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The Dynamic Root of Gratitude: Scientific Enquiry in Context

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Abstract

The concept of gratitude is a subject of current philosophical analysis and a virtue of special attention in positive psychology but it has not so far attracted the interest of theologians to the same degree. This paper proposes that the Christian theological framework offers a stimulating ground of encouragement to scientific enquiry. Gratitude is both a virtue which recalls past benefits and a forward-looking emotion which excites interest, builds confidence, stimulates a God-given curiosity and underpins a lively desire to understand the creation and contribute to its well-being. I argue that by grounding our enquiring within a sense of God's redemptive creating of the world, we are able to respond to God's lure to become co-creators with God. In so doing we become more response-able with the potential to become more responsible persons. As persons made in God's image, we are free to give ourselves to the world's well-being and to work with one another to serve the Common Good.

Keywords

Curiosity, Creation, Imagination, Gratitude, Response-ability, Responsibility, Co-creation

Gratitude lies at the heart of the world's true being as the creation of God. "And God saw that it was good …" implies, for the writer of the book of Genesis, that God sees his world as worthy of his love and therefore capable of fulfilling his purpose (Gen. 1:31). As one commentator has it, "All creation tout ensemble, not only its component parts, is pronounced 'very good', the climactic seventh divine pronouncement. There is no evil, only beauty, in the world that God makes" (Clifford 1995: 9). The dynamic virtue of gratitude is rooted in the being of God, creator, redeemer and ever-present encourager of our human flourishing.

All human beings are naturally grateful for the world of which they find themselves to be an integral part. We find it to be an exciting, beautiful and splendidly puzzling environment. It is impossible to observe it neutrally as if it was simply a happenstance, by which I mean a world without questions or mysteries. Rather, it is alive with an impact on humankind: it is an environment which demands our attention. In theological terms we might say that God lures us by God's presence in creation to take delight in it and to set about understanding it and our place within it, so that we can contribute to its well-being.

Hence we are grateful for what we inherit from earlier scholars, and are free to share with our peers as we enquire with them in a research community. This is an aspect of scientific enquiry which we need to be reminded of, as too frequently we are ignorant of where we stand and may even be tempted to think that we are on our own. Yet our capacity to grow in understanding is inspired when we feel that we are joining in the conversation of the generations. I recall that the first physics textbooks I was given almost always began (often in small print) with a couple of paragraphs on earlier scientists who had contributed to the topic, with reference to important applications which had followed. And my excellent teachers did not give me to understand that this was a preliminary to the real business of learning science, but an integral part of it.

In attending to the conversation of the generations we will be further stimulated to put our scientific enquiring into a wider context. The wider cultural context in which our science is set is something too for which we can be grateful. Science does not "make sense" for us as an exclusive isolated set of disciplines, as if a physicist was somehow no more than a physicist, or a geologist nothing but a geologist. Maryam Mirzakhani, the winner of a 2014 Fields Medal for Outstanding Discoveries in Mathematics, describes the language of mathematics as full of "beauty and elegance" (Sample 2014). These are qualities that potentially link all disciplines and every experience. We all, every one of us, can enjoy the beauty of creation and take personal delight in it. The experience underlines another aspect of our professional work as a scientist: the first thing to remember as a professional, including as a professional scientist, is that we are persons alongside other persons. Whatever authority we have as an acknowledged expert in any field stems first from our character as a person. Yves Congar (1957: xxvii–xxviii) reminds his fellow priests and bishops that whatever their responsibilities their ordination gives them, they remain lay persons alongside other laypeople.

We are grateful too for the skills we bring to our enquiring; not only our technical skills and the range of our experimental opportunities, but our capacity to make new links across the disciplines, to put our knowledge in a cultural context, to take imaginative leaps, and to persevere in the face of problems, misunderstandings, difficulties and frustrations. In all of these ways we shall be fortified by our gratitude for the world in which we are set, our conversation with the generations and our common humanity. But the context will not be complete if it excludes God and we neglect to ground it in a theological framework. Of course, no true scientific, moral or aesthetic proposition can be deduced from a theological system, for no theological system is any more complete than our scientific understanding of the world. Hence we talk of our human experience being "grounded" in a theological framework in the sense that it provides a dynamic, developing, non-empirical set of ideas and relationships which we find/believe lies behind the truth as we see it. In this sense it is genuinely valuable: from it we draw strength for our humanity and for our professional practice.

II

The virtue of gratitude is not merely a backward-looking emotion: gratitude is a positive, forward-looking virtue which excites our interest, builds confidence, stimulates curiosity and underpins a lively desire to understand the world and our place within it. The fact is that as we become increasingly knowledgeable about the world, and therefore ourselves, through experimental investigation we become more response-able: that is we have greater freedom to serve the future and care for the world's well-being. In effect, therefore, we also thereby acquire the potential to act with greater responsibly, to become in fact, more responsible persons. To the extent that we do, we become more aware of our lively humanity, and what it means to be informed by "the image of God". I argue that by setting our gratitude within God's redemptive creating of the world we appreciate what it is to discover how we can be co-creators with God. Our gratitude inspires us to focus our attention on our legacy. What will our contribution be to the conversation of the generations? How will we empower the future?

III

The questions we face as we give attention to the world and our place within it are not reducible to questions with scientific answers. They arise for us in the wider social and cultural context in which as scientists we remain because we are persons. Of course scientific enquiry offers relevant evidence which if we are sensible we shall take into account. But the fundamental issues with which we wrestle are both complex and intriguing. Who are we? What we are trying to achieve? What do we want? What does it all mean? The world in which we find ourselves is not merely a physical object; as a part of it, we feel compelled to address questions such as the ones I have mentioned – amongst many others.

The human mind has wrestled from the beginning of time with the crucial issues for human life raised by the experience of evil and suffering. These were not confined to the external events in the physical world, earthquakes, hurricanes, threats to the food supply, etc., but included disease, the untrustworthiness of neighbours, and human disharmony leading to conflict. In fact much recent archaeological evidence from excavated graves suggests that personal violence might have accounted for a disproportionate percentage of deaths. How could these factors be dealt with creatively so that hope could be sustained in the face of such awful experiences?

The first human responses were mythical such that the world was often given personality and character; it was considered pro-active in its impact on human well-being. Robert Bellah argues that it was quite natural that as humankind evolved we attempted to "master" our experience of the world. He suggests this occurred primarily in three ways. First, by telling stories which "explained" how it would be possible for us to live with hope for the future. Second, by reenacting the story in ritual dance which thus allowed the participants to share in the triumph of good over evil; and third, through artistic representation by which the creature was "fixed" (Bellah 2011). Eleanore Stump believes that the problem of evil even now is best considered by talking ourselves into the human story with the help of narratives (Stump 2010).

But there is obviously more to say. Humankind, tentatively at first, has been positive about our circumstances and set about understanding the world by experimental investigation. No doubt the first attempts of our forefathers were initiated accidentally: they noticed how events seemed to be related, speculated about them and then tried to repeat them, sometimes with successful outcomes. But then individuals out of sheer interest took up private enquiry only later coming together formally in scholarly societies and communities of enquiry. All this contributed and still contributes to the story of scientific enquiry; we rehearse the story so far and find that we ourselves are wanting to take up the conversation. The opportunity to join in the narrative and write the next chapter offers us the potential of new insight into our world, ourselves and ways of managing our environment.

As we do this, we become more and more appreciative of the achievements of earlier scholars. We enter with gratitude into the conversation we inherit and take it up with our peers with the desire and expectation that we can, as we say with some trepidation, "make progress". We are often mistakenly inclined to be narrow in our focus; we become physicists, nuclear physicists, astro-physicists, physical chemists, theoretical physicists, mathematical physicists, and neglect the wider conversations with scientists in general whose emerging stories may well illuminate our own limited focus. Thus, for example, work on the puzzling matter of gravity has been illuminating for many enquiries in biology (examples are the study of gravitropism in plants, and the circulation of the blood in animals).

But scientific enquiry does not flourish as an entirely independent set of conversations; it nestles in the wider cultural context of our human thinking – a feature for which we are also grateful. Human creative exploration in the arts and social sciences widens, transforms and interprets the content and context of the story we tell in the sciences. It extends our awareness of what and who we are as persons-in-relation, how we feel about ourselves and where we place ourselves in the creation. And they influence for good or ill the ways in which we use our knowledge and develop skills with which to apply it.

IV

Human nature is characterised by curiosity. As Aristotle says, "All men by nature desire to know" (Aristotle 1.1, 108a). The Christian theological framework regards curiosity as God-given. We are not simply grateful that we are curious about the world but grateful to God who gave us this inestimable gift: our Christian sense of gratitude is triadic not dyadic. Our gratitude for our God-given gratitude expresses itself in a desire to learn which stimulates experiment, encourages us to play with the materials which our senses bring to our attention, and satisfies us when our enquiring leads us to truth, especially when that truth produces opportunities which will enhance the quality of human life. We want to know just because we want to know (we are curious!), but we want to know also because we believe that what we learn will produce results that are good for us and for our world. Risk is a dimension of all experiment and every enquiry; it is bound to be since whatever our belief about the likely outcome of an experiment, there is always the possibility of error. Not only do we not mind, it is a vital aspect of our human nature for which we are grateful to God who thereby enables us to learn from both error and truth.

The pursuit of knowledge enhances our response-ability which in turn prompts us to consider how we can be more responsible persons. However, our natural capacity to feel puzzlement and awe is unsatisfying in itself. Why are we naturally curious? What does it mean? Consequently we were led to philosophise, to try to put things together in a constructive way.

V

The framework of Christian theology sets God at the Centre of Creation. Our gratitude for creation is deepened and clearly future-orientated when we focus on God's dynamic nature. The Triune God is graciously making his world – it is not a mere physical object (though it undoubtedly is material, as Aquinas affirms) (Turner 2013: 47–69) - but a world to the well-being of which God has committed himself. We have a glimmer of an idea what this means because we share our lives with others through mutual support, common interest, concern and personal love.

In the case of God we say that the quality of gracious creating is redemptive by which we mean that God has complete response-ability for the creation and accepts complete responsibility for it. That is what we mean when we say that God creates ex nihilo; there are no constraints on God, internal or external which limit how he relates to the world; God is free to be completely responsible for the creation's well-being. Christians are frequently misunderstood when they say that God is omnipotent. The human imaginative response of this claim puts it in the context of our human desire for power whereas God's omnipotence refers to power over God's self. Nothing can undermine God's authority because he knows himself utterly: the result is that God is free to give God's whole self to the well-being of the other, the creation.

This is explored in the Christian doctrine of incarnation. God assumes in Christ the fullness of human being within the creation, without limit of the authority of the Father, or of the lively presence of the Spirit. The world has no life apart from the presence of God, but the life is continuously sustained, such that the reality of God's gracious love is ineradicable. Hence we say of Christ in the creed that God assumes responsibility for all that is in heaven and earth; God lived with us and for us, suffered with us, even descended into hell and redeemed the lost. His ascension and prefigured return are symbols of the absoluteness of God's presence with his creation.

VI

The puzzlement and awe which we feel as we contemplate the creation is the root of our curiosity, our divinely-inspired desire to know. But there is more to understanding than simply gaining information. "First the world is not merely the object of our understanding; it is the occasion for it. The world prompts us to enquiry by presenting itself (to us) as puzzling, and then obligingly yields up its truths in response to our patient investigations". (Lear 1988: 7). Our theological perspective on this is that God in creating makes a world which lures us to explore its sense, its nature, and to celebrate it through our own enquiries and experiments. The crucial dimension for us is that we come to realize that we can share God's love of the world: God has made us in his image, and empowered us, on the model of Christ, to share God's character. Our gratitude for this astonishing revelation frees us to commit ourselves in courteous love to "saving the world" and to sharing in his redemptive creativity.

The gratitude we feel for the stimulus to enquire about our world employing all our technical skill, imaginative insights and capacity for theory-building is thrilling; it strengthens our determination to contribute to the world's well-being. It encourages us to understand that as we become more response-able, we have also to become more responsible persons. Peacocke, following W. G. Pollard and contra Monod, affirms that chance is a crucial dimension of creation as the Christian sees it. He goes on,

> [since] …we propose that the world owes its being to a Creator God then I see no reason why God should not allow the potentialities of his universe to be developed in all their ramifications through the operation of random events; indeed, in principle, this is the only way in which all potentialities might eventually, given enough time and space, be actualized (Peacocke 1979: 92–97).

And we can share in the business of actualizing some of the choices which are available to us because we are made in God's image.

VII

This brings me to the question of our human nature – an intriguing puzzle which our experience of the world presents us with. What am I? Who are we? What is our purpose in the world? We say that human being is made in the image of God; this statement Genesis affirms not just with regard to the individual private person, but as the whole human community in which we each share. We are all, all humankind, male and female created "in the image of God" (Gen. 1:27). But if we are made in God's image, what is the image of God which we are to hold in our minds? What in this context do we mean by "God"? For the sake of brevity I take the classical statements about God: God is omnipotent, omniscient and all-loving. It has often been assumed, as I have claimed above, that when God is said to be omnipotent we mean that there is nothing that is beyond God's power to do in the world; after all, God is the Creator. But this is to misunderstand what God is about in creating. God is looking for the affectionate involvement of the world: God wants our willing co-operation. God does not determine the outcome by divine fiat: were God to do so, God would deny the divine nature and also deny vitality to the world's "life". What God wants is that we respond to the lure of the divine loving presence and set about the business of understanding the world as a creation in order that with God we can contribute to bringing it to perfection. The dynamic affection which we see embedded in the mutuality of Trinitarian life, is the relationship into which God invites his world in the persons of humankind. The Trinitarian mutuality is instantiated in the Second Person of the Trinity who in giving himself without reserve for the world's well-being, incarnates God's love and invites us to follow him.

As persons in God's image, we are free to do so, if we want to. But if this is to happen God must not simply be able to control all things, but be able to choose not to control everything. Thus what is actually meant by calling God omnipotent is that he has absolute power over himself: God will never behave in a way which is foreign to his nature as we see in Christ's resistance to temptation. Further, by omniscience we mean that he has full knowledge of himself so that whatever occurs in his world, however destructive human being may choose to be, his patience is unlimited. He can bear the pain, as is clear in the incarnation, the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. This means that God is free to give himself to the well-being of the other, namely his creation, so that we can through knowing him come to terms with our own nature. As persons in his image we too can, if we so choose, give ourselves to the well-being of the creation, both other people and the natural world.

Our God-given curiosity responds to the lure of God in creating and encourages us to enquire. Our sciences are a set of dimensions with which we plot our conversation with God and with one another. They open us to new worlds, raise new questions and enable us to work with God in realizing the world he is making. When we do it well, our growing responsibility encourages us to become more responsible, because we know we are called to work in a world which at its core expresses the fullness of God's affectionate nature.

God saw that the world was good, worthy of loving care and committed presence. What the results of our experimental investigations offer is a sharing in God's creative enterprise. We too can be redemptively creative. Being in the image of God is more than having a particular attitude to what we do; it is concerned with acting as a grateful person. Success will be hard-won; patience – even suffering – may be required if we are to act responsibly. The model of God's relationship with his creating is informative. God bears the pain of human "falling short of the glory of God" without recrimination or abandonment of God's loving focus on the world's well-being. So can we, if we so choose. When we put our discoveries to practical use, we want to be able to say with God, "And behold it is very good!" A demanding ambition, but one for which we can be truly grateful.

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Part III.

Miscellanea

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Enn Kasak qualified from the University of Tartu in 1981 as theoretical physicist (specialization in astrophysics). In 1981-1995, he did research on the physics of galaxies and cosmology at Tartu Observatory. He acquired a Ph.D. in astrophysics in 1990. Kasak worked as the director of Võro Institute from 1995-1997, helping create the orthography and grammar for his native language – Võro. From 1998-2007 he was an associate professor in the University of Tallinn and the Institute of Law. Initially, he studied the early history of science and pseudo-science in Ancient Mesopotamia, later he devoted himself to the problems of logic and argumentation. Since 2007, he has been an associate professor of the methodology of science at the University of Tartu. In 2014 the University of Tartu Press published his book on logic (in Estonian). Lately, he has also worked on questions of reality, religiosity of science, and scientific stupidity.

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Wiesław M. Macek is Ordinary Professor at Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, Poland, and at the Space Research Centre, Polish Academy of Sciences. He also has a Ph. D. in theology. He was a member of the Plasma Wave Science team on the Voyager mission to Neptune in 1989. His recent research interests focus on nonlinear dynamics, deterministic chaos, and fractal structures in space plasmas, and include studies in theology in the context of contemporary science. He has published about 70 papers including in such journals as Nature, Science, Physical Review Letters, and Astrophysical Journal Letters. Recently, he has delivered a general university lecture on Science and Religion.

Mark Pretorius has been a senior academic at the South African Theological Seminary (SATS) for the last 4 years, having served before that as its senior assessor since his appointment in 2002. He holds a Ph.D from the University of Pretoria (UP) in the discipline of systematic theology and ethics. He is also an extraordinary lecturer at UP, and a lecturer in ethics at the University of South Africa (UNISA). He has approximately 13 years full-time teaching experience in the discipline of theology, specifically in systematic theology. He also has a strong interest in the discipline of science and theology, and oversees the SATS M.Th. in science and theology. So far, he has published 12 scientific and 4 popular articles. He has also published 4 books, and co-authored three.

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