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Is gratitude a moral virtue?

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Abstract One matter upon which the already voluminous philosophical and psychological literature on the topic seems to be agreed is that gratitude is a psychologically and socially beneficial human quality of some moral significance. Further to this, gratitude seems to be widely regarded by positive psychologists and virtue ethicists as a moral virtue. This paper, however, sets out to show that such claims and assumptions about the moral character of gratitude are questionable and that its status as a moral virtue is by no means straightforward.

Keywords Gratitude · Thankfulness · Virtue · Duty · Justice

1 Gratitude, virtue and emotion

The aim of this paper is to try to see what sense, if any, might be made of gratitude as a moral virtue. In this regard, the growing academic literature on gratitude and thankfulness—both philosophical (for example, Berger 1975; Card 1988; Walker 1988; McConnell 1993; Fitzgerald 1998; Wellman 1999; Roberts 2004; McAleer 2012; Carr 2013; Gulliford et al. 2013) and psychological (for example, McCullough et al. 2001; Emmons and McCullough 2004; McCullough et al. 2004; Froh et al. 2008; Grabtand and Gino 2010; Watkins 2013; Froh and Bono 2014)—has already done robust service in distinguishing various senses and dimensions of this complex notion. However, since—as Robert Roberts (2014) has

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lately observed—the received usage of gratitude and cognate notions evidently covers a wide territory of family related terms, it may not be advisable look for any single set of criteria to which all such terms might be expected to conform. Insofar, since gratitude terms may at different times profess to identify emotions, dispositions, personality traits, attitudes, obligations (of sorts), acts of reciprocation, virtues—amongst other thing—it is possible that some previous disputes about appropriate usage may have been at cross purposes. Still, by way of present stage setting, we may attend briefly to two key controversies in the modern gratitude literature. The first is that of whether gratitude always requires a benefactor. The second is that of the extent to which gratitude might or should be conceived as a 'duty-free' moral virtue.

With regard to the first of these issues, while it seems that gratitude is perhaps paradigmatically appropriate in so-called 'triadic' cases in which a beneficiary has benefited from a benefit or favour intentionally bestowed by a (well-meaning) benefactor, it would be excessively rigorous—not to say futile—to legislate that the term is not appropriately used by those who express 'dyadic' thanks for lucky escapes, good looks or fine weather. While it may be that such dyadic or non-benefactored thanks are often indistinguishable from more general *appreciation*—or even relief—they may also sometimes betoken (not least when offered in a religious spirit) something not too sentimentally far removed from the thanks of benefactored or 'targeted' gratitude (for this term, see McAleer 2012). That said, one might yet suppose that some distinction between targeted or triadic and untargeted or dyadic gratitude could have a bearing on the second issue of whether gratitude might best be viewed as a non-obligatory virtue. It might be thought, for example, that a general untargeted (affective) attitude of thankfulness for all the good things that come one's way is closer to what we might want to call virtuous gratitude than the occasional grudging thanks offered by unwilling beneficiaries in response to perhaps unsought benefaction.

To be sure, the deontological associations and/or connotations of gratitude may seem to court paradox: Jean-Jacques Rousseau is said to have observed that 'gratitude is a duty that ought to be paid, but no-one has a right to expect'; and, more recently, Claudia Card has quipped that 'a duty to be grateful sounds like a joke' (Card 1988: 117). Still, recent philosophical ambitions to purge targeted or other gratitude entirely of deontic connotations and associations (Wellman 1999) would seem logically ill advised. For it seems clear enough that even if we should not want a child to learn gratitude as only a matter of grudging duty, it is hard to see how we might teach him or her what gratitude or expressing thanks *means* without conveying that it is something due or owed in circumstances in which one has been benefited in some way—whether or not by a particular benefactor. So while we may as parents and teachers want to move children's grasp of the concept beyond mere tit-for-tat reciprocation—which may be no mean psychological or pedagogical feat—this could only be a matter of improving their attitudes or responses to what is due by way of gratitude, not of persuading them that nothing is in any way due at all.

So while advocates of virtuous gratitude may well argue that this would have to involve promoting the right sort of positive feelings towards benefactors, such affect could count as gratitude only in the light of some recognition that it is due or called

for in circumstances of benefit or benefaction. Precisely, some appreciation of what is owed (though by no means formally obliged) to benefactors in virtue of benefaction would have to be a defining feature of any grateful affect or feeling. Indeed, this would seem required for gratitude to count—as it is widely regarded in the literature—as an *emotion*, more than mere affect or feeling: gratitude as an emotion would presumably be affect—of some sort—cognitively or attitudinally shaped towards required appreciation of favours bestowed or services rendered. However, such observations seem to raise questions not to date well addressed in the literature. First, there is the question of what role any such grateful sentiment or emotion might play in virtuous gratitude: more precisely, of whether we should take grateful sentiment or emotion to be identical with, or as only as a constituent of, virtuous gratitude. Secondly, there is the further question of the precise *moral* status of such emotional and/or virtuous gratitude. We shall address these questions in the following sections.

2 Grateful emotion and virtuous gratitude

In Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and the virtue-ethical tradition largely inspired by that work, it seems clear enough that while (even) positive emotions, sentiments and feelings are necessary parts or constituents of virtue, more is needed for them to qualify as virtues. Or, more precisely, that while some positive affections or dispositions—such as sociability, cheerfulness or optimism—might well count as 'natural' virtues, they would not qualify as moral virtues of the kind with which the *Nicomachean Ethics* is primarily concerned. For the point of moral virtues—and the reason for Aristotle's interest in them in this work—is that these are capacities or qualities that agents may be *praised* for possessing or *blamed* for lacking and for which it is also possible to educate in cases where they are lacking. Thus, for example, while it may be futile, impertinent or intrusive to criticise a person—at least morally—for their pessimism or joylessness (though we might for these reasons avoid them), there is evidently a greater case for deploring the dishonesty, idleness, intemperateness, cowardice and/or injustice of likewise vicious agents and for encouraging them to change for the better.

To be sure, given that (Aristotelian) moral virtues are concerned with the regulation, ordering or refinement of appetites, sentiments and emotions, what enables the correction or educability of idleness, intemperateness or cowardice is the work of Aristotle's intellectual virtue of *phronesis* or practical wisdom in determining the mean between appetitive and affective deficits and excesses. Moreover, while the doctrine of the mean has not escaped philosophical criticism, even caricature (Russell 2000: 186), it seems to make good sense of much virtuous deliberation—not least in the case of such virtues as courage and temperance where becoming brave or self-controlled may indeed seem a matter of determining (and of course sticking to) a well-judged middle course between too much and too little fear or appetite. Even where it may appear less plausible to look for a middle ground between (say) honesty and dishonesty, justice and injustice, we can make much sense of virtuous avoidance of dishonesty and injustice on the one hand and of ill-

judged or misplaced honesty and justice on the other. That said, in view of both Aristotle's own apparent reluctance to regard gratitude as any sort of virtue on the one hand (Aristotle 1969: book 4, Sect. 3: though see Kristjánsson 2014 for an Aristotelian defence of gratitude) and an extensive literature extolling the unmitigated psychological and social benefits of gratitude on the other, we might be at some loss to construe gratitude as a virtuous mean between affective deficit and excess. On the one hand, if gratitude is unbecoming to the virtuous agent, there can be no vicious deficit; on the other, if gratitude is an unmixed psychological and social good, there may be no excess.

To be sure, while these anti- and pro-gratitude claims hail from the very different theoretical directions of ancient ethics and modern empirical psychology, what they may have in common is some slide between moral and psychological considerations—to the detriment of any very clear moral agenda for gratitude. For Aristotle, it would seem that gratitude—in virtue of the position of 'inferiority' or indebtedness that it places beneficiaries—is both morally objectionable and psychologically uncongenial or discomforting to his ethical paragon of the great-souled man. But aside from any shortfall between Aristotle's ancient patrician view of virtue and modern democratic and/or egalitarian moral sensibilities, it could hardly be a general objection to the exercise of virtue that it is often uncongenial or discomforting. Clearly, many acts that are psychologically or otherwise uncongenial or unpleasant—from facing enemies in battle to apologising for a fault—are all the same morally required; indeed, it is in a large part because of the difficulty and unpleasantness of such acts that we regard them as admirable or praiseworthy. This, by the way, could not be otherwise even on a theory such as Aristotle's that distinguishes the virtuous from the incontinent in terms of the undivided motivation of the former: for while the virtuous, unlike the continent, are unequivocally clear that they have to face danger or opposition courageously, it does not follow that they would not find this difficult, unwelcome or uncongenial. (On this point, see Carr 2009; also Kristjánsson 2010.)

However, it may be an even greater difficulty with much of the modern empirical psychological research literature on gratitude that it seems largely focused on the psychological benefits and social well-being of acts or other expressions of gratitude—to large, if not entire, neglect of anything that we might seriously call ethical or moral evaluation (though for honourable exceptions, see Shelton 2004 and—to be considered shortly—McCullough and others 2001, 2004). While this is not to deny any theoretical or practical usefulness to such work, it seems nevertheless prone to easy slide from observations to the effect that if people feel better from expressing thanks, or that the wheels of social intercourse and cooperation are well oiled by acts of gratitude, then such benefits must be of moral significance. Once again, however, just as it does not follow from the fact that an act is uncomfortable or uncongenial that it is also of no moral worth, it does not follow that because an act is personally congenial or socially wheel-oiling—and thereby perhaps a spur to other psychologically upbeat acts of its kind—that it is of any moral significance. Indeed, there are clearly (sadistic or other) acts of personally motivating pleasure to some, as well as socially bonding activities (of, perhaps, collective delusion or hysteria) that are of little or no moral merit at all.

Again, to be clear, this is not at all to belittle or deny any psychological, social, spiritual or other benefit to gratitude: there is no present dissent from the common view that gratitude is a human quality that all good parents should want their children to possess or exhibit—not merely for the instrumental or utilitarian end that they might thereby be more socially popular or acceptable (though this, again, is not a negligible reason), but because they may also be more exemplary human beings. The present point is rather that if gratitude is to be considered a *virtue*—in the manner of honesty, justice or benevolence—it would seem to require some capacity for moral discrimination between virtuous and vicious (excessive, deficient or misjudged) forms of conduct in the manner of such other virtues. Moreover, for gratitude to be a *moral* virtue, we also require some idea of the distinctive or *intrinsic* ethical benefits of gratitude along the lines of (say) honesty, justice or benevolence. So far as one can see, neither the psychological nor the philosophical literature gives a very clear and distinct idea of what these moral ends might be and therefore of the part that practical deliberation might play in promoting them.

Indeed, to pause a moment longer over general psychological approaches to gratitude, it is fairly clear that interest in this question of the deliberative dimensions of virtuous gratitude mostly takes a back seat—if it features at all—to questions of the promotion of (as much) gratitude (as possible) for its allegedly (empirically) established beneficial psychological and social effects. In this regard, psychological research findings on the positive effects of gratitude lean heavily on the results of a range of behavioural interventions—for example, exercises in counting one's blessings and regular acts of thanksgiving—that are focused more on gratitude habituation than on rational enquiry into or exploration of the meaning of gratitude. This gives the psychological literature—not to mention much of the popular self-help literature that has followed in its wake—a distinctly *therapeutic* air. On this view, gratitude becomes another form of self-medication for a range of psychological or spiritual ills of low morale, pessimism, cynicism or other negativity. Once more, this is not necessarily to decry such therapeutic benefits, if they are indeed thereby effective—as they may well be—towards such psychological or spiritual remediation. But since it is clear that spirits may be raised towards moral, immoral or amoral ends, more needs to be said to show what moral value such morale-raising gratitude might also have.

Still, might it not be said that the social scientific research has fairly well demonstrated the moral value and virtue of gratitude by showing that it increases pro-social and altruistic behaviour? To be sure, one recent influential contribution to the psychological literature (McCullough et al. 2001; see also McCullough and Tsang 2004) seems to measure the three moral functions of gratitude that it distinguishes—as 'moral barometer', 'moral motive' and 'moral reinforcer'—in just such pro-social terms. In this regard, might not gratitude be considered, alongside justice, as a major *social* virtue—perhaps even as itself a species of justice? But this is again far too quick. First, apart from the consideration that gratitude seems regarded on this view as means to an end—as opposed to a personally formative end in itself in the manner of Aristotelian virtues of courage or justice—it is far from clear that any greater openness to or concern for others allegedly engendered by the regular practice or expression of gratitude would amount to the discriminating

capacity with which the present paper is concerned. On the contrary, such habituation to global thanksgiving may well be indiscriminate to the point of the excessive or misplaced thankfulness that virtuous gratitude should seek to avoid. But secondly, if such a blanket attitude of thankfulness is not a discriminating virtue in the sense sought in this paper, it is even less clearly a *moral* virtue of the order of justice. For the concern of justice is not merely with the promotion of sociability or altruism but with individual and social fairness, freedom and rights—and this again requires measured rational discrimination. From this viewpoint, it cannot be at all ruled out that an agent might be given to general gratitude-induced sociable and altruistic attitudes yet lack much real concern with moral justice—and we shall seek to put a finer point on this in the following section.

3 Gratitude, practical deliberation and justice

Still, to whatever extent the social scientific or psychological literature may seem less than helpful to appreciating what it might mean for gratitude to be a moral virtue, it might be said that at least the ingredients of some such account are to be found in the no less extensive philosophical literature. Is there not enough in what philosophers have already said, for example, to develop an account of the workings of moral deliberation in the case of gratitude? For a start, it seems likely that all those who have so far written on the topic would agree that *ingratitude*—the general lack of any grateful attitude or feeling towards benefactors or sources of benefaction—is a clear defect or vice of deficit. To be sure, it cannot be denied that philosophers have disagreed more about what might constitute *excess* of grateful feelings or misapplication of gratitude. Thus, for example, in a recent striking and distinctive contribution to the philosophical literature, Patrick Boleyn Fitzgerald has argued that it is appropriate to express gratitude to those who have deliberately set out to harm us (or even succeeded in doing so). However, whatever the spiritual appeal of Fitzgerald's account—perhaps as a development or extension of religious (Christian or Buddhist) injunctions to forgive one's enemies—it is not hard to see why such a position might be thought philosophically less than compelling, not least in its radical departure from the received grammar of gratitude usage (see, for example, Carr 2013). Even so, it seems likely that contrary opinions on this score could still agree on clearer cases of misapplied gratitude—where, for example, one is mistakenly grateful to the wrong person or is inclined to go overboard with effusive thanks for a very slight favour. So while philosophers are liable, as ever, to disagree over the precise conceptual parameters of gratitude, this might not in itself preclude the construction of reasonably coherent and intelligible—albeit rival—conceptions of virtuously grateful deliberation.

Unfortunately, however, this does not seem to settle the problem of whether gratitude is a *moral* virtue. For it now turns out that the real problem is not that of whether there might be something resembling coherent practical deliberation to some appropriate grateful end—avoiding unacceptable extremes of ingratitude and excessive or misplaced gratitude—but that of whether such deliberation is itself always or inevitably of a *moral* character or directed towards clear moral ends. To

see this, one need only consider the case of a beneficiary of a very large inheritance that—to the receiver's certain knowledge—is based on the proceeds of slavery or other large-scale human exploitation. To be sure, it might first seem that the dilemma here is of a quite familiar moral kind: to be precisely that of whether such a beneficiary should thank the benefactor and accept the inheritance on the one hand, or refuse both thanks and the inheritance in the name of moral justice on the other. Indeed, this might look like one of those well-rehearsed virtue conflicts in which agent have to decide between honesty and kindness: whether it is morally better to be honest and risk hurting someone's feelings, or avoid hurting him or her by some (perhaps none too serious) dissembling (Carr 2003).

Closer scrutiny of the tension between gratitude and justice in the above example, however, suggests that this analogy is seriously misleading. For whereas the basic concern of an agent faced with conflict between honesty and kindness is still that of what *morally* to do for the best in the circumstances, it seems that an agent could well fulfil all of the requirements of gratitude without at all *caring* what is morally best or just in circumstances of immoral benefit. In short, it seems that one could be appropriately, proportionately and consummately grateful in such circumstances irrespective of any moral concern or intent. On the face of it, morality just need not at all come into the matter. Here, to be sure, in the rare but praiseworthy cases in which psychologists have clearly appreciated the dangers of immorally implicated gratitude, they have sought *psychological* explanation of this in terms of failure of agents to grasp the full moral implications of their conduct (McCullough and Tsang 2004): on this view, immorally grateful agents are simply not aware of the moral downside of their actions. But however true this may be, it fails to bite the logical bullet that the grammar of gratitude seems to have no inherent moral features or associations. Whether or not grateful agents do desire to act morally is one thing: whether they *need* to do so in order to be truly grateful is another. (For insightful points in this general direction, though without the present focus on virtuous gratitude, see Shelton 2004).

Indeed, yet worse, if justice is not necessary for gratitude, it is also not obvious that gratitude is necessary for justice. For, as philosophers and other gratitude gurus have not been slow to point out, since no-one has any *right* to expect rewards, thanks or other signs of appreciation from acts of benefaction, while the feelings of benefactors may well be bruised by what they perceive as beneficiary ingratitude, no real moral bones are broken and benefactors can hardly cry injustice for no return on what has been freely given. So it is at least arguable not only that one can be unjustly grateful, but that one might also (as long as, perhaps, this does not actually amount to biting the hand that feeds one) fail to be grateful without being unjust.

This may seem a surprising and awkward turn-up for gratitude—despite some already noted unease about the possible immoral entanglements of grateful responses—that also does not seem to have been widely appreciated in a literature much dedicated to the clarification and justification of gratitude as a moral quality in general and/or moral virtue in particular. But if there is anything to the story so far, what gratitude may now seem to be is an attitude, disposition or capacity that *mostly* fits the profile of (Aristotelian or other) virtue—as an attitude or disposition for

which we can be praised for having or blamed for lacking and which also requires some discriminating practical deliberation for the avoidance of undesirable deficits and excesses (or misapplications)—but that nevertheless lacks what would widely be considered a defining feature of such virtue: namely, that it should be clearly directed towards the achievement of moral ends. Since this shortcoming seems fairly major in the context of any serious attempt to justify gratitude as moral virtue, we might now seem driven, albeit reluctantly, to re-assess gratitude as something short of a genuine virtue and as more a kind of good manners or good grace that—while socially or personally desirable and requiring appropriate judgement and deliberation—is of no inherent *moral* worth or import. While such a concession may well be disappointing to those who have toiled long and hard in what they have taken to be the moral vineyard of gratitude, one might wonder whether any other option is possible.

4 Virtuous gratitude with and without morality

However, one might also note that what we have lately observed of gratitude would seem to apply equally to other qualities or dispositions that have commonly been recognised as (moral) virtues—such as courage and temperance. Indeed, one of the problems that has haunted the modern philosophical literature on courage is that this trait or disposition can also be directed to various moral, immoral or non-moral ends: in short, it seems that the burglar, assassin or serial killer may need courage no less than the social reformer or the martyr. Among previous philosophical responses to this observation have been that courage may be considered morally virtuous irrespective of the goodness or otherwise of the ends to which it is directed (Von Wright 1963); that no act could be regarded as courage if directed towards immoral ends (Geach 1977); and—by way of some compromise—that an act directed to immoral ends might be regarded as an instance of courage but not as a virtue (Foot 1978: 16). More recent discussion has rightly found all of these proposals to be wanting (Scarfe 2010). In reading *Paradise Lost*, for example, we may well be persuaded that Satan does indeed exhibit a range of admirable virtues—including courage, self-control and loyalty (if not also some compassion and sense of injustice)—though his overall goals are morally perverse, corrupt or otherwise suspect. From this perspective, what we might feel compelled to say is that Satan's courage is certainly virtuous—but not *morally* so.

The obvious trouble with this response, however, is that it seems to jar with a received usage according to which moral purpose simply seems built into the *meaning* of virtue: on this view the expression 'moral virtue' seems tautologous, so that one could not have virtue that was not *ipso facto* moral. That said, it may also be that modern usage has inclined to a somewhat narrower construal of the term 'virtue' than that of older terminologies—in which, for example, its ancient Greek progenitor might be applied to any excellence of character that served individual flourishing, irrespective of any wider connection to justice or the common good. On this view, it would generally benefit an agent to be courageous or self-controlled

irrespective of the ends—just or otherwise—to which she employed such executive virtues. On the other hand, the ancient doctrine of the unity of the virtues may also have been prompted by (perhaps Socratic) recognition that there is something incomplete about any such courage and temperance—which might not be in the interests of full human flourishing apart from concomitant commitment to the more morally explicit ends of justice or benevolence. Still, this need not entail any denial that immoral or amoral courage or self-control are in the broader individually advantageous sense virtues—that even criminals might be admired for possessing.

At all events, it seems that much of what has here been said of courage and temperance applies fairly well to gratitude as a candidate moral virtue. On this view, we might readily concede that gratitude often exhibits all the key hallmarks of a virtue—it may be an attitude, capacity or disposition for which agents may be praised for possessing or blamed for lacking, and which involves practical deliberation to an appropriate mean between deficit ingratitude and excess or misapplied gratitude—but which may as such be consistent with amoral or immoral no less than moral ends, at least in any latter day sense of morality as justice. To be sure, gratitude may at least seem to differ from courage or temperance insofar as it is clearly a social or pro-social characteristic: thus, while the immorally courageous might also be anti-social loners, it might seem harder for the immorally grateful to be so. From this viewpoint, it might also seem clearer how to go about educating the immorally grateful in the moral responsibilities of human association. Be that as it may, insofar as one might still be sincerely or wholeheartedly grateful without necessarily caring about the justice or goodness of what one was grateful for or of those to whom one was grateful, any such educational task would seem no less pressing in the case of gratitude than in that of courage.

Taking this to be the case, it should give some appropriate pause, not only to a general social scientific or psychological literature that often seems to *assume* that because gratitude has allegedly been shown to have psychological and social benefits (often, it has to be said, on the basis of self-report questionnaires) these must also be of some moral merit, but also to a philosophical literature that may also move too quickly from the observation that since gratitude has many features of traditional virtues, such features must assume the moral character of such virtues as justice or benevolence. However, it should also give some pause to moral educationalists who may no less assume—on the basis of psychological and psychological literature—that educating for gratitude must always and inevitably conduce to the moral development of young or old. If the story so far is correct, it would now seem that in order to contribute to a human flourishing that embraces some genuine concern for justice and the common human good, gratitude—no less than courage and/or temperance—requires promoting or educating in the light of some larger and more reflective moral vision. Otherwise, just as promotion of or habituation in courage and temperance has produced brave and self-controlled villains and crooks, it could be that sincere, heartfelt and well-judged gratitude might be inculcated or promoted to ends that are quite corrupt and self-serving.

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