

Article

# Endurance, Acceptance, or Constitutional Gratitude: Non-Theistic and Theistic Attitudes to Suffering

Caleb M. Cohoe 

Department of Philosophy, Metropolitan State University of Denver, Denver, CO 80217, USA; calebcohoe@gmail.com

**Abstract:** Against those who think that only believers in a personal God are entitled to be grateful for their existence and for reality itself (cosmic gratitude), I show that there are non-theistic views on which everything that happens is part of an overall good order, supporting gratitude toward that order's source. However, most non-theist views that affirm reality's goodness, including pantheism, axiarchism, and ultimism, hold that an individual's existence has value as part of a larger whole. Some things may be bad for me but good for the whole. In such cases, acceptance is the best available positive attitude. Many versions of theism, by contrast, support constitutional gratitude, a characteristic attitude of thankfulness toward the ultimate source of goodness. Using Marilyn Adams' distinction between global and local goods, I show how Christianity, Islam, and other theistic views that affirm a personal God who cares for the well-being of each individual as such enable constitutional gratitude. If the evils you experience will be defeated by greater goods that you personally experience, you can be grateful to God for God's presence and plan even in suffering. Whether this attitude is more appropriate than acceptance or endurance depends on facts about reality and value.

**Keywords:** gratitude; theism; acceptance; pantheism; axiarchism; ultimism; Stoicism; Kierkegaard; local evils; suffering



**Citation:** Cohoe, Caleb M. 2022.

Endurance, Acceptance, or Constitutional Gratitude: Non-Theistic and Theistic Attitudes to Suffering. *Religions* 13: 1005. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13101005>

Academic Editor: Kent Dunnington

Received: 20 August 2022

Accepted: 14 October 2022

Published: 21 October 2022

**Publisher's Note:** MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



**Copyright:** © 2022 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction

When we experience illness, pain, loss, or betrayal, how should we react? Can any positive attitudes be appropriate or are sorrow, anger, and other negative attitudes the only fitting responses? This question is deeply practical. People who think that suffering, hardships, and disappointments are simply to be endured live differently than those who accept them as necessary or even see them as contributing to their good. Whether some positive attitude is appropriate (perhaps alongside negative ones) depends on how such events fit into my life's overall story and shape (if my life does, in fact, exhibit a narrative structure). It also depends on how such events fit into the overall order of reality: is there some greater meaning or plan that can explain away, balance out, or even defeat such evils? On many views, there is no reason to think that the sufferings I experience have any meaning or value, either for me personally or in some broader cosmic context. Given this, any positive attitudes or efforts to find meaning in them turn out to be mistaken. Endurance is the most appropriate attitude available.

Some hold that only those who affirm the existence of a personal and providential God are in a position to take a positive attitude toward apparent evils and failures. We need to affirm this sort of theism if we are to be grateful for our lives and what they contain. In this paper, I argue that the situation is more complex. Some non-theistic views do license gratitude for our existence and for reality itself, which I will call cosmic gratitude. They allow people to view everything that happens as part of an overall good order. This justifies a positive attitude of acceptance toward all the events in my life, including apparent evils and things that happen to me against my will. In seeing all that exists as part of an

overall good order, I can maintain gratitude toward the source of that order for this overall goodness, whatever occurs. Such an approach does not, however, go as far as some theistic views, which license what Robert C. Roberts calls constitutional gratitude. This is a lasting characteristic attitude of thankfulness toward God, not just in good times, but throughout all of life's successes and failures (R. C. Roberts 2014, inspired by Søren Kierkegaard). Roberts has argued for the importance of such an attitude to living well. In this paper, I use Marilyn Adams' distinction between global and local approaches to goodness and evil (Adams 1989) to argue that non-theists lack a suitable metaphysical and epistemological basis for this sort of gratitude toward what they see as the source of reality.

For Marilyn Adams, Christianity is distinctively committed to the view that God's overall plan for the global triumph of goodness over evil is inseparable from the local triumph of good over evil within the believer's individual life. Whatever evils and misfortunes an individual experiences will be overcome, not just insofar as they fit into some overall good order, but by being defeated within that very individual's life. This view supports the distinctive sort of constitutional gratitude for which Roberts advocates. According to this view, throughout any suffering I experience, there is an ongoing benefit that I receive and for which I can be grateful. This benefit consists of both an ongoing connection to God, the infinitely valuable divine being, and an assurance that whatever happens is part of God's good plan, a plan that is good not only for the whole world but also for the individual. These two claims support an attitude of gratitude even in the midst of suffering. It is important to note that not all Christians or theists affirm these theological commitments or endorse constitutional gratitude. However, it is only within the context of personal theism that constitutional gratitude can make sense. This kind of gratitude requires a theology that not only sees God as the all-powerful and all-wise designer of reality (something Platonists, Stoics, and numerous other non-theists affirm), but also as intimately related to each individual, showing love to individual created persons and fulfilling the desires of their hearts (cf. Eleonore Stump 2010). Many important theologians do, in fact, affirm a version of the defeat-of-evil views that Adam defends. The idea that God defeats evil at the individual as well as global level is found not just in contemporary thinkers such as Adams and Stump, but also in medieval theologians from both Christian and Muslim traditions (e.g. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas; al-Hilli and al-Murtaza). On such a framework, people of faith can be constitutionally grateful due to their belief that whatever happens in their lives will turn out to contribute to their good, albeit not in ways they can always foresee. This allows them to be grateful no matter which misfortunes they suffer.

While Stoics and other thinkers who affirm cosmic goodness can license cosmic gratitude and acceptance of whatever happens, their views do not support this kind of constitutional gratitude. Non-theist views that allow for cosmic goodness hold positions on which my existence as an individual has value as part of a larger whole. We see this historically in the Stoics (Aurelius 2011; Epictetus 2014). We also see this in contemporary defenders of axiarchism, the view that the cosmos and everything it contains exists because it is good (recent discussions includes Leslie 2001, 2013; Roberts 2014; Mulgran 2017; the position goes back to Plotinus and the Platonist tradition, see Cohoe 2017, pp. 752–54 for some of the ancient antecedents). The goodness these philosophers affirm is global and concerns the overall ordering of things. Axiarchism does not defend the idea that every individual's life will be good for the individual as such. The situation is similar with ultimism, a position that affirms the existence of an ultimate being that is the source of reality and value, but emphasizes human limitations in knowing such a being. John Schellenberg, one of the foremost contemporary defenders of ultimism, argues that ultimism is compatible with many world religions while also offering room for skeptics, agnostics, and those who think there is some higher power out there while not holding fully determinate beliefs (Schellenberg 2009). Jeanine Diller has further broadened ultimism by suggesting that it should not require that the ultimate principle be completely unlimited, but instead just needs to be "better than anything else in the actual world" (Diller 2013). While the

indeterminate character of this view allows it to include a diversity of perspectives, it also prevents ultimists from affirming anything similar to the position of Adams and Stump. Their affirmations of the goodness and order of the universe are too global and general to imply that whatever happens to you will be for your benefit. As we shall see, axiarchism and ultimism can, at best, support an attitude of acceptance, since you are entitled to think that whatever happens fits into an overall excellent order.

Since these views give priority to this cosmic whole, they cannot ensure the local goodness of an individual's life and everything in it. Some things may be bad for me as an individual but good for the whole. This is something that the ancient Stoics recognized and is a topic on which their contemporary adherents counsel acceptance (Aurelius 2011; Pigliucci 2015; Pigliucci and Lopez 2019, pp. 59–60). You should be willing to acknowledge that not everything is set up for your good. This may help in dealing with bad fortune, but this attitude of acceptance is quite different from gratitude. There are, then, types of gratitude that do not have a true equivalent for non-theists. Acceptance of fortune may offer a positive response to suffering, but it is not the same as constitutional gratitude. In this way, non-theist attitudes toward fortunate and unfortunate events are significantly different than the sorts of attitudes encouraged by Christianity, Islam, and other religions with a personal God who offers a loving relationship to each individual and cares for the well-being of each individual as such.

## 2. Characterizing Gratitude, Cosmic Gratitude, and Constitutional Gratitude

To see when and where gratitude is appropriate, we need to consider what gratitude is and what it requires. In this paper, I focus on gratitude in its proper sense. I follow the predominant contemporary philosophical and psychological approach, which takes gratitude in this proper sense to be a three-place relation: *you* are grateful for *something* to *someone* (Manela 2019, Section 1; Carr 2013; Gulliford et al. 2013; R. C. Roberts 2014; Manela 2016). This beneficiary–benefit–benefactor structure is found both in small cases, such as being grateful to your child for bringing you breakfast in bed, and in cases that encompass your whole life, such as being grateful to God for creating and sustaining you. Gratitude goes beyond mere appreciation for some good. According to this predominant contemporary understanding, gratitude consists of appropriately acknowledging the source of goods you have received without fully meriting (Gulliford et al. 2013; Carr 2013; Manela 2019). It requires recognizing the source behind these goods as something that has benefitted you in a special way and deserves thanks and praise. Some scholars have defended gratitude for non-theists by endorsing non-directed gratitude (Lacewing 2016) or giving up on the requirement that gratitude have an appropriate target (Bardsley 2013; Boleyn-Fitzgerald 2016). By contrast, I am maintaining the three-place beneficiary–benefit–benefactor structure. In my view, it better characterizes gratitude than these alternatives. Moreover, I think that non-theistic views can meet the requirements on a benefactor, so requiring a target for gratitude does not tip the scales too much in favor of theism.

Many scholars, however, hold that only persons can be targets of gratitude. Robert C. Roberts insists that, “without personifying concepts”, any supposed description of gratitude “would fail plausibly to describe a kind of gratitude”. (R. C. Roberts 2014, p. 73) The target of gratitude that we see as our benefactor needs to be a person (or at least needs to be personified). Similarly, Tony Manela argues that the source of the good must “intend to benefit the beneficiary under the description ‘benefit the beneficiary’” in order to be an appropriate target of gratitude (Manela 2018, p. 630). This view raises questions about whether non-theists—those who do not believe that there is a personal God—can be grateful for their existence or for the existence of reality. In other work, I have argued that this cosmic gratitude, as I call it, does not require a belief that the cause of one's existence or the existence of the cosmos is personal (Cohoe 2022a, 2022b). Cosmic gratitude can be appropriate even for those with vague beliefs about the source of the cosmos or those who take its source to be non-personal (e.g., a system, form, nature, or idea) but good.

In my view, there are still important requirements that a source must meet to be regarded as a benefactor. To enable cosmic gratitude, non-theists must hold: (1) that our existence and the existence of the universe are good; and (2) that they come from a source that is itself good and causes the goodness of the universe and our lives (this causation may be either immanent or transcendent). This source need not be conceived as personal and does not need to aim at the good of individuals as such. The source could still count as a benefactor if it produces an overall good order in which an individual's good is included.

There are several historical examples of philosophers who have held views that allow for non-theistic cosmic gratitude, including the Stoics, Baruch Spinoza, and, on some readings, Plato. There are also a variety of contemporary metaphysical views that license cosmic gratitude, including the versions of ultimism and axiarchism previously mentioned (contemporary articulations of a view that meets this requirement include [Parfit 1998](#); [Leslie 2001, 2013](#); [Schellenberg 2009](#); [Diller 2013](#); [Roberts 2014](#); [Buckareff and Nagasawa 2016](#); [Mulgran 2017](#)). While only academic philosophers fully articulate such views, they have significant connections to the views of reality that many religiously unaffiliated people in contemporary societies seem to hold as measured by surveys and sociological work. For example, Pew 2018 found that a large proportion of the American population does not believe in a personal, biblical God but does believe that there is a good higher power or ordering force behind reality. If an appropriate target of gratitude need only be good and a reliable cause of goodness, there are important commonalities and connections between theists and non-theists when it comes to cosmic gratitude. As we shall see, however, the sorts of gratitude that theism and non-theistic accounts allow for are still significantly different due to differences in their accounts of the benefits we receive and our relationship to the beneficiary behind them.

To show the difference between theistic and non-theistic gratitude, we first need to explore the idea of constitutional gratitude. It is easy to be grateful for things we see as benefitting us. At the Thanksgiving dinner table, after enjoying a great meal and delicious pies, I find it easy to feel grateful to those who have prepared it and, more broadly, to all those responsible for the pleasant and comfortable life I enjoy. When we receive things we desire—a promotion, a raise or recovery from sickness—gratitude may come naturally. But what about things that happen in our lives that seem neutral or even bad? What about pain and suffering? Most of us would not be grateful for missing out on Thanksgiving dinner, much less losing a job or having our health permanently damaged. Robert C. Roberts, however, insists that for the Christian, gratitude to God should always be present:

Thanks for the God-relationship is always proper, takes precedence over thanks for the blessings of this life, and persists through the thick and the thin of the latter blessings. It persists, that is, in the person whose cosmic gratitude is a Christian virtue, a firm and stable trait of character marked by the wisdom of the proviso. ([R. C. Roberts 2014](#), p. 78)

The proviso to which Roberts refers has to do with the way that the Christian should receive good things from God, as secondary in importance to God's own goodness: "were these blessings taken from me, my gratitude to you, O God, would continue unabated" ([R. C. Roberts 2014](#), pp. 77–78). God, as both benefactor and highest good, is the Christian's focus, allowing for gratitude to continue whatever else happens.

Roberts, following Søren Kierkegaard, takes constitutional gratitude to consist in this kind of abiding love and appreciation for God and everything God gives whether or not it seems good in the moment. In part, Christians can hold such attitudes because they recognize human limitations in identifying what is good or bad. What might seem harmful for you may turn out to be beneficial while desired goods might turn out to be harmful. As Robert says, the faithful Christian "steadfastly gives priority to the relationship with a benefactor by subjecting all good and bad fortune to a kind of humble skepticism about the value of every benefit and detriment in the light of God's unchanging goodness" ([R. C. Roberts 2014](#), p. 82).

Even when real evils and harms are experienced, they are experienced within a larger context where the Christian is confident of God's care and overall plan for our good. This is not to say that the person will be unaffected. Roberts claims that the Christian's gratitude in the face of what seem to be misfortunes would be "not unchanged, perhaps, but unabated" (R. C. Roberts 2014, p. 78). When facing adversity, the believer's experience and reaction will be different, but it will still be a reaction of gratitude because the believer continues to have the benefit of relationship with God and continues to trust in God's plan. Here, Roberts draws on Søren Kierkegaard's reading of Job as an exemplar of gratitude.

Kierkegaard draws attention to Job's response to God when he loses all the blessings he had been given:

At the moment when the Lord took everything, [Job] did not say first, "The Lord took", but he said first, "The Lord gave". The word is short, but in its brevity it perfectly expresses what it wishes to indicate, that Job's soul is not crushed down in silent submission to sorrow, but that his heart first expanded in gratitude; that the loss of everything first made him thankful to the Lord that He had given him all the blessings that He now took from him . . . It was not become less beautiful to him because it was taken away, nor more beautiful, but still beautiful as before, beautiful because the Lord gave it, and what now might seem more beautiful to him, was not the gift but the goodness of God. (Kierkegaard 1958, pp. 75–76)

For Kierkegaard, Job displays gratitude by continuing to appreciate the goodness of what he received even after it was taken from him. Instead of dealing with loss by insisting that what he received was not good or having the memory of its goodness destroyed, Job holds onto his appreciation of the gifts he was given.

Job appreciates their beauty but he appreciates more the beauty of the one who gave them:

[Job] confessed that the blessing of the Lord had been merciful to him, he returned thanks for it; therefore it did not remain in his mind as a torturing memory. He confessed that the Lord had blessed richly and beyond all measure his undertakings; he had been thankful for this, and therefore the memory did not become to him a consuming unrest. He did not conceal from himself that everything had been taken from him; therefore the Lord, who took it, remained in his upright soul. He did not avoid the thought that it was lost; therefore his soul rested quietly until the explanation of the Lord again came to him, and found his heart like the good earth well cultivated in patience. (Kierkegaard 1958, p. 79)

For Kierkegaard, Job is not in denial. He feels sorrow at what is lost, but he retains his faith in God's goodness to him and acknowledges the goods he has received. The Lord continues to be a benefactor and Job's soul can rest given his trust in the Lord, even if he has not yet received any explanation. On the view Roberts develops, the person developing constitutional gratitude is going to be grateful in all circumstances, not just when things are going well. The Christian with constitutional gratitude is convinced that all things, whether apparently good or bad, are coming from a God who is absolutely good and also has the Christian's good in mind (cf. Stump 1993, 2010). This allows for patience in the face of adversity. Roberts and Kierkegaard see this virtue as specifically theological. If, however, non-theists can be grateful for their lives and the universe, can they also manifest this sort of constitutional gratitude?

### 3. Global and Local Goods and Defeat

In order for constitutional gratitude to be warranted, you need to be in a position to believe that all the things you receive will have value within your life. This is the situation that Job is in, at least in the interpretation of Kierkegaard and Roberts. This perspective is not, however, open to most non-theists because their views do not ensure that everything that happens to individuals will be good for them. To understand the relevant requirement for constitutional gratitude, we need to look to the helpful distinctions Marilyn Adams

makes between global and local evils and goods. As Adams notes, the source of good in a universe can be seen both at a cosmic level “as ‘producer of global goods’ and at a local or individual level as bringing about ‘goodness to . . . individual created persons’” (Adams 1989, p. 302). For any good or evil, we can ask both about how it fits into the overall order of the universe and the ways in which it is good or bad for specific individuals.

Adams draws attention to the category of horrendous evils, which she defines as “evils the participation in (the doing or suffering of) which gives one reason *prima facie* to doubt whether one’s life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to one on the whole” (Adams 1989, p. 299). Whether something counts as a horrendous evil is not merely subjective: people can be mistaken in their judgments about their own lives. It is, however relative to someone’s psychology and constitution because, as Adams claims, “nature and experience endow people with different strengths; one bears easily what crushes another” (Adams 1989, pp. 299–300). Adams does not precisely delineate this category but instead offers a number of paradigmatic examples:

The rape of a woman and axing off of her arms, psychophysical torture whose ultimate goal is the disintegration of personality, betrayal of one’s deepest loyalties, cannibalizing one’s own off-spring, child abuse of the sort described by Ivan Karamazov, . . . I believe most people would find in the doing or suffering of them *prima facie* reason to doubt the positive meaning of their lives. (Adams 1989, p. 300)

Adams selects examples that are actually found in our world and that seem, based on their awfulness, to call into question the meaning and goodness of the lives of those who experience them.

Adams then argues that the horrors that these individuals suffer cannot be addressed by global considerations about the good. Even if such evils can be included in “maximally perfect world orders”, that fact would “not automatically provide consolation for the individuals who participate in or suffer these horrendous evils” (Adams 1989, p. 302). The horrors might have some “generic and global positive meaning” insofar as they are included within a “maximally perfect world order” but this would do nothing to ensure the goodness of life for the individual (Adams 1989, p. 302). Something can be tolerable as part of an overall order while still being utterly destructive of goodness within the life of some person. This means that the source of goodness in a universe “cannot be said to be good or loving to any created persons the positive meaning of whose lives [this source] allows to be engulfed in and/or defeated by evils—that is, individuals within whose lives horrendous evils remain undefeated” (Adams 1989, p. 302). Such a person’s life would, on an individual level, be experienced as bad and as a failure even if it contributed to some overall excellent world order.

Adams’ solution is to insist that on the Christian understanding, God is in a position to defeat horrendous evils not just globally, but for each individual. Adams appeals to two features of God that are central to Christian axiology. First, God, as the ultimate and infinite good, can offer something incommensurably better than the evil someone has suffered: “the good of beatific face-to-face intimacy with God would engulf . . . even the horrendous evils humans experience in this present life here below, and overcome any *prima facie* reasons the individual had to doubt whether his/her life would or could be worth living” (Adams 1989, pp. 306–7). A life of loving intimacy with an infinite being is a good life even if it also contains horrendous evils. Going further, Adams thinks that God can providentially order individual’s lives to bring good out of evil. God can “make all those sufferings which threaten to destroy the positive meaning of a person’s life meaningful through positive defeat . . . by integrating participation in horrendous evils into a person’s relationship with God” (Adams 1989, p. 307). For Adams, evils will not just be outweighed by goods; they will, in some way, be turned to the good of the very individual who experiences them. Adams, drawing on the Christian tradition, suggests three possible ways in which evils might be integrated into someone’s life and experience of the good: through allowing for more perfect identification with God and the suffering Christ, through increased divine

gratitude to the sufferer, and/or through increased insight into the divine life itself (Adams 1989, pp. 307–8).

On this view, the Christian can be grateful in the midst of suffering because of a final assurance that due to God's goodness this suffering will be defeated, ensuring that "for those who love God, all things work together for the good" (*Romans* 8:28). God produces good not just universally for a world order, but for each of those who love God. This position is not unique to Christians. Seyyed Jaaber Mousavirad notes that many Muslim theologians endorse the principle of compensation, which is the idea that someone will receive "an equal or greater amount of good in the Hereafter to compensate for the loss and hardship of the evil experienced in this world" (Mousavirad 2022). Mousavirad uses the notion of compensation in an analogous way to Adams to address the evil and suffering experienced by individuals. It is worth noting that compensation may not be as strong as the defeat that Adams endorses. Nevertheless, it may be enough to ensure that the sufferer can continue to see God as a benefactor and experience an ongoing benefit even in the midst of suffering thanks to trust in God and God's ultimate plan.

While many versions of theism are set up to ensure the defeat of local evils, this is not true of all versions. Peter van Inwagen's response to the problem of evil, for example, concedes that local evils may need to be accepted for the sake of global goods (van Inwagen 2006), resulting in a view similar to that of the Stoics and other goodness-affirming non-theists, as we will see in the next section. So, some theistic views only license acceptance, not constitutional gratitude. There are also important questions about whether these defeat and compensation views are plausible or even defensible. For the question of constitutional gratitude, however, we need only consider whether non-theists can make analogous moves. Can non-theist views of goodness ensure local defeat of evils in addition to incorporating them into global goodness?

#### 4. Goodness-Affirming Non-Theists on Global and Local Goods

Non-theist views struggle to guarantee this because they do not involve a personal God who cares for the individual as such. The ancient Stoics serve as an excellent test case because they hold that Reason/Zeus orders all things and is active in every part of the universe. This means that there are no relevant limits on Reason's knowledge or power that would prevent Reason from promoting the good of an individual. Reason exercises a universal providence (one of many ideas in ancient Greek philosophical theology that influences theology in the Abrahamic traditions: see Cohoe 2017, pp. 752–54). For the Stoics, nothing happens that Reason does not order. However, they think that Reason aims at the good of the whole and the best overall order, not at individual goods (see Cohoe 2020, pp. 205–8 for more on how to understand pantheism—both Stoic and otherwise—in contrast to theism). Humans' role as sharers in reason is to act in ways that promote the good of the whole. It is not to seek our individual good primarily.

For the Stoics, we can aim at things that are according to nature, such as health, prosperity, and life, but we should only be disposed to aim at them insofar as this is in accordance with Reason's overall plan for the cosmos. Once we learn that part of the plan involves suffering something that is not generally according to nature, we should accept this even though it is not to our individual advantage.

The influential early Greek Stoic Chrysippus strongly emphasizes this point:

As long as the future is uncertain to me I always hold to those things which are better adapted to obtaining the things in accordance with nature; for God himself has made me disposed to select these. But if I actually knew that I was fated now to be ill, I would even have an impulse to be ill. For my foot too, if it had intelligence, would have an impulse to get muddy. (Chrysippus, quoted by Epictetus, *Discourses* 2.6.9=LS 58J=SVF 3.191, trans. Long and Sedley 1987)

For Chrysippus, I should not just tolerate illness but instead see it, once it happens, as something to be selected positively because it is part of fate or Reason's overall plan for the world order. Just as the foot would be willing to undergo things that are not according to

nature with respect to its individual condition (e.g., getting muddy) because they promote a greater overall good (e.g., moving to some place that the whole body needs to be in), so I should be willing to undergo things that are not according to nature with respect to my individual condition. Chrysippus does not, however, appeal to any further individual benefit that I (or the foot, in the analogy) might receive by undergoing these things. I (and the foot) should choose them simply for the good of the whole.

Epictetus, a former slave who became one of the leading Stoic teachers in the Imperial Roman period, picks up on the foot example to emphasize that the primary good is not that of the individual human, but of the cosmic whole:

It is natural for the foot to be clean, taken in isolation, but if you consider it as a foot and not in isolation, it will be appropriate for it to step into mud, and trample on thorns, and sometimes even to be cut off for the sake of the body as a whole; for otherwise, it will no longer be a foot. We should think in some such way about ourselves also. What are you? A human being. Now, if you consider yourself in isolation, it is natural for you to live to an advanced age, to be rich, and to enjoy good health; but if you consider yourself as a human being and as part of some whole, it may be in the interest of the whole that you should now fall ill, now embark on a voyage and be exposed to danger, now suffer poverty, and perhaps even die before your time. Why do you resent this, then? Don't you know that in isolation a foot is no longer a foot, and that you likewise will no longer be a human being? What, then, is a human being? A part of a city, first of all that which is made up of gods and human beings. (Epictetus 2014, *Discourses* 2.5.24–26, trans. Robin Hard)

Epictetus thinks we need to give up on seeking our individual good and, by seeing ourselves as parts of the cosmic whole, be content with contributing to the good of the whole. My part in the universe may involve uncompensated suffering if this leads to a better overall ordering. In the Stoic view, there is no reason to think that negative things will turn out to benefit me in the long run since the universe is not aiming at my partial good. Negative things need not be defeated by positive things or integrated into an individual's personal good.

Instead, the Stoic response to horrendous evils is to deny that anything external is evil and insist that the goodness or badness of our lives is entirely a matter of our choices and our virtue (or lack thereof). Things that are not according to nature such as disease, poverty, assault, and death are not evils (except insofar as they involve the vicious choices of individuals), while things according to nature such as health, prosperity, and life are not good. Only virtue is good and only vice is evil. For the Stoics, externals belong to the class of indifferents (even if, according to most Stoics, things according to nature may be preferred to their opposites, which are also in the class of indifferents). This allows for the Stoics to counsel acceptance of whatever happens as part of an overall good ordering. I should have a positive attitude toward everything that happens in my life, but this attitude is weaker and more limited than constitutional gratitude. I am not in a position to think that whatever happens to me will work out for my own benefit. Just as the foot may suffer things that harm it as a foot for the greater good of the body, so we may suffer things that harm us as humans while benefitting the universe as a whole. Your feet are there to serve your body. They do not primarily have their own individual good. I might develop calluses and hurt my feet in order to get somewhere quickly. If my foot has a cancerous growth, I might even need to destroy it completely. I am willing to do whatever is necessary to my feet in order to achieve my overall goals and what benefits my body. For the Stoics, we are rational feet, creatures who are self-aware but limited parts of the universe. We need to be ready to accept harmful things up to and including our own death, if that is for the greater good, without any personal consolation. The Stoics think I can avoid having negative attitudes about anything that happens to me by taking on this universal perspective. I should assent to what happens without sorrow or anger and, in seeing what happens as

part of an overall good order of reality, I can maintain cosmic gratitude and a positive attitude of acceptance toward all things (cf. [Seneca 2011](#), II.30).

Being convinced that things will work out for the greater good is not, however, the same as Job's attitude, the approach of constitutional gratitude. Kierkegaard contrasts Stoic imperturbability with the reaction of Job:

Is not that one who prides himself on not being able to sorrow in the day of sorrow put to shame by not being able to rejoice in the day of gladness? Is not the sight of such imperturbability unpleasant and distressing, almost revolting, while it is affecting to see an honorable old man, who but now sat in the gladness of the Lord, sitting with his fatherly countenance downcast, his mantle rent and his head shaven! ([Kierkegaard 1958](#), p. 74)

For Kierkegaard, Job feels both sorrow and joy. In contrast to the Stoic, Job is not detached from what happens to him. He experiences things as good or bad for him and does not seek refuge in being part of a greater whole.

Instead, throughout the good and the bad, Job experiences gratitude to God as the source of goodness for both himself and the world and is confident that God is acting well:

In the same instant that everything was taken from him [Job] knew that it was the Lord who had taken it, and therefore in his loss he remained in understanding with the Lord; in his loss, he preserved his confidence in the Lord; he looked upon the Lord and therefore he did not see despair. Or does only that man see God's hand who sees that He gives; does not that one also see God who sees that He takes? ([Kierkegaard 1958](#), pp. 81–82)

Insofar as Job sees what happens to him as coming from God and continues to trust in God, he has consolation even in the midst of sorrow. This consolation rests on seeing God as both good and as good to Job, not just a source of global goods for a broad order of things.

It is this sense of goodness to Job that allows for continuing gratitude in the midst of sorrow. As Kierkegaard puts it:

The Lord took it all. Then Job gathered together all his sorrows and "cast them upon the Lord," and then He also took those from him, and only praise remained in the incorruptible joy of his heart. For Job's house was a house of sorrow if ever a house was such, but where this word is spoken, "Blessed be the name of the Lord," there gladness also has its home. ([Kierkegaard 1958](#), p. 83)

For Kierkegaard, gladness remains because Job continues to see what happens to him, sad as it is, as coming from a good God who continues to care for him. On Kierkegaard's reading, Job does not know how things will work out or how evils will be defeated but he remains confident in God and experiences God as a benefactor for him. As we saw, Marilyn Adams spells out Christianity's promise of goodness: God is able to defeat evils in the very life of the individual who experienced them. The theistic view acknowledges evil and sorrow but insists they can be defeated by God's goodness, while the Stoic view involves denying that what has happened is evil and remaining indifferent to all externals.

Committed Stoics are entitled to accept whatever happens to them with a positive attitude but they cannot be constitutionally grateful because they have no reason to think that what happens to them will be beneficial for them as individuals. This issue is not unique to the Stoics. While many non-theistic views of the universe do not go as far as the Stoics in denying the value of externals, they share the Stoic strategy of appealing to global goods and an overall ordering in justifying seemingly bad things. These global goods may ensure that the universe itself is a good place, but they do nothing to reassure individuals about the goodness of our lives as such. We see this in contemporary non-theistic views that affirm the goodness of the universe, such as those of axiarchists and ultimists. While most people are not familiar with the terms "axiarchism" or "ultimism," the views philosophers defend under these names describe attitudes toward reality embraced by many non-theists who experience gratitude and wonder. Axiarchism and ultimism both affirm the claim that there is some good higher power and that this goodness in some way causes or explains

both the existence of the cosmos and our existence as individuals. They also do not claim that this higher power is the same as the God of a revealed religion such as Christianity, Islam, or Hinduism, and they leave open the question of what this higher power is (e.g., whether it is the cosmos itself or some transcendent ultimate divine being). In this sense, these views match well with the significant percentage of people in contemporary Western society who believe in a higher power but do not affirm that this higher power is the God of a revealed religion (Pew Research Center 2018).

As mentioned above, axiarchists hold that the cosmos and everything it contains exists because it is good (Leslie 2001, 2013; Roberts 2014; Mulgran 2017). However, axiarchism is a position about global goods. It maintains that reality as a whole is good in its overall ordering but it is not committed to thinking that each individual life is good. There is also no relationship of love or care between the good and the individual that allows individuals to trust that the goodness behind the universe will make their life good for them. The situation is similar with ultimism, a position defended by John Schellenberg and picked up by several other contemporary philosophers. Ultimists affirm that there is a metaphysically ultimate and, further, that it is connected to our good (salvifically ultimate) and is a source of value (axiologically ultimate). As Schellenberg puts it, “there is a metaphysically and axiologically ultimate reality (one representing both the deepest fact about the nature of things and the greatest possible value), in relation to which an ultimate good can be attained” (Schellenberg 2009, p. 1). Schellenberg thinks that the strength of ultimism lies in its openness and flexibility. It can fit with many world religions but does not endorse all their requirements, allowing space for skeptics, agnostics, and those who affirm some sort of higher power but lack a worked-out theology. Jeanine Diller has gone even further to broaden ultimism by suggesting that it should not require that the ultimate principle be completely unlimited in all dimensions, but simply needs to be “better than anything else in the actual world” (Diller 2013). For Diller, the best version of ultimism turns out to be a broad tent: “the disjunction of views claiming that there exists something that is metaphysically, axiologically, or soteriologically ultimate, in unlimited or limited ways” (Diller 2013, p. 230). This would allow a significantly greater number of people to count as ultimists. While Diller’s characterization may be a little too broad to guarantee that endorsing ultimism would put one in a position to express cosmic gratitude, it expresses the idea that many people are implicitly committed to views in which there is a higher power or order that is both good and metaphysically explanatory, even if their views are not fully developed (for other views that would meet my conditions, see Parfit 1998; Buckareff and Nagasawa 2016; Mulgran 2017).

In both Schellenberg and Diller’s versions, however, there is no reason to think that what happens to you will be good for you even if it may contribute to the goodness of the universe as a whole. Schellenberg’s position is specifically set up to avoid anthropomorphic accounts of value, as he affirms the goodness of the overall universe while refusing to affirm that human beings play a central role in the value of the cosmos. Even if a view is not specifically set up to avoid anthropomorphic accounts of value, non-theistic positions are generally not equipped to affirm the conditions necessary for constitutional gratitude. Their affirmations of the goodness and order of the universe are too global and general to imply that whatever happens to you will be for your benefit. Such views can support an attitude of acceptance since you are entitled to think that whatever happens fits into an overall excellent order. This, however, is not the same attitude as constitutional gratitude. For the axiarchist or ultimist, you should be willing to acknowledge that not everything is set up for your good. This may help, to some extent, in dealing with bad fortune, but this attitude of acceptance or resignation is quite different from gratitude. Such views do not license the sorts of attitudes found in the Abrahamic religions, in which the global triumph of goodness over evil goes together with the local triumph of good over evil within the believer’s individual life. Even though some types of gratitude can be shared between theists and non-theists, there are important differences between the kinds of attitudes

available to theist and non-theists that depend on the way that the ultimate relates to individuals and their goods.

### 5. The Value of Constitutional Gratitude

Constitutional gratitude can only be obtained in metaphysical views such as the forms of theism found in Abrahamic religions, which affirm the goodness of the ultimate toward the individual. I have not, however, fully explored the value of constitutional gratitude. If Roberts is correct and constitutional gratitude is a virtue that improves our lives, then theism's ability to support such a virtue counts in its favor. If, however, it has neutral or negative value, the situation will be different. Some think that asking people to be grateful for their suffering and to value their negative experiences is dangerous or unwarranted. D. Z. Phillips (2004) and Nick Trakakis (2008), among others, have attacked theistic defenders of suffering as morally insensitive and insisted that they are inappropriately justifying the unjustifiable. If these attacks are successful, then constitutional gratitude is unlikely to be an appropriate attitude toward suffering and misfortune. We should note, however, that these anti-suffering and anti-theodicy reactions attack the positive attitude of acceptance as well as constitutional gratitude. If suffering is an abomination, then any positive attitude, whether acceptance or constitutional gratitude, is inappropriate. Whether either of these attitudes can be defended depends on the nature of reality and value. In particular, the status of constitutional gratitude depends on whether the theist is entitled to believe that local evils will be defeated and whether this is enough to address anti-suffering and anti-theodicy worries (see Stump 1993, 2010; and Adams 1989 for important theistic responses).

### 6. Conclusions

Robert C. Roberts argues that constitutional gratitude, a characteristic and stable attitude of thankfulness toward an ultimate source of goodness, is a virtue. I have shown that non-theists lack the necessary metaphysical and epistemological basis for such an attitude. Most non-theist views that support the goodness of the cosmos, such as pantheism, axiarchism, and ultimism, hold that the existence of an individual has value as part of a larger whole. Since they give priority to a cosmic whole, they do not ensure the local goodness of an individual's life and everything in it. Some things may be bad for me but good for the whole. In such cases, acceptance may be the best available positive attitude, as ancient and contemporary Stoics counsel.

Many versions of theism, by contrast, support constitutional gratitude because they imply that whatever evils you personally experience will be defeated by greater goods that you personally experience. This allows you to be grateful even in suffering. Whether this is a better and more appropriate attitude depends on facts about reality and value. Even if both theists and non-theists can experience cosmic gratitude, their attitudes toward fortunate and unfortunate events are significantly different. Christianity, Islam, and other religions with a personal God who cares for the well-being of each individual agent as such enable constitutional gratitude, not mere acceptance.

**Funding:** This research was funded by the Templeton Foundation, grant number 59916.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Acknowledgments:** I would like to thank the other grant recipients from the Gratitude to God project and the Department of Philosophy at Fort Lewis College for their helpful feedback on earlier versions of this material.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## References

- Adams, Marilyn McCord. 1989. Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 63: 297–310. [CrossRef]
- Aurelius, Marcus. 2011. *Meditations: With Selected Correspondence*. Translated by Robin Hard. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bardsley, Karen. 2013. Mother nature and the mother of all virtues: On the rationality of feeling gratitude toward nature. *Environmental Ethics* 35: 27–40. [CrossRef]
- Boleyn-Fitzgerald, Patrick. 2016. Gratitude toward things. In *Perspectives on Gratitude: An Interdisciplinary Approach*. Edited by David Carr. New York: Routledge, pp. 112–25.
- Buckareff, Andrei, and Yujin Nagasawa, eds. 2016. *Alternative Concepts of God: Essays on the Metaphysics of the Divine*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Carr, David. 2013. Varieties of Gratitude. *Journal of Value Inquiry* 47: 17–28. [CrossRef]
- Cohoe, Caleb M. 2017. Why the One Cannot Have Parts: Plotinus on Divine Simplicity, Ontological Independence, and Perfect Being Theology. *Philosophical Quarterly* 67: 751–71. [CrossRef]
- Cohoe, Caleb M. 2020. Accounting for the Whole: Why Pantheism Is on a Metaphysical Par with Complex Theism. *Faith and Philosophy* 37: 202–19. [CrossRef]
- Cohoe, Caleb M. 2022a. Why and How to be Grateful to Non-Personal Agents. Journal article manuscript under review, last modified September 15. Microsoft Word file.
- Cohoe, Caleb M. 2022b. Targets of Cosmic Gratitude. Journal article manuscript under review, last modified October 1. Microsoft Word file.
- Diller, Jeanine. 2013. The Conceptual Focus of Ultimism: An Object of Religious Concern for Nones and Somes. *Religious Studies* 49: 221–33. [CrossRef]
- Epictetus. 2014. *Discourses, Fragments, Handbook*. Translated by Robin Hard. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gulliford, Liz, Blaire Morgan, and Kristján Kristjánsson. 2013. Recent Work on the Concept of Gratitude in Philosophy and Psychology. *Journal of Value Inquiry* 47: 285–317. [CrossRef]
- Kierkegaard, Søren. 1958. *Edifying Discourses: A Selection*. Edited by Paul L. Holmer. Translated by David Ferdinand, and Lillian Marvin Swenson. New York: Harper Torchbooks.
- Lacewing, Michael. 2016. Can non-theists appropriately feel existential gratitude? *Religious Studies* 52: 145–65. [CrossRef]
- Leslie, John. 2001. *Infinite Minds: A Philosophical Cosmology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Leslie, John. 2013. A Proof of God's Reality. In *The Puzzle of Existence: Why Is there Something Rather Than Nothing?* Edited by Tyron Goldschmidt. New York: Routledge, pp. 128–43.
- Long, Anthony, and David Neil Sedley, trans. and eds. 1987. *The Hellenistic Philosophers*. 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Manela, Tony. 2016. Gratitude and Appreciation. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 49: 55–66.
- Manela, Tony. 2018. Gratitude to nature. *Environmental Values* 27: 623–44. [CrossRef]
- Manela, Tony. 2019. Gratitude. In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, (Fall 2019 Edition)*. Edited by Edward N. Zalta. Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab.
- Mousavirad, Seyyed Jaaber. 2022. Theory of Compensation and the Problem of Evil; a New Defense. *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 14. [CrossRef]
- Mulgran, Tim. 2017. Beyond Theism and Atheism: Axiarchism and Ananthropocentric Purposivism. *Philosophy Compass* 12: 1–11.
- Parfit, Derek. 1998. Why anything? Why this? *London Review of Books* 22: 24–27.
- Pew Research Center. 2018. *When Americans Say They Believe in God, What Do They Mean*. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center. Available online: [https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/04/25/when-americans-say-they-believe-in-god-what-do-they-mean/04-25-18\\_beliefingod-00-03/](https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/04/25/when-americans-say-they-believe-in-god-what-do-they-mean/04-25-18_beliefingod-00-03/) (accessed on 10 October 2022).
- Phillips, Dewi Zephaniah. 2004. *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God*. London: SCM Press.
- Pigliucci, Massimo. 2015. *How to Be a Stoic: Using Ancient Philosophy to Live a Modern Life*. New York: Basic Books.
- Pigliucci, Massimo, and Gregory Lopez. 2019. *A Handbook for New Stoics: How to Thrive in a World Out of Your Control—52 Week-by-Week Lessons*. New York: The Experiment.
- Roberts, John Russell. 2014. Axiarchism and Selectors. *Faith and Philosophy* 31: 412–21. [CrossRef]
- Roberts, Robert C. 2014. Cosmic gratitude. *European Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 6: 65–83. [CrossRef]
- Schellenberg, John. 2009. *The Will to Imagine: A Justification of Sceptical Religion*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Seneca. 2011. *On Benefits [De Beneficiis]*. Translated by Miriam Griffin, and Brad Inwood. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Stump, Eleonore J. 1993. Aquinas on the Sufferings of Job. In *Reasoned Faith*. Edited by Eleonore J. Stump. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 328–57.
- Stump, Eleonore J. 2010. *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Trakakis, Nick. 2008. *The End of Philosophy of Religion*. London: Continuum.
- van Inwagen, Peter. 2006. *The Problem of Evil*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.