


Just How Special Are Humans?

with Eric Priest, Celia Deane-Drummond, Joseph Henrich, and Mary Meyers, "Introduction to Symposium on 'Just How Special Are Humans?'; Eric Priest, "Human Uniqueness: Debates in Science and Theology"; Joseph Henrich, "How Culture Made Us Uniquely Human"; Agustín Fuentes, "Distinctively Human? Meaning-Making and World Shaping as Core Processes of the Human Niche"; Cristine Legare, "The Cumulative Quality of Culture Explains Human Uniqueness"; David Reich, "Human Uniqueness from a Biological Point of View"; Alan Mittelman, "The Mystery of Human Uniqueness: Common Sense, Science, and Judaism"; Jan-Olav Henriksen, "Experiencing the World as the Evolved Image of God: Religion in the Context of Science"; Jennifer A. Herdt, "Responsible Agency: A Human Distinctive?"; Celia Deane-Drummond, "Tracing Distinctive Human Moral Emotions: The Contribution of a Theology of Gratitude"; and John Behr, "Nature Makes an Ascent from the Lower to the Higher: Gregory of Nyssa on Human Distinctiveness."

TRACING DISTINCTIVE HUMAN MORAL EMOTIONS? THE CONTRIBUTION OF A THEOLOGY OF GRATITUDE

by Celia Deane-Drummond 

Abstract. Darwin thought that the moral sense was among the most challenging aspects of human life to account for through evolutionary explanations. This article seeks to probe the question about human uniqueness primarily from a theological perspective by focusing in depth on one distinctive moral sentiment, gratitude, particularly in the thought of Thomas Aquinas. It uses that example as a case study about how to consider the validity of arguments for human uniqueness within the broader compass of the cultural evolution of sociality and morality within the human sciences, including evolutionary anthropology. Further questions about the evolution of religion surface in this discussion since gratitude, from a theological perspective, necessarily includes gratitude to God as a fundamental aspect of religious faith and practice.

Keywords: Aquinas; cultural evolution; evolutionary anthropology; gratitude; human uniqueness; moral sentiments

BEGINNING A DIALOGUE

Trying to understand the distinctive aspects of who we are as human beings is no easy task. From a Christian theological starting point, the idea

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of humanity as the image of God (*imago Dei*) is premised on the perfect image of God in Jesus Christ as both human and divine. For centuries, the terminology of divine image bearing has held sway in theological circles as a marker of human uniqueness. Theologians generally understand that divine image as marked out by (1) unique substantive capacities, focusing, for example, particularly on the importance of reason and/or language,¹ or (2) unique performative relationships,² including with God, who is also understood as a relational, trinitarian unity expressed as both ontological (immanent Trinity) or performative (economic Trinity), or (3) unique functions, such as humanity's unique vocation to act in dominion over the world in imitation of God's ultimate rule, or occasionally (4) ontological uniqueness, based on divine ensoulment and therefore implying a metaphysics of difference from other creatures.

In terms of method, it is the *depth* of analysis of specific texts that draws on experience as well as critical analytical and philosophical tools that marks out distinctive theological discussion. This is done in such a way that parts company from the more common scientific evidence-based arguments based on assemblage of cumulative data in favor of a particular hypothesis. The comparison should not, of course, be taken too far. For example, theological reviews and systematic treatise may also survey a wide range of positions and their evidential basis, and some scientists may focus specifically on models in depth. What is worth noting here is the normative practice for each, rather than exceptions which show more methodological overlap. Both scientific and theological critique benefit from awareness of philosophical presuppositions and the importance of creative imagination and narrative, though narrative is usually more self-conscious within theological writing. At the same time, engaging with and recognizing the scientific context in which such a theological contribution might arise is also important for genuine dialogue.

Mapping the different options for theological interpretations of *imago Dei* in the light of the evolutionary sciences continues to be the subject of theological and philosophical debate (Deane-Drummond 2012; Deane-Drummond and Wason 2012; McFadyen 2012; Stenmark 2012; Torrance 2012; Walton 2012). Charles Darwin, while recognizing humanity's difference from our closest living primate relatives, insisted on any differences in mental capacity between animals and humans as being one of degree, rather than of kind. But for him, it is the moral sense that "perhaps affords the best and highest distinction between man and the lower animals" (Darwin 2004, 151). He therefore believed that the moral sense was among the most challenging areas of human specialness to try and account for in purely evolutionary terms. For him, "social instincts" emerged in prehuman societies to encourage animals to live together and to reduce conflict (Darwin 2004, 145). These eventually became "higher" and "lower" moral rules in human societies, the former being founded on social

instincts and the latter on cultural norms (Darwin 2004, 147). Scientific debates on the biological basis for the cultural evolution of morality in different societal and cultural contexts are still ongoing and therefore offer a fruitful opportunity for further dialogue with theological perspectives. The specific instance of moral sentiment is of particular interest from a theological perspective, since it includes substantive, relational, and functional components that also draw out philosophical, theological, and scientific concerns (Clayton and Schloss 2004; Putnam, Neiman and Schloss 2014).

The focus of this article is on the particular moral sentiment of gratitude as a way of deepening a discussion of what it means theologically for humanity to be named as in the image of God, since by focusing on a particular case in a way that also includes humanity's relationship with God, I hope to show that new insights emerge on what it means to be human. I endeavor to do so in a way that both draws together theological and scientific knowledge and insight and, at the same time, mutually challenges aspects of both.

How far moral sentiments are unique to humans is a matter of contention in the scientific literature, and often understood as being in a liminal relationship to the remarkable nascent capacities of many other social animals (see Deane-Drummond 2014, 2017, 2019). At the same time, evolutionary anthropologists recognize that modern humans are the only living species from the otherwise extant *Homo* lineage. Secular and theological debates about language and its role as a marker in human uniqueness both biologically and culturally are unlikely to be sufficient, not least because of a more complex understanding of the evolution of cognition and semiotics (Deane-Drummond and Fuentes 2017). Evolutionary anthropology shows that the human lineage is one that has sporadically edged its way forward, to a degree at least, in an interlaced meshwork across different hominin species that were potentially interbreeding (Ackermann and Schroeder 2020, 29–46). Although the dynamics of this process are uneven, over the Pleistocene period distinctive neurological, physiological, and social changes eventually paved the way for subsequent periods of rapid socio-cultural change (Fuentes 2020, 13–28; Fuentes, this issue).

If it is difficult to map such biosocial changes based on archaeological research on hominin bones or material records, it is even more challenging to address changes in the inner emotional or cognitive worlds of our earliest ancestors. Discussion of distinctively human moral emotions lead to further complications when those crossing different disciplinary boundaries recognize that their working definitions of morality are likely to be different. Whereas Darwin proposed a utilitarian basis for morality, explanations in evolutionary psychology often refer to rule-based norms. Theological definitions, furthermore, may be normative (deontological),

based on an assessment of likely outcomes (utilitarian), or judged on the characteristics of the agents (virtue ethics). The latter, virtue approach, involves a complex combination of cognitive capacities and religious affect, such as the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. There is also a distinction between generalized prosociality (that Darwin referred to as social instincts) and morality in evolutionary terms, especially when morality is defined as norm based. Within prosociality the different elements of compassion show different valences. The meaning of empathy, for example, might seem relatively straightforward but is generally different for philosophers and behavioral scientists (Deane-Drummond 2019). The challenge for theologians entering such a discussion is how to go beyond the first preliminary task of philosophical clarification of what precisely is being discussed. Further, by using specific narrowly disciplinary based definitions of morality the possibility of any convergence starts to become strained.

My argument in this article is that if theologians are going to make a specific contribution to debates on human distinctiveness, then their analysis needs to respond creatively to that science as well as consider how far doctrinal positions are still convincing. For example, the basic naturalistic premise of cultural evolution challenges aspects of more traditional Christian theology, including substantive Christological versions of the image of God (*imago Dei*) (Hays and Burdett 2017).⁵ At the same time, simply reiterating Christian tradition on the importance of human uniqueness and advocating human exceptionalism because of specific dogmatic claims without any reference to scientific work is not necessarily helpful either. One alternative, resisting reference to divine image bearing on the basis that it is no longer compatible with an emergent understanding of humanity from other animals (e.g., Fergusson 2013), admittedly avoids tension with evolutionary sciences. By deflating the importance of image bearing, however, this perspective cuts out a tradition that has shaped Christian theology for centuries. My own preference is for a reinterpretation of what the image of God signifies, with a preference for considering that image in terms of performance (Deane-Drummond 2012), rather than a debunking of or refusal to speak of humanity in terms of image bearing. Performative image bearing puts emphasis on the place of each and every human being regardless of geographical, cultural, or racial origin in the theological drama of human life on earth, caught up, as it is, with the drama of life as a whole (Deane-Drummond 2014). Image bearing is therefore expressive of the vocational task of each human being in relation to God, each other, and the natural world. In so far as it does not depend in an absolute sense on capacities such as cognition or language or capacity for relationship, it can include all human beings whatever their degree of impairment from the norm. It also puts emphasis on the ontological in so far as each persons' place in the overall theodrama is one that is both divinely given, but also, made. In other words, each person is gifted as God's image bearers

from the beginning of life, but also is capable of becoming *more like* the perfect image in Christ through the way we act, particularly in relation to each other and other creatures. The different virtues, including compassion, justice, wisdom, gratitude, humility, and so on that come to be expressed in a human person's life are therefore also expressions of image bearing.

GRATITUDE: MAPPING ITS MEANING AND EMERGENCE⁴

Although there is a range of possible moral emotions that could be fruitful for mutual discussion between theology and the biological and human sciences on the topic of human distinctiveness, I am focusing in this article on *gratitude*, both because of the attention it has received in psychological research, and because of its potential in enlivening cross disciplinary conversations between evolutionary anthropology, theology and philosophy (see also Deane-Drummond 2022). While theologians are more inclined to find their focus through specialist studies of the work of particular theologians (as in Behr, this issue), an alternative is to focus on one facet of what that image bearing entails from different perspectives.

Ashraf H.A. Rushdy has stressed that there is no one philosophy of gratitude and separates what could be termed *juridical* definitions from *relational* definitions. The juridical approach “attempts to understand the conditions under which gratitude may be said to be due or deserved, the second on what it is that gratitude does or expresses or invites in the specific contexts in which it is manifest” (Rushdy 2020, 2). It is, therefore, a recognition of *debt*. The alternative definition of gratitude understands it as an emotion that shapes relationships, so that gratitude enables a bond to be created between the beneficiary and the benefactor (Rushdy 2020, 401). As an emotion that ties people together, it is closely related to but not identical with prosociality. Gratitude is described as a ground for human sociality that helps to explain why this moral emotion enables the social basis for characterizing humanity's place as the distinctly cooperative species (Bowles and Gintis 2013).

Gratitude, when understood as a means through which to foster cooperation, indicates the evolutionary and biological basis of gratitude grounded in primate social reciprocity (Bonnie and de Waal 2004). The philosophy behind this interpretation of gratitude oscillates between an economic understanding of gratitude, as an acknowledgment of debt, and a notion of gratitude as something that facilitates what Peter Kropotkin called mutual aid (Kropotkin 2005). Frans de Waal goes further and suggests that “it is safe to assume that the actions of our ancestors were guided by gratitude, obligation, retribution, and indignation long before they developed enough language capacity for moral discourse” (de Waal 1997, 161). From this perspective, the sentiment of debt and obligation in the

acknowledgment of benefits is integral to the evolution of reciprocal altruism characteristic of many species (Trivers 1971). Emotions of gratitude could facilitate direct reciprocity by acknowledging debt.

Direct reciprocity is cooperation based on the philosophical principle of *do ut des*, “I give so you may give,” whereas indirect reciprocity implies cooperation embodied in the principle “I help you and somebody else helps me” (Nowak and Roch 2007, 605; McCullough, Kimeldorf and Cohen 2008; Rushdy 2020, 19). *Downstream indirect reciprocity* is embodied in the urge to help someone who has helped others in the past and can be viewed as a gratitude that strengthens kinship or existing relations, whereas *upstream indirect reciprocity* moves beyond such relations (Nowak and Roch 2007). Gratitude can help to produce *upstream indirect reciprocity* and shows that those who feel gratefulness for something can act in a way that is beneficial toward strangers who, from a narrow economic perspective, do not deserve that generosity (Nowak and Roch 2007). *Upstream indirect reciprocity* is arguably hard to understand from a perspective on gratitude as primarily an internalization of “the norm of reciprocity” since it is not a thankful human response to a benefactor (Elfers and Hlava 2016, 22). Instead, it indicates that gratitude can be perceived as spontaneous generosity emerging through, but not identical with, networks of direct reciprocity (Nowak and Roch 2007). Gratitude also seems to be involved in the spread of altruism within social networks known as altruistic “paying it forward” (McCullough, Kimeldorf and Cohen 2008) which points to distinctively human types of collaboration (Smith, Pedersen, Forster et al. 2017; Steller, Gordon, Piff et al. 2017). Further research suggests gratitude helps to sustain collaboration within whole cultures (Smith, Pedersen, Forster et al. 2017), strengthens human relationships (Algoe, Gable and Maisel 2010), or broadens and builds other positive emotions (Fredrickson 2004).

Although gratitude is an important aspect of later uniquely human religious rituals, what relationship might it have with a broader sense of spiritual awareness? (Frias, Watkins, Webber et al. 2011; Rosmarin, Pirutinsky, Cohen et al. 2011) The feeling of gratitude can evolve to a philosophical or religious understanding of the world for “highly grateful people may possess a worldview in which everything they have—and even life itself—is a gift” (McCullough, Emmons and Tsang 2002, 114).

Emerging gratitude may have taken different forms in different cultures of early humans (Henrich and McElreath 2003). Gift-giving appears relatively late in the archaeological record, but gratitude in archaic populations, such as Neanderthals, may have had a different form (Spikins, Hitchens and Needham 2017; Spikins, Scott and Wright 2017).

It is outside the scope of this article to discuss in detail what could be termed the prerequisites for distinctive human practices of widespread gift exchange across different social groups. Tracking any material evidence of

exchange of gifts may not necessarily be associated with feelings of gratitude but may simply fulfil cultural or other social obligations. What can be traced through material evidence is the emergence and development of much more general patterns of reciprocity. Penny Spikins and her colleagues, for example, argue that the emergence of tolerance is important prior to the possibility of exchange of goods and resources at the boundaries of one social group with other groups (Spikins, French, Wood et al. 2021). Where ecological resources are scarce, tolerance may be crucial for enabling shared access to those resources. In other words, both reciprocity and tolerance between groups is a prerequisite for the possibility of exchange prior to the development of feelings of gratitude.⁵

Miller and Wang (2022) have published research on the movement of ostrich eggshell beads among human communities across Africa around 50,000 years ago. By tracking bead diameter, thickness, and aperture diameter the authors were able to track social networks, with little variation found in eastern Africa, but far more variation in southern Africa, with beads showing strong similarities in the first phase between 50 and 33ka. The authors interpret these results in terms of the breakdown in social networks between the east and southern regions arising from changing climate in the region. Such sophisticated social networks maintained through exchange of carefully crafted goods implies, but does not prove, the presence of gratitude.

Analysis of the explicit anthropology of gift exchange and its cultural diversity and development in subsequent archaic societies has been influenced by Marcel Mauss' classic text *Essay on the Gift: The Form and Sense of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (Mauss [1923] 2015). One aspect of his work on gift was his analysis of strongly felt obligation and even one might say a *requirement* to pay back, and then pass on to another, including in his study different legal systems as well as the frameworks found in Hindu religious traditions. Further, *taonga*⁶ in a Polynesian setting is endowed with individuality that goes beyond the spiritual dimension or *hau* of the forest, which ties *taonga* both to its owners and the soil. *Taonga* are required to be passed on, shaped by the *hau* of the originating *taonga*. Indeed, to keep that gift and not pass it on is assumed to lead to some serious evil or even death (Mauss [1923] 2015, 72).⁷

While traditionally acknowledged as a human virtue, current psychological studies indicate that feelings of gratitude in those cultures under investigation are related to emotional wellbeing (Emmons and Crumpler 2000; Emmons and Shelton 2002; Algoe and Haidt 2009; Emmons and Mishra 2011; Fagley 2012). The way gratitude is defined as a positive emotion in many psychological studies falls short of its interpretation as an explicitly social and moral emotion (Morgan, Gulliford and Kristjánsson 2017). Arguably, three distinct stages must be present for distinctively human gratitude to qualify as an explicitly *moral* virtue: (1) the recogni-

tion of an intentionally given benefit; (2) a positive affective state toward a benefactor; (3) an increase in motivation to reciprocate (Carr 2013; Gulliford, Morgan and Kristjánsson 2013; Roberts 2016; de La Taille 2018). Evolutionary studies identify some but not all these aspects related to gratitude through reciprocal exchanges.

GRATITUDE: EXPLORING SPECIFIC CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS

What kind of questions might emerge from a deeper consideration of an explicitly theological narrative of gratitude? There is a vast literature on gratitude in different theological traditions, even within the specific religious tradition of Christianity. Thomas Aquinas is one of the most articulate writers on the moral life and remains influential in contemporary theology and ethics. His very first question in his treatise on gratitude is about whether gratitude or *gratia*, also translated thankfulness, is distinct or not in human life, or if it collapses into other dispositions or virtues (Aquinas 2012, 2a2ae Qu. 106.1).⁸ And the first and most obvious virtue for him to distinguish from gratitude is religion, *religionis*, given that religion is an expression of the honor due to God for all the benefits received. The second virtue to be distinguished from gratitude relates to what is specifically owed to parents, a virtue that he names as piety, *pietatis*. He then asks how the distinctiveness of gratitude might be related to its role in repayment. Following Aristotle (Aristotle 2004, 5:4), Aquinas illustrates the purpose of giving thanks as a *type of paying back*, as an act of justice. He responds to queries about this ordering by suggesting that the greater debt owed always in some respects includes other kinds of debt, so that the primary cause of a debt of owing is in God, then one's parents, and then other benefactors. There is a gradation in such virtues so that gratitude is in what could be viewed as the base layer of thankfulness that has specific and distinct expression in both piety and religion. Religion, in so far as it includes the highest form of thankfulness to God, also includes piety and gratitude for benefaction.

The description of gratitude as repayment in Aquinas' account seems to be a cognitive process, rather than simply being related to moral emotions. Does this mean that in Thomas Aquinas, gratitude is not simply a moral emotion, or, as he prefers, a passion, but is also related to cognition as well? Gratitude is in one sense aligned to justice, for to be authentic it comes with, he suggests, an element of commutative justice or paying back. At the same time, however, it goes further than this type of justice because it arises not in a merely proportionate nor coercive manner but much more spontaneously. Therefore, an assessment of the proportionality is important in understanding gratitude. So, the penitent, he suggests, will give relatively more thanks compared with those who are innocent,

because in their case God gives grace to one forgiven instead of punishment (Aquinas 2012, 2a2ae Qu. 106.2).

Aquinas also considered the degree to which favors or kindnesses are done with the hope or expectation of reward for oneself, rather than altruistically, or perhaps with mixed motives. He rejects, then, the idea that even a very wealthy benefactor should not be thanked because he would not somehow need to be recompensed (Aquinas 2012, 2a2ae Qu. 106.3). There are also nuances in what he names thankful “expressions of the heart” and material paying back “the gift” in return for benefaction (Aquinas 2012, 2a2ae Qu. 106.4). Accordingly, if someone is in too much of a hurry to pay back a gift, it would not be virtuous, but rather constrained repayment.

A further aspect that Aquinas considers is whether gratitude is just something very generalized and related to preserving friendship, since acknowledgement of what is given by a friend, along with all the other virtues, is integral to friendship. Repayment may arise out of a virtuous act of justice, or a virtuous act of gratitude or a virtuous act of friendship (Aquinas 2012, 2a2ae Qu. 106.1). Justice is true to its virtue when it is a legal debt. Friendship can, in his view, arise from an assessment of mutual usefulness to the other, in which case repayment is related to the effect of the original gift; while he confines *virtuous* friendship according to the *disposition* of the giver, and it is this that he suggests gratitude is most concerned about, rather than the material effect of a gift on the one who receives (Aquinas 2012, 2a2ae Qu. 106.5). In other words, gifts given in virtuous friendship are not just measured by their usefulness, but by the attitude of the giver in cementing relationships. For a kindly action to be morally good and thus deserving of gratitude depends on the will or intent of the giver. Although Aquinas labors to distinguish friendship, gratitude and justice, the distinctly human ability to express these different dispositions also tend to blur into one another.

Human ability to measure the attitude of the giver inclines a greater gift in return in a way that flows directly from building loving relationships in charity meaning that “the obligation of gratitude has no limit” (Aquinas 2012, 2a2ae Qu. 106.6). This has some resonance with the psychological idea of “paying it forward” in that generosity helps to build up relationships. For Aquinas there is, therefore, *both* affect and cognition, a discernment of intention of the will along with a spontaneity and lack of calculation that make up the virtue of gratitude.

Aquinas urges us to pay attention to the motivation for charity and the attitude or will of the giver in relation to the virtue of justice. Wellbeing in Christian theology takes its cue from a sacrificial understanding of virtue that is modelled on Christ as exemplar *par excellence* of virtue. This sacrificial dimension is illustrated through what Thomas would consider the more ultimate expression of gratitude in religious practice. A sharing

by believers in the life of Christ in religious ritual through the Eucharist, which itself means thanksgiving, is tied up with Christ's sacrificial death given by grace, so combining grace, *chara*, and joy, *charis*. Gratitude, therefore, is integral to a much wider Christian narrative of creation and salvation history, both of which could be perceived as the ultimate gifts given by God to every believer and which therefore have the capacity to elicit a deep sense of gratitude.

It is therefore not surprising that a lack of gratitude, or ingratitude to God in particular, is a sin or vice, rather than just something arising from a specific disposition of character. Aquinas dedicates a question to the specific problems associated with ingratitude, naming some aspects serious (mortal) sins if they work against love or proper relationship with God (Aquinas 2012, Qu. 107). The writing of Ignatius of Loyola—founder of the Jesuit order—is relevant here. In a letter to Simon Rodrigues on March 18, 1542, Ignatius states, “Ingratitude is one of the things most worthy of detestation before our Creator and Lord ... out of all the sins and evils which can be imagined. For it is a failure to recognize the good things, the graces and the gifts received. As such, it is the cause, beginning and origin of all evils and sins. On the contrary, recognition and gratitude for the good things and gifts received is greatly loved and esteemed both in heaven and on earth” (Iparraguire and Dalmases 1982: 679).

Ignatius makes it particularly clear that rather than aiming at more superficial feelings of happiness, gratitude pushes the believer toward greater acts of sacrifice. Ignatius' spiritual exercise known as the Examen includes a method of making an examination of conscience which starts by “giving thanks to God for the favors received” (Ignatius of Loyola 1951, §43). The method for examination of conscience is laid out in the first week of the *Spiritual Exercises*. A basic first step in any examen at any time of day or period begins, therefore, by reflecting on positive inner emotions and gratitude toward God for those relationships or events. Gratitude is, therefore, in a primary sense about one's relationship with God and understanding of self as dependent on God. In addition, the First Principle and Foundation on which the Exercises are based states that “man is created to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul” (Puhl 1951, §23). Timothy Gallagher agrees that “it would be difficult to express more strongly a sense of the incomparable value of gratitude” (Gallagher 2006, 59). Theologian Gerard Fagin supports the idea that core to Ignatius' thinking is a mysticism of gratitude (Fagin 1992). At the deepest level, the primary relation between God and the believer is love, and that between the believer and God is gratitude. The mystery of being human is, therefore, according to this tradition, bound up with a sense of gratitude to God.

Fostering gratitude daily was the engine which drove believers to greater acts of individual sacrifice in obedience to a specific God-given command

or call. Loyola's understanding implies a direct correlation between gratitude and the spiritual life. Complex human capacities like discernment and gratitude are fundamentally about the spiritual life. We discern a path in our relationship with God, and that path is one filled at its most basic level with gratitude (Au 2010). The positive movements of the Holy Spirit in the believer are therefore discerned through monitoring feelings of gratitude that are then related back to the divine.

INTEGRATION AND EXPLORATION OF FURTHER QUESTIONS

Although exploring the path of human evolution of moral emotions is challenging—philosophically, scientifically, and theologically (Putnam, Neiman and Schloss 2014)—dialogue on the biocultural evolution of wisdom as an important aspect of human distinctiveness (Deane-Drummond and Fuentes 2017) and other religiously important moral sentiments of humility and grace (Deane-Drummond and Fuentes 2020) gives some reason to suppose that analysis of different dimensions of the biocultural evolution of gratitude will benefit from a deeper theological understanding of what gratitude means.

From the preliminary analysis outlined so far, the difference, perhaps, between the evolutionary, psychological, and theological accounts of gratitude relate to the perceived benefits. The model of gratitude in psychology focuses on positive feelings of gratitude and connects with experiences of personal wellbeing and happiness, even if this is understood in a social context. An evolutionary understanding relates gratitude to broader benefits in terms of prosociality. An understanding of an individual's sacrificial element in gratitude for the sake of the well-being of the community seems to be missing, but it is core to theological accounts, and could also have been important in the way gratitude began to be expressed in early human evolution. The emergence of reciprocal exchange between social species and eventually tolerance to outsiders so that disparate groups could interact, and exchange materials was likely a prerequisite for the eventual emergence of more sophisticated cultural systems of gift exchange recorded in hunter gatherer societies. In the latter case, however, one aspect of the felt obligation to "pass on" relates to gratitude in a juridical sense, and one of the driving factors seems to be fear of failure to fulfil moral rules and obligations. Theology is also attentive to the distinctions within gratitude, such as the way it is expressed in a superlative sense through being forgiven, or through a superlative sense of gifts of grace, as in felt spiritual experience. Theological analysis, at least in the limited sense outlined here, distinguishes but also blurs gratitude with other socially and morally important spheres including justice and friendship in a way that chimes with aspects of anthropological work, but is arguably less resonant with current psychological literature.

Understanding the evolution of religion is notoriously complex, with formal religions arising relatively late in human history (Bellah 2011). It is not unreasonable, however, to suppose that gratitude could be implicated in experiences of the divine or unseen spirits considerably prior to any formalized religion or formal acknowledgement of the presence of “Big Gods.” The adequacy of the argument that religion has evolved through fear of a punitive God by curtailing antisocial behavior has been challenged by an alternative model that stresses the importance of religion in promoting prosocial behaviors through prestige rather than dominance models of leadership (Lenfesty and Morgan 2019). Discussion on archaic human evolution focuses on how humans in the far distant past behaved, and how human emotional capacities, including gratitude, may have developed through a complex interplay of biological and cultural evolution (Kolodny, Feldman and Creanza 2018). Working out what those changes are at this nexus of distinct biological and cultural traits is likely to provide important clues to human uniqueness. But how did these changes come about? More general and unspecific feelings of gratefulness when benefiting from another’s unselfish efforts is likely to be prior to verbal expressions of gratitude specific to gifts received from individuals (Husong, Langley, Rothenberg et al. 2018). In this context, *generosity* within social relationships and *generalized reciprocity* in early hominins (Whiten and Erdal 2012; Hare 2017) provides important insights, whilst the cultural context of caregiving and its uniqueness in humans from at least 1.5 million years ago also provides a key cultural component (Spikins, Rutherford and Needham 2010; Spikins 2015; Spikins, Needham, Tilley et al. 2018).

Theology provides a further reminder of the importance of narrative in developing meaning in human cultures by closely relating gratitude to unseen worlds, including spiritual experience. This serves to challenge assumptions about what might or might not be the evolutionary dynamics of gratitude. Much of the anthropological material records tell us about the functional elements of the lives of humans and prehumans in the distant past, such as how they moved around, found food, and survived, though there are also tantalizing glimpses of how they related to each other emotionally.

Even prior to the emergence of the genus *Homo* around two million years ago, prehumans were attracted to apparently vulnerable childlike objects (Spikins 2015, 2019) and cared for each other over the long term when they were ill or injured in ways not seen in other apes (Fisk and Macho 1992; Spikins, Rutherford and Needham 2010). Caregiving for the ill and injured provides one possible focus for understanding the relationship between biological and cultural evolution. Caregiving is a product of both evolved predispositions, such as empathy, and cultural norms about how to support vulnerable individuals and is likely to have been important

in the emergence of a motivation to recognize and acknowledge altruism in others (Spikins, Needham, Tilley et al. 2018), and therefore eventually recognize in others a genuine desire to give. In theological terms such extreme examples of caregiving would be understood as expressions of mercy and loving compassion.

Modern ethnographic social contexts, which promote strong social bonds and a willingness to give for the sake of others (Wiessner 2002; Hewlett 2013; Crittenden 2016; 2016), play an important role in the social and cultural expressions of gratitude. Such analyses are likely to provide some important clues in what is unique about human gratitude and how it eventually came to be expressed. Certainly, in hunter gatherer communities, explicit expressions of gratitude seem to be rare, not least because doing favors for others in a close knit and inter dependent community is assumed to be the rule rather than the exception.⁹ Gratitude, however, may still be felt, even if it is not verbally articulated. Although Christian theology positively encourages at least some verbal articulation of gratitude, there is also a sense in which the abundant provision of God is a presupposition of divine providence, and in this way reduces any sense of anxiety or worry about daily needs. Further, gratitude, when considered as a uniquely human orientation toward God, each other, and creatures around us, is capable of including all living human beings, is reflective of the divine image of God that is made evident in Jesus Christ, inspires action that fosters the common good in a community, and provides a theological lens through which to understand something about the mystery of our human uniqueness in a way that does not separate us from other creaturely kinds.

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NOTES

1. It is not my intention to expand on the considerable debate surrounding each of these proposals. “Reason” in classic thought is not simply cognitive function, but articulates the human capacity beyond that of other animals to demonstrate self-reflective consciousness. Those who object to more substantive characteristics being a marker for human uniqueness may do so on the basis that such qualities are not found in, for example, those with disabilities or cognitive

disfunction. Philosophical defense of this position is based on what is considered normative for the human condition (see Stenmark 2012).

2. Similarly, to the substantive view, those who object to the relational view may do so on the basis that this would not apply to those with autism, and so seems to exclude some human beings.

3. The authors also discuss the doctrine of sin in the light of science, but that is less relevant to more a discussion of prosocial virtues.

4. Some of the background work on the philosophical aspects of gratitude for this article was researched by Marten Bjork as part of a JTF funded project with Penny Spikins as co-PI, entitled the *Roots of Gratitude*, grant number 61389.

5. As far back as 400,000 years ago the controlled use of fire by human groups showed up simultaneously in many different regions in the world including the Old World, Africa and western Eurasia. The pattern suggests cultural diffusion and implies that different hominin groups tolerated each other to transmit ideas and techniques over many geographical regions within a very short time period in a way that was highly distinctive for our species (MacDonald et al. 2021).

6. Loosely translated: goods or articles.

7. It would be impossible in the short space of this article to do adequate justice to all different dimensions of Mauss' classic work on gift exchange and its subsequent influence. There are some resonances between Aquinas' approach to gratitude and that found in classic anthropological texts, particularly in relation to a sense of obligation to pay back—as discussed below.

8. Further details of Aquinas' understanding of gratitude and ingratitude are published in Deane-Drummond 2022.

9. What is particularly interesting is that in the hunter gatherer societies explored by Polly Wiessner, gratitude is perceived, as in Aquinas, as a way of acknowledging debt, and for that reason seems to be avoided in these societies. Wiessner writes, "If gratitude was recognized, then people could put others in debt which would destroy that aspect of the economic system. Among the Bushmen and many other hunter-gatherers, there is no word for thank you." Polly Wiessner, December 20, 2019, personal email communication cf. (Wiessner, 2002).

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