CHAPTER 1

Joyful Recognition
Debt, Duty, and Gratitude to God

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As a response to a gift, gratitude is an obligation. But what kind of obligation is gratitude, especially gratitude to God? Martin Luther placed gift at the heart of his understanding of God's relation to creatures and thus brought this question to the heart of Christian life. Gratitude and its obligations are key themes, as well, in Anthony Kronman's massive *Confessions of a Born-Again Pagan*, which charges Christianity in general and Luther in particular with encumbering modern humans with an overwhelming existential burden and thus sapping our lives and our world of meaning.[1] Before we engage these arguments, however, we need to explore a prevalent theological account of gratitude that lends some plausibility to his critique.

1.1 Gratitude as Repayment

For Thomas Aquinas, gratitude is a virtue 'annexed' to justice, to giving to others what is their due.[2] When it comes to gifts we receive from others, we have no legal debt to repay, but we do have a moral one. It consists in recollecting the kindness shown and, above all, in paying them back.[3] The

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[1] Anthony T. Kronman, *Confessions of a Born-Again Pagan* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016).

[2] On the relation of gratitude to justice in Thomas, see Adam Eitel, 'Virtue or Art? Political Friendship Reconsidered,' *Journal of Religious Ethics* 44 (2016): 260–277 (271–72).

[3] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II.2, q. 80.

need for repayment, a prevalent intuition in many cultures, is rooted for Thomas in a metaphysical principle and is part of the natural order:

> Every effect turns naturally to its cause; wherefore Dionysius says . . . that 'God turns all things to Himself, because He is the cause of all': for the effect must needs always be directed (*ordinetur*) to the end of the agent. Now it is evident that a benefactor, as such, is cause of the beneficiary. Hence the natural order (*ordo*) requires that he who has received a favor should, by repaying the favor (*per gratiarum recompensationem*), turn to his benefactor according to the mode of each.[4]

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

To understand Thomas rightly, it is important to distinguish between (1) thinking of gratitude itself as a form of repayment, in which case gratitude is given *as* repayment and thus *in place* of other forms of repayment and (2) considering these other forms of repayment a constitutive feature of gratitude *in addition* to giving thanks. In the first case, the fact that I have an obligation to thank my benefactor is taken to imply, first, that I *owe* the benefactor thanks, which is to say that thanks is her *due*. A gift sets up a moral relation of debt, where the debt is repaid with thanks. In the latter case, there is this same logic of obligation and debt, but repayment of the benefit itself is required. I owe something more than thanks.[5]

Thomas holds the latter view. Gratitude requires three things. First, to recognize the benefit. Second, to express thanks for it. And third, 'to repay (*retribuat*) the favor at a suitable place and time according to one's means.'[6] Thanks alone do not discharge the debt of gratitude.

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

[4] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II.2, q. 106, a. 3.

[5] Thomas Aquinas was not alone among Christians or monotheists to insist that to be a creature is to incur an enormous debt to the creator. A century and a half before Aquinas, the Jewish medieval philosopher Bahya ibn Paquda (1050–1120) did the same in the third gate of the *Duties of the Heart* (Edwin Collins, ed., *The Duties of the Heart by Rabbi Bachye: Translated, with Introduction* [London: John Murray, 1905], 27–30).

[6] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II.2, q. 107, a. 2.

gratis, the 'beneficiary is under a moral obligation (*ex debito honestatis*) to bestow something gratis in return,' argues Thomas. He continues,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1.2 Gratitude as Recognition

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

But gifts and gratitude are not unalterable 'natural' phenomena; they have a cultural history.[12] Their character is variable depending on economic and political arrangements and prevalent anthropologies and social imaginaries. A plausible alternative way of thinking about gifts and gratitude is available. Take, first, gifts. One can think of them as completely free, with their recipients not owing anything to givers, let alone equivalent or greater returns. Granted, a great deal of ink has been spilled arguing to the contrary. Marcel Mauss's interpretation of gift exchange in so-called archaic societies as obligatory and reciprocal has loomed large.[13] Jacques Derrida has gone to the very edges of existence to find a place for the 'pure gift,' untainted by the demand for reciprocation, in death itself.[14] Even so, cogent defenses of the possibility of truly gratuitous gift-giving have been elaborated, by Kathryn Tanner for example.[15] This is not, however, the occasion to rehearse them. Suffice it to say that there is nothing logically self-contradictory about this understanding of gifts, and their actuality is at least plausibly defensible, above all in the case of God's giving.

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

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

[13] Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls (New York, NY: Norton, 2000).

[14] Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992) and *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

[15] See Kathryn Tanner, *Economy of Grace* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2005) and *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001). A similar account of gifts and giving can be found in Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a World Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). For discussion of Tanner in relation to John Milbank's influential 'Can a Gift Be Given?' *Modern Theology* 11 (1995): 119–61, see Sarah Coakley, 'Why Gift? Gift, Gender, and Trinitarian Relations in Milbank and Tanner,' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 62 (2008): 224–35; David Albertson, 'On "The Gift" in Tanner's Theology: A Patristic Parable,' *Modern Theology* 21 (2005): 107–18.

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

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

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

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

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

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

[18] On the distinctions between gift on the one side and entitlement and luck on the other, see Kronman, *Confessions*, 59–64.

truthfully and, in this way, they receive their due, it being the case that, on the account of the gift to which this kind of gratitude is an appropriate response, what they intended was, to quote Seneca, 'to be of service and to give pleasure to the one to whom' they have given the gift.[19]

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

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

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

[19] Seneca, *Ben.* 2.31.2. [20] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II.2, q. 106, a. 3.
[21] Seneca, *Ben.* 2.31.2.
[22] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 15. This is a refrain in *Leviathan*. Cf. ch. 14: 'of the voluntary acts of every man, the object is some *Good to himself*.' Kronman discusses Hobbes on gift giving in 'Desperate Debtors,' unpublished paper submitted for Yale Center for Faith & Culture consultation on 'Joy, Gratitude, and Complaint,' September 2017, p. 7.
[23] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 11. [24] Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ch. 10.

the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful' (Luke 6:35–36). There is a tension in the text between expecting nothing in return and being promised a reward. But the command that human character and behavior align with the God who is merciful and kind to the ungrateful and wicked suggests that we not take the heavenly reward as a make-up for foregoing worldly repayment. The text suggests a vision of God who, while commanding humans to practice a divine kind of love, 'expects nothing in return' for the gifts God gives. It implies also a corresponding vision of humans whose being and reward are one and the same: to be and to act as the children of just that kind of God. Gratitude to this kind of God and gratitude to the children of this kind of God cannot consist in repayment.

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

1.3 Luther's Gratitude to a Loving God

'The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it,' writes Luther in the last thesis of his *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518). In the proof offered for the thesis, he explains: 'Rather than seeking its own good, the love of God flows forth and bestows good.'[25] The negative part of these formulations is critical: God's love is *not* about finding what is pleasing to it; it *does not* seek its own good. Consequently, when God bestows good, no repayment is needed. That is not just because no repayment is possible since God is fully self-sufficient and since everything humans could possibly have with which to repay God would be, ultimately, a gift from God in the first place.[26] Equally importantly, and perhaps more fundamentally, no repayment is needed because *the requirement of repayment would misconstrue the nature of God's love*: unlike (sinful) human love, which, Luther says, seeks ultimately its own good, divine love does not seek any good for itself, but instead bestows good on others. In his 1535 *Lectures on Galatians* (the biblical text to which he was 'betrothed,' his 'Katie von Bora'),[27] Luther writes:

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

[25] Martin Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation*, in *LW* 31:57.
[26] See Luther, *Selected Psalms II*, in *LW* 13:91.
[27] Jaroslav Pelikan, 'Introduction to Volume 26,' *LW* 26, ix.

> people who are unwilling to accept grace and eternal life from Him freely but want to earn it by their own works. They simply want to rob Him of the glory of His deity.[28]

To try to repay God for benefits, let alone to give God an initiating gift to which God would be obliged to respond,[29] is to misrecognize both one's nature as a creature and the moral character of the Creator (see Rom. 11:35).

The way Luther explains the absence of sacrifices before the Fall and the nature of sacrifices after the Fall illustrates well both God's free giving and the corresponding account of gratitude (which we have called the recognition account of gratitude). In the Garden of Eden, humans' first home, God 'does not prescribe the slaughter of oxen, the burning of incense, vows, fastings, and other tortures of the body. Only this He wants: that he [Adam] praise God, that he thank Him, that he rejoice in the Lord, and that he obey Him by not eating from the forbidden tree.'[30] There is no suggestion that praising, thanking, rejoicing, and obeying are ways of repaying a *debt* owed to God for the gift of existence in a world described as 'very good'; rejoicing would seem a particularly odd currency for paying off a debt. The list contains appropriate ways of responding to God, including obligatory recognition of benefits received in gratitude and praise. After the Fall, God did institute sacrifices. But they 'had no other purpose,' writes Luther, than to set before early humans the 'hope of future deliverance and [to] exhort them to show their gratitude' to the God of love.[31] Sacrifices in Genesis 4 are not repayment to God for gifts received; like the sacraments of the later church, Luther thinks of them as reminders for humans of God's gifts, past and future.[32]

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

[28] Luther, *Lectures on Galatians*, in *LW* 26:127. Unlike most of what Luther wrote, Luther's 1535 Lectures on Galatians have the official status of a Lutheran confessional text.

[29] On the impossibility of putting God under obligation, see Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, in *LW* 25:376.

[30] Luther, *Lectures on Genesis 1–5*, in *LW* 1:106.

[31] Luther, *Lectures on Genesis 1–5*, in *LW* 1:247.

[32] In his *Sermons on the Catechism* (1528), Luther writes: 'But if everything is the gift of God, then you owe it to him to serve him with all these things and praise and thank him, since he has given them and still preserves them' (*LW* 51:163; see also *Lectures on Genesis 21–25*, in *LW* 4:42). Here, as later in the *Smaller Catechism* itself, satisfying God's requirements is what humans owe to God because God gave them 'everything.' But that is not typical of how Luther thinks of the relation between God's gifts and human obligations. In his *Lectures on Genesis*, the gift of creation does not seem to generate debts which are then paid with obedience to God's requirement for humans to thank and praise and to obey and serve God. They are God's commands, but they don't seem to be obligations justified by God's generosity, duties that generosity creates.

God. It shows up in the concluding section of a longer passage in which he aligns God's love in creating the world out of nothing and God's love in elevating the presumed 'nobodies' of the world. Luther writes:

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

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

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

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

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

[33] Luther, *LW* 21:300. [34] Luther, *LW* 31:367.

and the generosity of God's human children should in no way be tied to gratitude or ingratitude. The central claim of Luther's passage sums up the thrust of both Gospel texts: 'For a man does not serve that he may put men under obligation.' God's gifts do not make humans God's debtors, serving to place humans under obligation to love God above all things and neighbors as themselves in repayment for love received. Correspondingly, human gifts do not make their recipients into debtors, placing them under obligation to repay. Instead, God's gifts, received in thanksgiving and praise which recognize them as gifts, motivate and enable people to love God and neighbors willingly and with joy.

Gratitude to God and to humans is not a repayment for the simple reason that gifts do not incur repayable debts. What makes joyful love of God and neighbor possible is God's free gift-giving *which itself* does not put humans under obligation and which humans ought to recognize in gratitude but do not have to repay. Granted, love of God is a duty for a Christian, but it is not a duty of gratitude to God grounded in an infinite debt, but a duty of obedience to God grounded in the fact that human fulfillment lies in the alignment of human character with God's. And this normative vision of human character is grounded in the yet more fundamental fact that human being as such is constituted by the presence of God.[35]

1.4 A Counter-Gift as Great as the Gift

In *Confessions of a Born-Again Pagan*, Anthony Kronman offers an intellectual history of the West as the story of human relation to the world as

[35] The work of loving God and neighbor which humans do in response to God's gift of unconditional love for them is not, according to Luther, the response of independent, self-standing agents. 'Surely we are named after Christ,' writes Luther, 'not because he is absent from us, but because he dwells in us, that is, because we believe in him and are Christs to one another and do to our neighbors as Christ does to us' (*LW* 31:368). Analogously, this applies not just in the order of redemption but also in the order of creation. In redemption, Luther writes in his *Lectures on Genesis*, 'we are formed once more according to that familiar and indeed better image . . . that we may live in God and with God and be one with Him' (*LW* 1:64). On the basis of this and other passages from *Lectures on Genesis*, Atti Raunio has argued, 'the original human being created in God's image participated in the divine life and its qualities' ('The Human Being,' in *Engaging Luther: A (New) Theological Assessment*, ed. Oli-Pekka Vainio [Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010], 37). This active presence of God in humans is not added to already completed human beings; this is who they, as created by God, are. In this account of creation and redemption, it is not that something is given to humans that might then create their indebtedness and require repayment. God's own life is given to them – the presence of the indwelling Christ – who then becomes the principle of their agency, including the agency of offering gratitude and praise to God. Granted, human beings cooperate with God. But they are 'Christs' because Christ lives in them. This is not human action out of indebtedness to God; it is action made possible by God in the very gift that God gave them.

home; it is a narrative of the loss of the world as home and its hoped-for recovery. At the center of the story of loss is gratitude to God, the heavy burden of the impossibility of thanking God adequately and the resentment born out of that frustration. The result, Kronman claims, is the disenchanted world of rights and the expulsion of love and gratitude, both essential elements of home, from public life. For Kronman, Luther is the main villain of the story, the worst exemplar of the tribe of world-unhoming Christian theologians whose progenitor was the Apostle Paul. All of them 'have insisted, over and over again, on God's remoteness from man and on our utter incapacity to be grateful to him in the measure his gifts demand.'[36] If our reading of Luther above is convincing, one of the central claims of Kronman's book is misguided.

Contrary to what his talk of divine gifts demanding impossible gratitude may suggest, Kronman rejects the historically widely accepted repayment account of gratitude that we have encountered in Thomas Aquinas. For him, genuine gifts are expressions of love for another person for their own sake. Gratitude is, of course, the appropriate response for the goodness received, and a grateful person will be moved by the wish to return.[37] 'Nothing, perhaps, is more characteristic of gratitude than this,' Kronman writes, and continues, 'A gift that is meant for us arouses an affection for the one who has made it, so long as we are not crippled by envy.'[38] Crucial for his account is that the return to which the grateful person is moved differs categorically from repayment. 'A debt is a burden and repayment is a relief,' he writes. 'The joy of loving in return for love is something different. It is a joy of bringing a gift of one's own to those whose unbought love' a person has received.[39]

So far, Kronman's account of gift and gratitude tracks closely with Luther's: gifts are expressions of love for the recipient and they create no debts. The proper response to gifts is gratitude; unless blocked by envy, they arouse the joy of loving the giver and giving in turn. So why is Luther his anti-hero? Because in Kronman's view humans can in principle 'never return [God's] love with one that is as good and as great' as is God's love for them.[40] But exactly this is what they, Kronman believes, insuppressibly yearn to do. An 'abysmal gap' separates God and humans, God being both too distant and too different from them. God is the creator and they are

[36] Kronman, *Confessions*, 392.
[37] See Melanie Klein, 'Envy and Gratitude,' in *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works 1946–1963* (London: Vintage, 1997), 176–235 (189).
[38] Kronman, *Confessions*, 57–58. [39] Kronman, *Confessions*, 58. [40] Kronman, *Confessions*, 90.

creatures; God is self-standing and needs nothing, but they have received from God their very existence along with everything they need to live.

But why do humans think that they must give God a gift that is *as good and as great* as God's was to them? Kronman gives two reasons. First, *the Christian God demands* such an impossible gift. Or so Kronman says. He gives no evidence for this claim. True, the kind of love God does demand – to love God with one's *whole* being and to love one's neighbor *as oneself* – is impossible for humans to achieve. But God nowhere demands that human love be as good and as great as God's; the demand would be preposterous.[41] Even Thomas, who advocates the repayment account of gratitude, seeks to accommodate differences in power and possibility between givers and receivers; as we have seen, the requirement is to 'repay the favor at a suitable place and time *according to one's means*.' So does Seneca.[42] Any plausible account of gratitude must have a way of accommodating differences in power and capacity among agents. Kronman's account of Christian gratitude to God doesn't.

Second, Kronman believes that humans have a deep yearning to return to the original giver a commensurate reciprocating gift, to give them or someone else in turn 'a gift of equal magnitude.'[43] The inability to do so is, along with the inability to feel gratitude, 'the worst disaster that can befall a human being.'[44] He does not offer any support for the claim, nor does he explain the origin of such a yearning. But we can safely infer that Kronman

[41] Kronman's claim that the entire life of Christians 'is a meditation on their incompetence ever to be grateful enough' (*Confessions*, 115) is an inference from the vantage point of his own anthropology to how Christians must experience their relation to God. It corresponds to nothing that any of the great theologians has in fact claimed.

[42] Seneca, *Ben.* 7.1.16. [43] Kronman, *Confessions*, 95.

[44] Kronman, *Confessions*, 59. Kronman argues that all reflective humans who embrace the Christian faith – indeed, any of the three Abrahamic faiths – will recognize themselves in the tragic figure of Milton's Satan before his Fall, desperate to 'quit the debt immense of endless gratitude so burdensome' (99). For Kronman, this experience of Satan is the paradigmatic Christian experience. But it is not clear that Satan's problem in Milton's *Paradise Lost* is that, being a creature, 'he could never love God as well or as much as God loved him' (99). To the contrary, Milton's Satan mistakenly places himself on the same plane of being as God and thinks that going only 'one step higher' would make him the highest and relieve him of the debt of gratitude. From the vantage point of Milton's Satan, the problem was in the kind of relation that requires any gratitude at all, not in the impossible amount of gratitude demanded. This is also how the Apostle Paul in Romans characterizes the original problem of sinners: 'for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him' (1:21). Luther argued that to honor God *as* God is precisely *not* to seek to give God a return gift at all, let alone to seek to give a return gift that is 'as good and as great' as is God's; it is to joyfully recognize the gift received and therefore be motivated to do, in humanly possible ways, likewise.

thinks recipients will feel diminished if they are unable to give a commensurate gift in return, so that when the gap is great, as in the case of God and humans, recipients can only 'feel contempt' for themselves.[45] But irrespective of how humans tend to feel, to insist that the return gift must be equal to the original gift – *as* good and *as* great – is to make a category mistake. Such calculation belongs to the repayment account of gratitude, which Kronman rightly rejects. If gifts are expressions of love for recipients for their own sake, any return gift must reflect the possibilities of the original recipient, in which case the problem of impossible gratitude disappears. In fact, nobody is then incapable of adequate gratitude.

Kronman ascribes spontaneity to gift-giving and therefore endorses what we have called a recognition account of gratitude. At the same time, he implicitly *retains a repayment account of gratitude*, only the repayment is in his case a requirement not of justice but of an inner psychological yearning. A tension between the spontaneity of the gift and the compulsion to correspondingly great expression of gratitude in the form of a return gift is at the core of Kronman's account of gift and gratitude. And this tension is paired with another: between the need to affirm equality of human givers and receivers so that their gifts and return gifts can match in magnitude and the stubborn reality of their de facto inequality. Kronman removes inequality between God and humans by denying the existence of a transcendent God. But he is left with de facto inequality among human givers and receivers with fatal consequences for his entire project. Since certain forms of human inequality are ineliminable, as long as receivers feel that they must give return gifts 'as good and great' as those they received, most will be left with contempt for themselves and envy of others on account of their inability to do so.[46] Which will make them want to turn

[45] Kronman, *Confessions*, 85.

[46] Kronman senses the problem and seeks to remedy it by noting that the return gift need not be given to the original givers (children need not return it to their parents but can return it to their children) and by insisting that among humans gifts and return gifts can be 'equivalent' in magnitude or at least 'of comparable value' (96). They *can* be, provided the humans involved are roughly equivalent in their capacities. But many, indeed most, are not; though most (not all!) can give *some* return gift, many cannot give back a gift as large as they have received. The pressure to return a gift 'as good and great' will set off the chain reaction Kronman wishes to avoid: the inability will lead to self-contempt and self-contempt will turn into resentment. Kronman thinks that the problem is much greater when it comes to the relation between God the giver and humans as recipients because the relation is 'radically asymmetrical' (96). But he does not think that asymmetricity radically enough: God and human beings are not great and small on the same scale at all for the competition to legitimately arise; they are on a different plane of being (see below). They are, precisely as Kronman says, *incommensurable*. And for just that reason, the problem of envy does not need to arise.

all benefits into entitlements, precisely the modern tendency Kronman's *Confessions* is written to counter.

1.5 Back to Luther

Martin Luther, Kronman's villain, ought in fact to be his savior. Building on Luther, we argue that a commensurate reciprocating gift is *not* a requirement of gratitude.[47] The requirement of gratitude is recognition of the gift as a gift and joy in having received it. Affection for the giver and a wish to return love is certainly a hoped-for consequence of the reception of the gift with gratitude. But it is no more than that. Here again, it would be a mistake to think that in most cases the responding love must be 'as good and great' as the initiating one.

For Luther at the center of the human predicament is not a gift-induced-and-divinely-demanded-but-actually-impossible commensurate return gift. It would be un-godlike and therefore ungodly of God to require such a return. From his perspective, the demand for commensurate return is a self-imposed and self-defeating obligation humans project onto God. That projection entails a twofold misrecognition. One concerns the metaphysical character of God and consists in the assumption that God and humans exist on the same plane of being. The consequence is the belief that God and humans compete for the same 'honor space': the more honor is ascribed to God, the less of it can be ascribed to human beings. As many theologians have noted, God and humans are not in such a competitive relationship. The second misrecognition concerns the moral character of God, and it consists in failure to appreciate that God *is* love and therefore does not bestow love only to those who are worthy or who, after receiving it, make themselves worthy of it.

Summing up both points, we might say that frustrated yearning to give God a gift 'as good and great' as the one received from God is not an enactment of faith that is bound to lead to dethronement of God and the emergence of the world of humans acting as if they were self-sufficient and competing demi-gods, as Kronman argued. Instead, that yearning is a consequence of a failure of theological imagination and an inability to rejoice in the sheer generosity of the non-competitive Giver at the origin of

[47] A less forceful but still compelling argument against Kronman on this point could be made from the perspective of Thomas's theology.

our existence, rather than experiencing ourselves as diminished by it. All this is not to say that we do not, many of us at least, chafe at our creatureliness and crave the ability to establish our equality with God through an equal return of God's gifts. To do so, however, is to turn away from the truly appropriate form of gratitude to God revealed in Jesus Christ – joyful recognition of the goodness of God the giver and of what God gives – and to harm ourselves, and likely each other, in the process.