

Secular Spirituality and the Hermeneutics of Ontological Gratitude

ABSTRACT: In his 2010 article, “Secular Spirituality and the Logic of Giving Thanks”, John Bishop recalls a striking theme in a recent address by Richard Dawkins in which he appeared to enthusiastically endorse the appropriateness of a “naturalised spirituality” that involved “existential gratitude”, and this led him to investigate the notion of a naturalised or secular spirituality with particular reference to Robert Solomon’s *Spirituality for the Skeptic* (2002). This essay looks to pick up on Bishop’s engagements with both Dawkins and Solomon, but to extend the conversation well beyond them in order to defend the credibility and integrity of secular spirituality in its movement of ontological gratitude. In this way it looks to offer a first sketch of what might be termed a ‘hermeneutics of ontological gratitude’. To this end – and via a distinction between gratitude for existence and life – the essay considers Dawkins’ argument and Solomon’s work in further detail, before turning to consider various other perspectives on the problem including Kenneth Schmitz’s existential Thomist notion of ontological contingency, Hannah Arendt’s concept of primary natality, and Emmanuel Levinas’ sketch of the self in its interiority and economy. My claim is that any serious naturalistic spirituality needs to take into account not only a gratitude for one’s existence per se, but for the whole context of individual and collective being.

KEY WORDS: Secular Spirituality, Ontological Gratitude, Robert C. Solomon, Richard Dawkins, Hannah Arendt, William Desmond, Emmanuel Levinas.

Secular Spirituality and the Hermeneutics of Ontological Gratitude

Over recent years, various advocates of secular and atheistic worldviews have looked to dispel the oft-cited Weberian critique of modern intellectual life – and thus, by extension, the contemporary scientific worldview – that such an outlook involves a reductionistic levelling down that robs human life of enchantment and even spiritual depth (Levine 2008, Solomon 2002, Dennett 2007, Dawkins 2006, et al). The advent of the recent secular spirituality movement (if such a diverse phenomenon can be so-called) is thus in many ways an attempt to reinforce the cogency of an undiluted naturalistic (often scientific) worldview while at the same time avoiding what Max Weber (borrowing from Schiller) described as the “disenchantment of the world” (1946, 156).

But to what extent, and in what sense, can a secular spirituality – with its implicit naturalism (or at least anti-supernaturalism) – sustain a robust sense of *gratitude*? Is a vigorous and reflective gratitude for one’s existence and the experiences of life something that is logically possible only for those who consider there is something or someone to whom one’s gratitude can be directed? What of a situation in which one’s thankfulness is deep and profound; what if it fills one with awe? In what follows I will argue that ontological gratitude is an entirely credible and meaningful response to serious existential reflection, which (despite its deep and obvious compatibility with the notion of a Divine creator) is independent of theistic belief.

DAWKINS ON GRATITUDE

Richard Dawkins has long been an advocate for the appropriateness of the response of reverence and awe at what the contemporary sciences are revealing about the astonishing complexity and beauty of the cosmos. In the opening chapter of his *The God Delusion*, for instance, he enthusiastically associates himself with Darwin, Einstein, Hawking, Sagan and others in affirming the appropriateness of “a quasi-mystical response to nature” which may be given voice in poetical turns of phrase, so long as such an attitude is absolutely distinguished from positive belief in a supernatural God (2006, 32).

Over the last few years, however, there seems to have been a development (or at least an accentuation) in his work from expressions of awe-struck appreciation of nature, to the language of gratitude and thankfulness for our lives and our place within the cosmos. It was this theme in Dawkins’ address to an audience at the University of Auckland in April 2010 that so caught John Bishop’s attention and on which he wrote in his recent article, “Secular Spirituality and the Logic

of Giving Thanks”. Bishop himself refers to Dawkins’ claim in Auckland that “our own existence is something for which we should give thanks” and that “gratitude is a proper stance for an evolutionary naturalist to take” (Bishop’s paraphrase – 2010, 523).

At his keynote address the previous month at the 2010 Global Atheist Convention in Melbourne, Dawkins began by exclaiming:

The fact of your own existence is the most astonishing fact you will ever have to confront. Don’t you dare ever get used to it. Don’t you dare ever say that life is boring, monotonous or joyless. (Dawkins, 2010)¹

Beyond the enormous statistical improbability of personal existence (interpreted as “extreme *luck*”), Dawkins is similarly impressed by the extraordinary “*predictability*” provided by natural selection. “Both of these”, he proclaims,

should give us cause to give thanks for our existence; individual existence clearly, but also give thanks for the existence of evolution itself which is this astonishing process that contrived to take the blind forces of physics – which are the same all over the universe – and ... produce (at least on this planet) this wondrous panoply of complexity, of beauty, and the illusion of design. (Dawkins, 2010)

As will be argued in what follows, there is much to affirm in Dawkins’ claims and apparent intuitions on this score. Nonetheless, as it stands (even allowing that the public lecture medium is hardly conducive to more sophisticated argumentation), his account is both extremely underdeveloped and problematic. Dawkins does not ignore the obvious question raised by his claims concerning the apparent ‘rightness’ of gratitude: “*Give thanks?*”, he asks; “give thanks to who or what? To providence? To the fairies? To the gods?”. Yet his answer to this key question raises far more questions than answers.

First, rather than looking to answer the question directly, Dawkins instead takes it as an opening to discuss the question of evolutionary significance of the ubiquitous phenomenon of religion. In this address he adds to the hypothesis concerning the origin of religion he gives in *The God Delusion*

¹ My thanks to Chris Mulherin for drawing my attention to his Convention blog on the ABC Religion website, and for his making available the audio file of this unpublished lecture from which the following quotations have been taken.

(i.e., the survival benefit involved in the predisposition of children to believe what their parents tell them) by suggesting that religion may simply be a vacuum phenomenon deriving from the need to keep mental records “of who owe[d] what to whom” in pre-monetary trading societies. Leaving aside the obvious flirtation with the genetic fallacy involved in such accounts, one is left wondering in what sense such hypotheses in evolutionary psychology provide any sort of answer to the question Dawkins himself posed: “give thanks to who or what?”

Second, the issue of the connection between Dawkins’ vacuum phenomenon account of religion and why we should be thankful for our existence is particularly difficult to fathom. Dawkins’ account is based on the phenomenon observed by ethologists where animals almost ritualistically act out ordinary behaviours in contexts that lack the normal stimulus for that behaviour; the behaviour literally “goes off in a vacuum”. Dawkins suggests that religious thinking and practices might be understood in a similar fashion. “The bit of our brain that calculates debt, obligation, debt, grudge, gratitude ... develops early, which is why even small children are so obsessed with fairness”, and hard-wired as we are for thinking in these terms, we project such ideas onto the cosmos as a whole, even when there is no actual reality to be thankful *to*, or to feel oneself in debt *to*. So just as sexual lust in humans can go off in a vacuum (when the lust is directed toward a mere mental representation such that the biological purpose of sex – reproduction – is thwarted), so too gratitude, guilt, or a sense of indebtedness can go off in a vacuum (in its being directed toward imagined cosmic source/s of ordinary events, rather than actual account keeping in real human relationships).

The problem is clear: such a dual insistence – that on one hand, we should give thanks for our lives, while on the other hand, such thanks-giving is in fact most likely a quasi-pathological left-over of our evolutionary past – is close to incoherent. If thanks-giving for our personal existence is ultimately meaningless, at best an empty gesture stemming from psychological structures evolutionarily ingrained by past survival strategies, then on what ground is it to be advocated?

One might insist that in fact Dawkins’ notion of existential gratitude is fundamentally different from religious senses that are (supposedly) undermined by the evolutionary sciences. Accordingly, it might be said that Dawkins’ sense of gratitude is simply – and only – a thoughtful acknowledgement of the great mathematical improbability of one’s existence, and as such is grounded in valid mathematics and science rather than empty vacuum phenomena. But in fact, this is not at all where Dawkins himself seems to be heading. To the contrary, he clearly indicates that

his own sense of existential gratitude is precisely a result of the same kind of vacuum phenomena that he has suggested helped give rise to religion:

So that's a possible evolutionary reason why we feel an urge to give thanks, even when we know that there is nobody to thank. It's nothing to be ashamed of. And I hope ... my talk gave sufficient reason for our own gratitude to be alive, even if it is gratitude in a vacuum. (Dawkins, 2010)

Not only is Dawkins content to locate the origins of his own sense of gratitude in the vacuum phenomena that gave rise to religion, he also just as unequivocally maintains that he thinks such gratitude is *intellectually justified* and important. This is to say that we should not merely be looking to understand and 'excuse' such thoughts and feelings (not being "ashamed" of them); nor should we simply be looking to understand them as having some kind of instrumental use unrelated to its dubious truth value. Rather, as John Bishop pointed out, Dawkins seems to be *recommending* gratitude in an "epistemic sense", as "a proper response to reality", and that its appropriateness may in some sense be inferred from the improbability of our individual existence (see Bishop 2010, 531). Differently put, Dawkins seems to be making a *normative* claim here about the interpretive 'rightness' of existential gratitude, and our obligation to *feel* it, while in the final analysis leaving the grounds of such a judgement completely obscure.²

TOWARD A HERMENEUTICS OF ONTOLOGICAL GRATITUDE

Despite the inchoate nature of his pronouncements on this matter, Dawkins' insistence on the appropriateness of existential gratitude is – I maintain – entirely justified on secular terms. Yet how can a compelling case be made for its appropriateness and even importance? Indeed, less ambitious still, how can a case be made for the appropriateness of wonder and astonishment at one's existence even before the movement of gratitude is made? The problem, as Paolo Costa has recently pointed out, is that such feelings and thoughts are often triggered in the midst of otherwise very ordinary experiences:

Someone can be struck dumb by the simple fact of [existence] ... or the simple fact of the simultaneous presence of life and death in our ordinary lives, while, for others, such things

² In this context, Bishop's observation concerning the "irritation" of many of his "scientific naturalist colleagues" is a moot point (2010, 531).

fail even to raise an eyebrow. Who is right and who is wrong? Where is the boundary to be drawn between the ordinary and the exceptional in our lives? (Costa 2011, 148)

How are we to deal with the fact that what moves some (be they theists, agnostics or atheists) to profound wonder, leaves others unmoved? If one cannot immediately feel and understand the wondrousness of existence and life, and of the deep appropriateness of some kind of movement of response along the lines of gratitude, then how could it ever be pointed out? One might insist, with Heidegger, that “at bottom, the ordinary is not ordinary; it is extraordinary” (1993, 179), but the experience of the extraordinary at the heart of ordinary experiences is not something that can be simply ‘pointed out’ since there *is* no-‘thing’ to indicate: there is no hitherto overlooked empirical datum as such. Thus, those who would venture to insist upon the wonder and gratuitousness of existence and life – and in this way take leave of Wittgenstein’s famous advice in the final lines of the *Tractatus* that we must pass over in silence what we cannot speak about – are left with a difficult task to indicate precisely that of which Dawkins has apparently caught some kind of glimpse, but which many of his scientific naturalist colleagues have overlooked.

What is therefore needed is a method – a set of concepts and a means of fruitfully applying them – to peer beyond the empirical data to that which can be gleaned of their overall context and significance. What is needed is a *hermeneutics* of ontological gratitude.

TWO KINDS OF GRATITUDE: DAWKINS REPRISED

Any interpretive approach requires conceptual tools, and the first such tool I wish to propose is a distinction between two senses of ontological gratitude that seem often to be unhelpfully conflated. This is a distinction that has already been suggested by the expression “gratitude for existence and life” which is not a tautology but a way of naming two dimensions of what is being referred to as “ontological gratitude”.

On one hand, ontological gratitude involves a thankfulness for the gift of one’s being or existence as such; the sheer fact of individual existence (albeit as a particular kind of creature) which points to the deep ontological contingency that is at the heart of the metaphysics of the living human creature.³ On the other hand, ontological gratitude also involves a thankfulness for the experience

³ I leave to one side the whole issue of ‘existential’ vis-à-vis ‘ontological’ language and the vast and ancient historical issues pertaining to the semantic field of each. There are a variety of issues here which I have addressed elsewhere, including the problems associated with the prevalent overly ‘thin’ conception of existence qua mere ‘fact’ (see Colledge 2008). Nonetheless, for the purposes of this essay, suffice to say

of living within such a rich context, with the profusion of ways that life is facilitated and infused with meaning by which we are nurtured and delighted, but also inevitably oppressed and made to endure trials; a context that begins before birth and which sustains us throughout our lives. If the notion of ontological gratitude is to be given its full scope, both of these dimensions need to be addressed.

It is helpful to relate this distinction to Dawkins' assertions concerning the appropriateness of gratitude. While the categories obviously don't apply in any direct sense to his words, it is striking that his emphasis seems largely to be skewed towards a thankfulness for existence, rather than for life. The programmatic opening words of his address noted earlier make this clear: "The *fact* of your own *existence* is the most astonishing fact you will ever have to confront." (Dawkins 2010; my emphasis). These words are immediately followed by an insistence on the statistical improbability of this "fact":

Of course, with hindsight, the probability of your existence is 'one': since you are here. But that is the hindsight of the lottery winner. The probability of winning a big lottery before you go into it is so close to 'zero' as to render it an irrational decision ... I don't need to spell out the argument: your parents have to meet, they have to copulate on a particular occasion, a particular sperm had to copulate with a particular egg; and even that wasn't enough to determine your personal identity, because after that fertilised egg was formed it might have split to become a pair of identical twins ... And, of course, the same conditions had to be true for your grandparents, your great grandparents ... all the way back to the origin of life." (Dawkins 2010)

In making this claim, Dawkins pointedly rejects the interpretation of many fellow scientific naturalists who would see individual existence as a mere brute fact of no particular significance; a fact that only *seems* to be extraordinary if we take the illegitimate step of imagining ourselves out of the picture (illegitimate since we are only able to run this thought experiment on the basis of our *already* existing). For him, *that* we exist as the people we are is no neutral datum, but an incredibly significant point of wonder.

that I prefer "ontological gratitude" to "existential gratitude" given that I intend the former term to capture a broader sense of gratitude not only for one's existence as such, but for the many aspects of lived being in its often tumultuous richness.

The nascent sense of metaphysical ‘thatness’ residing in Dawkins’ astonishment at the ‘fact’ of personal existence is something that can be significantly teased out and built upon, and I will return to this in the following section. However, it is first worth noting that his account of the emergence of the self into existence is considerably truncated. As is perhaps appropriate for an evolutionary biologist, Dawkins seems to assume that the *individual* springs into being at the point of conception (or perhaps rather implantation). But this is to confuse genetics with individuality. What is missing is any kind of account of the vast range of other factors that go into making the individual human being, with its own sense of personal identity, who is *able* to reflect upon the astonishing fact of its own existence.

The list of such factors is of course a very long one, though any brief account would need to include a range of broad categories. Of great importance is the quality and character of our early experiences both within the womb and beyond it within our family of origin in which we are nurtured into the world and come to an early sense of ourselves. So too are the large-scale and finer-grained cultural influences that shape our view of the world as we grow and mature, and with this our horizons and assumptions, our passions, our expectations and much else. The socio-political circumstances of the time and place of our birth and childhood are also vastly significant influences, as is the availability and quality of education. Our native language/s profoundly shapes the possibilities of thought and expression (and even what it is possible to think). The social groups within which we find ourselves also deeply influence our sense of ourselves in the world, and the myriad experiences of life – be they due to the actions of others known and unknown, intended and unintended, or due merely to the vagaries of good or bad fortune – all go towards powerfully shaping who we become and understand ourselves to be.

That we are at all (that we exist) is – upon reflection – a cause for astonishment, awe and humble gratitude. But gratitude for *who* we are and what experience has shaped us to become, is no less profound a cause for gratitude, even when this thanks is inevitably qualified by the vagaries and even tragedies of life.

GRATITUDE FOR EXISTENCE: SCHMITZ AND DESMOND

What Dawkins describes as the extraordinary “fact” of the individual’s existence is not *simply* a ‘brute fact’. Certainly, it is that. But beyond such an insight there are ancient philosophical resources available to conceptually flesh out a more robust sense of what is at stake in this recognition concerning the human being’s fundamental existential *contingency*.

Even while arguing that a secular account of ontological gratitude is possible and important, it is nonetheless the case that the philosophical tradition which gives most striking voice to the dimension of existential contingency is Existential Thomism. The utterly theological trajectory of the Thomist metaphysics of *esse* is clear, but the secular thinker need not follow the metaphysical principle of the *actus essendi* all the way to the notion of God as “*ipsum esse subsistens*”. The recognition of the astonishing mystery of the act of being is itself a phenomenological insight of considerable power that can rightly move theist, atheist and agnostic alike to silence.

Kenneth Schmitz writes evocatively of the abyssal mystery of the creature’s existence:

Taken in itself, the creature is precisely nihil. It trembles before the abyss of its own absolute non-being, before its own absence ... [T]he being of the creature is, in its entirety, a gift; and the utter gratuity of such a radical gift includes within it the nothingness of the creature ... Its proper condition is one of radical non-necessity, fully permeated by the fragility of its existence. (Schmitz 1999, 282-283)

The strong sense of existential contingency on which Schmitz here insists stems from the recognition of the self as radically not *causa sui*. But further, the appearance of the self in the world is absolutely mysterious; it is an utterly gratuitous gift that one cannot “get behind” in order to conceive of its coming, or rationalise its possibility. The self simply *finds itself* in the midst of the world (amongst others). Yet this gift of personal existence is astonishingly fragile: just as – phenomenologically – it is given out of the abyss, so too it can be just as easily and mysteriously extinguished. Dawkins’ words ring true here: “The fact of your own existence is the most astonishing fact you will ever have to confront. Don’t you dare ever get used to it.”

The oeuvre of contemporary philosopher William Desmond, with its strong sense of ontological perplexity and contingency, might itself be aptly described (in the terms by which this essay has been framed) as an extended inquiry into the hermeneutics of ontological gratitude. For Desmond, the issue identified earlier in the quotation from Paolo Costa (concerning the ‘either you get it or you don’t’ problem of gratitude) is eventually a matter of the fact that the being who reflects on its own existence is always already submerged within, and is a product of, that about which s/he is asking. As often as not, we cannot see the forest for the trees; we cannot see the originating flow of being, for all the beings! At this point, the echoes of Platonic analogy in his thought are clear:

The primal giving of being ... I am seeking to name, is like the air we breathe: in some ways so all-surrounding that it is the least noticed of things. Or it is like the light that makes everything visible, and that is itself overlooked in its very enabling of us to look at things at all. (Desmond 1995a, 14)

In Desmond's work, ontological astonishment and perplexity are closely linked to a recognition not only of the 'unreasonable' plenitude, the teeming excessiveness, the utter gratuity of being, but also of its intrinsic *goodness*. One of his strategies for revealing the intimations of this primal goodness is to point out the instinctual attributions of value we recognise in our own being and that of others by which we spontaneously celebrate the unconditional goodness of 'to be'. As a matter of course, we desire always to remain in being, this basic *conatus essendi* pointing towards a particular kind of love of being: the love of one's own being as good. But beyond all sense of self-insistence, he points to the uncomplicated rejoicing that accompanies the birth of a child, and subsequently, of the young child's wonder and delight in its discovery of the world (Desmond 1995b, 226). In short, humans are in love with being, even if its ubiquity, richness and profusion have the effect of blinding us to this most self-evident of facts.

GRATITUDE FOR LIFE IN SOLOMON'S NATURALISED SPIRITUALITY

Robert Solomon and Richard Dawkins share a broadly non-theistic outlook on the world even while arguing for the importance of an ontological gratitude. However, the similarities of their approaches largely end there, both in terms of methodology and content. Methodologically, the natural sciences provide the overwhelming driving force behind Dawkins' account, while Solomon is quite clear that his own account is "more of an ethical and aesthetic than a metaphysical or scientific claim" (2002, 17). On this basis alone, one would expect there to be substantial differences in content between their discussions, but a further distinction arises in terms of their implicit understandings of ontological gratitude. If Dawkins argues for the appropriateness of gratitude for existence, Solomon's emphasis is on gratitude for life; Dawkins is arguing for a thankfulness for the *coming-into-being* of the individual, Solomon for the *becoming* of the self. It is perhaps for this reason that Solomon is intent on reclaiming the *terminology* of "spirituality" from the domination of religious discourses by rejecting "the notion that spirituality refers us to the supernatural" (2002, 17). For him, spirituality (which includes the movements of trust and gratitude) is something immanent to the life. Dawkins, on the other hand, seems not much interested in the "spirituality" of living, but in the natural processes by which life comes about.

The rich but surprisingly brief section – “Gratitude: The Idea of Life as a Gift” (2002, 103-106) – in which Solomon makes his case concerning that for which gratitude is the worthy response, calls for careful analysis.⁴ A first key point is his unflinching commitment to the importance of gratitude for non-theists: “It seems to me”, he says, “that we naturalists have given up a great deal by relegating gratitude to the supernatural dump just because there is no particular person to feel grateful to” (2002, 104). And this in turn leads him to ask the key question with which this essay is concerned: i.e.,

What does it mean [from a non-theist] to feel gratitude, not for this or that particular favor from another person or even (as in the case of one’s parents or a great teacher) for setting the course of one’s entire life, but (in some sense) to life itself, to the universe as a whole? (2002, 104)

Second, Solomon strongly rejects the thoughtless sense of entitlement one often encounters toward life; an attitude that claims one’s successes as essentially one’s own doing, and (the flipside of that coin) one’s trials as inexplicable and unfair. Tellingly, he links this to the strong temptation he sees in many great scholars (including Nietzsche, a figure whom he deeply esteems), toward a striking “suspicion of gratitude”. An attitude of thankfulness, after all, speaks precisely of one’s dependence on others, and thus one’s vulnerability and contingency. This is a condition of which Ernest Becker is perhaps the most penetrating observer in his analysis of what he refers to as the ubiquitous “*causa sui* project” that drives so much frantic human activity, and through which human individuals (indeed whole cultures) seek to become father to themselves (Becker 1973, 115ff). As will be seen, this is also a matter to which Hannah Arendt and Emmanuel Levinas powerfully speak in their different ways.

Third, Solomon distinguishes between two very different responses to the vagaries of fortune in life. One approach is to write off one’s good fortune to “sheer chance” (not giving it any further reflection), or alternatively to dumb “luck” (which at least might cause one some pause of relieved appreciation). Such responses he contrasts with an interpretation that sees life fortune in terms of “fate”. Fate, in Solomon’s sense, relates not to a sense of the ‘pre-determinedness’ of life, but to the insight that “we are not in complete control of our lives, that there are forces much larger than

⁴ The following remarks on Solomon’s thoughts on this theme complement John Bishop’s more Analytic account (2010, 526-30).

ourselves that determine [them]” (2002, 91).⁵ The pertinence of the Nietzschean motif of *amor fati* here comes to the fore, though Solomon is clear that Nietzsche’s affirmation of life “means little if it is not accompanied by some larger sense of gratitude ... not only for one’s life, but to one’s life – or rather to life – as well”. (2002, 105)

To this point, Solomon’s analysis has essentially been concerned with gratitude for good fortune, something which he suggests is best interpreted through the lens of fate. In places there is something troublingly incomplete about his discussion, however, and in one section the thread seems to take a seriously individualistic turn when fate is appealed to as implying that people of good fortune are “beneficiaries of a (more or less benign) universe, or even the lucky beneficiaries of good fortune in a cruel universe”, something that he concludes calls forth gratitude (2002, 104). However, and this is the fourth point, looming banality is avoided only when Solomon – prompted by Kundera’s novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* – turns to consider the properly ontological question of “*Why is there me at all?*”, concluding that “[l]ife, in the final analysis, is a gift that ... none of us deserves”, and that calls forth a response of gratitude (2002, 105). Here at least is the outline – albeit an incomplete one – for a fuller sense of ontological gratitude both for both existence and life.

Finally, the section on life as a gift ends with consideration of the deep remaining equivocalities surrounding what until now has remained virtually unacknowledged: viz, the “profoundly disturbing realisation” that a great many lives are filled not with obvious causes for gratitude, but with great pain and misfortune. Here his case threatens to unravel: if it turns out that we are not “condemned to a miserable life and an early death”, this turns out to be just “a matter of luck”, and after all, “there but for the grace of God (or fate, or luck) go I” (2002, 106). A footnote adds a further telling note to this thread:

I hasten to add that this is not to say that *any* human life is worth living or worthy of gratitude. There are, to be sure, tragic and miserable lives, lives that are a curse, and worthy of cursing, rather than a blessing deserving of gratitude. But for most of us – certainly for most readers of this book, life IS a blessing. (2002, 152)

⁵ There is a sense in which fate plays a similar role in Solomonian thought to what “facticity” plays in early Heideggerian thought, though that is a connection I won’t expand on here.

This discussion provides a sobering but important segue into another key theme in Solomon's book, one to which John Bishop paid close attention in his aforementioned essay.⁶ I refer here to Solomon's discussion of spirituality as "cosmic trust". Within Solomon's little book, the chapter dealing with cosmic trust is one of the richest, though for the purposes of this essay what is most relevant is what it reveals about Solomon's understanding of ontological gratitude.

Solomon distinguishes the deep and seasoned form of "authentic trust" in the cosmos from both "basic trust" (the naïve trust of a child towards its parents in a safe and happy household) and "blind trust" (which is stubborn and sometimes self-deluding). On his account, such trust is not a feeling or an uncritical attitude: it is a deliberate choice, a resolved stance towards the world, a "way of being within the world" that carries with it no guarantees, and which in fact "includes the acceptance of a *lack* of control and the recognition of one's own vulnerability" (2002, 45-46). It is "a synthesis of uncertainty and confidence, a sense of powerlessness combined with resoluteness and responsibility", and a properly spiritual outlook must take equal cognisance of both sides of this synthesis (2002, 47).⁷

In the final analysis, then, this determined outlook of cosmic trust – even in the context of terrible events that challenge this faith in the fundamental trustworthiness of the cosmos – is sewn into Solomon's account of the appropriateness of ontological gratitude. Life is a gift which is worthy of gratitude, and to trust is to hold faith with this gift, to resist resentment and envy, and to be content with what has been given (2002, 51-56). At this point, barring the obvious lack of a personal trust dimension between creature and creator, Solomon's secular spirituality is in many respects analogous to a seasoned theistic account.

One is reminded here of William Desmond's account of what he calls "metaphysical trust": a trust/faith in being that defies all determinate calculations. This, for Desmond, is "no pre-packaged foundationalism" (1995b, 257-58). For him, far from being a blind whistling in the dark, it needs to be authentically arrived at through a fulsome 'yes' to the goodness of being: a yes pronounced in full knowledge of evil and one's own radical finitude. Going beyond Solomon, Desmond describes this as "an extreme task of love":

⁶ In his essay, Bishop takes "a (moderately) analytical approach" to Solomon's account of cosmic trust, enumerating six features or propositions of this account.

⁷ Again, comparisons with early Heideggerian thought are palpable here, this time in terms of the notion of "anticipatory resoluteness" in *Sein und Zeit*.

In the face of nothing, to affirm the good of life; to know that one will come to nothing and to live beyond this fear of one's own nothingness, putting it in place relative to the great good of the gift, even though the gift is for a time, and we must part with it (2001, 507).

ONTOLOGICAL GRATITUDE IN ARENDT AND LEVINAS

Two additional sources for the development of a hermeneutics of ontological gratitude – accounts which touch, largely respectively, on both gratitude for existence and for life – are Hannah Arendt's notion of "primary natality" and Emmanuel Levinas' understanding of the self in its interiority and economy. While incomplete as accounts of ontological gratitude per se, much may be gleaned from both for present purposes.

Arendt's category of natality is perhaps not an obvious place to draw inspiration for a hermeneutics of ontological gratitude. Still, her work represents a seismic shift in focus for the western philosophical tradition by introducing the category of natality as an essential companion to the ubiquitous theme of mortality, and this alone gives her work significance in this context. This is the case even though her interest in birth largely serves other purposes in her thought, being linked with socio-political and intellectual themes that are beyond the scope of this paper.

Arendt was struck by the motif of *absolute beginning* represented by birth. Birth is radical new beginning par excellence, and in this sense it is the condition of possibility of all other beginnings. "Factual natality", as she calls it, is a miracle of beginning that happens so often that we fail to appreciate its extraordinariness; we become blasé about "the constant influx of newcomers who are born into the world as strangers" (1959, 10). These newcomers arrive "again and again in[to] a world that preceded them in time" (1978, 109-10. See also 217), and in this way "with each birth, something uniquely new comes into the world" where "nobody was ... before" (1959, 158). In an unlikely but telling anticipation of Dawkins' recent (albeit tonally different) account, Arendt points out that such regular occurrences of genuine newness "always happen against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability" ... [and it] therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle" (1959, 158). Otherwise put, "in the language of natural science, it is the 'infinite improbability that occurs regularly'" (1959, 222).

There is a strong insistence in Arendt's thought, then, that the birth of a child is an extraordinary event that bestows an unmatched gift on the human community, guaranteeing its survival, its new beginning, its "salvation" (1978, 212). What is far less clear in her work, however, is that the

child is also, through its own birth, granted the gift *of itself to itself*. The child is *given to exist*. So while the world owes gratitude for the new natal's appearance amongst them, so too – Arendt neglects to point out – the natal owes a debt of gratitude of its own very being. William Desmond's reflection on this point fills out what has been left conspicuously unsaid by Arendt:

Birth itself is a mystery at the origin; not just a neutral fact of the coming, or the seemingly indifferent occurrence of a valueless biological event, but the mystery of a singular life given for no universal reason, for no special reason we humans can determine, yet mysteriously arriving into this world ... not thrown, not condemned, though its beyondness to general reason may make it seem so. (2001, 512)

To some degree there is a sense in Arendt's work – even if the language of gratitude does not appear – of the importance of the nurturing context into which the natal arrives. Here – nascently, at least – is an opening to a sense of thankfulness for life. The child, though a stranger, finds itself welcomed into a network of communal relationships that preceded it, but on which its arrival will dramatically impact. Every person, she says, “is born a member of a particular community, and survives only if he is welcomed and made at home in it” (quoted in Bowen-Moore 1989, 18). Having appeared into the world as a stranger, the thriving of the individual requires the nurture of others. As Desmond puts it: “We are given to ourselves [and] we give beyond ourselves ... Others will come and the gift will be passed on” (2001, 511).

But what is also tellingly missing in Arendt's account of the coming of the child into the welcome community of others, is its original and elemental nurture within the body of its mother, within whom the child moves from its dark origins to the point of being ready (or not) to begin the arduous journey into the light of this wider community. As Adriana Cavarero has noted, the natal does indeed come into the world as a new beginning, but this beginning is proximally not *ex nihilo*, but rather *from the womb* (1995, 6). In the present context, the effect of this insight intensifies the sense of the being-nurtured of the self. The gift of one's existence is utterly entwined with the gift of one's being-nurtured.

Emmanuel Levinas provides a further window on this aspect of being-nurtured in his analysis of “living from” in section 2 of *Totality and Infinity*. In this section, he presents the self in its everyday economy as avidly involved and immersed in the enjoyment of the world's bounty. The self “lives from” the world and on it, content in its passivity as it takes in the world for its

sustenance and nurture. What is particularly interesting about Levinas' discussion in this section is the way in which the self is ambiguously suspended between independence and dependence. On one hand, it is quite independent from both the world from which it lives and the Others from which it took its life. The self *is* not the world, but *takes in* the world, and similarly, the self "is not simply caused or issued forth from the father [*sic*] but is absolutely other than him" (1999, 63). Like Arendt, there is a sense in which the self for Levinas arises *ex nihilo*. But on the other hand, the self is not absolutely independent, *causa sui*, for any such pretension "is belied by birth [which is] non-chosen and impossible to choose" (1999, 223).

Yet there is a strong sense in which Levinas also takes the step beyond Arendt's *ex nihilo* account of the individual self by addressing the nurturing activity of the mother, who births the infant into the world and makes a home for it. But in an ironic sense, it is the very self-depreciative sense of the mother's withdrawal that allows the infant to grow into its own skin, as it were, and in this way to gain the illusion of self-sufficiency, even as its very life is being preserved and nurtured by this Other. What this sets up is a perfectly Beckerian scenario whereby the self is able to effectively banish the spectre of death, and adopt the pretence of its own *causa sui* project. In this way, as Levinas puts it, the "virile and heroic I" emerges, (1999, 270). But so too does the denial not only of death and the global vulnerability of the self, but also of the need for gratitude for one's existence and life.

There is, then, a sense in which Levinas' account points the way towards a certain recognition of the need for ontological gratitude, though this is not eventually where his emphasis lies. Levinas does not so much insist upon an indicative concerning ontological dependence which needs to be recognised through the offering of gestures of thanks. His approach is rather to insist on the imperative to become like the maternal Other in offering hospitality to the stranger, the widow and the orphan. His response is ethical rather than spiritual; or perhaps its spirituality is entirely subsumed within the ethical, and in this way his final contribution to the argument of this paper is somewhat ambiguous.

If the various thinkers considered above each add important pieces to the task of developing a hermeneutics of ontological gratitude, what pitfalls have been identified in each? As Solomon himself points out, for all its affirmation of life, Nietzsche's highest principle, *amor fati*, fails insofar as it lacks a sense of gratitude. Solomon's own account of the connection between the fate

interpretation and gratitude for life is in need of much further development. As for Arendt, in referring to the natal's contribution to the world by which it keeps faith with the 'new beginnings' motif of its birth, her principle of *amor mundi* rushes onward rather too quickly and in this way also fails to encapsulate a sense of gratitude for the gift of being and life itself. While there is a sense of rejoicing in the nurture of the world and the maternal Other in Levinas' account of the individual's "living from", there is no explicit recognition of the need to be deeply thankful for the self's being and life. Nonetheless, while significantly underdeveloped, the resources are present in Levinasian and Solomonian thought to move beyond both Nietzsche and Arendt toward a third kind of love – '*amor vita*' – made conscious and self-reflective: a love of life born of a gratitude for the gift of both existence, which one has so undeservedly received, and of life, which has been preserved, nurtured and enriched by the world and others within it.

CONCLUSION: A SECULAR JOB?

The preceding is meant to provide a sketch of an outline of a hermeneutics of ontological gratitude that proceeds reflectively and phenomenologically rather than on the basis of theological commitment or conclusions. On this account, such commitments and conclusions may well follow, or they may not; but in neither case is the integrity of a secular response of gratitude for existence and life in any way impugned.

In this light, I take strong issue with what I see as an unfortunate tendency in some theological discourses to undercut such an affirmation in the course of insisting on salvific accounts by which human life is redeemed from its crushing imperfection. Such discourses are familiar enough in the Christian tradition, particularly among those who fit William James' category of the "twice-born" (see James, 1945, 79ff). A striking modern example of such an approach is seen in the words of the twentieth century French theologian, Louis Lochet, who in one place maintained the following:

Pagan thought has only two possibilities: to accept death and so despair, or to pretend not to see it and so remain ignorant of what life is. The meaning of life can be grasped only by accepting death. And death cannot be accepted, save in the light of faith. (Lochet 1962, 183)⁸

Here Lochet forecloses on any possibility of an authentic response to the meaning of death outside of a Christian faith in resurrection. Presumably the thought here is that a life that ends in final

⁸ With thanks to my colleague Greg Moses for alerting me to this passage. Translation by David Hawe.

death would be rendered worthless; that the goodness of *this* life – aside from its place in an infinitely larger eternal context – is not something that can be affirmed.⁹ *Prima facie*, what this suggests is that, but for “the light of faith”, Locket would have much in common with the sentiments of Silenius, companion of Dionysus, in an episode famously related by Nietzsche at the outset of his *The Birth of Tragedy*, that has Silenius declaring under duress to King Midas that “the best and most desirable thing for man ... [is] to never have been born, not to be, to be nothing” with the second best being “to die soon” (Nietzsche 1993, 22).

I conclude with a thought experiment, one that concerns the viability of a genuine expression of secular ontological gratitude. Consider the following secular paraphrase of Job 1:21 that then gives way then to an extended elaboration:

Naked I came from the womb, and naked I shall return to the earth.
What has been given, has run its course.
I give thanks for this life that I have received,
both for the gift of being at all
– which seems to me in itself so inexplicable and extraordinary –
and also for the many blessings that have been granted to me in the course of my life:
neither of which I have in any way earned or deserved.
And as for my sufferings, though they have been many,
I have been prepared to endure them, so great has been this gift of living at all.
And as I approach the unknown day of my dying,
though frightened at the prospect of the irrecoverable loss of so great a gift,
I steal myself to be simply thankful that I have had the opportunity of life at all.
That alone, surely, is the only appropriate gesture I can make
when faced with the inevitability of my passing back into non-existence.

⁹ This conversation perhaps indicates something of the benefit for Christian theism of allowing for the independent integrity of a seasoned and thoughtful secular expression of thanks in the midst of death. In this sense, perhaps the Christian hope in resurrection might be put as follows ... Not that, ‘there *has* to be more life beyond death, *since* I believe in a just and kind God’, but rather that, ‘I hope in a God whose graciousness is *so* outrageously beneficent, that there might be *even more* life to come’. The difference between the two approaches may appear minor, but it makes an enormous difference. Otherwise, do not Christians risk being like spoilt children who on Christmas morning, having torn open all their lovely gifts, then stamp their feet because there aren’t still more gifts to come? Are they so dissatisfied with the incredible gift of existence and earthly life that it cannot be accepted as anything *other* than a mere prelude to perfected heavenly existence?

Does such an expression ring true? One can well imagine a harsh critique of such an approach given from the perspective of insistent theism. Terry Eagleton's recent scathing review of Alain de Botton's *Religion for Atheists* (Eagleton 2012) provides, I suggest, an anticipation of such a response. Here he speaks of "reluctant atheists" who "long to dunk themselves in the baptismal font but can't quite bring themselves to believe"; people such as Steiner, Scruton and Critchley, as well as those Critchley has himself written about (Žižek, Badiou, Agamben) in his recently published *The Faith of the Faithless* (2012): i.e., "leftist thinkers "whose work draws "deeply" – and presumably most objectionably, *parasitically* – on Christian theology. In this respect, Eagleton prefers the straight-forward "disgust" towards religion expressed by Christopher Hitchens to those who would cherry-pick what is currently considered the palatable bits of the religious world view while spurning its overall thrust and disciplines.

To such objections (whether or not they are correctly attributed to such thoughtful figures as Eagleton¹⁰), I can only beg to differ. In my estimation, expressions such as the one sketched out above count as a profound expression of secular spirituality, one marked by integrity, insight and seasoned maturity. As much inspired by awe at the gift of existence and life, as it is by dread at the threat of death, it represents a kind of 'prayer' (perhaps better, a spiritual address, or even benediction) to the cosmos. Certainly, such an expression is deeply consistent with important aspects of monotheistic belief, even while stopping well short of acknowledgement of a personal God to whom it might be addressed. This does not, however, mean that it amounts to a mere parody of religious belief; nor, I would suggest, should it *simply* be regarded as an inadequate stepping stone along the way to theism, for those who have yet to 'join the dots'.

This is to side with those who would defend the independent integrity and value of a sufficiently nuanced secular spirituality; and further, that such a defence can and should be mounted even from the perspective of theism itself. Just as there are more and less banal and even dangerous versions of religious faith and adherence, the same can be said both of agnosticism and atheism. Indeed, in many cases, the family resemblances can be greater *across* the divide of religious belief and non-belief than they are on any one side.

¹⁰ To be fair, Eagleton's target is not so much protagonists of the kind represented in the foregoing 'secular prayer of thanks' thought experiment. He is rather targeting those for whom religion offers certain utilitarian benefits (often of an elitist and unsavoury kind), and in this sense he places de Botton in a most unflattering light, following in the footsteps of figures such as Machiavelli, Voltaire, Toland, Gibbon, Diderot, Arnold, Comte and even Habermas: those who see a social role for religion while spurning it themselves. There is, nonetheless, a common thread here in terms of a pervasive contempt for "spirituality without religion", and with it a strong suspicion concerning all such allegedly counterfeit versions of religious faith.

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