

Benevolent Situations and Gratitude

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Commentary on Kwong-loi Shun, “Anger, Compassion, and the Distinction between First and Third Person” *Australasian Philosophical Review* 6.1 (issue theme: Moral psychology— Insights from Chinese Philosophy), forthcoming.

This commentary explores a question concerning the positive reactive attitudes that is raised by Kwong-loi Shun’s intriguing remarks on gratitude. Shun’s overarching aim in “Anger, Compassion, and the Distinction between First and Third Person” is to outline and motivate a Confucian, situation-focused, account of our evaluative responses, one according to which the commonly drawn distinction between first- and third- personal attitudinal perspectives is undermined. The bulk of Shun’s essay is devoted to developing this view as it pertains to moral anger—where a distinction is often drawn, as per P.F. Strawson [1962], between i) anger that is first-personal, construing *oneself* as having been wronged (resentment), and ii) anger that is third-personal, construing some third-party as having been wronged (indignation). Having argued that moral anger is fundamentally a response to *situations* in which a person is wronged, rather than a perspectival response that admits of two different kinds depending on whether the angry agent is the victim,¹ Shun extends this point to gratitude in his concluding comments.

About gratitude, Shun makes one fairly modest point, and one more speculative point. The modest point (modest relative to what Shun has already argued) is that

¹ This argument is examined, and given a Strawsonian response, in Wallace (forthcoming).

gratitude, too, fails to reflect a distinction based on whether that grateful agent was the direct beneficiary of the benefactor's good will. The more speculative point is that the fittingness of gratitude is independent of whether the would-be grateful person bears any special relation to the beneficiary, such that one might be grateful to benefactors for benefits bestowed to strangers. The modest and speculative points are clearly related: if there is no fundamental difference between the positive response we have when we are *ourselves* are benevolently benefitted, and when the beneficiary is another—as Strawsonians hold in distinguishing gratitude from its third-personal analogue (e.g. approbation)—then, in principle, gratitude might be felt for benefits bestowed to persons to whom we are not specially related, e.g. strangers.

While Shun does not settle on an answer to the question, 'can gratitude be felt about benefits bestowed to toward persons with whom one is not specially related?'—it is, after all, only raised in the paper's conclusion—he suggests a positive answer. Intrigued by this idea, my commentary considers how the resources of Shun's situation-based view might accommodate gratitude of this sort. Two opposed routes present themselves. Though, for brevity's sake, I refer below to the idea that gratitude might be felt toward beneficiaries who are strangers as 'Shun's proposal', it should be kept in mind that Shun makes this proposal only speculatively and that this commentary goes beyond what Shun commits himself to in the target article.

Beginning with cases of gratitude about benefits bestowed to those with whom one is related but non-identical, Shun moves outward to cases in which the beneficiary bears no special relation to oneself, e.g. where the beneficiary is a complete stranger. Shun suggests that gratitude is in order in cases of the latter sort— i.e. to benefactors for

benefits bestowed to agents unrelated to us—and that gratitude is made fitting in these impersonal cases by the same factors that render it fitting in cases where the beneficiary is, or is closely related to, the grateful agent. This proposal concerning gratitude can be developed in conflicting ways, which, for dialectical purposes, I present in the form of a dilemma.

First, Shun observes—rightly, in my view—that one might feel gratitude for a benefit bestowed not to oneself, but to another with whom one is closely related, e.g. one’s child. As Shun writes, “a parent might feel gratitude to someone for comforting her child after he has been injured and is awaiting medical help” [26]. While the skeptic might wonder whether the parent here does not construe herself as the beneficiary (perhaps *in addition to* the child’s being a beneficiary), such a reading seems strained, and in any case, not mandatory. As Robert Roberts [2015: 889] writes in considering a similar case, “It is of course imaginable that the mother sees the son’s being given the gift as a gift to herself....But this is not the most natural, or a necessary, reading of the case. As I see it, the mother is grateful for the gift *to her son*. She does not construe herself as the beneficiary, but him.” In cases like these, it is presumably something like the fact that the parent “identifies with” the child that renders gratitude intelligible. This kind of identification is plausibly also what enables the parent to, say, feel *proud of* her child (or, for that matter, proud of her great-grandparent, say) for his achievement, without therein taking credit for that achievement.

Shun considers what I take to be a version of this ‘identifying-with’ proposal when he considers the possibility that “gratitude is a response to bestowed benefit in a certain area of life to the extent that one stands in a *special caring relation* to the

beneficiary” [26]. The parent identifies with, or stands in a special caring relation to, the beneficiary (the child), and it is presumably this relational fact that renders fitting gratitude to the child’s benefactor. Shun considers a further example, one that seems to illustrate that gratitude’s fittingness for benefits bestowed to another depends on the benefit being calibrated to the nature of the caring relation one bears toward the beneficiary. That is, as Shun notes, in cases where the beneficiary is one’s student, for example, gratitude is intuitively fitting to a colleague for providing professional support to that student, in a way that it is not (or is less obviously) fitting for goods that do not benefit the student *qua* student. Here one’s special caring relation—that between teacher and student, or mentor and mentee—apparently sets constraints on the kinds of benefits to the beneficiary that render the teacher’s gratitude fitting.

Next, having put on firm ground the thought that gratitude does not presuppose that the grateful agent is the direct beneficiary of another’s good will, Shun proceeds to consider whether gratitude requires a special caring relation to the beneficiary, *at all*; *perhaps* it is sufficient that there is “some caring relation as such, of a kind that extends to total strangers” [27]. The example Shun considers is one in which riot police exercise restraint in dealing with rioters involved in a violent protest. Filling in the example, Shun writes, “I do not personally know the youth involved, but I am relieved that they have been spared more severe injuries. If gratitude depends only on some caring relation as such, then it would make sense for me to feel gratitude for benefits bestowed on *total strangers*, to the extent that I care about them” [27, italics added]. This is an interesting case, about which the following questions suggest themselves: are we to imagine that the riot police and protesters as sharing a community with the grateful person? What is

the significance of the rioters being *youths*? For, depending on these details, we may be inclined to understand the example not exactly as one between total strangers, but as that between members of a shared community, some less experienced, some more experienced, and some entrusted by both to safeguard that very community. For now, however, we can suppose that one learns of the police's restraint and the protest via TV broadcast, and that the protesters are not only personally unknown to the grateful subject, but also inhabitants of another, distant, land with which one has no special connection.

Now, let us suppose that one might well feel gratitude in cases where the beneficiary is a stranger, i.e. cases like that involving the protesters. I see two ways of understanding the form that gratitude comes to take on this proposal. The first, and more straightforward proposal, is that the scope of gratitude—i.e. gratitude roughly as we presently know it in our close relationships—is *expanded*, such that we might fittingly feel gratitude regardless of who the beneficiary is. On this proposal, there is no principled reason why we should not be motivated to respond with gratitude's characteristic expressions— which at one extreme are experienced as responses to 'debts of gratitude'— toward strangers for benefits bestowed to further strangers.² Where the Strawsonian picture would suggest a generalized attitude in these cases e.g. the positive analogue of indignation, i.e. approval or approbation (which does not include the motivation to thank another or reciprocate), the alternative under consideration would involve our extending this heartfelt response more broadly, regardless of whether

² Eskens (ms.) proposes a view of 'moral gratitude' along these lines, though on her view, moral gratitude exists alongside personal gratitude (where the latter is felt when the grateful agent is herself the beneficiary).

the beneficiary is oneself, one's child, a stranger in a faraway land, etc. That Shun might opt for this expansive route is perhaps suggested by Shun's discussion of compassion, where Shun claims that "the proposal is that I should respond in the same intimate and unmediated manner to situations in which someone else has been harmed, as I do to a comparable situation in which I myself has been harmed, albeit with differentiation due to different relations" [21]. Though Shun does not put it this way, there is a sense in which the expansive route involves a thickening of one's relations to others such that one is might stand in a "special caring relation" to *anyone*. Regardless of whether the beneficiary is one's child or a stranger, we might "sensitize our heart so that we have the same sense of *connectedness* to all humans" [21].

While this expansive route succeeds in collapsing the distinction between first- and third-personal responses, considerations of symmetry would seem to commend that we adopt a similarly expansive view of resentment, such that I feel resentment not only when *I* am wronged, but also when the wronged party is a total stranger. That is, the expansive approach to gratitude, in effect, extends 'personal responses' to strangers, such that expressions of thanks may be fitting to benefactors with whom one is otherwise unrelated. But if the proposal is that we feel gratitude, a response that motivates us to reciprocate good will toward the benefactors, regardless of who the beneficiary is, then why would this proposal not apply also to the angry reciprocation (or payback) associated with resentment, i.e. the victim's motivation to confront wrongdoer and hold accountable the wrongdoer? The expansive route suggests that an accurate view of benevolent situations involves, even where the beneficiary is a total stranger, "some obligation to respond, minimally to convey one's appreciation and,

beyond that to reciprocate” [25]. But if reciprocation is a kind of ‘positive payback’, how does the expansive proposal non-arbitrarily block commitment to a similar kind of expansion in the domain of anger? That is, granting that moral anger admits of no fundamental perspectival distinction depending on whether the angry agent is (closely related to) the victim, what is to stop us from pursuing an expansive route for moral anger, such that (in effect) the payback associated with resentment is extended to all cases moral anger? In short, the view of anger commended by Shun appears to stand in tension with the view of anger commended by the expansive view of gratitude.

On an alternative way of developing the proposed view of gratitude, which we may term the ‘restrictive’ route, gratitude in effect collapses into the impersonal response of approbation or approval. Though it would require a revision of the view of gratitude as involving grateful reciprocation, this route would seem to more closely mirror Shun’s discussion of anger, where retaliatory and confrontational responses (‘payback’, broadly construed) more or less fall out of the picture. The costs of pursuing this ‘restrictive route’ include the removal from our interpersonal practices of features of gratitude that seem to have great importance to our lives. For, while we *might* think our moral practices would be improved were we to rid ourselves of angry responses that construe another as deserving of negative treatment, an analogous eradication of positive reciprocation—the ‘reward-like’ payback that we characteristically direct toward benefactors, at least for weighty benefits—seems less attractive.

But perhaps the restrictive route is ultimately preferable on a situation-focused view of the sort advanced by Shun. For, though gratitude generally enjoys a good reputation, perhaps our practices sometimes evince a kind of gratitude that ‘resides in

the self' [6], misconstruing a benevolent benefit as a boost to one's personal status that calls for payback in the form of a 'debt of gratitude'. That is, as moral anger can take on an egoistic flavor when the wronged party construes the injury as a personal affront that must be set aright in order to 'get even', perhaps gratitude's construal of oneself as needing to, as it were, communicate to the benefactor that one was personally worthy of the benefit is liable to similar charges.³ If so, and this feature of gratitude is discarded on the restrictive view, maybe that is not such a bad thing. Still, given the relationship-enhancing qualities characteristic of expressions of grateful reciprocation, we might reasonably hesitate to embrace the restrictive view. In any case, given Shun's characterization of gratitude (as involving "not just some sense of appreciation for benefits bestowed out of good will, but also some obligation to respond...and, beyond that, to reciprocate in some appropriate manner that demonstrates one's appreciation" [25]), the restrictive route would appear to be more revisionary than Shun initially portrays his proposal to be.

Alternatively, it may be that the expansive picture is to be preferred. Perhaps anger and gratitude differ in their motivational-tendencies, such that reciprocation is built into the nature of gratitude but not anger. If so, we might pursue the expansive route for gratitude, extending our responses of grateful reciprocation to situations involving beneficiaries bearing no special connection to ourselves, without committing ourselves to an analogous stance on angry payback. But while this idea is coherent, it

³ See, for example, Adam Smith (TMS II.III.10), who writes "What gratitude chiefly desires, is not only to make the benefactor feel pleasure in his turn, but to make him conscious that he meets with this reward on account of his past conduct, to make him pleased with that conduct, and to satisfy him that the person upon whom he bestowed his good offices was not unworthy of them."

is typically held that gratitude and resentment are symmetrical in their motivational structures. Both are taken to be responses to another's manifestation of quality of will (good and ill, respectively) that motivates the recipient (or one who identifies with the recipient) to communicate to the agent what the manifestation of will meant for them, by reciprocating (Smith TMS II.III.; Roberts 2004: 66-7; Shoemaker 2013). Perhaps, however, though both moral anger and gratitude *motivate* the subject to reciprocate, assuming (as seems plausible) that there exist duties of gratitude, but not anger, we might locate principled grounds within our first-order normative views for pursuing the expansive route for gratitude, but not anger.

I have explored two ways of unpacking the proposal raised by Shun that gratitude might be felt toward agents who manifest good will toward persons with whom we are wholly unrelated. On the first (expansive) approach, expressions of grateful reciprocation are extended to persons who presently receive (or are theorized as fittingly receiving) only our approval or approbation. On the second (restrictive) approach, gratitude in effect collapses into approval, and our interpersonal practices are rid not only of angry payback (of the sort associated with resentment), but also of the positive payback presently associated with gratitude. Perhaps the two routes are not equally unappealing, but as each brings out aspects of Shun's view worthy of further exploration, I offer them in the form of a dilemma, one ultimately expressive of excitement about Shun's thinking on benevolent situations and the kind of gratitude these might call for.⁴

⁴ I thank Hui-chieh Loy and two anonymous reviewers for helpful comments.

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