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Gratitude Without God — Just Whom Does an Atheist Thank?

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Just whom does an atheist thank? That is the fascinating question addressed in philosopher Roland Aronson's article, "[Thank Who Very Much?](#)," published in the current issue of *The Philosopher's Magazine*.

Aronson describes the problem eloquently:

Living without God today means facing life and death as no generation before us has done. It entails giving meaning to our lives not only in the absence of a supreme being, but now without the forces and trends that gave hope to the past several generations of secularists. We who live after progress, after Marxism, and after the Holocaust have stopped believing that the world is being transformed by reason and democracy. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the modern faith that human life is heading in a positive direction has been undone, giving way to the earlier religious faith it replaced, or to no faith at all. Alone as never before, in a universe scientifically better understood than ever, we find little in its almost-infinite vastness to guide us towards what our lives mean and how we should live them.

To answer these questions anew, agnostics, atheists and secularists must absorb the experience of the twentieth century and the issues of the twenty-first. We must face today's concerns about forces beyond our control and our own responsibility, shape a satisfying way of living in relation to what we can know and what we cannot know, affirm a secular basis for morality even while, especially in the United States, religion is being trumpeted as essential to living ethically, formulate new ways of coming to terms with death, and explore what hope can mean after the collapse of Enlightenment anticipations.

Dr. Aronson, Distinguished Professor of Humanities at Wayne State University, sees the recovery of a sense of gratitude as standing at the center of the challenges he describes. He acknowledges that thankfulness to the Creator is central to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but to whom does an atheist give thanks?

He writes of a sense of wonder that came upon him on a walk through woods — a sense of wonder that cried out for proper expression:



Hiking through a nearby woods on a late summer day recently, I followed the turning path and suddenly saw a pristine lake, then walked down a hill to its edge as birds chirped and darted about, stopping at a clearing to register the warmth of the sun against my face. Feelings welled up: physical pleasure, delight in the sounds and sights, gladness to be out here on this day. But something else as well, curious and less distinct, a vague feeling more like gratitude than anything else but not towards any being or person I could recognize. Only half-formed, this feeling didn't fit into any easily discernable category, evading my usual lenses and language of perception.

Dr. Aronson's problem is this — he wants to be grateful for what he sees and experiences in the cosmos, but he does not believe in God. So, who to thank?

He further admits that a proper sense of gratitude would tie together his experience, uniting his pleasure with his understanding. But, if one rejects belief in a supernatural being from the outset, gratitude is awkward, to say the least.

In the end, Aronson wants to express gratitude in the face of nihilism. He wants to find the kind of meaning in the

cosmos rejected by figures such as Albert Camus. So, in the end he roots his sense of gratitude for the cosmos *in* the cosmos itself. Thinking of the power of the sun and other forces necessary for human life, he proposes that atheists express gratitude for “forces beyond our control.” He also points to our dependencies upon other people and generations.

“Feelings of dependence and of belonging are appropriate attitudes of response by the secular person,” he argues. “So are feelings of reverence and awe. None of these need be vague or fuzzy – if their worldly sources are not ignored and they are not projected beyond our universe, they become specific modes of living and experiencing our actual situation.”

In the end, he proposes that non-theists should imagine their own “map of dependence” that would trace obligation and meaning. “To give thanks is to honor this.”

Professor Aronson deserves credit for acknowledging the problem — the problem of expressing gratitude without reference to God. His proposal sounds much like the gushing expression of the late Carl Sagan’s embrace of the cold and accidental cosmos.

His article also performs the helpful service of demonstrating how the Christian view of life is so utterly different than that of the atheist. Current concerns about the Christian worldview properly focus on ultimate questions having to do with truth, existence, human dignity, and purpose. Dr. Aronson reminds us that one key and essential component of the Christian worldview is gratitude to God. The inevitable conflict (what James Orr called the “antagonism”) between the Christian view of the world and the secular view comes down to gratitude as much as anything else.

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