

# **Learning and Teaching Virtuous Gratitude**

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## **Introduction**

There has been a recent notable growth of interest in the topic of gratitude in philosophy, psychology and education and other fields. (For, example, in philosophy, Berger, 1975; Card, 1988; Walker, 1988; McConnell, 1993; Fitzgerald, 1998; Wellman, 1999; Roberts, 2004; McAleer, 2012; Carr, 2013; Gulliford, Morgan & Kristjánsson, 2013; Kristjánsson, 2015; Carr, 2015: in psychology, McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons & Larson, 2001; Emmons & McCullough, 2004; Bartlett & DeSteno 2006; Watkins, 2013; Froh, Bono, Fan, Emmons, Henderson, Harris, Leggio & Wood, 2014: and in education, White, 1999; Howells, 2012). To be sure,

given that the terms ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ are, at least in some cultures, among the first to be learned, gratitude does seem to be a fundamental dimension of human association or social reciprocation. Moreover, as the slightest acquaintance with above cited philosophical and psychological literature soon shows, gratitude has invariably also been regarded as a personal and social benefit of some moral significance.

In this light, one might hold that teaching the young to be grateful or at least to understand the meaning of gratitude should be a parental and/or other educational priority. If gratitude is a basic facet of positive human development, a building block of civilised human association, or – like requirements to be honest or fair – a moral obligation, we may well consider it an educational duty to encourage or require some inclination on the part of the young to respond gratefully to favours or benefits. Indeed, this is probably no more nor less than what good parents and teachers have always sought to foster on the part of those in their parental and/or

educational care. That said, the question of what form such education might or should take is complex and the purpose of this paper is to identify and explore such complexities. As a prelude to this, however, we may first look at attempts that have to date been made – mainly by psychologists – to understand, promote or assist the learning of gratitude.

### **Recent attempts to promote gratitude**

Recent psychological interest in gratitude has been mainly inspired by a widely influential movement of ‘positive psychology’ that has done much to foster a contemporary shift in educational policy and practice away from narrow focus on academic achievement and certification towards broader aspects of educational development including the cultivation of so-called ‘character strengths’ (see, for example, Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich & Linkins, 2009; Waters, 2012). In this context, gratitude has been linked to a range of psychological social and other benefits, including feelings of

personal wellbeing and life satisfaction (Watkins, Woodward, Stone & Kolts, 2003; Wood, Joseph & Maltby, 2008), pro-social dispositions (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006) and better interpersonal relationships (Algoe, 2012; Bartlett, Condon, Cruz, Baumann & DeSteno, 2012). Of some present interest, research has also claimed to show that boosting gratitude may increase satisfaction with school experience (Froh, Sefick & Emmons, 2008). Indeed, development and deployment of gratitude-boosting interventions in educational contexts has increased in recent years – especially in the USA and Australia where positive education has been widely influential (see, for example, Froh and colleagues, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2014; Waters 2011). Typically, the purpose of such interventions – which usually include counting blessings, creating gratitude diaries/journals, and going on gratitude visits – is to increase focus on gratitude and the frequency of grateful experience, sometimes with the aim of generating such positive psychological benefits as increased well-being (Froh *et al.* 2009; Waters 2011).

In one of the earliest and best known of such interventions, Emmons and McCullough (2003) examined the effects on adults of counting blessings, either once a week for ten weeks (Study 1), or once a day for two weeks (Study 2). The research team demonstrated how such gratitude exercises lead participants to more positive appraisals of their lives; to greater optimism about the week ahead; to fewer physical complaints; to improved pro-social attitudes and behaviour; to enhanced positive affect; and to reduced negative affect. Indeed, in the wake of such research, gratitude exercises have been introduced into school curricula. For example, Froh and colleagues (Froh, Sefick & Emmons, 2008) have implemented a range of ‘gratitude interventions’ in the USA that have included – alongside counting blessings – the writing and delivering of thank-you letters (Froh, Kashdan, Ozimkowski & Miller, 2009) and attempts to teach children to think gratefully via social-cognitive appraisals of benefit exchange (Froh *et al.*, 2014, p. 132). Such educational interventions have also been held to

produce such psychological and social benefits as increase in self-reported life satisfaction and wellbeing – including reduction of negative affect.

More recently, however, such approaches to the promotion of gratitude have been specifically targeted at parents. In this regard, a recent work entitled *Making Grateful Kids* (2014) by Jeffrey Froh and Giacomo Bono – two of the best-known contemporary advocates of educational promotion of gratitude – is especially noteworthy for its exploration of a wide variety of practical interventions by which parents, teachers and others might promote gratitude among the young. Moreover, some very large claims on behalf of the benefits of gratitude are made by this work: thus, gratitude is described on the book cover as a ‘miracle cure’ and a ‘wonder drug’ ensuring that children and young people will ‘behave better, improve their grades and avoid risky behaviours’. Still, these various psychological approaches clearly raise

questions concerning the educational significance and value of such interventions, to which we may now turn.

### **The educational significance of gratitude**

Insofar, the overall drift of such psychological literature seems to be that the practice of gratitude has a range of psycho-social benefits and that these stand to be promoted or cultivated via the regular practice of gratitude or developing a habit of thanksgiving. On the face of it, it seems supposed that gratitude may be developed or habituated by regular practice in much the same way as musical or a sporting skill. (It is here worth noting that a skill-focused model of virtue acquisition has been much pressed in some contemporary Aristotelian literature of virtue ethics: see, for example, Annas, 2011.) However, one might well wonder exactly *what* is being developed or built up in this way: in short, what exactly is here *meant* by gratitude as such? Is gratitude a feeling of subjective well-being, an attitude (perhaps involving beliefs about

the world) or a social skill? Perhaps it is meant to be all of these in psychological and/or other literature; but the precise educational significance or value of any of these things remains far from clear.

To begin with, while it may be that gratitude involves feelings of subjective well-being, or is at least conducive to some positive affect (e.g., Gallup, 1998; Watkins *et al.* 2006), this would not alone justify its educational promotion. On a conception of education as crucially implicated in the promotion of knowledge and understanding (as, for example, pioneered in modern times by Peters, 1966) experiencing such affect would seem neither necessary nor sufficient for educational significance: clearly, what is emotionally congenial need not be educational and what is educational is often not emotionally congenial. Much the same might also apply to gratitude conceived only as a positive or optimistic attitude or outlook on the world, or a ‘life orientation’ (see, for example, Wood *et al.* 2010), since this by itself would also not serve to show whether such a state is an *educationally*

significant one to be in. In short, for a psychological state to be of educational value, more would need to be said about the reasons *why* it is so valuable, than that it is a pleasant one to be in. On the other hand, any suggestion that gratitude is a pro-social skill – that it conduces to better interpersonal association – might seem more educationally promising. But, again, questions need to be asked about the precise *educational* significance of such skills (since it is not obvious that all of these, such as good manners, have large educational significance) – perhaps especially about whether any general disposition to gratitude invariably conduces to the *right* sort of social relations, or what might or should be regarded as *appropriate* social or other gratitude.

Evidently, many of these questions – about the appropriateness of grateful feelings or dispositions – are clearly pointing in a *normative* direction. In this regard, it may also be conceded that most psychologists and philosophers have regarded gratitude as not only personally and socially beneficial, but also as of some *moral*

significance. Moreover, while this view seems more frequently assumed by psychologists than argued for, there are nevertheless honourable attempts in in the psychological literature to give this claim some normative substance. Thus, for example, Michael McCullough and colleagues (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons & Larson, 2001; see also McCullough & Tsang, 2004) have argued that gratitude has a three-fold function as a *moral barometer*, as a *moral motivator* and as a *moral reinforcer*: in short, gratitude is held to be a gauge of agents' moral appreciation, and a disposition that tends towards as well as magnifying such tendency towards moral agency. Insofar, might this not provide a case for the teaching of gratitude to children and young people in schools or other educational contexts? Might we not feel as compelled or morally obligated to teach young people to be grateful as we would in instructing or encouraging them to be more honest, fair or tolerant?

The trouble now, however, is that the claims of McCullough and others for the moral significance or implications of gratitude are far from clear or straightforward. To begin with, they seem based on little more than the observation that gratitude has interpersonal or pro-social benefits. But, of course, such social or interpersonal benefits – no less than benefits measured in terms of subjective wellbeing – could yet fall short of moral significance or value. For just as activities conducive to feelings of subjective well being might be amoral or even immoral, it could be that activities productive of social or interpersonal attachment also failed to serve moral ends. Indeed, it may be that much injustice has followed in human affairs from too much (tribal or other) attachment as too little. Moreover, even if we do conceive the ends that gratitude serves – as a moral motivator or reinforcer – as morally significant, it would by no means follow that *gratitude* would qualify as a moral end or quality *in and of itself*. Aside from this falling short of showing what moral value gratitude might have in its own right, it seems that anything that served the moral ends to which

gratitude is directed might well be adopted instead. For example, we would not need gratitude to promote positive interpersonal relations, if (say) educating for justice or benevolence served equally as well.

While philosophers may have been less interested than psychologists in questions about the learning of gratitude, they have been much concerned with questions of its *meaning* and have invariably taken gratitude to have some moral significance. All the same, there has also been much controversy over the precise moral character of gratitude and perhaps the key issue has turned on its status as a requirement or *duty* (For works that clearly define this issue, see McConnell, 1993; Wellman, 1999: see also Carr, 2013). The main trouble here is that while some measure of gratitude towards benefactors seems socially expected – and appreciating this parents may encourage their children to thank others for favours – there is yet a clear sense in which such gratitude is not *obligatory* in the manner of such moral or other obligations as

honesty or fairness and that benefactors therefore do not have any *right* to the thanks of those they benefit (Carr, 2015). Indeed, in light of this feature of gratitude, Rousseau (cited in Watkins *et al.*, 2006) has been credited with observing (with perhaps characteristic paradox) that ‘gratitude is a duty which ought to be paid, but which none have a right to expect’; and Claudia Card has more recently remarked that ‘a duty to be grateful sounds like a joke’ (Card, 1988, p. 8). Thus, insofar as the favours of benefactors are unsolicited and freely given, while ungrateful beneficiaries might well appear to the giver and others to be impolite or graceless, it is not entirely clear that they have failed to meet any – certainly moral – obligation (though see McConnell, 1993 for an alternative argument).

A related difficulty about conceiving gratitude as duty-fulfilment is that young people or others may well give thanks from a sense of obligation without being at all what we would normally regard as grateful. This is because being truly grateful seems more than just

a matter of the routine, casual or token utterances of ‘thanks’ or ‘have a nice day’ that pepper everyday human discourse – which may well mean, and perhaps more often than not do mean, hardly much at all. In this light, genuine gratitude seems to require some positive attitude or sentiment of sincere appreciation either for the favours or gifts given, or for the generosity and good will of others (for example, Roberts, 2004; Wellman, 1999). But, again, such (perhaps dispositional or affective) gratitude may not be commanded or required. Indeed, requiring thanks from the young may well seem counter-productive if it results in discouraging the free expression of gratitude – much as requiring them to practice scales on the piano may sometimes alienate them from music. To be sure, this point is not that the young should never be required to do or learn anything against their will: it is rather that whereas the aim of teaching a musical skill is to foster the *ability* rather than the inclination to perform it, the point of teaching gratitude is precisely to inspire pupils to *want* to be grateful rather than merely to perform grateful acts.

In this light, many philosophers have been drawn to conceiving gratitude as more a moral *virtue* than a duty. (see, for explicit defence of gratitude as a virtue, Wellman, 1999). So conceived, virtuous gratitude would not be just a regular tendency to express thanks, but an affectively grounded trait-like capacity to feel thankful or want to show sincere appreciation on appropriate occasions of benefaction. Thus, just as we should not regard agents as benevolent or compassionate unless they felt care or compassion – no matter how much or how often they contributed to charitable causes – so we should not consider them to be grateful people unless they *feel* grateful (though, of course, we might also require such feelings to show themselves in grateful action). That said, there is a compelling case for saying that such grateful emotion is neither sufficient nor necessary for genuine gratitude.

First – leaving for later a significant issue about whether the previously considered gratitude interventions of psychologists are

the most effective ways of fostering any alleged virtuous gratitude – it is far from evident that the presence of a positive feeling or attitude towards others or the world is generally *sufficient* for moral virtue. Clearly, there are many affective qualities that we consider desirable, laudable or admirable – such as cheerfulness or optimism – that are not moral virtues in the manner of, say, honesty or justice. In this regard, it would seem to be one crucial difference between cheerfulness and honesty that while we might praise someone for possessing either of these qualities, we would (or could) hardly criticize a person for being gloomy as we could (or would) for being dishonest. But likewise, while we might encourage the young to be grateful, or even show some disapproval if they are not, they are (arguably) under no moral obligation to be so – and we certainly could not punish them for being ungrateful in the way that we might for lying or cheating. In this light, we *might* be inclined to say – not least in a spirit of liberal tolerance – that the gratitude or ingratitude of agents, no

less than their abundance or lack of cheer, is largely their own affair.

But it is also not entirely clear that the positive affect in which philosophers and psychologists have sometimes sought to ground virtuous gratitude is *necessary* either. To be sure, parents may require young children to express or write letters of thanks for gifts or favours that they may not value from family, friends or relatives for whom they may have little or no regard – and that they may hate doing this. In such cases, we might well say that they are not *really* grateful. Still, it does not follow – perhaps in more mature cases – that all who thank those to whom they may not be warmly disposed for gifts of little value to them, should also *not* be considered genuinely or sincerely grateful. But, by much the same token, it is not obvious that we should count the wholehearted thanks of small children to those they love for presents that they have always wanted as *virtuous* gratitude either. By this light, any apparently thankful young child might *fail* to count as genuinely

grateful precisely insofar as she is concerned only with the satisfaction of her desire for a new acquisition or to express the love of close attachment. On the other hand, a morally mature adult may well count as truly and sincerely grateful – despite any and all negative feelings towards gift or giver – if she duly appreciates the kind and generous spirit in which the gift is given and makes a clear effort to respond in kind. To understand this better, we may now take a closer look – with reference to the virtue ethics of Aristotle – at the possible virtue ethical credentials of gratitude.

### **Towards virtuous gratitude**

So far, any educational case for the teaching or other promotion of gratitude would seem to rest on conceiving gratitude as something like a moral virtue – in the manner, perhaps, of honesty or justice – of a kind that might call for educational development or formation. In this regard, modern work in virtue ethics – deriving mostly

(though not exclusively) from Aristotle (1969) – regards virtue as a state of character concerned, *inter alia*, with the practical cultivation of particular virtue-specific emotions that disposes agents to act in morally optimal ways. (Latter day work in virtue ethics is voluminous: but, for this fairly standard view, see Carr, 2003). Insofar, recent psychological efforts to develop gratitude interventions that are productive of grateful feelings and pro-social conduct may seem in line with this broad goal. However, matters are not quite so straightforward. First, it is not clear that grateful sentiments, attitudes or habits are generally or inevitably of *moral* concern – in the manner of such virtues as honesty or justice. This is an issue to which we shall return in the last section. But secondly, insofar as there is more to Aristotelian virtue than the cultivation of pro-social habits conducive to positive psychological states, it far from clear how gratitude would qualify as a *virtue* that learners might require *educational* assistance to develop as required for their personal moral or other growth or flourishing –

again, in the manner of such time-honoured virtues as honesty, temperance or justice.

Since the second of these issues may seem more fundamental, we shall here first explore the question of whether or how gratitude might pass muster as an educable virtue. In this regard, we have already noticed that a key difference between gratitude as a form of routine reciprocation – the result of parental encouragement of children to return, for example, routine thanks for favours – and the thanks of the putative virtuously grateful agent, is that the latter should be heartfelt in the light of some genuine appreciation of the human point, purpose and spirit of gratitude. On this score, contemporary neo-Aristotelian literature on the moral psychology of virtue evidently holds that feelings, emotions and passions are no less implicated in moral virtues than reason (again, for example, see Carr 2003). Thus, to be virtuously compassionate or generous is not just to feel disposed – as a matter of duty – to help or give time or resources to others, but also to be inspired by the attitudes

or sentiments of the compassionate or generous agent. Likewise, it might be said that to be a virtuously grateful agent, it is not enough to be disposed to give thanks for favours, but also requires the attitudes or sentiments of the grateful agent – which have often been identified in the academic literature with something like a grateful feeling or emotion of gratitude (for a stout defence of gratitude as an emotional disposition – a ‘concern-based construal’ – see Roberts 2004). We should here acknowledge that the gratitude on which we are mainly focusing is that directed towards a specific agent of benefaction (and usually called ‘triadic’ or benefit-triggered’ gratitude: see Carr, 2013; Gulliford *et al.*, 2013; Lambert, Graham & Fincham, 2009). To be sure, gratitude has also been construed as a broader ‘untargeted’ attitude of appreciation of all good things that may come one’s way (see Fitzgerald, 1998; McAleer, 2012; Lambert *et al.*, 2009; Gulliford *et al.*, 2013). However, insofar as there are persuasive philosophical arguments against such a more grammatically relaxed conception of gratitude

(see, for example, Carr, 2013), we shall not explore such complexity further here.

Still, insofar as the practical wisdom or deliberation (*phronesis*) that Aristotle (1969, book 6, section 4) regards as necessary for virtue is concerned with the proper ordering or regulation of virtuous affect – with determining the precise or appropriate measure or expression of such affect – there is some room for caution here about the way in which emotions are implicated in virtues. Indeed, it may be one trouble that the ‘doctrine of the mean’, through which Aristotle attempts to explain the role of affect in moral virtues, is often too simply conceived on the model – most commonly cited – of the relationship of courage to fear. In this light, courage is usually defined as a *via media* between a vicious excess of fear (cowardice) and a no less vicious deficit of the same (recklessness or impetuosity). However, the difficulty of applying any such general account of virtue as mediating between excesses and defects of some particular sentiment specific to that

virtue were long ago exposed by Bertrand Russell's witty *reductio* of Aristotelian justice as seeking a way between partiality and impartiality (Russell, 2000). That said, the joke may only really tell against someone mistakenly looking for some distinct feeling whose unjust excess is partiality and whose deficit is impartiality. But insofar as impartiality is not a deficit of partiality, but rather what justice actually *means*, it may simply be a mistake to seek any specific just feeling or emotion that the virtue of justice might serve to temper or moderate.

Of course this is not to deny that there may *be* emotions that it is the business of justice to temper or moderate. For example, a judge might by nature be too sociable and inclined to see the best in others. But while we can see how justice might be endangered by complete deficit of some such agreeableness, it is no less clear how excess of it might incline to unjust leniency. Again, while a teacher who deplores the conduct of a particular pupil might be justified in persisting in such sentiment – perhaps in order to get the pupil to

behave better – she may also need to ensure that this does not become excessive personal dislike and/or prejudice. So while it may not make sense to suppose that there is any distinctive sentiment of justice that the virtuously just would need to control or moderate (it would, after all, be odd to say ‘I feel very just today’), there may well be a range of justice-related feelings and emotions between which this virtue does need to arbitrate.

But what here true of justice may be no less so of gratitude. For despite any and all temptation to conceive gratitude as rooted in the cultivation of a specific grateful feeling or emotion that may also require moderation in the interest of some ideal mean, it is far from obvious that there is any such distinct sentiment. For while we might make sense enough of ingratitude as a vicious deficit of gratitude, it is less apparent what sense might be made of an *excess* of gratitude – since, as in the case of justice, gratitude seems to be the normative target at which we are aiming rather than a specific sentiment of which we might have too much. Again, we need not

doubt that gratitude often does involve the negotiation or moderation of both positive and negative feelings or emotions (see Morgan, Gulliford & Carr, 2015). Thus, for example, someone might interpret a gift or favour from someone whom they admire to be more meaningful than it is and respond with inappropriate romantic attachment to the benefactor. While such attachment might be appropriate in some circumstances, it could well be misplaced here and therefore in need of moderating in the name of well-judged gratitude. However, if someone responds to a well-intentioned gift with some disappointment, guilt or embarrassment (Morgan, Gulliford & Kristjansson, 2014), these may also be emotions or feelings that need laying aside or suppressing in the name of due gratitude. But while all of such – negative and positive – forms of affect no doubt require negotiation or moderation in the name of well-judged gratitude, to construe these as excessive or deficient forms of some specific sentiment of that name may be less advisable: rather, they are diverse forms of affect

– over-attachment or negative reaction – by which an agent *may* fail to hit the desired normative mean of gratitude.

Moreover, as in the case of justice, there are clearly ways of failing to meet the best normative standards of virtuous gratitude that are not necessarily, if at all, due to the mismanagement of feeling or emotion. Precisely, some of these could be failures of perception or reason (wisdom). Thus, just as a judge may fail to discern (or not have access to) the evidence that clearly points to the defendant's guilt, so a beneficiary might be simply mistaken about the questionable circumstances of some apparent benefaction. So, for example, a grateful beneficiary might fail to see that an apparent gift or favour has strings attached – that it is intended more as a bribe than as a free gift – or, in some cases, he or she may be mistaken about the true source of the benefaction. Indeed, we do not need to turn to fiction for cases in which benefactors, desiring to remain anonymous, appoint some other agent to the task of benefaction. In such cases, if the beneficiary thanks the stand-in

benefactor – and that stand-in fails to reveal that the gift or favour did not come from him or her – then gratitude might seem misplaced, if not actually null and void, by dint of targeting the wrong person.

To be sure, not all of these cases are clear-cut and there is much disagreement – especially among philosophers – over what we should say in some of them. Clearly, whereas some hold that we should not be grateful where gratitude is not to the real giver, or where the giver has some ulterior motive, others would no less firmly regard such circumstances as irrelevant just as long as we benefit. (Such discrepancies have emerged among the British public whereby 22.8% of respondents agreed/strongly agreed that they would be grateful, 26% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 51.1% disagreed/strongly disagreed that they would be grateful in the case of an ulterior motive: see Arthur, Kristjansson, Gulliford & Morgan, 2015). The key point for now is that if there is a case for gratitude as a *virtue* – more especially an educable virtue – it

would rest on conceiving it as not just a matter of habitual thanksgiving of possible psychological or social benefit, but as a *considered* response in which there are rules and standards for its appropriate expression, allowing for the possibility of getting things wrong as well as getting them right. Insofar, the cultivation of virtuous gratitude precisely requires the development of that capacity for deliberation and *judgement* that Aristotle (1969, book 6, section 4) long identified as *phronesis* or practical wisdom. In such terms, virtuous gratitude is precisely a matter of the ordering of an agent's cognitive, affective and desiderative life in accordance with some deliberative ideal of appropriate thanksgiving. (For this conception of virtue in general, see Carr 2009; for its application to gratitude, see Morgan & Gulliford, 2014; Morgan, Gulliford & Carr, 2015). Just as practical wisdom is needed for the proper conduct of honesty or justice – for ensuring that we are not blinded to truth or fairness by error or biased attachment – so it would be needed for gratitude, so that we are not

ungrateful when we ought not to be, or mistakenly grateful where such gratitude is not warranted.

Still, so conceived, it is at least arguable that gratitude may count not only as a virtue, but as a teachable virtue. In such terms, it might qualify as a virtue alongside honesty, justice, temperance, courage and generosity insofar as it contributes – in something like the manner of other virtues – to what we should and generally do regard as a flourishing and/or admirable human life. To be clear, such gratitude would be more than a trait of personality or temperament such as cheerfulness or good humour: for, while we may praise or admire such traits in others, we do not necessarily praise these as moral or other achievements – and we are even less likely to *blame* others for failure to exhibit such qualities. On the other hand, we do often commend or admire the grateful for their gratitude and we also in some measure criticize the ungrateful for their lack of it. It also seems that we praise virtuous gratitude – or gratitude freely given – for much the same reason that we praise

the other virtues of honesty, justice, courage, self-control or generosity: precisely, because – while we have seen that gratitude is not a matter of strict obligation in the manner of justice – this and other virtues do require a degree of civilised self-discipline that may sometimes run counter to our less pro-social inclinations. So, just as we may be tempted to lie to our own advantage, take more than our due of common goods, or fail to stand our ground, so we may often gracelessly fail to acknowledge the contributions of others to our fortunes and successes. But this may also be why any teaching of virtuous gratitude cannot logically be prised apart – as some have sought to separate it (see Wellman, 1999) – from the grasp of the ‘quasi-obligatory’ character of gratitude. From the outset, learning the grammar of gratitude or what gratitude *means*, as in the case of honesty, fairness and courage, is learning that we are at least invited – if not compelled – to exercise even when or where it is uncongenial or inconvenient. Still, we yet need to give some attention to a remaining puzzle about the precise moral status of any such virtuous gratitude.

## The moral status of gratitude revisited

Whatever the good news so far for gratitude as a learnable virtue, an earlier question about its precise moral status – indicated, but postponed, at the beginning of the last section – remains to be addressed. For there we suggested that in order to make a clear case for its educational requirement, we might need to show that gratitude is a matter of *moral* significance or concern in the manner of such values and virtues of honesty and justice. But have we not clearly demonstrated the fundamental moral status of gratitude by arguing that it seems to be something like a *virtue* in the manner of justice or honesty that we may be praised for exhibiting and criticized for lacking? Unfortunately, matters are again not so simple. To begin with, while agents who act dishonestly or unjustly may thereby act *immorally*, this is less evidently so of those who are ungrateful. The main reason for this, already noticed, is that insofar as no one is actually *obliged* to give

thanks for gifts or favours – which as such are freely and unconditionally given – honesty and justice are morally required in a way that gratitude is not. So while those who fail to be grateful for gifts and favours may be counted ungracious, unkind or uncivil, it seems less appropriate to call them *immoral*. Insofar, it is at least arguable that there is no *requirement* to be grateful in order to be moral.

However, if gratitude is not *necessary* for morality, it would not appear *sufficient* either. For it seems that people may be sincerely, wholeheartedly and consummately grateful for gifts or favours in circumstances of utter moral corruption or exploitation – in which, indeed, the grateful may be fully aware of such corruption and exploitation (Carr, 2015; also Shelton, 2004). We have only to think here of the gratitude of those in receipt of large inheritances based on profits from the slave trade or other colonial exploitation, or of gang members who are grateful to colleagues for killing off some serious rival in dubious gangland enterprises. We need not

for a moment doubt that such gratitude is entirely sincere and genuine, or suppose that insofar as it is immorally implicated it cannot count as real gratitude. Indeed, the ‘paradox’ here is that one might at one and the same time morally deplore the circumstances in which such gratitude is expressed and yet honour mobsters for being grateful – or, perhaps, deplore their ingratitude – regardless of the morally shadowy nature of what they are grateful for (Carr, 2015; Shelton, 2004).

To be sure, while this may seem ethically odd or anomalous, it is actually far from uniquely so. For do we not also admire the courage or bravery of master criminals – or evil villains of fictional narratives – who will face every danger and discomfort in order to pursue their wicked ends (Scarfe, 2010)? In fact, it is a notable feature of much narrative literature that we will often find (especially romantic) villains admirable for their qualities of character, even when we well know that they are up to no good. Thus, reading *Paradise Lost*, we may well admire Satan for his

courage, his commitment to his wicked cause, his steadfast refusal to submit to the will of others, his loyalty to his followers – even his gratitude to those followers – even though we find his deliberate attempts to corrupt Adam and Eve morally reprehensible. Indeed, while we regard Satan’s project as completely devious and unjust, it is no less clear that it is also prosecuted with a fearless honesty, even with a certain sense of injustice about his plight. But, of course, having a sense of justice may yet fall short of being just.

That said, to doubt that virtues such as courage and gratitude are inherently moral in the sense of honesty or justice is not at all to deny that they are personal and social qualities of considerable significance that are importantly constitutive of human well-being and flourishing. Perhaps what the above consideration might make us more sensitive to is that courage, self-control, gratitude and other personal and social virtues need to be shaped and guided by such moral virtues as honesty and justice to the end of *moral*

flourishing. Moreover, it should be noticed that while virtues such as courage or temperance *may* (though not necessarily) be conceived as primarily self-regarding virtues, a virtue such as gratitude would appear to be essentially *other-regarding* (if not always to all comers). Thus, as in the case of honesty and fair dealing, parents and teachers may be quick to insist that children and young people are mindful of the function of gratitude as a form of positive pro-social reciprocation. In short, while gratitude may not be inherently moral, it may well count as a significant *social* virtue that it is generally desirable for agents to possess insofar humans are characteristically – not least on an Aristotelian view – social animals. But having appreciated both this and that *genuine* or virtuous gratitude cannot merely be a matter of routine expression of thanks, but requires – along with such other virtues as honesty, justice and courage – some capacity for deliberation on the whys and wherefores of appropriate thanksgiving, do we not now have a clear case for the education of virtuous gratitude?

To be sure, we are finally inclined to a generally affirmative answer to this question. That said, observations lately made about the way in which educating gratitude should go also clearly raise problems for some of the recent gratitude initiatives and interventions of positive psychologists, whose claims for these have been prone to some morally and educationally controversial advocacy. To begin with, whatever its benefits as an interpersonal attitude or disposition, it is not clear why gratitude *in particular* should be an especial priority in the upbringing and education of the young. Thus, despite psychological rhetoric (following the Stoic philosopher Cicero) about gratitude as the ‘parent of the virtues’ (McCullough & Tsang, 2004) – which fails to explain how a social virtue such as gratitude might engender such moral virtues as honesty and justice – it is far from clear that it has any higher priority in human affairs than such other virtues as honesty, fairness, compassion, generosity or forgiveness. Moreover, from a moral viewpoint, there may be real dangers in encouraging parents: to ‘help children regulate negative emotions by being a calm

problem solver, by labelling and validating their emotions, and by *replacing* their negative thoughts with positive ones' (Froh & Bono, 2014, p. 20). For while recognising the potential value of 'cognitive reframing', any general advice to 'move quickly past negative events' (Froh & Bono, 2014, p. 28) may not always be well-advised, and – from a moral viewpoint – young people might rather be encouraged to learn to cope with negative emotions (even if what psychologists term 'negative emotions' are always appropriately so-called) rather than evade them. Indeed, such more moral pro-social emotions or virtues as sympathy and compassion may be slower to develop if children are encouraged to make 'downward social comparisons' – that is, making contrasts with others who are less fortunate than themselves – as a means of boosting their own grateful sense of wellbeing (Froh & Bono, 2014, pp. 25-26; and 159 f).

But the strongest objection to any school deployment of the gratitude interventions of psychologists is that these are not very

obviously *educational*. Insofar as the attitudes and commitments of a virtuously grateful character are matters of rational engagement they require the reason-responsive practical deliberations of *phronesis* or practical wisdom that we earlier identified as a key ingredient of any genuine virtue. This being so, the primary educational task is surely not the prescriptive one of *making* children globally or ‘indiscriminately’ grateful, but – especially in the light of the more morally anomalous aspects and implications of this notion – of encouraging reflection on the *meaning* of gratitude and discerning its appropriateness in this or that circumstance (Morgan *et al.*, 2015). In this regard, while we have noticed some more recent and welcome psychological interest in promoting *understandings* of gratitude (Froh & Bono, 2014; Froh *et al.*, 2014), it may also be asked whether this goes quite far enough. Thus, while Froh and Bono suggest that schools might or should help children to ‘think gratefully’ by reflecting on gratitude related appraisals, their emphasis on appreciating the personal *value* of the benefit received, the benefactor’s *intentions* and the

*cost* to a benefactor of helping (Froh & Bono 2014, p. 222), is still rather one-sided. So, for example, while such focus may well ‘tune individuals into seeing the best in other people...’ (Froh & Bono, 2014, p. 194), it is far from uncontroversial that we should *always* aim to see the best in others and there may indeed be a *moral* case for encouraging more sober assessment of other folk – including their often mixed and/or underhand motives for benefaction – warts and all.

Still, notwithstanding the questions we have raised in this paper about the moral credentials of gratitude, it may well be that discriminating gratitude is a significant interpersonal or pro-social attitude or virtue that we rightly value, commend agents for exhibiting and criticize them for lacking. Insofar, if assisting deeper appreciation of the whys and wherefores of gratitude is a precondition of the growth of such virtue, there may be some case for sober and disciplined exploration of the grammatical and conceptual complexities of gratitude discourse in formal

educational contexts (see Arthur *et al.*, 2015). Thus, as in the case of mastering the grammar of other human virtues such as honesty, justice, temperance, courage or generosity, there might here – in the spirit of the contemporary virtue ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) – be a place for exploration of the complexities of gratitude through the study of literary narratives and stories in such subjects as English, History and Religious Education (see, for example, Carr and Harrison, 2015). But given the evident moral and other complexities of gratitude as a not unproblematic strand in the warp and weave of human association this would, to be sure, need to be a critical and discriminating examination. That said, the details of such critical gratitude education will need to be addressed elsewhere. (Morgan, Gulliford and Carr, 2015)

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