
Gratitude, Moral Emotions
and the Moral Life

by

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Gratitude is food for a Good Life.

*-An excerpt from a business
executive's speech*

Gratitude is a duty which ought to be paid,
but which none have a right to expect.

-Jean Jacques Rousseau

Gratitude is the moral memory of mankind.

-George Simmel

Introduction

This small sampling of quotes expresses some of the reasons that, as an emotion, gratitude is infectious. The ties of gratitude to other human emotions, perceptions, and life circumstances come as welcome relief when we consider that some emotions (e.g., shame, envy, rage) tempt us down a road of misunderstanding, discontent, and anger. Gratitude just “feels” different. As these quotes reveal, gratitude possesses various endearing themes that thread themselves within a moral stance.

Gratitude enriches by its moral flavor and subsequent impulse to give back; this behavior is central to any theory holding itself to a moral stance or imperative. As the quote by Simmel suggests, when we think of grateful moments in our lives, an essential attribute is a “memory” informing our moral convictions and duties. We know life in a new way (which psychologists aptly term “affective knowledge”). Again, just think of times when you felt truly grateful or, more powerfully, overcome with this positive emotion. What was the experience like? How did it alter your perceptions of the world around you?

Background

To bring order to our discussion, I will examine a number of themes. First, after a short exploration of the significance of gratitude, I will offer seven rationales for studying gratitude. This sets the framework for an in-depth look at the meaning of gratitude. Building on this detailed sketch, I will link gratitude to its moral roots through recasting it as a moral emotion and explore how this emotion works. Finally, I will offer a critical view of gratitude in order to further its definition as a moral emotion.

The notion of gratitude has struggled with two misunderstandings. First, popular conceptions of gratitude have distorted its true meaning. Second, though the notion of gratitude is intuitively compelling, many definitions and assertions commonly set forth in books and magazines geared toward general audiences have obscured a critical investigation of its true nature.¹ Thus, in popular culture gratitude receives, unintended or not, a “pass.” More specifically, when attempting to explore its essence, people, including many academics and scholarly writers, have succumbed to what I term the “pollyannaish bias.” This bias surfaces when one naively assumes that the nature of a specific concept is *always* positive.

This bias distorts the attempt to assign any moral role to gratitude, particularly in regard to its relationship with moral behavior. That is, if living a moral life is a valued enterprise (which most surely it is), and if gratitude is viewed consistently in a positive framework, then any examination of gratitude necessarily becomes overwhelmingly (and unfairly) weighted to the positive. It is as if one wears a set of glasses that views the world as one-dimensional. As we will see below, that is hardly the case!

Finally, it would be remiss to consider gratitude’s evolving meaning without looking at the role of the American character.

“Thanksgiving and gratitude have marked important milestones in American life for hundreds of years.”² The first Americans combined Old World traditions with Native American rituals to represent the importance of the Almighty’s presence in their lives. One can only speculate what was on the minds of the early immigrants

who gave up everything in their search for freedom, enduring endless suffering, including disease and death, as they journeyed across the ocean to an unknown future.

Upon arrival they encountered appalling living conditions, the adversity of inclement weather, and the ever constant threat of disease. Nonetheless, they persevered through these difficulties and somehow recognized the need to give “thanks.” Zooming ahead over two centuries to current times, like many others, I have personally found Thanksgiving to be my favorite holiday. Unencumbered by the gift-studded and luxurious atmosphere that plagues Christmas and is slowly beginning to corrode Easter, Thanksgiving Day keeps its focus: an earnest, well-intended opportunity to offer and experience unadorned thanks.

Why Study Gratitude?

Even granting its appeal, it is necessary to spell out, if only briefly, why the study of gratitude is significant for our moral lives. Seven reasons are listed below, which invite the reader to consider one or another moral theme.

First, gratitude enriches love. Early on in my clinical training I discovered what has become for me as a practicing clinician an unassailable law. If an individual is incapable of experiencing or creating a growing potential for gratitude, then it becomes virtually impossible to heal whatever wounds, hurts, and troubling thoughts plague or cripple the person. Devoid of the ability to express gratitude, individuals remain stuck and – consciously or not – take on a “victim” state; they loop endlessly through ruminations, perceptions, and felt experiences, sculpting for themselves a primary and all-encompassing

world-view that is one of misunderstanding, suspicion, and self-pity.

Second, and stated simply, gratitude is a positive experience. It stands to reason that feeling grateful is affirming. Moreover, a strong body of research has shown that people experiencing positive moods are more inclined to behave altruistically.³

Third, it is not overreaching to assume that gratitude helps communities whether on a local or national level. At a public level, gratitude encourages a sense of obligation.

For the grateful citizen such feelings would in all likelihood translate into a greater tendency to vote, higher motivation to become aware of and understand current events, and greater openness to participate in various civic events. For the grateful leader, on the other hand, such feelings would generate an inclination to encourage responsibility to the electorate, commitment to principled decision making, and greater attention to the common good. In sum, gratitude might well be viewed as the psychological glue requisite for the well-functioning civic culture.

Fourth, gratitude helps diffuse negativity. Take the common example of going on a vacation. What could go right? Well, having a good time. What could go wrong? Well, the worries know no bounds. Missing the plane, having a flat tire while going to the airport, failing to pack the necessary clothing, enduring the disappointment over a rained-out concert for which tickets had already been purchased, and on and on. Which scenarios are we apt to dwell on in the days leading up to leaving on our trip?

Notice also that it is much easier to generate negative than positive experiences over the decisions we make. In all likelihood, this phenomenon arises from

humans' tendency to focus on negative rather than positive events. From an evolutionary perspective, this inclination is entirely understandable. Our cave man and woman ancestors probably found survival more possible if they constantly considered the possibilities and were wary of the negative circumstances with which they had to cope (e.g., shortages of food, raids by hostile tribes). Plausibly, this tendency to think negatively, besides all the omnipresent psychological and environmental factors that every individual must confront and cope with, had some biological roots since it contributed to the flourishing of the human species. From an anthropological perspective, a human tendency demonstrated over several thousand years is hardly sensitive to the rapid change that cultures undergo.

Additionally, one psychologist rightly reminds us of something we find unpleasant. Fear holds us captive for years whereas the joys of the moments tend to evaporate all too quickly.⁴ Otherwise, how else do we fully explain the seemingly endless ability negative events have to influence, wreak havoc with, and cripple our lives? What is needed is an ongoing, concerted effort, and taking action such as undergoing therapy, admitting the reality of a crisis no matter how painful, enlisting friends, or altering or changing one's environment. Consider the following true story of one woman's pain, struggle, effort, and eventual hope.

It was a few days ago. I was extremely depressed and very distressed. I was feeling somewhat suicidal. Things looked pretty bad, and I wasn't sure what to do or where to go. I have felt this way on many occasions. I tried the crisis

line . . . on previous occasions. I called again that evening. I was fortunate enough to talk with a psych nurse. . . . She was so very kind and helpful to me. She was understanding, caring, and supportive. Even her tone of voice was comforting. We talked for a bit and she encouraged me to go home and call her back. I did that. I had started feeling less agitated and more hopeful. She said she wanted me to call her again, in the morning unless I needed to call back again in the middle of the night. . . . I felt so much better. . . . I am so very very grateful to her helping save my life. I thank for God for her.

I inquired how gratitude might have altered her perception, feelings, or self-understanding. She replied:

The experience was full of sadness and despair. But my hope was rekindled by this soft voice in the darkest of nights. . . . She gave me dignity and showed compassion. The gratitude I feel towards her and the crisis line is immeasurable. I am better for it. I am alive.

Truly, this personal struggle and heroic effort (for a deeply depressed person to reach out and even telephone another might truly be a courageous undertaking) allowed this woman to enlist the use of gratitude as an antidote.

Fifth, gratitude serves as an antidote to stress. Phenomena such as “road rage,” “desk rage,” and “air rage” are becoming more common. Stress clearly acts as a

stumbling block to the moral life. As an example, when I’m under stress, I am apt unconsciously to jettison the behaviors I wish to practice and eschew the vision of the “good” teacher I desire to be. I am more curt with my students and impatient with their questions, and, sadly, misperceive their intentions. Later, upon reflection, I find my conscience troubled. More often than not, along with the personal responsibility I must assume for my actions, I realize the fact that some stressful event is present in my life and affecting my actions. Stress, especially significant stress, or stress that accumulates over a long period of time, hijacks our consciousness and derails us from the person we desire to be.

Sixth, gratitude serves to limit selfish desires. One of the interesting findings in psychological research is the phenomenon of relative deprivation. For example, suppose we make \$50,000 annually. To our surprise, we receive a raise and now enjoy a salary boost that places us in the \$75,000 bracket. Initially, we bask in this newly acquired earning power. But over time we drift, usually unnoticed, to evaluate our position and come to compare ourselves with those earning more, and thereby we want more for ourselves.⁵ Such feeling-states of self-preoccupation and possible envy cannot help but limit our perceptions of the needs of others.

Finally, gratitude has received sparse attention in the discipline of psychology. Psychologists have focused the vast majority of their interests and studies on various aspects of pathology: addictions, personality disorders, schizophrenias, etc. There is nothing wrong with such interest. But the questions is begged: Where is the balance? What about the time needed to explore what allows human beings to thrive,

flourish, and cope successfully with their environments in order that they might become content individuals, productive citizens, and contributing members of society?

Finding answers to these questions is the purpose of a rapidly growing movement entitled “positive psychology,” whose focus is the domain of human virtues and strengths. This movement examines positive emotions (such as gratitude) as well as virtues, and the human attributes that contribute to an enjoyable life through character building and healthy coping. It goes without saying that studying such positive characteristics of the human species would go a long way in delineating what assists the role of human development in attaining perspectives and ideals that encourage the flourishing of human goodness.

In sum, furthering love, relishing its positive features, sustaining community, reducing negativity, relieving stress, containing selfish desires, and clearing a path for human decency through the study of moral betterment cannot help but further the meaningful conception anyone assigns to living ethically. To place them squarely in a more precise framework we might say the following:

If we accept the premise that discourse and actions between human beings are legitimate moral concerns (e.g., how one speaks and relates to others), and that morality itself is indispensable for the functioning of relationships whether they be at an interpersonal or societal level, then it is incumbent on academics and scholars to explore critically the relationship between morality and gratitude.⁶

What Is Gratitude?

The Process of Exchange

Definitions of gratitude abound. Nonetheless, three core themes always seem to surface.

1. A benefactor offers or bestows some type of gift upon a recipient for which no contractual obligation exists.

2. The beneficiary of the gift perceives the benefactor as well-intended. In other words, the person offering the gift provides it without some ulterior motive such as personal gain or power over the one who receives the gift.

3. The beneficiary of the gift is filled with some form of positive experience (here we use the term gratitude but note that it takes the two previous circumstances to bring about this positive experience). More often than not, the now “gifted” recipients take upon themselves some form of freely accepted responsibility that moves them to offer to the benefactor or perhaps to someone else some type of gift.

Several qualities outlined in this sequence form the nucleus of any viable definition of gratitude. First of all, there is the assumption of good-will. Every person possesses what psychologists term a “theory of the mind.” That is, each person has the capacity to make sense of someone else’s thoughts and to assume that the other can do the same and that both act in consonance with their thinking.

Let’s apply this principle to the development of the beneficiary’s grateful state. We view the other’s internal state and perceive a significant level of goodness that is freely given (lacking a sense of rigid duty or forced obligation). Additionally, we possess the notion of a gift, something prized and cherished that is given freely, and respond both internally (thoughts, feelings)

and externally (actions). Note here the power of good intentions.

Even if the gift is inappropriate, gratitude is likely to be displayed. For example, a husband gives the gift of roses to his wife on Valentine's Day. Even if she would have preferred another gift or some money, she is likely to appreciate her spouse's gesture of kindness and feel grateful.

Emotion

The moral life in general is severely shortchanged if emotion has no significant role. Feelings convey significant information about the moral life and our own personal intentions. As psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton notes, the word "emotion" is derived from the Latin word *emovere*, which means "to move out, stir up, excite."⁷ The intensity of our feelings communicates our felt concerns.⁸ Emotions inform both ourselves and others. "Emotions form the prime material in the exploration of an individual's concern."⁹

Given this focus on "concern," it stands to reason that our emotions frequently convey an evaluation. For example, if a friend's remark hurts us, our anger can reflect, among other things, the value we assign to this relationship and our friend. In other words, we are angry precisely because of the friendship's significance. Summarizing this train of thought, psychologist Norma Haan writes,

emotions accompany and enrich understandings, and they convey far more authentic information about a person's position in a dispute than any well-articulated thoughts. In ordinary circumstances, emotions instruct and energize action.¹⁰

At the same time, the moral life contains far more than an emotional component. Intellectual rigor and virtues such as prudence all come into play. When experienced as especially intense, emotions can overwhelm conscience, from which our moral decisions flow. Thus, on the one hand, emotions provide knowledge and meaning regarding our moral concerns – the meaning we give to personal goodness, and the motivation to carry out our actions. On the other hand, they also have the potential to distort and bias our moral responses.

Even gratitude is not immune from this double-edged sword. We can, for example, feel deep gratitude toward someone and go out of our way to behave kindly in return. On the other hand, if we are grateful for a wicked deed, then an intense level of gratitude can undermine the sound moral principles we hold dear and wish to implement.

I suspect that for many academic writers and scholars, writing about emotion and morality is like flirting with the irrational. Emotion is understood as an inferior experience because of its perceived irrationality. Emotions are typically associated with the darker side of human nature. "One reason many scholars have preferred to base morality on logic, rather than on feeling, is that most Western philosophers have assumed human nature to be basically selfish, cruel, and deceitful."¹¹ A wide body of psychological research contradicts this view, however, and more recent investigations explore the positive contribution to the moral life. More and more frequently, subjects such as "altruism" and "moral emotions" find coverage in psychological literature¹²

A fundamental building block making up personality and its display is the strength

and intensity of emotional expression. Recall that the word “emotion” is derived from a Latin root whose meaning captures stirring to excitement, thereby pointing toward some type of movement and action. In other words, emotions invariably point us toward a goal. They are intrinsically motivating.

Finally, emotions are integral to the richness and complexity of experience. Without emotions “our once-colorful world would be bleached and drab gray.”¹³ In sum, we would be foolish to yield the place of emotions in the moral life.

Generally speaking, most academics are open to considering the view of the famed developmental psychologist Jerome Kagan who asserted that:

Construction of a persuasive rational basis for behaving morally has been the problem on which most moral philosophers have stubbed their toes. I believe they will continue to do so until they recognize what Chinese philosophers have appreciated for a long time: namely, feeling, not logic, sustains the superego.¹⁴

Related to this assertion, but distinct from it, is the vital role that empathy plays in a grateful experience. It stands to reason that any meaningful conception of gratitude must include the experience of empathy, which is best described as the core of morality.

On several occasions over the years, I have queried groups of students about the relationship between being moral and having the capacity for empathy. I have yet to see a student voice the opinion that morality can exist without some type of empathic component. Empathy allows us to delve into the intentions of another. By knowing

the benefactor’s intentions we are more likely to consider their actions grateful ones. As we shall see later, whether the action is indeed moral requires additional scrutiny.

Conversely, if their actions toward us are devoid of any type of kindness, we are hardly inclined to feel grateful, and perhaps hold the grudge of ingratitude. Empathy is a developmental process that grows to a mature state only from the normal course of human development. According to Martin Hoffman, the foremost theorist of empathy’s development, empathy begins in a very rudimentary way associated with primitive physical responses. As cognitive maturation proceeds, children are able to realize their own wants and needs; observing others evokes feelings that lead to empathic stirrings and the motivation to help someone in distress.

Over time, children come to realize that their peers possess a set of unique feelings and perspectives that might differ from their own. But because of common experiences, the feelings of hurt, sorrow, disappointment, frustration, anger as well as numerous positive experiences such as joy, contentment, and hope can be experienced, assumed and to various degrees lived vicariously.¹⁵ That is why empathy is usually defined as feeling the hurts, pains, joys, and hopes of others as if they were one’s own.¹⁶ Notice that the empathy experienced is only vicarious. In other words, as the informal definition above states, the feelings felt are “as if” they are one’s own.

It is not an exaggeration to say that empathy reflects the heart of morality. And though actions themselves can never be divorced from morality, a quote from the eminent theologian Karl Rahner bears mentioning: “On the scales of God, only

hearts have any weight.” Without empathy, compassion would be non-existent, relationships would be unendurable, and the experience of love would prove a fruitless quest. Empathy is the psychological glue that cements interpersonal relationships, civic duty, nation building, and ties to the wider global community.

An empathically based morality of the heart makes viable a “moral center.” Sensitivity, the capacity for moral outrage, and the translation of our commitments into actions and deeds are integrally tied to our capacity for empathic expression. A morality of the heart is best viewed within the context of empathic experience. Threaded through a morality of the heart are a variety of emotions (including gratitude) that reflect personal values and one’s objects of attachments (affective knowledge).

Moreover, emotional and empathic expressions are integral to our lives as loving human beings. Yet such expressions do not ensure a moral response; empathy, like all experience, does not ensure moral behavior. We can, for example, (a) “wallow” in empathy to the point of paralysis; (b) over-empathize with some (see the fighting among ethnic groups who remain loyal to their own but detest other groups, thereby justifying the goal of ethnic cleansing; or (c) have empathic stirrings that instigate boundary violations and override proper therapeutic protocols as well as common sense.

Moreover, intense emotions can surface when empathizing with others. Emotions can energize our moral actions, but persons of good conscience cannot let emotions blind them to other considerations. Emotions might ready us for action, but in and of themselves emotions do not convey the right thing to do, and sometimes they can

undermine the right course to follow. A parent might have profound empathy for her addicted and trouble-prone teenager, but what the adolescent needs is not more empathy but the response of “tough love” that points to inpatient treatment.

Nonetheless, we do not want to downplay the significance of empathy. Not to conclude on a niggling note, empathy provides a *moral quality* or *texture* that sustains a compassionate and caring stance. Without this vital component, our moral decision making would increasingly fall prey to insensitive, callous, and perhaps even heartless choices.

At this point in the discussion the reader might surmise that we have taken an excursion that fails to probe the relationship of gratitude to the moral life. Nothing could be more false. In order to understand gratitude, we must discover its richly complex and intricate structure. Thus far we have established the following: The elements that make up gratitude and the characteristics associated with this emotion all point to themes associated with any viable and commonly accepted moral system. It is now incumbent to examine how gratitude is a moral emotion.

Gratitude as a Moral Emotion

An explosion of recent research has situated gratitude within a moral domain and framework. Yet broadening our perspective, experiencing a grateful state reflects only one of several emotions psychologists list as “moral.” It should be pointed out that the number of moral emotions is subject to debate in the literature on emotion. Ironically, from a more general perspective, the actual number of emotions is itself an issue that sparks great debate. Even the definition of emotion is a subject of dispute.

Despite these uncertainties, most psychologists would agree that the following merit serious consideration as ennobling emotional states: gratitude, guilt, joy, conscientiousness, and contentment.

Though these emotions are firmly ensconced as potentially principled affections, the discerning reader notes that a downside exists for each one. One could be grateful for escaping capture for a crime, bear undeserved guilt (often labeled shame), find happiness over the failure of a competitor, experience an extreme sensitivity that leaves one immobilized, and show equanimity over another's misfortune. In addition, some emotions, normally not associated with a moral stance can, in particular situations, warrant a moral label. For example, to be angry over viewing a television program depicting children starving or abused is best described as fitting indignation over their plight.

More specifically, what qualifies gratitude as a moral emotion? McCullough and his colleagues set forth three essential prerequisites that demonstrate that gratitude is an emotion meriting the adjective "moral." First, gratitude serves as a moral indicator that enables us to "know" we have benefitted from the kindness of another. In other words, it acts as a measuring device or conscious interjection that creates a mindfulness of being gifted. Second, this sense of gift predisposes us to behave kindly. Consequently, one experiences some type of motivating orientation that calls forth an altruistic outlook of action. Finally, the beneficiary's intention to give back might create a spiraling effect wherein one party reinforces the other to continue the gift-giving exchange.

Though a finer weaving together of various research findings would produce a

more coherent and theoretically meaningful definition of emotion and the role of gratitude, few would question the potential for gratitude to be a rich resource for living any notion of the "good" life. To bring this point home, for many centuries scholars and writers have extolled the expression of gratitude while noting a deficiency in this sentiment to be abhorrent. A few samples include the following:

Blow, blow, thou winter wind!
Thou art not so unkind
As man's ingratitude.
William Shakespeare

Ingratitude. . . is the essence of
vileness. *Immanuel Kant*

Men detest one forgetful of a benefit.
Cicero

The modern cynic says "Blessed is he who expects nothing for he shall be satisfied." Francis of Assisi says "Blessed is he who expects nothing, for he shall appreciate everything." *G. K. Chesterton*¹⁷

What is the endearing pull of gratitude? As noted above, gratitude is inextricably tied to gift-giving. Who is against the giving of a gift (much less its reception)? Gifts are reminders that we are valued and frequently demonstrate visibly the presence of noble affections. To enjoy a gift (depending on its meaning to the beneficiary) oftentimes means to hold dearly a treasure. More commonly than not, treasures are cherished and remembered.

Furthermore, they require us to become executors who watch over the gift and share it wisely. In the process of treasure-holding and dispensing we note something *special* taking place, which we willingly accede to

and support. As the gift's recipients we discover ourselves as valued, treated specially, and reminded of our uniqueness. All in all, as we have noted, a feature of an emotion is its power to express our concern. Some concerns, of course, are simple and elementary. ("I like chocolate," or "I like the Chicago Bears.")

These concerns pale in comparison to others that define us, make us who we are, and provide meaning for our futures. Such concerns capture our hearts in ways that no other interests can. Our affection for them might know no bounds; we might proffer the point that it is inconceivable to be without them; and indeed, shudder when even considering their absence from our lives. In short, they are the prime source of our meaning, our purpose, and the call we have to be as authentically human as possible. "Humans," as the philosopher Jonathan Lear notes, "are inherently makers and interpreters of meaning. It is meaning – ideas, desires, beliefs – which causes humans to do the interesting things they do."¹⁸

These concerns, whose message arises from the emotions we experience, can be profoundly felt; indeed, they reflect the very core sense of our self-definitions. A sampling includes: being a good parent, loving one's country, and adhering to a distinct set of religious or philosophical beliefs. We literally *love* these beliefs, fulfilling what the great developmental psychologist, Jean Piaget, labeled the most cogent aspect of adult thought: the capacity to fall in love with one's own ideas. The religious thinker Pedro Arrupe teases out our concerns, ideas, and beliefs we love when he observes:

Nothing is more practical than finding God, that is, falling in love in a quite

absolute, final way. What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning, what you will do with your evenings, how you will spend your weekends, what you read, who you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and *gratitude* [emphasis added]. Fall in love. Stay in love. And it will decide everything.¹⁹

We flesh out our concerns, the care of our children, the loyalty we show a dear friend, the sacrifice we make for a cause we intensely believe in. All of these concerns on our capacity for moral meaning and action cannot help but hinge ultimately on gratitude. Why? Because the *fundamental law* of gratitude is that the people, ideas, and situations to which we show such depth of concern *always* do more for us than we could ever do for them.

Ask any mother, even in the midst of worries and frustration, what life would be like without her two developing adolescents. Probe a fireman what his feelings were as he saw his comrades fall to the ravages of terrorism. Ask a faithful spouse what purpose she has in caring for her demented husband. Interview a devoted teacher as she struggles day after day to help her students learn. Such emotions and the concerns they convey invite – and in truth demand – an emotionally grateful state. Would anyone say we are not spelling out morality itself wherein the most fundamental acts of goodness are laid bare?

It has been shown through psychological research that people differ on their definitions of morality and the standards used to define them. For some it is faithful respect, for others care and kindness; still

others opine an upright character, and some individuals adhere to the moral sense they acquire through the tenets of their faith.²⁰ Our pluralistic culture will never find consensus over controversial issues (e.g., abortion, capital punishment). For some issues, differences are deeply felt and passions run high.²¹ Be that as it may, we can't help but revert to the adage made famous by a Supreme Court justice when he remarked that he could not define pornography but he knew it when he saw it.

I would suggest that the same fundamental axiom applies to morality. We cannot resolve the question of the meaning of morality, but we know it when certain actions are witnessed and specific words are spoken. The examples above are in accord with this type of thinking, and gratitude becomes the inherent reminder that goodness is best understood when it is given away – whether it be through the actions of a parent, a public servant, a spouse, or a teacher.

The Experience of Gratitude

How do we grasp the gratitude experience and its potential to lead to our moral growth? I think the only way to grasp this appealing experience is, simply, to inquire from others their own personal experiences of gratitude. In line with this thinking, I interviewed over 150 people from **all walks of life: colleagues, young adults, health care workers, adult students, and those affiliated with several faith traditions.** Though analyzing their answers is still in process, four discoverable themes for moral living will be introduced and identified by the term “moral catalyst.” The first of these is role modeling.

Role Modeling

We cherish, even hunger, for the ability to aspire to and equal the deeds of another. Take the following poignant story written by a physician intern as she struggled with a complex medical problem. She described an experience that moved her to great gratitude.

Doctor, please come look at Baby M; he's not breathing! The baby in question had been born ten days earlier after 26 weeks gestation (normal is 40 weeks), weighed 600 grams (1.5 lbs), and had a disastrous brain hemorrhage; the doctor was struggling through her fifth day as an intern, second night on call in the neonatal ICU, exhausted at 2 a.m. and anxious. Indeed, the infant only breathed when someone gently tapped the soles of his feet; absent stimulation, absent breath. The young intern doubted her ability to successfully intubate the baby and place him on the ventilator (breathing machine), but even as she considered this, a nurse stated that she thought the baby was a “DNR,” (Do Not Resuscitate) and therefore should be allowed to die without intervention. A thorough review of the baby's chart, however, failed to reveal any note or order pertaining to a DNR. Reluctantly, the doctor realized that she would have to call the attending neonatologist, whom she did not yet know, for guidance. She felt inadequate, insecure and embarrassed as she dialed fearing a negative response. It was by now 3 a.m. and she was incompetent. Her attending's sleepy voice startled her and she apologetically outlined the situation. Dr. L. listened and then said quietly, “this baby has been very sick from birth. We've had many talks with his mother about the seriousness of his

condition and I think she knows he will probably die. We have done all that we can for this child. So, I recommend that you just stop stimulating.” The intern gasped, and without thinking blurted, “Then he will die!” Dr. L. apparently heard the desperation in her voice and immediately replied, “just keep doing what you’re doing and I’ll be there in thirty minutes.” He was. He found his intern still keeping vigilance at the tiny crib. Dr. L. stood closely beside her and smiled with so much gentleness and understanding the young doctor was overwhelmed with relief and *gratitude* [emphasis added]. Together they told the nurse to stop tapping the tiny feet, and waited. To everyone’s amazement, Baby M. chose that moment to start breathing again; he lived six days longer and died peacefully.

The young doctor eventually became a faculty member herself. Always she kept the memory of that night, of the generosity, support, and kindness her mentor had shown, and she has tried to emulate those qualities in her own life as teacher-physician.

It would be difficult to find someone to comment after reading the above that either physician was lacking or unmotivated by a profound level of goodness. The intern, as the story concludes, has shared her goodness. (Recall that two essential themes of gratitude are the capacity to give goodness away and, in addition, the humility to acknowledge the power of another to do more for oneself than the person could do for the other.) Likewise, Baby M. became a teacher to the young intern. Truly, Baby M. did more for this intern than she could ever do for him.

This story is flooded with moral overtones. First, the intern used the seasoned doctor as a role model and came to give away goodness as she practiced her profession with patients. Second, she continues giving away goodness by her teaching of residents and inspiring other young professionals to be the best doctors they can aspire to be.

The moral quality of role modeling need not be as dramatic as the beautiful story told above. Each of us is a product of a life history, a life story we continue to tell. We forge ahead continuing to aspire to ideals and wondering what adventure awaits us. But this future is not lived in a vacuum. It is the product of countless people who have offered us the right question or advice. It is the summation of care and nurture. It is a faithful respect others have shown us through patience at our failings and joy at our successes.

One teacher who wrote about gratitude in her survey captures this phenomenon when she describes a party given for her as she retired after many years of devoted teaching. “I am much more appreciative of the fidelity of mom and dad, grandparents, aunts and uncles. . . .” She goes on to describe these relatives as “outstanding models of perseverance.”

It is not difficult to imagine the power of role modeling. A teacher’s unexpected question sparks insights where before there was no awareness. We re-evaluate our feelings because of an older sister’s comments. Future progress on the field is attributed to a coach’s firm yet caring direction. The kindness of our own supervisor makes us sensitive to those under our direction.

To summarize, gratitude toward someone who has assumed the hallowed

position of role model brings forth a kindness we fittingly and so willingly return in kind.

Sharing Our Gifts

Gifts frequently become maps to guide our lives. The natural gifts we possess lead us to act assertively as to our strengths as well as to be cautioned by our weaknesses. Externally, gifts provided by others point us, with time, to engage the world with an affirming, open stance. This statement readily becomes apparent when we read about abused or neglected children. Quite often these youth are never able to acknowledge their own gifts nor view life positively.

Throughout this essay we have commented upon the fundamental role gifts play in the gratitude experience. Plainly, gifts – given, received graciously, and responded to through a similar gift-giving with others –reaffirm a moral sense; in short, that we are, indeed, moral beings whose lives require responsible actions. The numerous interviews I conducted and stories I read revealed situations of blessings generously shared in response to blessings received.

In fact, gift sharing exemplifies more profoundly than any other experience the meaning of “the giving away of goodness.” This very realization invites us to a sense of interdependence and “otherness.” And otherness always sparks us to be conscious of a life outside ourselves. Starkly stated, there is more than the all-powerful “I”; there is more than “me.” This relating and sharing builds on the very moral quality contained in relationships themselves. How we speak, what we say, and the manner in which we respond, always revert back to the goodness we carry within and are motivated to carry

out. In short, what we do by way of our actions speaks directly to who we “are” interiorly.

Gratitude brings forth its own peering into the soul. When offering a gift out of kindness to somebody, especially without the expectation or possibility of receiving something in return (e.g., an anonymous bystander who offers assistance to someone in need), we encounter the most fundamental core of morality: selflessness freely given. Gratitude as a way of life reflects an unflinching pattern of gift-giving flowing from life experienced as gift.

Mother Teresa proves a fitting example for viewing gratitude as a way of life. Mother Teresa was, unconditionally, a gift-giver. But this fact is obscured in comparison to a more dominant theme expressed so pervasively throughout her adulthood. Above all, she was acutely aware that the poor, to whom she devoted her life, returned gifts far more abundant than she could ever repay. It was her gratitude, viewed through a lens that allowed her to see the power of the powerless and become a receptacle for this power, that both nourished her and caused the gratitude she felt to become a source for continued gift-giving.

Positive Emotion

A final feature that makes gratitude so crucial for moral living is its capacity to engender a positive state. By way of contrast, negative emotions draw us inward, narrowing our focus to distressing problems and painful hurts. Nonetheless, we need to be aware of what may only be a first planting of the seed of gratitude, a first flickering that develops ever gradually, and finally blossoms with time. This gratitude offers meaning and hope, helping us make

sense of our experience.

I recall one woman who had come to me after her devastation over her husband's infidelity and subsequent abandonment. When I first saw her, the emotional broadside and trauma that had followed were readily apparent. Her world had fallen apart; it no longer made sense. Everything she had been taught was now being drowned by emotional anguish.

Over the years she drew upon an inner strength, gradually exposing herself to a world that was previously foreign. As time passed, her self-confidence grew. She volunteered in several social service agencies. Hobbies surfaced, and unfamiliar interests arose, bringing about growth. She felt grateful over these new opportunities that had come her way.

But something else happened, too. She was able to look back on her life and find gratitude even in the break-up of her marriage. Of course she readily acknowledged that the pain she had felt was something she never wanted nor was it something she desired to go through again, even given her present accomplishments. Yet, the ruptured relationship and the traumatic events surrounding it had, indeed, occurred. With a newly gained perspective on her life, she saw her growth and felt grateful.

Positive feelings are frequently associated with caring, kindly acts. Though there is no "guarantee" that this will take place, more often than not, when feeling joyful or serene, we are more apt to be sensitive to the needs of those around us and to respond favorably to their situation or plight. For the woman described above as well as the newly unearthed sensitivity so many find through affirming feelings, gratitude is a natural response and often a

catalyst for giving back. These positive feelings lead to the next effect of gratitude, that of opening our world.

Openness to the World

One characteristic of living an ethical life is its frequent tendency to expose us to a world beyond ourselves. The very definition of gratitude must almost invariably contain some relational aspect, some connection with others that naturally leads us to moral issues and concerns.

This dimension of gratitude was touchingly portrayed by a middle-aged professional who described gratitude through the image of "glass." He wrote:

One image I have [of gratitude] is a window beyond which is a view, sometimes obscured, of loving kindness practiced by human beings I've known, sometimes ones who take me completely by surprise. Better than a window is a full length glass door which beckons me to pass through, not to repay but to engage and contribute to the practice of loving kindness as unselfconsciously as I can.

Passing through this "glass door," he went on to describe a situation where his negative vision was altered and his new-found gratitude was a source of insight. He concluded by saying, "I have been able to express my appreciation more and to find opportunities for caring I previously overlooked." Again, in part because of gratitude, eyes were opened and goodness flowed forth.

This broadened view offered by a grateful state is supported by psychological research. When we have negative feelings, we are often stuck. We focus on something specific (e.g., the slight of a friend, failure to

meet a goal). Our interests narrow, and we become glued to the irritation, upset, anger, or rage that corresponds to our agitated state. Anger is just one of these emotions. Sadness, envy, and shame have similar characteristics. Think of times when you felt angry, sad, envious, guilty or significantly embarrassed. Then what occurred? If you were like most people, your adverse condition led to a world shut inward as you became absorbed by discontent. Only the moment mattered, though frequently a cascading occurs as your mind is flooded by, for example, your friend's previous slights and insensitivities, thereby reinforcing (and confirming the righteousness of) your currently unhappy mood.

On the other hand, positive mood states disentangle us from this imprisonment. They expand our consciousness and allow for a world heretofore ignored. Other people become important for the pleasure they bring us; we savor our current situation; we seek out other similar experiences. Emotions that occasion these happenings include gratitude, joy, surprise, and contentment.

Patently, the moral life is enriched by these latter affections. We view, ponder, and soothe more easily. When we find ourselves in such states we are more receptive to a consciousness and memory of gratitude. Under such conditions we might feel gratitude, which nudges us even more through its motivational current to venture forth to engage and, frequently, share the world we know. Again, there is no guarantee that this will happen, but it goes without saying that negative emotional states will rarely engender altruism whereas the latter provides a springboard for kindness to be offered and realized.

To summarize, aspiring to follow in the footsteps of a kind mentor, finding

satisfaction in gift-giving, experiencing an openness to the world, and finding the soothing, comforting state of positive feelings set the stage for triggering gratitude. Gratitude offers the hope of kindness and the giving away of goodness to others, while cementing relationships through the perceived good-will of the benefactor and the sharing of gifts in return.

Does Gratitude Always Foster a Moral Life?

Recall the pollyannaish bias spelled out at the beginning of this article. Too often we are prone to behave uncritically as we examine certain concepts. Gratitude is one of them. In short, gratitude must have a moral anchor lest the beneficiary of the gift succumb to the machinations, manipulations, and crimes/heinous deeds of the perpetrator(s). Though gifts usually emanate from kindness, good will, and generosity, that is not always the case, and their effects on the receiver are not always positive. "Gifts bring pride, and also envy, hatred, greed, jealousy. People are literally the creative products of the gifts they receive."²² Gratitude requires not only a perceived state of good will on the part of the giver, but socially expected behaviors on the receiver's part. The effect of gratitude, in other words, can be a motivation or an accomplice to evil. Take the following situations:

1. An uncle gives an expensive gift to his nephew as a way to embarrass his sister.
2. An employee must publicly endure before his co-workers the effusive but knowingly false praise of his boss.
3. Serial killers such as Richard Speck and Ted Bundy express appreciation toward unwitting individuals who offer them a ride, which helps them in turn to mark off a place

to bury victims.

4. Ordinary Germans confronted in the pre-World War II years with high unemployment, crippling inflation, and increasing crime express appreciation to Hitler for tackling all of the above problems.

5. By all accounts, Hitler himself had deep affection (appreciation) for his mother, who died prematurely.

6. Ideological cronies and bureaucrats fawn over Hitler and carry out his wishes knowing full well their implications.

7. A German citizen living in Berlin faces rape at the hands of Russian soldiers seeking revenge for Germany's ravaging of the Motherland and is grateful that this violent act is experienced by her close friend while she herself is spared.

These examples reflect, to various degrees, some sense of appreciation. There is the benefit of a gift and in many of these instances a perception of good will whether by the nephew ecstatic over his prized gift and perhaps even the German woman who perceives her captors as showing some type of pity toward her while forcing themselves unmercifully on her friend.

How do we preserve the moral integrity of gratitude while eschewing the false intentions, insolent if not gross behaviors, and the "distorted" if not "fake" gratitude that follows? I think there are three ways to immunize gratitude and maintain its moral integrity.

First, there is the need to distinguish between true and false gratitude. Of course to make this distinction requires us to sort out the true from the false and what is central to each. All of these illustrations are deficient in one degree or another in offering a well-intentioned gift for the purpose of furthering another's well-being. Logically, "true" gratitude, minimally, would need to

acknowledge this foundational, albeit elementary, framework.

Further, true and false gratuities would be seen as categories, each with their own discrete tendencies and themes. Given the vagaries of human behavior, the endless streams of situations, and the myriad thought processes available to humans, one could reasonably posit a set of gratuities for each of the two categories (true and false) ranging from the morally neutral to wickedness (for false gratitude) to a profound level of goodness, e.g., gratitude as a way of life (true gratitude).

Second, we must view gratitude from the perspective of a "depth model." This focus most properly refers to true gratitude. The reality (and truth) of this statement are easily supported. There is a vast difference from showing appreciation with the common "thank you" to someone who holds the door as we struggle with several large packages compared to an out-of-town sibling who offers the warmest sense of "thank you" to her younger sister who for the past five years has cared for their sickly and soon-to-die mother. In regard to this example, it might prove helpful to recall that emotions can be intense and voice profound concern.

Finally, if true gratitude is rooted in a moral anchor that is best described as the giving away of goodness, there must be some description of the good.

Here we venture into questionable territory because of the contentious debates that have engulfed Western civilization since the time of the Greeks as to the nature of the good. Nonetheless, in a pluralistic society and against a background of growing respect for human rights and the dignity of the human person, then some formulation of the good is necessary to avoid pluralism's downside: a potential for moral chaos.

The moral world of moderns is significantly different from that of previous civilizations. This becomes clear, among other places, when we look at the sense that human beings command our respect. In one form or another, this seems to be a human universal: that is, in every society, there seems to be some such sense. The boundary around those beings worthy of respect may be drawn parochially in earlier cultures, but there always is such a class. And among what we recognize as **higher** civilizations, this always includes the whole human species.²³

Adding to this respect, even if the good is elusive and no definition is endorsed by everyone, there is no denying its overpowering presence in virtually all aspects of daily life.

The daily discourse of ordinary people is filled with oblique references to morality. We talk constantly about being or not being decent, nice, or dependable; about having or not having a good character; about friendship, loyalty, and moderation or fickleness, insincerity, and addiction. When we overhear these conversations or read about these topics in magazines and novels, we sometimes say that people are preoccupied with personal relationships: the problems of mother and child, of wife and husband, of lovers, friends, and co-workers. This preoccupation is not simply about relationships, however; much of it is about what those relationships ought to be. This preoccupation, like the adjectives with which we express it – loyal, kind, or nice; disloyal, selfish, or rude – is with the language of morality, even though

we often disguise it in the language of personality.²⁴

If we blend these two thoughts, the notion of respect for others and the constant reminder to recall and live the meaning of the “good” in our everyday lives, then we are well on our way to providing gratitude its moral anchor. To summarize, the language of humans is how, with respect for ourselves and others, to live lives of a good mother, father, sibling, friend, co-worker, teammate and so on. Though unarticulated and often couched in a psychological jargon, the essence of human relationships and the quality for judging them is unambiguously a moral one.

Finally, of what does the “good” consist if gratitude is to find a moral ally that nourishes its call to fostering gift giving, recognizing good will, prizing the gift, and giving the goodness of the gift away? Again, we are open to numerous interpretations of the good. But we are searching for a common morality in which goodness can exist. Some candidates we might nominate for fleshing out the good and with which gratitude can find linkage and remain true to its “call” are: respecting one’s as well as others’ relational commitments; refusing to humiliate another human being no matter what the level of disagreement; securing an atmosphere for openness to various ideas; learning from tradition; championing service to the wider community; inhibiting aggression; searching for moral heroes; and pursuing one’s talents in a way that brings a healthy sense of self-pride but eschews arrogance.²⁵

Having a grateful life sustains and nourishes all the elements of what we might term gratitude’s goodness. Pulling together all of the above, gratitude is necessary for all relationships whether they be interpersonal

or societal. It bonds us to one another in ways that strengthen the numerous expressions of life's loves. If love is the purpose of life, then gratitude is the completion of life. For to have gratitude is to recognize in an on-going way the treasure of others, the nourishing of their goodness, and the hope that the gift of goodness will triumph by being given away, thereby ensuring in the process a future of greater goodness both for ourselves and our world.

Notes

1. See Robert A. Emmons and Charles M. Shelton, "Gratitude and the Science of Positive Psychology," in C. R. Snyder and Shane J. Lopez, *Handbook of Positive Psychology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 459-60.
2. "Thanksgiving in the U.S.A.," <http://www.thanksgiving.org/html/traditions/national.html> (September 9, 1999), p. 1.
3. Robert B. Cialdini, Douglas T. Kenrick, and Donald J. Baumann, "Effects of Mood on Prosocial Behavior in Children and Adults," in Nancy Eisenberg, ed., *The Development of Prosocial Behavior* (New York: Academic Press, 1982), pp. 399-59.
4. Nico H. Frijda, "The Law of Emotions," *American Psychologist* 43 (1985): 349-58.
5. See David G. Myers and Ed Diener, "Who is Happy?" *Psychological Science* 6 (January 1995): 10-19 and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "If We Are So Rich, Why Aren't We Happy?" *American Psychologist* 54 (October 1999): 821-27.
6. Charles M. Shelton, *Toward a Psychology of Gratitude* (in preparation).
7. Robert Jay Lifton, *The Broken Connection* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), p. 122.
8. For informed discussions of emotions accessible to the educated lay reader, see Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, *The Subtlety of Emotions* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2000) and Paul E. Griffiths, *What Emotions Really Are* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997).
9. Norma Haan, Eliane Aerts, and Bruce A. B. Cooper, *On Moral Grounds: The Search for Practical Morality* (New York: New York University Press, 1985), p. 38.
10. Norma Haan *et al.*, *On Moral Grounds*, p. 147.
11. Jerome Kagan, *The Nature of the Child* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), p. 123.
12. See, for example, Nancy Eisenberg and Janet Strayer, eds., *Empathy and Its Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
13. James J. Gross, "Emotions and Emotion Regulation" in Lawrence A. Pervin and Oliver P. John, eds., *Handbook of Personality: Theory and Research* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1999), p. 525.
14. Kagan, *The Nature of the Child*, p. xiv.
15. For a treatment summarizing Hoffman's theory with morality, see Charles M. Shelton, *Morality of the Heart* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1990).

16. Hoffman has since modified some ideas while synthesizing others. For an elegant summary of his thinking spanning over three decades of research, see Martin L. Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
17. These quotes were gathered from a series of papers presented at a symposium entitled “Kindling the Science of Gratitude,” sponsored by The John Templeton Foundation, October 14-16, 2000, Dallas.
18. Jonathan Lear, *Open Minded: Working Out the Logic of the Soul* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 24.
19. Pedro Arrupe frequently used this statement in homilies he delivered. It is verified by many Jesuits who heard him speak. To my knowledge it has never been published as an official text.
20. Lawrence J. Walker and Russell C. Pitts, “Naturalistic Conceptions of Moral Maturity,” *Developmental Psychology* 34: 403-19.
21. This fragmentation is well illustrated in Alan Wolfe, *Moral Freedom: The Search for Virtue in a World of Choice* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001).
22. Karl E. Scheibe, *The Drama of Everyday Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 209.
23. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 11.
24. James Q. Wilson, *The Moral Sense* (New York: The Free Press, 1993), p. vii.
25. I am working out a theory of gratitude that will incorporate in book form the vast majority of the ideas expressed in this chapter, “A Psychology of Gratitude for Everyday Life: What It is and How to Live It” (in preparation).