

Does Gratitude Motivate Moral Action?

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In gratitude for your good fortune, you must render in return some sacrifice of your own life for other life—Albert Schweitzer

Gratitude, a positive emotional response to benevolence, is a moral emotion that represents a key element of the human moral apparatus. Most often, gratitude stems from the perception that one has benefited due to the actions of another person. There is an acknowledgement that one has received a gift and an appreciation of and recognition of the value of that gift. The gift is something of value given to one unearned and undeserved by one moral agent at some cost to that agent and for the benefit of the recipient. Thus, a grateful state usually requires a relationship, and inasmuch as actions between human beings are legitimate moral concerns, gratitude is relevant to the moral life.

Classical writers focused on the good life emphasized the cultivation and expression of gratitude for the health and vitality of both citizenry and society. Across cultures and time spans, experiences and expressions of gratitude have been treated as both basic and desirable aspects of human personality and social life. One contemporary philosopher recently remarked that “gratitude is the most pleasant of virtues and the most virtuous of pleasures.” Similarly, across time, ingratitude has been treated as a serious

vice. It would not be an overstatement to maintain that few emotions hold gratitude's magnetic appeal. This emotion's attraction arises from several sources: its linkage to other positive emotions (e.g. contentment, happiness, and hope); its power to evoke a focus by the recipient on the benevolence of others, thereby ensuring a perception that kindness has been offered; and its beneficial consequences which frequently are the motive to respond favorably toward another.

But gratitude is more than a feeling. It requires a willingness to recognize (a) that one has been the beneficiary of someone's kindness, (b) that the benefactor has intentionally provided a benefit, often incurring some personal cost, and (c) that the benefit has value in the eyes of the beneficiary. In gratitude we recognize the other's moral agency—that they could have done otherwise but chose to intentionally provide a benefit, hence they were concerned with our well-being, and that they had correctly grasped the character of our moral situation (that we were in need of the benefit).

Gratitude implies humility—a recognition that we could not be who we are or where we are in life without the contributions of others. Gratitude also implies a recognition that it is possible for other forces to act towards us with beneficial, selfless motives. In gratitude we remember the contributions that others have made for the sake of our well-being. On the recipient side, we acknowledge having received a benefit and we realize that the giver acted intentionally in order to benefit us.

By experiencing gratitude, a person is motivated to carry out prosocial behavior, energized to sustain moral behaviors, and is inhibited from committing destructive interpersonal behaviors. Because of its specialized functions in the moral domain, gratitude is similar in some respects to empathy, sympathy, guilt, and shame. Whereas

empathy and sympathy operate when people have the opportunity to respond to the plight of another person, and guilt and shame operate when people have failed to meet moral standards or obligations, gratitude operates typically when people acknowledge that they are the recipients of prosocial behavior. Gratitude serves as a *moral barometer*, providing individuals with an affective readout that accompanies the perception that another person has treated them prosocially. Gratitude serves as a *moral motive*, stimulating people to behave prosocially after they have been the beneficiaries of other people's prosocial behavior. The focus of this talk is to evaluate evidence that one function of gratitude is to stimulate moral, especially prosocial action, and in so doing, make a strong case for the role of gratitude in living a moral, constructive life.

But gratitude is not the only emotional reaction to receiving a benefit. Individuals may react with feelings of indebtedness, an unpleasant emotional state that motivates people to repay not out of generosity, but out of a desire to reduce inequity. Similarly, receiving a benefit might trigger the norm of reciprocity, which states that people should help those who have helped them, and should not injure those who have helped them. Despite its status as a virtue, research has not yet unequivocally differentiated the effect of these three reactions to benevolence on subsequent prosocial behavior.

Feeling grateful is not the same as being a grateful person. A grateful person is one who is prone to feeling gratitude frequently across a range of situations. The grateful person is one who *affirms* the goodness in his or her life and *recognizes* that the sources of this goodness lie at least partially outside of themselves. The grateful disposition is a generalized tendency to recognize and respond with positive emotions to the role of other moral agents' benevolence in the positive experiences and outcomes that one obtains.

Recent research has shown that individuals who report habitually experiencing gratitude engage more frequently in prosocial behaviors than do individuals who experience gratitude less often. Individual differences in gratitude are related to individual differences in personality factors that have typically been linked to prosocial emotions and behavior, namely, high agreeableness, empathy, and forgiveness, as well as low narcissism and envy.

Furthermore, data are not limited to what grateful people report about their own experience. The informants of people with strong dispositions toward gratitude report that these grateful friends engaged in more prosocial behaviors (e.g., loaning money, providing compassion, sympathy, and emotional support) than did the informants of less grateful individuals. Grateful individuals are also rated by their informants as engaging in such supportive behaviors more frequently in general than do the informants of less grateful individuals. There is also some evidence that gratitude serves to inhibit of destructive interpersonal behavior, again suggesting its place in the moral realm.

An increasing number of studies have begun to test the *moral motive* hypothesis. Research on reactions to aid and reciprocity—which seem relevant to the motivational value of gratitude—has been dominated by the assumption that the key motive for moral behavior in reciprocity situations is inequity or indebtedness. Yet new studies provide strong initial evidence that gratitude shapes prosocial responding by increasing the likelihood that one will engage in effortful helping behavior. Moreover, these studies have been able to differentiate the unique effects of gratitude as a moral motive from the general effects of positive mood on helping behavior. Gratitude and indebtedness have distinct patterns of thought-action tendencies. Grateful responses are

more strongly associated with inclination for future altruism than indebtedness and feelings of obligation. One particularly informative set of studies examined gratitude experimentally by employing interpersonal emotion inductions and requests for assistance. Gratitude increased efforts to assist a benefactor even when such efforts were costly, as opposed to simple awareness of reciprocity norms, or general positive affect, and it is gratitude that drove helping behavior. This link has now been established experimentally as well as through earlier correlational findings.

The available evidence to date largely supports the moral motive hypothesis. The review of the literature suggests that gratitude is a psychologically substantive experience that is relevant to how people negotiate their moral and interpersonal lives. Gratitude is a moral affect orienting us to an acknowledged dependence out of which flows a profound sense of being gifted. As a consequence, when truly grateful, we are led to experience and interpret life situations in ways that call forth from us an openness to and engagement with the world through purposeful actions in order to share and increase the very good we have received. It is gratitude that enables us to receive and it is gratitude that motivates us to repay by returning the goodness that we have been given. In short, it is gratitude that enables us to be fully human. This being the case, a final question of interest relates to the ways that society and its agents might foster gratitude. Without doubt, it is fundamentally important to society that large numbers of citizens develop a proneness toward gratitude, but how might parents, mentors, schools, churches, and communities do so more effectively and reliably?