

The Shadow Sides of Gratitude Special Issue: An Introduction by the Guest Editors

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In recent years there has been growing academic interest in the topic of gratitude, in psychology, philosophy and education, amongst other fields. Philosophers have pondered the conceptual contours of gratitude and have debated its status as a virtue (Carr, 2015; McConnell, 1993), while educationalists have looked at whether and how gratitude should be fostered in young people (Jackson, 2016), and psychologists have examined the role of gratitude in promoting wellbeing and fostering good social relationships (Davis et al., 2016; Wood et al., 2010). To date, the predominant focus on gratitude has been on its moral and prosocial nature, and/or the positive psychosocial benefits which it confers. In response to this fervent focus on the positive aspects of gratitude, recently academics have called for appropriate critical consideration of the concept of gratitude, and its possible shadow sides (e.g., Morgan, Gulliford & Carr, 2015; Gulliford, Morgan, Hemming & Abbott, 2019).

Indeed, while many experiences of gratitude are life-affirming, the concept may not be as straightforwardly positive as many people have assumed. It is not uncommon for gratitude to be experienced with mixed emotions, such as embarrassment, shame and guilt (see Gulliford & Morgan, this issue). Beneficiaries may be suspicious of benefactors' motivations in bestowing favours, gifts and compliments which could serve an ulterior purpose, or in more extreme cases be perceived as malefaction (see Nisters, this issue). It could be argued that gratitude to benefactors promotes servility or encourages toleration of injustices (Jackson, 2016; McConnell, this issue), and that cultivating gratitude makes a virtue out of an unwanted dependence on others (van Hulzen, this issue). Thereby, the question also arises as to whether gratitude can be considered as 'bad' in particular circumstances (see Lösche, this issue). In contrast to the predominant view of gratitude as positive or pleasant, this special issue poses the questions of whether gratitude is always good or appropriate, whether it can be used for illicit means, and if there is such a thing as too much gratitude.

The contributions to this special issue have been, in part, stimulated by an interdisciplinary conference on "The Shadow Side of Gratitude". This 2019 conference, hosted

by the universities of Erfurt and Eichstätt-Ingolstadt (Germany), and Northampton and Worcester (UK), brought together experts from philosophy, theology, psychology and education to examine the potentially darker side of this everyday social emotion and valued human excellence. Following interdisciplinary discussions and debate, a selection of the conference papers are introduced in this special issue.

Mirroring the broader literature on gratitude, this special issue critically debates the structure of gratitude. The terms of ‘triadic’ and ‘dyadic’ gratitude are introduced within ‘recent work on the concept of gratitude in philosophy and psychology’, an earlier review paper from 2013 that is translated into German in this issue. The triadic structure of gratitude describes three common components of gratitude experience: a benefactor, a benefit, and a beneficiary (i.e., Person A bestows a benefit on Person B). Dyadic gratitude, on the other hand, describes situations where gratitude is experienced in the absence of a benefactor (i.e., Person B is grateful for X, or grateful that X happened). Triadic gratitude has been also labelled benefit-triggered gratitude, thankfulness or targeted gratitude (Lambert et al., 2009; Manela, 2016; Steindl-Rast, 2004), and dyadic gratitude has been described elsewhere as generalised gratitude, appreciation or propositional gratitude (Adler & Fagley, 2005; Lambert et al., 2009; McAleer, 2012). In the current issue, we see the terms of ‘targeted’ and ‘propositional’ gratitude being adopted by McConnell, and dyadic gratitude being relabelled as ‘reflective’ gratitude by van Hulzen. However, regardless of the apparent inconsistent use of terms to describe these distinct types of gratitude, there is large agreement within this special issue that these represent qualitatively different types of gratitude and the choice of gratitude conception has implications for education, measurement, reciprocation and gratitude’s moral status.

In this issue, *Terrance McConnell* (University of North Carolina at Greensboro, USA) describes ‘t-gratefulness’ and ‘p-gratefulness’, reflecting the traits of targeted and propositional gratitude respectively. Targeted gratitude, according to McConnell describes the disposition “to recognise and appreciate when someone has engaged in morally meritorious conduct from which he has benefited and is disposed to respond with proper degree of grateful behaviour”. As indicated in the description, t-gratefulness is considered a moral virtue. P-gratefulness, on the other hand, describes the disposition “to see what is good in situations, is adept at identifying, appreciating, and utilizing those good things and who generally thinks positively”. P-gratefulness is not obviously moral in nature but could be considered a prudential virtue. McConnell does, however, signal how p-gratefulness might enable cultivation of moral virtues (e.g., through prompting opportunities for moral improvement) and consequently be viewed as a ‘second-order moral virtue’. Moreover, while p-gratefulness describes positive and

pleasurable experiences, t-gratefulness – as described by McConnell – is not necessarily pleasant. Akin to Gulliford and Morgan’s update on the concept of gratitude in this issue, McConnell recognizes that gratitude may coincide with negatively valenced emotions.

In their update on gratitude, *Liz Gulliford* (University of Northampton, UK) and *Blair Morgan* (University of Worcester, UK) describe their empirical work that questions the positive valence and prosocial nature of gratitude experiences. This research includes evidence of how gratitude can co-occur with negatively valenced emotions such as indebtedness, guilt, awkwardness and embarrassment. These ‘mixed emotion’ experiences of gratitude are identified in adults, adolescents and children as well as cross-culturally. The empirical work described here also examines benefactor intention, putting to the test the ‘requirement’ of beneficence that is often assumed in the literature (as well as in the current issue: see, for example, McConnell; Lösche). Gulliford and Morgan observe that the presence of mixed emotions, and ulterior and malicious motives on the part of the benefactor, all function to decrease the level of gratitude experienced by the beneficiary – importantly, however, these factors do not diminish gratitude entirely. Such results can be compared against arguments around whether gratitude can only be experienced in response to a ‘morally meritorious beneficence’ (McConnell, this issue) or that gratitude requires a beneficent act that is intrinsically good in nature (Lösche, this issue).

Jörg Lösche (University of Zurich, Switzerland) considers the possible ways in which gratitude might be deemed ‘intrinsically bad’. Using a recursive framework, he sets out the ways in which gratitude towards the wrong object (the content condition), and inappropriate strength of grateful response (the proportionality condition) can be construed as incidences of intrinsically bad gratitude. The content condition describes how gratitude can be intrinsically bad when an individual responds gratefully to an intrinsically bad entity; for example, when an individual is grateful for another’s immoral act that benefits them. The proportionality condition describes how gratitude can be intrinsically bad when an individual’s grateful response is either significantly weaker than it should be, or when it is significantly too strong. The consideration of ‘overgratitude’ here goes some way towards answering the aforementioned question of whether there is such a thing as too much gratitude. The theme of inappropriate, or inapt, gratitude is further considered within McConnell and Gulliford and Morgan’s papers which respect to gratitude as a moral virtue and being experienced discriminately. In other words, that “gratitude would only count as appropriate when felt ‘at the right times, about the right things, towards the right people, for the right end and in the right way’” (Morgan et al., 2015, p.101, citing Aristotle, 1985).

The consideration of proportionality in this special issue signals that there is an asymmetry between overshooting and undershooting gratitude – that is, it is better to show too much than too little. This might thereby suggest that the ‘golden mean’ for gratitude does not sit squarely in the middle of a continuum between the two extremes. In his paper, Lösche highlights that the thresholds for gratitude becoming ‘intrinsically bad’ are difficult (or nigh impossible) to pinpoint. Taking a comprehensive view of gratitude as comprising conative, affective and communicative aspects, Lösche’s paper also reflects the work of psychologists in identifying the multiple components of gratitude experience (see Gulliford & Morgan this issue; Morgan, Gulliford & Kristjansson, 2017). Combined, these papers indicate some consensus for not considering individuals as simply grateful or ungrateful, but viewing grateful responses with respect to gratitude’s cognitive, affective, attitudinal or behavioural components.

In her essay, *Marie-Luise Raters* (University of Potsdam, Germany) tries to elucidate the moral status of gratitude. Is there a duty to be grateful if one has received something good from another? Or is gratitude more like something we praise but cannot file a suit for? For Raters, the expectation that refugees should be grateful, so often brought forward nowadays, is the peg on which to hang this discussion. Based on both the Kantian distinction between perfect and imperfect moral duties and the recent debate on supererogation, Raters argues for the claim that gratitude is not a duty but a supererogative attitude out of decency, i.e., it is morally desirable and advisable for every human being, refugee or not. With regard to gratitude’s moral nature, there is a clear and recurring proposal within this special issue that part of gratitude’s status as a moral virtue is linked to reciprocal behaviours (see Gulliford & Morgan; Lösche; McConnell; van Hulzen). Indeed, it has been proposed that the absence of an appropriate grateful response is one of gratitude’s shadow sides, or something that makes gratitude intrinsically bad (Lösche).

On considering reciprocation, *Mees van Hulzen* (University of Leipzig, Germany) argues that gratitude should not be perceived as a quid pro quo exchange or the cancelation of one’s debt to the benefactor, but instead as a recognition of something that cannot be returned. Drawing on cultural examples of gift-giving, van Hulzen puts forward that the ceremonial exchange of gifts does not take on a ‘give and take’ barter-ship, but instead a taking of turns in beneficence. On receiving a gift, we recognize the benefactor and the relationship or connection that the gift represents. Recognition of the benefaction creates a responsibility and commitment to respond, and, when responding to a benefaction, one does not return the gift or cancel the debt, but instead ‘obligates herself to the giver’. In this vein, gratitude becomes

corrupted when this sense of responsibility is lost, and it is the asymmetry in charitable benefaction that signposts the darker sides of gratitude, according to van Hulzen. Here, the needs and position of recipients changes the ‘obligations of responsibility’ into ‘obligations of obedience’.

An aversion to asymmetry in gratitude is also prominent in Nisters’ paper on ‘Gratitude, Anger and the Horror of Asymmetry’ (this issue). *Thomas Nisters* (University of Cologne, Germany) re-tells the story by Arthur Schnitzler called “Wohltaten still und rein gegeben” (Favours given quietly and purely). The story involves a benefaction from a wealthy man to a penniless man. The beneficiary, Franz, is initially grateful, however, later his reaction changes. He comes to reconstrue this benefaction as malefaction – ‘a condescending act, meant to debase him, done to make him feel this destitution even more strongly’. In explaining this change in Franz’s response to the benefactor, Nisters proposes a new construct: gratitude anger, or ‘granger’ - the ‘dark brother’ to gratitude. According to Nisters, both gratitude and granger share an aversion to asymmetry (described as an imbalance of credits, debts and dignity) and the desire to rectify this asymmetry. Whilst gratitude restores the balance between benefactor and beneficiary through the repayment of benefits, granger restores the status quo by debasing the benefactor and reducing their dignity. This novel construct indicates another case for mixed emotions in gratitude experience and also questions the logical framework of the acts of gratitude and ingratitude that Thomas Aquinas has established.

Three commentators react to Nisters’ suggestions. According to *Hilge Landweer* (Free University of Berlin, Germany), the theory of gift-giving, famously articulated in the writings of Marcel Mauss and Marcel Henaff, can help explain how and why the emotion of ‘granger’ comes into being: it is the appropriate reaction if a benefactor fails to bring about or to stabilise a relationship in which the two parties involved are at least symbolically equal. Both *Peter Nickl* (University of Regensburg, Germany) and *Martin Pickavé* (University of Toronto, Canada) aim at showing that Aquinas’s thinking about gratitude is much closer to Schnitzler’s story than Nisters suggests. Nickl points to Aquinas’s claim that in trying to “repay” a benefaction one has to consider the benefactor’s attitude (*affectus*) rather than what he really gives (*effectus*). Taking that into account, ‘granger’ could be the right gratitude-reaction. In the same spirit, Pickavé makes clear that Aquinas conceives of gratitude not as an emotion but as a form of justice, and acts of justice can be accompanied by negative emotions as well. Pickavé’s argument here speaks to a central theme throughout the papers presented in this special issue: gratitude can co-occur with negative emotions. More than this, however, the arguments put forward in this special issue bring into focus obligations and duties surrounding

gratitude, perceptions of benevolence, proportionality and appropriateness of gratitude experience, the moral nature of gratitude, and whether gratitude only pertains to morally meritorious actions. In doing so, this special issue begins to question the view that gratitude is entirely positive or pleasant, and signals some of gratitude's more 'shadowy sides'.

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