

Gratitude

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Firstly, gratitude is shown to be an emotional element which completes every action: to act means risking not to bring about the intended end. When the action is successful, the actor will have a positive emotion which can be interpreted as gratitude. The case of ingratitude (see the fairy tale of “The Fisherman and His Wife”), lacking the final assent, illustrates that the action of the thankless person never comes to an end. Secondly, the thankless person can reach whatever she wants, but will never reach happiness. Finally, there is the problem of the role of gratitude when most things are done by machines, not by humans. The essay touches on the structural varieties of gratitude (monadic, dyadic, triadic) without being definitive.

Keywords: gratitude, ingratitude, action theory, happiness, technical age

Introduction

In “Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology”, Wittgenstein says: “Neither is the newborn child capable of being malicious, friendly, or thankful. Thankfulness is only possible if there is already a complicated pattern of behaviour” (Wittgenstein, 1982).

But is this true also of the opposite, thanklessness? Thanklessness is the lack of a behaviour which in a certain circumstance can be expected from a person.

Wittgenstein’s examples open the wide field of virtues and vices. They can be seen as complicated behaviours, or as learned, shaped emotions.

The connection of virtues and emotions was very clearly present in Aquinas. According to an old tradition (Aristotle, Plutarch), the passions are the material out of which (some) virtues are made,¹ and Aquinas generally holds: The more perfect a virtue is, the greater passion it causes.²

The complicated pattern of behaviour—or emotion—in the case of gratitude is the following: You are in need, you ask someone for help, she has fulfilled your request, you know it, and now you are expected to give an—at least emotional—answer.

It is interesting to see that for Aquinas (quoting Seneca), the link between the giver and the receiver is not so much the material benefit, but the “affectus” with which the benefit was given;³ therefore, the recompensation (the thankfulness) lies also in the corresponding “affectus” of the receiver. There is a somehow democratic aspect in this: also a poor person who has only little to give, can do this in an obliging manner, and the poor who receives a great benefit can be really thankful even without the possibility of material recompensation.

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¹ Summa theol., II-II, qu. 152, art. 1: “sensibiles passionnes sunt materia moralium actuum”.

² Summa theol., I-II, qu. 59, art. 5: “Et sic per redundantiam..., quanto virtus fuerit perfectior, tanto magis passionem causat”.

³ Summa theol., II-II, qu. 106, art. 5: “gratiae recompensatio attendit magis affectum dantis quam effectum”.

Ingratitude

The lack of gratitude is ingratitude. I think there is no better way of illustrating ingratitude than with the fairy tale of “The Fisherman and His Wife”.

It’s the story of the speaking flounder, caught by chance, which turns out to be an enchanted prince. The fisherman lets him free, but the fisherman’s wife sees the opportunity to speculate on the gratitude of the fish and sends her man back to the sea to ask for a gift. At first she asks for a little cottage, because she’s living in a filthy shack with her husband. However, when the wish is granted she is not really satisfied, so after a week or two, she asks for a stone palace, and from then on, things are precipitating: the day after, she wants to become king, then emperor, and eventually pope. As she asks to become like God, she is turned to her former condition, sitting again in the filthy shack.

Gratitude and Action Theory

This story also sheds some light on the structure of an action.

An action can be seen as having come to an end, when the acting person is satisfied with the outcome.

A very old echo of this may be found in the *Book of Genesis*, when it says about God: “and He saw that it was good” after every single act of creation. See, e.g., Gen 1.21: “And God created whales, and every living creature ... and God saw that it was good”.

Let us presume God would see that it was not good: in this case, his action of creating whales and so on wouldn’t really have come to an end, it wouldn’t constitute a whole action.

Yet, to say “it is good”, is a sort of emotional statement.

An action is finished when the actor is pleased with it.

(This point could be illustrated with everyday examples as well as with the work of the artist: only if, with an emotional-creative act of saying “now it is finished”, her work is finished.)

I am afraid that this substantial part of an action is dismissed in the current theories of action (and also in the theory of “basic actions” by Arthur C. Danto (1973) which I cannot present here). It may suffice to remember that the recent attention paid to emotions involves a shift from philosophy of action to the philosophy of the acting person: because actions can be seen “from without”, that is, without their emotional impact, acting persons cannot.⁴ Or, how Christopher Wellman puts it: “I think that the primary subject of our moral evaluations regarding gratitude is the agent rather than her action” (Wellman, 1999).

The best illustration of an “action-without-end-because-lacking-of-emotional-assent”, and at the same time a marvellous example of ingratitude, is the fairy tale mentioned above.

Of course, you could reply that this interpretation goes too far.

To present God’s “He saw that it was good” as gratitude would entail the question: and to whom God is grateful? To Himself?

The other difficulty is this: If we accept that every action, in order to be regarded as finished, needs a final emotional assent, that doesn’t necessarily mean that this assent is gratitude.

Up to now, we have spoken about gratitude without technicalities, without a conceptual analysis, and

⁴ Danto says: “So we may consider basic actions apart from intentions” (Danto, 1973, p. 37).

without referring to ongoing discussions, e.g., if gratitude involves a triadic or a dyadic structure.⁵

Let us try to single out two characteristics of gratitude which we may find in every action, and let's postpone the further question if every action has to be seen as an actuation of gratitude.

Whenever we act, we are not sure if the action will reach its end. To act means to abandon the control of the basic situation and to undergo the risk of failing ("wer handelt, gibt sich aus der Hand", a German saying goes, which means "who acts gives up control").

To see an action being successful is—without religious accent—always an experience of "grace", that means: it didn't depend solely on us, the positive outcome was, in some way, "gratis".

Secondly: the successful end of the action, is normally answered by a positive emotion on the part of the acting person.

Gratitude as a Virtue

Gratitude is, as we will see in the next point, essential for happiness. All of us, generally, want to be happy,⁶ but not all of us want to be grateful.

At first sight, gratitude seems to be the (quasi) natural reaction to good things someone received. If this were true, people who have more would be more grateful (and happier) than people who have less. But this is not the case.

Why? It seems easier to think of the things not had: the failures, delusions, the limits and restrictions.

Maybe we don't have the positions we think we deserve. If we have, maybe there are evil colleagues in our department, or at least in the department next door.

Don't let me get into the banalities of everyday life. What I want to stress is: the people who succeeded in cultivating thankfulness were not simply those who had the easiest lives, the most beautiful partners, the most money or the highest degree of social reputation. Mostly, they built up their gratitude despite of bad experiences they had to deal with.

And this is the philosophical point: Gratitude is not the natural outcome of an objective situation. This is what the tale of "The Fisherman and His Wife" illustrates so clearly.

You can have all you wished and wanted, but you can be unhappy as well. Worse: you will be unhappy, if you have never learnt to cultivate gratitude.

Gratitude and ingratitude are opposed like a virtue and the corresponding vice, like generosity and avarice, chastity and fornication, courage and cowardice. But the couple "gratitude—ingratitude" has a peculiarity which the other couples of virtues and vices generally don't have. In terms of logic, we could speak of the difference between "contrary opposite" and "contradictory opposite".

Here's an example: black and white are contrary opposites. Black and non-black are contradictory opposites. In most cases, the opposition of virtue and vice—like generosity and avarice—is a contrary one. In the case of gratitude and ingratitude, the opposition seems to be a contradictory one. What does that mean?

⁵ Cfr. Gulliford, L., Morgan, B., & Kristjánsson, K. (2013). Recent work on the concept of gratitude in philosophy and psychology. *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 47, 285-317, especially pp. 297-301. Triadic: "an essentially social emotion of a specific attitudinal relationship of a beneficiary towards a benefactor's benefit", dyadic: "the habitual focussing on and appreciation of the positive benefits that life brings in the absence of any specific benefactor" (p. 301 for both quotes).

⁶ Maybe Nietzsche was the first philosopher to doubt the general strive for happiness: "Der Mensch strebt *nicht* nach Glück; nur der Engländer thut das". Götzen-Dämmerung (1888). In: *Kritische Studien-Ausgabe*, 6, 61. "Man does not strive for happiness; only the Englishman does".

The lack of gratitude—which is ingratitude—is not so easily to be seen. If someone receives a benefit and does not show the slightest sign of thankfulness (besides a weak and somehow formal “thank you”), she is ungrateful. Ingratitude is the absence of a due action or emotion. I think, this characteristic explains also that ingratitude is the most widespread vice. It’s just an absence. You don’t see it. But it is still there.⁷

What we have said, leads to two further consequences.

First: if you agree with the attempt to define an action completed only by the corresponding emotional statement, the drama of the ungrateful person (blatantly exemplified by the fisherman’s wife) is not that she never gets enough.

She never receives any benefit, because to receive a benefit would mean to be grateful for what you have got.

Second: who suffers most from the vice of thanklessness, is the ungrateful person herself. Her personality is like a net which catches so many things but is not able to retain the value of anything (like the cynic defined by Oscar Wilde: He knows the price of everything, but the value of nothing). Their net is always empty, even if they are emperors and popes. They are unhappy by constitution.

Gratitude and Happiness

The analysis of gratitude and ingratitude is not a mere exercise of study of emotions, it is essential for us: because without gratitude, there is no happiness.

Let us make a little thought experiment. Suppose a person, on her way to happiness, has gone quite far already. Only some wishes remain outstanding. Now imagine that also these wishes are granted. Then, we ask this person: All you hoped for has been fulfilled. Now, you are happy, aren’t you? —Yes, our friend would answer.

And, we go on, are you grateful for it? Suppose our friend says: No—why should I?

In this case, there is reason to doubt whether our question concerning happiness was answered well. Only the grateful person is happy, and the ungrateful will never be.

Objections

Now let us view again two objections which can be made to this sketch of gratitude.

First, gratitude is commonly thought of as a “triadic concept”: There is a beneficiary who feels gratitude for a benefit received by a benefactor. Or, at least, a “dyadic concept”: The beneficiary is grateful for the benefit, even without a concrete benefactor (an ill person has regained her health, a mother gives birth to a sound child).

There are also examples where gratitude is said to be felt in cases in which ordinary mortals would rather be angry: so, the Dalai Lama expressed “gratitude to the Chinese for giving him and others the opportunity to practice patience, regardless of the intentions being malicious” (Gulliford et al., 2013).

Earlier in this paper, I have stressed that gratitude would be an element of every successful action, because the positive outcome is always something which lies beyond my sphere of influence; it is “gratis”, not owed,

⁷ There are, following Aquinas, three degrees of gratitude, and three corresponding degrees of ingratitude (*Summa theol.*, II-II, qu. 107, art. 2; cfr. Hibbs, T. S. (2009), pp. 101-114, here p. 110): to recognize the favor received, to express one’s appreciation and thanks, to repay the favor. The degrees of ingratitude go the other way round: not to repay the favor (which is the least mistake of ingratitude), to behave as if one had not received a favor (not manifesting any form of saying thank you), third: not to recognize the reception of a favor. This degree is constituted by an inner, invisible act—we could also say, by the absence of an act—which is not even present to the ungrateful’s mind, because it is used to occur “by forgetting, per oblivionem”. But exactly this is the supreme degree of ingratitude.

not deserved. In the Dalai Lama example, it is not an action, but persecution and suffering which are invoked as benefits.

Surely, this is not the common figure of gratitude, but it is worth to be considered.

There is also a sort of gratitude which touches mysticism—a man's being "filled with thanks for his very being" (Tillich, as cited in Gulliford et al., 2013, p. 298). This concept, instead of being "triadic", or "dyadic", seems to be "monadic".

The other objection was: when every action, in order to be considered finished, needs a final emotional assent—are we allowed to call this assent gratitude? When we have reached what we wanted—is this enough to say, we are grateful? Obviously not.

Think of Don Giovanni: He is rushing from affair to affair, he gets what he wants, but he doesn't seem grateful. But did he ever complete an action? I leave the question to you.

Some of you could think that gratitude was presented here in a too metaphysical, or even mystical way. So I remind you that gratitude is not a human privilege, it occurs in animals, too. Maybe you have read the story of the humpback whale who could not move any more, since he was "trapped in tangled ropes off the coast of San Francisco". A crew of divers worked for several hours to free him, risking their own lives (think that a movement with his giant tail fin could easily kill a person). "Once free, the whale stayed up rubbing against the crew members like a cute dog" (Globe Today, as cited in Bauer, J., 2006, p. 225).

Obviously, the whale wanted to thank his rescuers.

Outlook: Gratitude in a Technical Age

Gratitude is a sign of freedom, and it is, normally, a free—at least emotional—answer to a free action: You are in need, you ask someone for help, etc.

But when you are helped by machines, by computers, by safety programmes which drive your car and manage to avoid a crash which our poor human reactions would not be able to see coming—what about gratitude?

It's hard to conceive gratitude towards a machine. If there had been a taxi driver to prevent the crash, of course we would be grateful to them. If it had been an autopilot programme to save our life, maybe there would be no gratitude at all—neither to the programme, nor to its inventor.

All of us want to be happy, but not all of us want to be grateful. That is, in my eyes, one of the reasons we are living in a technologically dominated world. Technology makes our lives easier and safer, but it helps also to "save" thankfulness.

If we try to imagine the future of thankfulness, we should look for its place in a technologically saturated world. If technology were to reduce gratitude, it would, contrarily to what it is supposed to do, reduce happiness also. And this is not what we want.

So, we should try to cultivate gratitude for our own sake.

Conclusion

Gratitude is, or at least elements of gratitude are, present in every action.

Every action is threatened to go wrong, and if it then turns out well, that constitutes a reason to be grateful.

We have not stressed the structural distinctions of triadic, dyadic, or—in the case of being thankful for one's very being—"monadic" gratitude.

However, gratitude should accompany us as much as possible.

Finally, gratitude is inevitably connected to happiness, ingratitude to dissatisfaction.

And at least, I wanted to hint at the difficulty to cultivate gratitude in a technical age.

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