

The Virtue of Gratitude and Its Associated Vices*

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It is common and natural to conceptualize gratitude as a virtuous character trait a person might possess. On one plausible understanding of character traits, a grateful person is one who is consistently disposed to respond with the proper degree of grateful behavior and feelings in situations that call for gratitude, and one person is more grateful than another when the former is disposed to come closer to this ideal degree than the latter. When people think of the virtue of gratitude in this way, they typically think of one vice associated with it—ingratitude—which is understood as a shortfall in certain grateful feelings and behaviors vis-à-vis those which a situation calls for. This understanding of gratitude as a virtue and ingratitude as its sole associated vice has two implications: 1) that there is a scale along which gratitude as a character trait can be quantified, and 2) that falling short along this scale, when gratitude is called for, is the only way a person can fail to be properly or virtuously grateful. I believe the first implication is misleadingly simplistic, and the second implication is patently false. My goal in this chapter is to show why those implications are mistaken by developing an account of the virtue of gratitude that reveals the rich variety of ways a person can fail to be properly grateful.

In the first two sections I sketch an account of *response-gratitude*: what it means for a beneficiary to be grateful to his benefactor in response to a particular act of benevolence she performs.¹ I argue that for a beneficiary to be grateful to a benefactor for an act of benevolence is

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essentially for the beneficiary to be disposed to think, feel and behave in certain ways concerning his benefactor, and so response-gratitude is properly understood as a complex of cognitive, affective, and behavioral dispositions. In the third section, I define the *virtue of gratitude* as the general disposition to form these particular dispositions toward the right (and only the right) benefactors at the right times to the right degrees. With this account of the virtue of gratitude on the table, in the fourth section I turn to an exploration of the ways a person can fail to possess this virtue, and I articulate the senses in which those failures can constitute *vices*—morally bad character traits. My analysis will reveal a surprising richness in the kinds of vices constituted by tendencies to respond improperly to benevolence or apparent benevolence. I conclude, in the fifth section, by suggesting several implications this richness in gratitude-associated vices has for moral education and for certain common generalizations about ingratitude that have been put forward by philosophers.

Response-Gratitude and Appreciation

Gratitude as a virtue is rightly (if vaguely) analyzed as the disposition to manifest the right kind and degree of gratitude in all (and only) situations in which it is called for. In order to understand the virtue of gratitude, then, we first need to understand the circumstances that call for gratitude and what it means for a beneficiary to be properly grateful in any given circumstance of that kind. In doing so, we must be careful not to let ordinary usage of gratitude terms lead us astray, because ordinary usage belies an important conceptual distinction.² We sometimes use gratitude terms (“grateful,” “thankful,” etc.) to convey or describe *appreciation*, as is typically done when such terms are followed by the word *that* and a proposition. Utterances like “I am grateful that

the weather was beautiful on my wedding day,” “I am grateful that the police officer was distracted as I sped by her cruiser,” and “I am grateful that my mother’s cancer went into remission” all express appreciation. Appreciation is properly a response to beneficial states of affairs or states of affairs one finds valuable, and this response is constituted by certain cognitive elements (a recognition of the value of the thing being appreciated) and certain affective elements (a tendency to take pleasure or enjoy the state of affairs being appreciated). Part of what it is to be grateful that my mother’s cancer went into remission, for instance, is to recognize the goodness and the rarity of that event, to refuse to take it for granted, and to take joy in the additional life and health such a state of affairs allows my mother. Appreciation is not fundamentally an interpersonal or inter-agential phenomenon, and though it is a mode of valuing, it does not necessarily entail any kind of care or concern, on the part of the beneficiary, for the wellbeing of its object. My gratitude that the weather was beautiful on my wedding day, for instance, certainly does not entail a care or concern on my part for the wellbeing of the weather.

We express a different kind of attitude when we use gratitude terms followed by the preposition *to*, as we do in utterances like “I am grateful to a stranger for coming to my rescue,” “I am grateful to my mentor for all her time and attention,” and “I am grateful to my parents.” In contrast to gratitude *that* (or appreciation), gratitude *to* is properly a response not to good states of affairs, but to the benevolent attitudes and actions of our benefactors. My gratitude toward my mentor is fitting or called for so long (and only so long) as she seems to have been motivated by a genuine intrinsic desire to see me flourish. If it turned out my mentor was mentoring me only because she was afraid she might not receive tenure otherwise, that might very well render my gratitude to her unwarranted (though it may still be reasonable to be grateful *that* she mentored me, insofar as I found her mentorship beneficial). By the same token, if the police officer who let me speed by without ticketing me had actually seen me and, out of kindheartedness, allowed me

to get away without being ticketed, it seems I should be grateful *to* her, and not just grateful *that* I escaped without getting a ticket.

Gratitude *to* differs from gratitude *that* (or appreciation) in that the former entails a kind of concern or care for the object of the attitude. This concern or care manifests in several ways. Perhaps most notably, it manifests in certain feelings—namely, feelings of *goodwill* toward the benefactor.³ It would ring false, after all, for me to claim to be grateful to my mentor for giving me so much time and attention if I find myself with no additional goodwill toward her—no hope that she fares well, no tendency to be happy when I hear things are going well for her, no tendency to be sad when I learn that things are going poorly for her. Gratitude *to* also entails certain behaviors or behavioral dispositions. It involves, for instance, a disposition to reciprocate favors a benefactor has done for me, a disposition to help her should I find her in distress in the future, and a disposition to avoid harming her myself.⁴ If I find out that a stranger who once came to my rescue is now in need of similar rescuing, and I can rescue her with little risk to myself, then it seems false to say I am grateful to her if I have no motivation to help her, even if I bear her feelings of goodwill. Gratitude *to*, then, includes certain behavioral dispositions, which, together with feelings of goodwill, are a fundamental part of what distinguishes gratitude *to* from gratitude *that*, or appreciation.

In this chapter, I will be primarily concerned with the virtue associated with gratitude *to* (which, from this point on, I will call simply “gratitude”). Though I will occasionally mention gratitude *that* for the sake of contrasting it with gratitude *to*, I will not be primarily concerned here with the virtue corresponding to gratitude *that*, or appreciation (a virtue which I will call *appreciativeness*).

An Elemental Analysis of Response-Gratitude

Gratitude, I will take it, is properly a response to benevolence. What are the elements of the grateful response?—that is, what are the components of the response a beneficiary must have to an instance of benevolence in order to count as fully or properly grateful for it? It seems to me that the grateful response can be resolved into three more or less distinct but closely interconnected kinds of elements: cognitive elements, affective elements, and behavioral elements. I will consider each of these in turn.

Cognitive elements. As a response to acts of benevolence, gratitude requires at the very least an accurate judgment or private recognition on the part of the beneficiary that an act of benevolence has occurred.⁵ It seems impossible, after all, that I could be grateful to my mentor for all her attention and advice if I am unaware or incredulous that she bore me some benevolence that motivated that attention and advice (though I could of course be grateful *that* she gave me her attention and advice without recognizing anything about her mental states). We would be hard pressed to call such a beneficiary grateful because, at the very least, a beneficiary who failed to judge that an act of benevolence had been performed would be unlikely to have the feelings or exhibit the behaviors a grateful person ought to have and perform. Such feelings and behaviors, after all, do not arise *ex nihilo* in normal people, so without accurate beliefs about an instance of benevolence, we would expect them not to arise.

To count as properly grateful for a particular instance of benevolence, a beneficiary must recognize not only *that* benevolence has been demonstrated; he must also be sensitive to the *magnitude* and the *scope* of the benevolence being demonstrated (i.e., roughly, which interests of the beneficiary the benefactor had an intrinsic desire to advance and how strong that desire was). This means that a grateful beneficiary will be properly attuned to evidence of such benevolence—will

recognize such evidence, give it the weight it warrants in his deliberation, and come to reasonable conclusions about how much and what kind of benevolence a benefactor had for him. A properly grateful beneficiary will, for instance, tend to recognize the difference between a wealthy person who gives him a certain amount of money and a poorer person who gives him the same sum of money. He will also tend to recognize the difference between someone who drops money in his lap accidentally and someone who intentionally and thoughtfully gives him money. He will tend to recognize the difference between the mentor who mentors him because she genuinely cares about his philosophical and professional development and the mentor who mentors him only because she worries about receiving tenure. A beneficiary who did not make such distinctions, it seems, would often thereby fail to respond to the former and latter parties with different degrees of gratitude, as a properly grateful person should. Being properly grateful to a benefactor, then, consists in part of a tendency to apprehend the benefactor's benevolence and infer its magnitude and scope correctly.⁶

Affective elements. As I noted in distinguishing gratitude from appreciation, an essential part of what it is for a beneficiary to be grateful *to* is to have certain feelings vis-à-vis the benefactor that he wouldn't have if not for her benevolence. Some philosophers believe there is a single feeling of gratitude, and that what it is to be grateful to someone is to have this feeling concerning them and their benevolence.⁷ This, however, is a mistake. It is true that often when we first become aware of someone's benevolence toward us, we experience a positive feeling; but this positive feeling is more accurately understood as part of *appreciating* the fact that someone has benefited us. This pleasant feeling is not always called for in response to acts of benevolence *qua* acts of benevolence.⁸ And indeed, it seems plausible that being grateful in a particular moment need not entail having any feelings at all toward a benefactor in that moment. I am, for example, grateful to people for things they did for me years ago, even though there are long stretches of

time during which I do not have any feelings regarding them. What makes me grateful during such stretches is my *disposition* to feel certain things regarding them when I am reminded of them. In particular, part of what makes me grateful to past benefactors is that when I hear of them and learn they are doing well, I experience positive feelings of joy or satisfaction, and when I hear that they are doing poorly, I experience negative feelings of sadness or grief. When it comes to feelings, then, what it means to be grateful is to be disposed to be happy when things go well for a benefactor and disposed to be upset or sad when things go poorly for her. This is the affective disposition I referred to as *goodwill* in the previous section.

As with the cognitive elements of the grateful response, the affective elements should be proportional to the benevolence shown to the beneficiary by the benefactor. That is, the magnitude, intensity and duration of the feelings of goodwill I am disposed to experience vis-à-vis a benefactor of mine should be proportional to the benevolence my benefactor has shown me. A properly grateful beneficiary should, all else equal, experience stronger feelings of happiness when he hears of the flourishing of a benefactor who showed him a great deal of benevolence than when he hears of the flourishing of a benefactor who showed him only a mild amount of benevolence. And if a beneficiary discovers evidence that his benefactor was more benevolent toward him than he originally believed, this realization should result in an increase in the amount of pleasure he takes in learning of her flourishing. So too, *mutatis mutandis*, for the feelings of grief or upset he would experience upon learning of such benefactors' misfortunes.

Behavioral elements. As I noted in the previous section, it seems that certain behaviors or behavioral dispositions are also an essential part of the grateful response. After all, a beneficiary who recognized his benefactor's benevolence and developed an affective disposition of goodwill toward her would still seem to fall short of gratitude if he found himself, despite those beliefs and feelings, completely unmotivated to return a favor or help her out in some way. Typically, the

sorts of behaviors we expect to see from a grateful beneficiary include returning a favor, coming to the aid of the benefactor if she is in trouble (especially if she requests help), taking care to avoid harming her,⁹ and using the gift or benefit she conferred in a way that is consistent with her reasonable hopes for how it should be used.¹⁰ This is not to say that all or even any of these behaviors is necessary for gratitude. After all, a beneficiary may be grateful but never have the opportunity to carry out any of these behaviors. What would make the difference between a grateful beneficiary and an ungrateful one in such cases, it seems, is whether the beneficiary has the *disposition* to do these things should the opportunity arise. As far as grateful behaviors go, then, we can say that gratitude entails not certain behaviors, but certain behavioral dispositions concerning the benefactor. Specifically, it entails grateful beneficence (a heightened disposition to benefit a benefactor) and grateful nonmaleficence (a heightened disposition to avoid harming a benefactor).

As with the cognitive and affective elements of the grateful response, the behavioral elements of the grateful response should be proportional to the benevolence shown to the beneficiary by the benefactor. That is, the degree to which a beneficiary is disposed to exert effort, expend resources, incur risk and suffer harm to benefit a benefactor should be proportional to the benevolence the benefactor showed him. A properly grateful beneficiary should, all else equal, be willing to do more to help or return a favor to a benefactor who showed great benevolence than one who showed only minor benevolence. And if a beneficiary discovers evidence that his benefactor was more benevolent toward him than he originally believed, this realization should result in an increase in what he would be willing to do to help or refrain from harming her.

To count as properly grateful, a beneficiary must not only be disposed to act in the proper beneficent and nonmaleficent ways, but he must be disposed to do so for the right reasons as

well. After all, a beneficiary who is disposed to help a benefactor but only for prudential reasons (e.g., to keep her benevolence flowing or to avoid getting a bad reputation) seems to fall short of gratitude.¹¹ Grateful beneficiaries must be motivated by the ultimate goal of seeing their benefactors fare well. They should take the fact that some action will benefit a benefactor to be, more or less by itself, a good reason to act in such a way, and they should be motivated to act in light of such reasons.

Thanking. A final aspect of gratitude worth noting is the practice of thanking. Thanking is clearly a crucial part of a grateful response, in the sense that a beneficiary who fails to thank a benefactor might very well be the clearest instance of an ingrate. Interestingly, thanking cannot be easily classified as one of the three kinds of elements (cognitive, affective or behavioral) I have outlined above. Some might be tempted to classify thanking as a kind of cognitive element, especially when thanking is understood to serve the function of reporting a beneficiary's belief that a benevolent act has occurred. And indeed, in order to be sincere, it seems that a beneficiary's thanking must be backed by the right beliefs. But thanking is clearly more than merely forming (or even reporting) a private judgment. After all, even when a beneficiary knows that his benefactor knows he's grateful, it seems he still ought to express his gratitude to her by thanking her. Some might be tempted to see thanking as a manifestation of the affective elements of gratitude, insofar as thanking often takes the form of a spontaneous expressive outpouring of the feelings of gratitude a grateful beneficiary should have. But thanking seems at least sometimes to be something other than an expressive outpouring of feelings. Indeed, there are times thanking seems called for, reasonable and sincere when a beneficiary is not experiencing any of the typical feelings of gratitude. This may happen, for instance, if a beneficiary receives a benevolent gift at a moment when he is preoccupied with other stronger thoughts and feelings that temporarily preclude him from experiencing feelings of gratitude. In such cases, thanking might still be

sincere if it is understood as a commitment to take up the behavioral and affective dispositions gratitude entails.¹² It might be thought, finally, that thanking is a manifestation of beneficent behavioral tendencies a beneficiary should have. After all, a benefactor often has an interest in knowing whether her act of benevolence was received, recognized and appreciated by her beneficiary, and letting her know these things (by thanking her) might count as the sort of return-beneficence a grateful beneficiary should be disposed to perform. But while thanking might sometimes count as a kind of benefit for the benefactor, this isn't true of thanking in all cases. There are times, for instance, when benefactors do not want or enjoy or have an interest in being thanked, and times when benefactors might come to know from third parties all they might want to know about how their benevolence was received; yet even in such cases, thanking seems called for.¹³

One possible explanation for all this is that thanking is its own element, distinct from the cognitive, affective and behavioral elements of the grateful response I have outlined. Another possibility, though, and one I find more plausible, is that thanking can play a variety of roles, any one of which can be reduced to the three elements I detailed above. If this were true, a beneficiary's failure to thank could always be traced back to a shortfall in one of these three elements. And that seems plausible enough. After all, it is difficult to imagine a beneficiary who shows the proper cognitive, affective and behavioral responses toward a benevolent benefactor but nevertheless reprehensibly fails to thank her. This entails that there is no need to posit thanking as a fourth distinct element of the grateful response and that the grateful response can be fully specified in terms of cognitive, affective and behavioral elements. Though a full argument for this position is outside the scope of this chapter, I will proceed on the premise that although thanking (or at least a disposition to thank) is necessary for being grateful, thanking is not a distinct element of the grateful response.

The grateful response, then, is a complex of interrelated cognitive, affective and behavioral elements. More specifically, a grateful beneficiary is one who, in response to an act of benevolence from a benefactor, forms certain beliefs about that benefactor and her benevolence, forms an affective disposition of goodwill toward her, and forms dispositions of grateful beneficence and nonmaleficence toward her. Out of these dispositions, he should also be disposed to thank his benefactor.

The Virtue of Gratitude

As my analysis of response-gratitude shows, gratitude to a benefactor for something she's done is best understood not as a feeling or as an emotional episode or as a behavior, but as a set of interconnected cognitive, affective and behavioral dispositions. If the *virtue* of gratitude is the disposition to consistently form properly grateful responses to acts of benevolence, and the properly grateful response to an act of benevolence is a complex of dispositions, then the virtue of gratitude is what we might call a meta-disposition: a disposition to consistently form the right cognitive, behavioral and affective dispositions in response to the right kinds of events (instances of benevolence), at the right times, to the right degrees. A grateful person, then, is one who is attuned to evidence of benevolence being shown toward him, reliably recognizes this benevolence, and consequently forms dispositions to think and feel and behave in properly grateful ways regarding his benefactors.

This account of the virtue of gratitude has several features worth noting. In the first place, it is compatible with the possibility of obligations of gratitude.¹⁴ To say that there are obligations of gratitude is to say that certain called-for grateful behaviors or refrainings, like returning a favor or rescuing a benefactor or going out of one's way to refrain from harming a benefactor, are

moral obligations. To say they are moral obligations is to say that such behaviors or refrainings are justified by moral reasons of a certain priority and stringency, that the beneficiary has little or no latitude in deciding to behave in such ways on certain occasions, and that failing to behave in such ways on those occasions without excuse is not just lousy or non-ideal but morally wrong.¹⁵ If there are obligations of gratitude, then a grateful beneficiary should recognize all those features of such obligatory grateful actions and refrainings and be inclined to act or refrain from acting in light of them. On my view, a virtuous beneficiary is someone who is disposed to do just that. A virtuously grateful beneficiary is one who is disposed, in practical reasoning, to take the fact that an action of his will benefit or protect a benefactor to constitute a reason to perform that action. If such an action is obligatory, then an ideal and virtuous beneficiary will be disposed to perceive the strength, priority and stringency of that reason accurately. Of course, a grateful beneficiary usually will benefit or avoid harming a benefactor spontaneously, from natural inclination, without any conscious deliberation. This is because a grateful beneficiary will also wish his benefactor well, and this affective component of his gratitude may tend to motivate grateful beneficence and nonmaleficence prior to any deliberation.¹⁶ But in circumstances when this natural inclination is overwhelmed (e.g., in cases where coming to a benefactor's aid will be difficult or unpleasant or will conflict with another of the beneficiary's commitments or moral obligations), a virtuously grateful beneficiary will still be disposed to recognize and acknowledge that helping or refraining from harming a benefactor is sometimes something he in some sense *must* do. And in these circumstances, this disposition is what will lead a virtuous beneficiary to act gratefully—perhaps not spontaneously, but from a sense of duty.

The second feature of my account worth noting is that it can be adapted to describe what it means to be grateful in contexts of varying degrees of specificity. A person who is grateful *to his parents*, for instance, is one who is inclined to recognize and respond with the appropriate

dispositions to benevolence from his parents, but not necessarily from other benefactors. A person described as grateful *to strangers* is one who is inclined to recognize and respond with the appropriate dispositions to benevolence from strangers, but not necessarily to benevolence from those he knows well. A person described as grateful *for advice* is one who is inclined to recognize the benevolence implied by the giving of thoughtful advice, but not necessarily other manifestations of benevolence. In these and other ways, my account of the virtue of gratitude can be adapted to describe not only the global character trait of gratitude but more local, fine-grained grateful dispositions as well.

Finally, my account of the virtue of gratitude can serve as a basis for a systematic exploration of the ways in which beneficiaries can fail to be grateful to benefactors and the vices these failures might constitute. It is to that exploration I now turn.

Ways to Fail to Be Grateful

There are three kinds of ways a beneficiary can fail to be properly grateful for an act of benevolence: he can fail to be properly attuned to evidence that an act of benevolence has occurred; he can fail to establish the proper grateful dispositions when gratitude is called for; and he can fail to preserve those dispositions for a proper or reasonable amount of time after the initial act of benevolence. I will consider each of these kinds of failure in turn.

Failures of attunement. Beneficiaries can fall short of gratitude, in the first place, by failing to notice whether gratitude is called for in a certain situation. We can imagine a beneficiary who believes that benevolence should be met with gratitude and who typically reacts with thanks, goodwill and beneficent dispositions when he perceives that benevolence has been shown to him, but who nonetheless often fails to notice such evidence, even in conditions when he should notice

it. When people benefit him, he is all too rarely left with the impression that they did so benevolently. Because he sometimes overlooks evidence of benevolence, such a person will not always respond with the proper grateful dispositions when gratitude is called for, and so he fails to qualify as fully or properly grateful. A person who displays such a failing once in a while is guilty of what we might call *ungrateful insensitivity*. When insensitivity is a recurring aspect of a person's character, we can say such a person manifests the *vice* of ungrateful insensitivity.¹⁷

We can view the vice of ungrateful insensitivity as a kind of deficiency—a shortfall in the sort of sensitivity necessary to count as fully and properly grateful. If just the right amount of this sensitivity is a component of the virtue of gratitude, and a deficiency in this sensitivity is a vice, what should we make of an *excess* of this sort of sensitivity? A person who demonstrates this excess—what we might call *oversensitivity*—is a person who either exaggerates the significance of evidence of benevolence so as to perceive more benevolence from a benefactor than is likely really there, or, in the extreme case, mistakenly takes certain features of a situation as evidence of benevolence when there is no benevolence at all. An oversensitive person might, for instance, be left with the impression that a coworker cares more about him than she really does when she gives him a mundane gift during a mandatory holiday gift exchange. Oversensitivity might also be ascribed to someone who is left with the impression that an apple tree bears him benevolence when an apple falls into his lap as he sits under the tree.

Is such oversensitivity a vice? Some might argue that it is simply on the grounds that oversensitivity is more than—and therefore, different from—the right amount of sensitivity we would expect from a grateful person.¹⁸ And oversensitivity also seems, almost by definition, to render someone confused or “foolish.”¹⁹ But there are several reasons to think that oversensitivity is vicious or morally problematic in a deeper sense. The first is that an oversensitive person is liable, in virtue of that oversensitivity, to be distracted by morally insignificant, gratitude-

irrelevant features of situations, and will therefore be less likely to notice gratitude-relevant features of situations that are important to recognize. An illustrative parallel can be found in the virtue of hospitality. A genuinely hospitable person is one who is properly sensitive to evidence of his guests' discomfort. To be insensitive to such evidence obviously makes one an imperfect host, since such insensitivity would lead to a lack of hospitable feelings and behavior when those are called for. But oversensitivity in this case is also a problem for a host, since it might lead him to be so distracted by minor or false signs of guest discomfort that he misses substantial genuine signs that he should note and act on. By the same token, an oversensitive beneficiary might get so distracted or overwhelmed attending to irrelevant features of a situation that he may sometimes overlook genuine evidence of benevolence. That will make it less likely that he will establish the beliefs and behavioral and affective dispositions that constitute gratitude toward those who genuinely deserve it.

Grateful oversensitivity may also be morally problematic to the extent that it leads a beneficiary to establish settled beliefs, affective dispositions and behavioral dispositions vis-à-vis a benefactor that are out of proportion to what that benefactor actually warrants. This is a possibility I will return to shortly.

Failure to establish proper dispositions: deficiencies. Even if a beneficiary is properly attuned to evidence of benevolence (and especially if he is not), he can fall short of gratitude if he fails to form settled beliefs and establish long-term properly grateful dispositions in response to such benevolence. Some might think that the establishment of settled beliefs and long-lasting affective and behavioral dispositions that constitute a virtuous response to some stimulus follows necessarily from proper sensitivity to that stimulus. But this isn't necessarily true. The existence of manipulative psychopaths, for instance, seems to show that it is possible to be highly attuned to evidence that others are suffering without actually experiencing genuine compassion. And many

non-psychopaths are properly sensitive to evidence of suffering, in that they recognize it and respond in the moment with virtuous-seeming reactions, even though those reactions fail to endure for more than a few moments. It is not uncommon, for instance, for television viewers to be momentarily captivated by images of abused and neglected animals in a commercial and then forget those animals moments later, thus never forming the longer-term dispositions to feel for and help such animals that a genuinely compassionate person should have. By the same token, a beneficiary might be properly attuned to evidence of benevolence, and thereby get the accurate impression that gratitude is called for in a particular instance, but fail to see that initial impression solidify into the settled, long-term beliefs and lasting affective and behavioral dispositions constitutive of genuine gratitude.

The most obvious form this failure can take is *ingratitude*—a failure to establish one or more of the elements of the grateful response to a sufficient magnitude when a grateful response is called for.²⁰ Typically, a beneficiary who is ungrateful to a benefactor is one who fails to form a settled belief that the benefactor was as benevolent and deserving of gratitude as the evidence available to him should lead him to believe. He is someone who does not form a settled disposition to wish his benefactor well with sufficient intensity, someone who fails to form a settled disposition to be sufficiently motivated to benefit his benefactor in the future. Typically, because the cognitive, affective and behavioral elements of the grateful response are interconnected, someone who is ungrateful will show a shortfall in all three kinds of elements. But it is worth noting that a beneficiary can, at least theoretically, be guilty of ingratitude vis-à-vis certain elements of the grateful response but not others. We could imagine, for instance, a beneficiary who forms settled accurate beliefs about how much benevolence his benefactor showed and forms a settled proportional affective disposition of goodwill, but finds himself not sufficiently motivated to come to his benefactor's aide when the situation calls for it. Such a

person, we might say, is guilty of *motivational* or *behavioral* ingratitude, but not *total* ingratitude. In any event, when a person's settled beliefs and dispositions fall short along at least one of these dimensions, he is guilty of ingratitude; and when such a person *habitually* falls short along at least one of these dimensions, he manifests the *vice* of ingratitude.

Three categories of ingratitude are worth distinguishing.²¹ The first kind of ingratitude occurs when a beneficiary responds with some settled belief in a benefactor's benevolence, some enduring affective disposition of goodwill and some lasting increase in beneficent tendencies toward the benefactor, but the magnitude of these elements falls short of what would be justified by the benefactor's benevolence. We can call this stripe of ingratitude *sub-gratitude*. Another kind of ingratitude is one in which a beneficiary notices that benevolence has been done but finds himself completely indifferent; he shows no increase at all in affective goodwill or grateful beneficence toward the benefactor, and perhaps forms no intermediate- or long-term memory of his benefactor's benevolence. We can call this kind of ingratitude *non-gratitude*. A third kind of ingratitude involves cases in which a beneficiary responds to evidence of a benefactor's benevolence with resentment, ill-will and hostility. We can imagine, for instance, a beneficiary who accurately perceives a benefactor's benevolence and, because he envies that benefactor's moral goodness, comes to resent her—comes to hope she fares poorly in the future, rejoices in her suffering to some degree, and perhaps even goes out of his way to set back her interests. We can call this especially devilish form of ingratitude *anti-gratitude*. Again, each of these species of ingratitude could theoretically manifest in only one or two elements of the grateful response, and any one of these species of ingratitude, should it become habitual or regular for a beneficiary, would qualify as a vice—the vice of sub-gratitude, the vice of non-gratitude, and the vice of anti-gratitude respectively.

Failure to establish proper dispositions: excesses. Just as a beneficiary's response to benevolence can fall short of what an act of benevolence calls for, a beneficiary's response can also *exceed* that which an act of benevolence calls for.²² The cognitive element of such an excessive response would be an unjustified belief that the benefactor bears more benevolence toward the beneficiary—that she is more willing to sacrifice for the beneficiary, that she cares more about the beneficiary—than she actually does. The affective element of an excessive response would be an outsized affective disposition of goodwill toward her—a disposition to be too ecstatic when things go well for the benefactor and too upset or devastated when things go poorly for her relative to what her benevolence justifies. The behavioral element of an excessive response would be an outsized tendency to benefit or refrain from harming the benefactor—a willingness or tendency to sacrifice too much for a benefactor relative to her own initial benevolence. Such an excessive response will also typically be associated with overly enthusiastic or extravagant thanking. As with oversensitivity, overgratitude can occur when a person responds gratefully toward something that is incapable of benevolence—for instance, an apple tree. As with ingratitude, overgratitude can theoretically manifest in only one or two of the elements of the grateful response. A beneficiary could, for example, overestimate how much the benefactor cared about him, but then coincidentally respond with just the right amount of affective goodwill and beneficence. But in reality, because the cognitive, affective and behavioral aspects of gratitude are interconnected, most beneficiaries will likely show excesses along all or none of the elements of the grateful response, at least in any given instance of a particular response to a particular moment of benevolence from a benefactor. When a beneficiary reacts with an excess in one or more of the elements of the grateful response, we can say he was *overgrateful* to the benefactor for that benefit. And a person who is habitually or regularly overgrateful, we can say, manifests the trait of *overgratitude*.²³

In what sense, if any, is overgratitude a vice? Like oversensitivity, overgratitude is vicious in the formal sense that it is a failure to achieve just the right amount of a virtuous disposition. Some think these excesses, though perhaps “foolish,” are not moral shortcomings in the sense that makes their bearer a less-than-ideal moral agent.²⁴ There are several reasons, however, to believe that overgratitude can be morally problematic, not merely foolish. For example, overgratitude, especially when fueled by grateful oversensitivity, can lead to an inaccurate sense of self-worth. This can happen in several ways. Imagine a person who goes around the world perceiving evidence of benevolence toward him far more often than is warranted. Over time, such a person would come to believe that he was cared-about and wished-well far more widely than he actually was. Such a person might come to develop the morally problematic belief that he is more special, more cared-about, and more to-be-cared-about than he really is, and this condition comes very close to the definition of arrogance.²⁵

Under other circumstances, overgratitude can lead a person to a kind of servility—the very opposite of arrogance. Imagine a beneficiary who habitually believes that his benefactors’ benevolence toward him is more than it really is, or more than he has any evidence to believe it is. If he judges his own benevolence accurately, such a beneficiary might systematically underestimate his own benevolence vis-à-vis that of others. Insofar as it is morally good and praiseworthy to be benevolent, then, and insofar as self-appraisal is in some ways tied to comparisons with others, an overgrateful beneficiary might wind up with a lower appraisal of his character and actions than he ought to have.

Overgrateful beliefs can lead to servility within intimate relationships as well. Imagine an overgrateful person in an abusive relationship who, despite frequently being treated with disregard or contempt, comes to believe his partner bears him great benevolence.²⁶ Despite a scarcity of evidence, he persuades himself that the cruel things his partner says to him are

intended to benefit him, are said and done out of care for him. Such a person is likely to think better of his partner and remain in such a relationship longer than he should—and longer than any virtuously self-respecting person would—at least in part because of the benevolence he mistakenly attributes to his partner.

Judgments aside, overgrateful affective and behavioral responses could also amount to a kind of servility when they lead a beneficiary to commit more emotional and behavioral resources to others than they deserve. An overgrateful beneficiary is one who spends more time worrying about others—more time feeling upset and sad when they suffer, for instance—than he should. He is also someone who spends more time and energy going out of his way to benefit his benefactors than he should. And the more time he spends worrying about others, and the more time and resources he spends doing things to benefit others, the less time, energy and resources he has to dedicate to himself and his own projects. A sufficiently overgrateful beneficiary will not have enough time or resources to treat his own interests with the care and attention proper self-respect would require, and in that sense, overgratitude can amount to a vice.

Overgratitude is also morally dangerous for another reason: It can lead a person to incorrectly rank his moral priorities. This can happen if a beneficiary is prone to show *differential overgratitude*—that is, overgratitude to certain entities but properly proportioned gratitude to others. A person who mistakenly believes he owes gratitude to an apple tree for giving him its apples when he was starving, for instance, might be more inclined to protect that tree or come to its aid than to help a human benefactor who intentionally and benevolently provided him with a benefit of lesser value; and if such a beneficiary finds himself in a position where he has to choose between helping the tree and helping his human benefactor, his overgratitude would lead him to make the wrong choice. Overgratitude can thus lead to problems with ordinal gratitude judgments and actions. It can also lead to problems prioritizing moral actions more generally.

Consider again an overgrateful person who has an outsized motivation to protect an apple tree he thinks showed him benevolence. If his motivation to protect the tree on a particular occasion conflicts with his motivation to keep a promise, he might be inclined to protect the tree rather than keep the promise, and in that way, his overgratitude would keep him from acting as he morally should.

Failures of duration. A final category of gratitude-associated vices comes to light when we note that even if a beneficiary accurately perceives benevolence and establishes the proper cognitive, affective and behavioral dispositions, those dispositions might nonetheless fail to endure as long as they should. The beneficiary of a monumental act of benevolence might, for instance, recognize a benefactor's benevolence and thank her and form accurate judgments and proportional affective and behavioral dispositions but forget about the act of benevolence after a few days. Alternatively, he may remember the benevolence but may find that his motivation to come to his benefactor's aid or his feelings in wishing his benefactor well wane too quickly over time. Insofar as the grateful disposition should endure for some period of time, such a beneficiary falls short of gratitude, and he thereby manifests what we might call *evanescent gratitude*. When a beneficiary is habitually evanescently grateful, we can say he manifests the vice of *gratitude evanescence*.

If we take evanescent gratitude to be a deficiency (a deficiency in the durability of the grateful dispositions), we might wonder whether there is an associated excess: a grateful disposition that endures too long. One might think that an ideally grateful person will remember an act of benevolence and be disposed to respond with the right feelings and behaviors *indefinitely*, even if this is a psychological impossibility for any actual human beneficiary.²⁷ But perhaps it is ideal that our memories of benevolence and our affective and behavioral dispositions concerning our benefactors' welfare fade somewhat over time. This fading may mirror the changes our

benefactors go through over time, changes that eventually make them different people from the ones who earned our gratitude in the first place. Imagine a benefactor who showed someone genuine benevolence when she was twenty, but then over subsequent decades became hardhearted and uncaring to the point where she would no longer perform the same kind of act of benevolence for the same person under the same circumstances. When her beneficiary encounters her fifty years later, there seems to be a sense in which the benefactor as she is at 70 no longer deserves the gratitude she did when she was twenty. For the beneficiary to show her now exactly the same gratitude he owed her decades ago for things she decades ago did might thus seem to be a sort of misfiring, not unlike grateful oversensitivity or overgratitude. Insofar as grateful dispositions can persist too long, we can think of them as constituting *overpersistent gratitude*, and a person whose gratitude is habitually overpersistent we might say suffers from the vice of *gratitude overpersistence*.

Conclusion

My goal in this chapter has been to sketch an account of the virtue of gratitude and to explore the range of vices associated with that virtue. On my account, the virtue of gratitude is best understood as the disposition to form and sustain a properly grateful response to the right people at the right times and to the right degree. The grateful response itself is at its core a complex of dispositions that includes beliefs about the benefactor, an affective disposition of goodwill, and behavioral dispositions of grateful beneficence and nonmaleficence. Gratitude as a virtue, then, is essentially a meta-disposition: specifically, the disposition to perceive benevolence and to form the proper grateful beliefs and affective and behavioral dispositions vis-à-vis the source of that benevolence. If this is the right way to construe the virtue of gratitude, I argued,

then there are three kinds of ways a beneficiary can fail to be properly grateful: he can fail to be properly sensitive to evidence of benevolence (failures of attunement); he can fail to establish the proper beliefs and dispositions when gratitude is called for (failures of establishment); and he can fail to preserve those beliefs and dispositions for a proper or reasonable amount of time (failures of duration). These categories of failure can be divided into deficiencies and excesses. The deficiency-failure of attunement is insensitivity—an insensitivity to evidence of benevolence and a failure to perceive that an act of benevolence has occurred. The excess-failure of attunement is oversensitivity—perceiving a certain amount of benevolence where no (or less) benevolence has been evidenced. The deficiency-failure of establishment is ingratitude, which can be subdivided into sub-gratitude, non-gratitude and anti-gratitude. The excess-failure of establishment is overgratitude, which occurs when the magnitude of the cognitive, affective and behavioral elements of the grateful response are outsized compared to the benevolence to which they are a response, or when such elements arise in response to no benevolence at all. Finally, failures of duration occur when a beneficiary fails to sustain a proper grateful disposition toward a benefactor over time. The deficiency-failure of duration is evanescent gratitude, and it is unclear whether there is an associated excess-failure—i.e., whether there is such a thing as overpersistent gratitude. Failures of establishment and failures of duration can be further specified by the particular element(s) of the grateful response in which the failure occurs. When a person finds he fails in any of these ways habitually or regularly as a beneficiary, this habit or regularity amounts to a vice that can be ascribed to that person.²⁸

If what I have said is correct, then there is a rich variety of ways in which a person can habitually fail to be grateful, and attending to this variety of gratitude-associated vices is important for several reasons. It may, for instance, be useful in the process of moral education. When we want to help a child develop into a properly grateful person, it helps to know exactly

how that particular child tends to stray from the properly grateful disposition. A child who shows insensitivity, for example, is one who needs to be taught to look out for and recognize the evidence that others are being benevolent toward him. A child who shows anti-grateful tendencies, on the other hand, may be keenly sensitive to evidence of the benevolence of others, but he may need to be taught not to envy this benevolence (and should instead, perhaps, be encouraged to match this benevolence with his own). A child who shows good sensitivity and decent affective gratitude but behavioral sub-grateful tendencies needs to be taught that recognition and feelings alone are not enough for gratitude, and he should be approached and coached the same way a goodhearted but lazy child might be. Importantly, moral educators should not assume that just because a child shows no ungrateful tendencies he needs no moral guidance as far as gratitude goes. Educators should keep an eye out for children who show tendencies toward oversensitivity and overgratitude, making sure such children develop proper levels of self-respect; and educators should avoid urging everyone to instantiate as much gratitude-constitutive behavior and feeling as possible as much of the time as possible.²⁹

Recognizing the variety of ways in which a beneficiary can fail to be grateful also helps us make and communicate more fine-grained judgments of those who demonstrate vicious ingratitude. It gives us the language and the concepts, for instance, to distinguish between anti-grates and sub-grates. A sub-grate is someone who bears his benefactor goodwill and treats her with beneficence but does not quite demonstrate enough of each to count as fully grateful. An anti-grate, by contrast, is someone who comes to resent his benefactors. Both are rightly called ingrates, but the ramifications of doing favors for one rather than the other are quite different: in particular, doing a favor for an anti-grate may actually endanger the benefactor in a way that doing a favor for a sub-grate would not, since anti-grates respond to benevolence with envy and resentment. Distinguishing these two types of beneficiaries is thus important for us to be able to

do when we pass along information to others, and it is something we cannot do effectively if we classify both types of beneficiaries simply as ingrates.

The ability to make these more fine-grained distinctions is helpful not only practically, in our interactions with others, but also theoretically, in the scholarly study of gratitude. It helps us qualify certain widespread generalizations about ingratitude, for instance, that are not strictly speaking accurate—or, at least, not as generally apt as they purport to be. Consider, for example, the claim that ingratitude is among the worst of the moral vices. Hume endorsed this view, writing that “Of all crimes that human creatures are capable of committing, the most horrid and unnatural is ingratitude...”³⁰ Kant considered ingratitude (along with envy and malice) “the essence of vileness and wickedness.”³¹ And Seneca ranked ingrates below thieves and adulterers.³² These claims do not seem wildly implausible so long as we take anti-gratitude to be representative of ingratitude generally. But they seem far less plausible when said of a mere subgrate. The moral of the story is that because ingratitude is heterogeneous, philosophers would be wiser to make generalizations about species of ingratitude than about ingratitude *tout court*. My account of the virtue of gratitude and the vices associated with it provides the tools necessary for this.

NOTES

¹ For the sake of clarity, throughout this chapter I will refer to beneficiaries with masculine pronouns and benefactors with feminine pronouns.

² I make this distinction in Manela, 2016a.

³ Those who point this out include Walker, 1980-1981; Manela, 2016b.

⁴ Manela, 2015b; Manela, 2016a.

⁵ This goes without saying for those in certain linguistic traditions. For instance, the French word for “grateful”, *reconnaissant*, is derived from the verb *reconnaître*, “to recognize”. And this insight is not lost on philosophers of gratitude in the Anglophone community. As Fred Berger notes, gratitude “involves at least the recognition of the other’s having done something” that qualifies as an act of benevolence. (Berger, 1975: 302) See also Walker, 1980-1981.

⁶ There may, of course, be occasions on which a beneficiary sees no direct evidence of a benefactor’s motivations. In some such cases, it may be perfectly consistent with proper gratitude to give a benefactor the benefit of the doubt that her motives are benevolent, not selfish. In other contexts, being so generous with the benefit of the doubt may not be warranted—especially when and if there is positive evidence the benefactor was *not* being benevolent.

⁷ See, for instance, Fitzgerald, 1998; Costello, 2009.

⁸ Positive feelings are not called for, for instance, in cases where the benefactor suffers terribly in benefitting the beneficiary, or in cases where a clumsy would-be benefactor is likely to cause the beneficiary more harm than good, or in cases where a benefactor wants to benefit the beneficiary in a way the beneficiary ashamedly realizes he does not deserve, or in cases where an especially self-abnegating benefactor is willing to accept grossly disproportionate sacrifices on her part for modest gains to the beneficiary. Some such cases may warrant praise or gratitude to the benefactor, but it seems plausible to say that a beneficiary need not *appreciate* such instances of benevolence, insofar as the beneficiary might prefer a state of affairs in which such benevolence hadn’t existed at all. At any rate, it seems true that positive feelings of joy aren’t called for in such circumstances.

⁹ Manela, 2015b; Walker, 1980-1981.

¹⁰ Camenisch, 1981.

¹¹ McConnell, 1993.

¹² Such cases are instances of what Camenisch (1981, 7) calls the “commissive” sense of thanking.

¹³ Except, perhaps, for the unusual sort of case in which a benefactor has an interest in *not* being thanked or in *not* knowing. In those cases (and perhaps only in those cases), thanking does not seem called for. For an interesting discussion of whether it could be reasonable for a virtuous benefactor to want not to be thanked, see the discussion of John Jarndyce in Robert Roberts’ contribution to this volume.

¹⁴ Philosophers who seem to presuppose the incompatibility of a virtue of gratitude and obligations of gratitude include Wellman, 1999. Presupposing such an incompatibilism spells trouble for any account of the virtue of gratitude because there are strong arguments for the existence of obligations of gratitude (see Manela, 2015b: §1.). Philosophers can avoid presupposing this incompatibilism as they begin inquiries into gratitude if they are careful to ask what we might call the *of*-question (*whether there are obligations of gratitude or a virtue of gratitude*) rather than the *is*-question (*whether gratitude is a set of obligations or a virtue*), since the second question subtly stacks the deck against the possibility that gratitude could describe *both* a set of obligations *and* a virtue. For other reasons to prefer the *of*-question as a starting point for philosophical inquiry into gratitude, see Manela, 2015a: §5.

¹⁵ For an extended discussion of a beneficiary’s obligation to go out of his way to avoid harming his benefactor, see Manela, 2015b: §1.

¹⁶ This is one example of the many ways in which the affective and behavioral elements of the grateful response are interconnected.

¹⁷ Of course, not every failure to notice evidence of benevolence disqualifies a beneficiary from counting as fully grateful. A blind person who doesn’t notice evidence of benevolence because of his blindness

doesn't count as ungrateful for that. Still, it seems fair to say that certain kinds of lack of attunement to relevant details are enough to keep a person from counting as fully virtuous. A serial CEO who fails to notice time and again that 90% of the leadership positions in the companies he manages are occupied by men, for instance, seems to fall short of full possession of the virtue of justice, even if he is properly concerned, indignant, and motivated to challenge such gender imbalances whenever they are pointed out to him. By the same token, someone who routinely overlooks clear evidence that people are treating him benevolently falls short of gratitude.

¹⁸ Nisters, 2012.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Ungrateful insensitivity is especially likely to lead to this.

²¹ These distinctions were originally put forward by Thomas Aquinas: II.II.107.

²² Such excesses are especially likely to occur when a beneficiary is oversensitive to evidence of benevolence.

²³ This vice, also originally described by Aquinas, has been named *hypergratitude* by Nisters, 2012. I prefer the term *overgratitude* because that term implies too much gratitude, whereas hypergratitude is a more neutral term, implying only more gratitude than is normal or usual.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ This is one reason it is morally problematic to anthropomorphize and feel grateful toward non-agential natural objects that benefit us. I make this point more fully in Manela, 2018.

²⁶ "Partner" here could be understood as a romantic partner, a friend, a parent, or a mentor.

²⁷ Of course, it seems fair to say that once a beneficiary returns a favor or otherwise performs an act of gratitude for a benefactor, the beneficiary should no longer have the same motivation to benefit his benefactor that he once did. But even after acts of gratitude are carried out, that shouldn't alter the cognitive and affective components of a grateful response, which should still remain in place in a grateful beneficiary. That is, even after acts of gratitude are carried out, we still expect a beneficiary to remember the act of benevolence, and to be disposed to be pleased when he hears things are going well for his beneficiary and upset when he hears things are going poorly. We might even still expect him to have some tendency, albeit one of reduced magnitude, to look for ways to benefit his benefactor beyond what he's already done.

²⁸ It is worth noting here that each of these vices can be more or less localized, more or less context-specific. Just as we can make sense of a person who is grateful to his parents, for instance, we can make sense of someone who is sub-grateful to his parents, overgrateful to strangers, or anti-grateful to siblings as people who show just those failures of gratitude in just those contexts.

²⁹ All this, of course, applies to those interested in self-cultivation as well as moral educators charged with the cultivation of others.

³⁰ Hume, 2007: III.I.I.

³¹ Kant, 1979: 218.

³² Seneca, 2010: I.10.4.

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