

# TRANSPERSONAL GRATITUDE: NATURE, EXPRESSIONS AND LINKS

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## **Abstract**

The concept of gratitude has always been a topic of interest for philosophers and theologians, and more recently for psychologists, in terms of its role in social harmony and its implications in a morally good life. This research proposes to conceptualise a modality of gratitude which has not received the philosophical attention that it merits: transpersonal gratitude, or gratitude for a benefit in the absence of benevolent agency, human or otherwise. After an examination of the existing literature, the first few chapters offer a definition of the concept of transpersonal gratitude, as well as a description of the phenomenological features of the experience. Gratitude in the absence of a benefactor is conceptualised as distinct from the personal and theistic modalities, focused on the significance and salience of the gift, inducing feelings of connectedness and broadening the scope of the grateful conduct.

The introduction of the concept of transpersonal gratitude as a distinct modality raises a few questions in terms of the applicability of current perspectives on gratitude. This research addresses issues such as the centrality of the benefactor's kind intention and the requirements of grateful expression and argues for a shift in philosophical considerations of gratitude from strict triadic accounts towards a dyadic view which allows a better understanding and conceptualisation of the spectrum of grateful experiences.

The moral worth of gratitude and the implications of transpersonal gratitude in morality are discussed, both as an emotion and a character trait. Subsequently, this research argues for a virtue of gratitude and suggests that such a virtue can be conceptualised according to a dyadic transpersonal model. Finally, we explore the links between transpersonal gratitude and empathy, as well as humility, to propose that transpersonal gratitude fosters a positive relationship of dependence between the individual and the world and as such, it is an important component of the morally good life.

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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

Gratitude has traditionally been explored by philosophers, theologians and psychologists as a moral and religious value, as well as a moral and spiritual emotion. Since antiquity, philosophers have defined gratitude as an integral and important part of social exchanges, one that helps harmonise relationships and encourage benevolence. Cicero and Seneca have written extensively on the subject, linking beneficence to the virtues of justice and generosity and detailing appropriate ways to make a return, to express gratitude. *De Officiis* (Cicero) and *De Beneficiis* (Seneca) were two major references in Western Philosophy and they are mentioned in most publications on gratitude throughout the Ancient and Medieval times, and until modern days. In philosophy and until the advent of moral sentimentalism, gratitude was a duty and a social obligation towards human benefactors and for some philosophers, towards God.

Indeed, from a religious perspective, gratitude has always been one of the cornerstones of man's relationship with God. All Holy Scriptures praise gratitude as the appropriate attitude towards God because everything that exists is by the grace of God's will. In theological writings, this thankful stance is said to be one of the most important experiences that allows a sense of connectedness with God and his creation. Beyond moral and prosocial concerns, the spiritual understanding of gratitude is said to promote a peaceful and sometimes joyous acceptance of the human condition, giving a sense of purpose to what at times might seem to be a chaotic and random series of events. Thus, gratitude is



important both for developing a good relationship with God and embracing life with its challenges and favours.

Gratitude as a duty appears to have an important part in our social life, since it inspires and supports benevolence, which in turn helps maintain a healthy society. But is gratitude only a duty, an obligation? How do emotions of thankfulness come into play?

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Adam Smith linked gratitude to sympathy, indicating that an agent's feelings mattered in the definition of what constitutes appropriate gratitude and its expressions. The birth of psychology and psychoanalysis introduced a shift in the way human emotions and behaviour were evaluated and conceptualised both in philosophy and psychology. However, it wasn't until the movement of positive psychology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that gratitude, as a positive emotion, started to become a topic of research and investigation.

Defining gratitude as a feeling of thankfulness for gifts received - specifically for gifts that come through no merit or effort on the part of the beneficiary - as well as the willingness and effort to make a return, both philosophers and psychologists emphasized the different elements of the emotion/behaviour and discussed its links with well-being and prosocial behaviour.

An important topic in the investigation of gratitude has been the intention of the giver: a gift is considered as such when the benefactor offers it without any expectations, preferably not even that of a thankful feedback. In this definition, gratitude is an emotion that arises in the form of thankfulness for a gift and its moral value consists in the ignition of a desire to do good in return. It has been

said to strengthen social bonds between individuals and contribute to the overall functionality of a society. From this perspective, what matters is the way gratitude impacts relationships within a social context, and the nature of the gift given/received does not make a great difference as long as the intention of offering is met with acceptance and thankfulness. Recent philosophical accounts have also focused on deontological challenges that the concept of gratitude presents, for example the fact that while gratitude generates certain duties, the feeling component of such expression cannot be a requirement; and yet in its absence, gratitude cannot be genuine and will thus fail to fulfil the obligations of said duties. Other accounts discuss whether gratitude is a virtue that contributes to the good life, or simply an emotion with some moral worth under certain circumstances. And yet others examine different dimensions of the experience of gratitude, such as its spiritual and transcendent aspects. While different accounts may hold distinct perspectives on how to conceptualise gratitude, the abundance of publications on the topic is evidence of a renewed philosophical interest in gratitude and its place in ethical theories.

Similarly, current psychological literature shows an increasing amount of studies analysing different aspects of gratitude as an emotion and a disposition or trait. They emphasise the social and prosocial nature of gratitude, as well as its implications in relationships with the self and others, its moral impact and the links between trait gratitude and other personality traits. Many also focus on the effect of the experience of gratitude on an individual's emotional well-being, pointing out that being grateful improves a person's overall sense of happiness and encourages a positive outlook on life. This in turn facilitates choices that serve the individual as well as her or his social environment. Several scales have been

devised to measure different parameters of the emotion of gratitude, such as its intensity and frequency under different circumstances. Gratitude has become the star of the decade with psychologists, and many therapists offer treatments that are based on helping their patients become more grateful for the goodness in their lives.

Gratitude is also a major topic advocated for and adopted by New Age spiritual movements, showing a growing popular interest in what gratitude means in everyday life. Feeling grateful and appreciative of all life experiences is promoted as part of one's spiritual development – over the spectrum of religious and non-religious experiences - that is said to allow more positive experiences into one's life, helping individuals to gain a sense of purpose and be happier in general. This point of view brings together elements from both religious and psychological approaches, focusing more on the value that thankfulness brings to individuals and less on the investigation of the nature and concept of gratitude. It is, at times, a simplified account of gratitude as a mere practice of keeping count of one's blessings, and as such, leaves out discussions on the meaning and moral implications of gratitude for the individual and society in general.

### **1.1. Topic and aims of this research**

As the above-mentioned accounts show, there are several approaches to gratitude both in philosophy and psychology. This is the result of gratitude being a relatively recent topic of investigation, which leaves room for new questions and considerations.

This research builds on what can be called the mainstream approach to modalities of gratitude. Indeed, philosophical and psychological accounts on the subject are mostly concerned with either personal or theistic types of gratitude, on the assumption that those are the two main types of thankful emotions that qualify for conceptualisation.

Personal gratitude is a term used to define a gratitude that is born within the context of a relationship between individuals. In this scenario, there is the benefactor who offers a gift to the beneficiary, ideally with no intention other than that of a kind offering and no expectations whatsoever; then there is the beneficiary who accepts the gifts, acknowledges the kindness bestowed upon him and feels thankful towards the benefactor. Thus, in the case of personal gratitude, the giver of the gift is the focus of the feeling of thankfulness. In contrast to this type of exchange, the gratitude that arises within man's relationship to God is called "theistic gratitude". The major difference in terms of this definition is the change of the recipient: in theistic gratitude, thankfulness is directed towards God as the source of all creation and life events. Another distinction between personal and theistic types of gratitude is the nature of the gift. Whereas in the context of personal relationships, a gift tends to be localised (a certain gift or favour at a certain point in time), God's gifts can be perceived as being continuous and everywhere, requiring an almost constant giving of thanks.

This is of course a simplified presentation of the many ways in which the concept of gratitude has been explored in moral philosophy, in political thought, in religion and in psychology. However, what interests us here is the distinction between the two different recipients of the feeling of gratitude: another human being, or God.

While it is obvious that this distinction can affect the expression of thankfulness in terms of intensity, duration and content, it is also noteworthy that in both cases there is an “other” who is perceived as the source of benefits. This “other” has certain characteristics that can vary according to its nature. God, for example, is supposed to be all knowing, whereas another human being is not; a divine entity can be almighty, whereas a fellow human is restricted by the mental, physical and emotional limits of his human condition. However, the fact that the recipient of thankfulness *is* an “other” suggest qualities that allow for a relationship between giver and receiver. And from that perspective, we can argue that theistic gratitude is in fact part of the more general modality of personal gratitude. After all, even though God is not a person in the sense of a human individual, He is an “other” with specific attributes, namely, in this case, the ability and willingness to bestow a benefit upon someone else. And even though God’s unique position as powerful creator of all might demand a greater sense of gratitude, that does not change the fact that the required gratitude is in response to a kind intention born in the (perceived) mind of an “other”.

This brings us to one of the main questions that this research investigates: is there a modality of gratitude that is not personal or theistic? Can there be thankfulness without the perception of a distinct “other”? These questions are pertinent particularly to those cases where a person who does not believe in a benevolent divine entity finds herself thankful for the blessings she has in life, or for a specific gift that she receives, such as an unexpected job offer. The feelings that arise in such situations are usually described and analysed as happiness and appreciation, but I would like to argue that there are instances where individuals with such benefits experience genuine feelings of thankfulness. A

quick survey of humanist blogs and websites suggests that there is indeed empirical evidence to this claim<sup>1</sup>. Who, then, is the recipient of such feelings if the source of the benefit cannot be pinpointed? What of those cases where events just seem to come together for a positive outcome in one's life? Dismissing feelings born in such moments as joy mistaken for thankfulness would be a reductionist approach to the spectrum of human experience of gratitude.

## **1.2. Transpersonal gratitude**

### *1.2.1. Terminological considerations*

Traditionally, gratitude is understood in the context of giver, gift and receiver; or benefactor, benefit and beneficiary. The giver/benefactor is the person who bestows a favour, a kindness or a gift/benefit upon another, who is the receiver/beneficiary.

Although this sounds simple enough, it does not express the dynamics of this triadic relationship very clearly. For example, when I am grateful to someone for a gift, who/what is to be called the "object" of my gratitude: the benefactor or the gift? Are they objects of my feelings of gratitude, or is there a better term that expresses the nature of my relationship to them?

For the sake of a more articulate discussion, the term "focus" will hereon designate the person or non-human agent who is the recipient of gratitude. The

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<sup>1</sup> Take, for example, secular versions of prayers of thanksgiving published on The Humanist website: "(...) May we be grateful for all we have, And compassion for those without" (Berman, 2014)

focus of gratitude is “who I am grateful *to*”. The term “object” will be used to represent the gift or benefit: the object of gratitude is “what I’m grateful *for*”.

Another terminological clarification is necessary for the terms “dyadic” and “triadic” that have recently been used to describe different kinds of gratitude, both in philosophical and psychological literature. Triadic gratitude refers to a context of giver-gift-receiver and the expressions of thankfulness within that context. Dyadic gratitude serves as an umbrella term to categorise all experiences of gratitude in the absence of a benevolent agent and is considered to be a general non-directed form of gratitude. The differences between this dyadic gratitude and transpersonal gratitude are discussed in further chapters.

Finally, the term “modality” is used in this research in its simple meaning of “a particular way of doing or experiencing something<sup>2</sup>”.

### *1.2.2. Definition*

This research proposes that there is a third modality of gratitude which is transpersonal, in that it goes beyond the usual patterns of the exchange between a specific giver and receiver, whether the source is God or another human being. Transpersonal gratitude is being thankful for something but to no one or nothing in particular. In other words, there is an *object* of gratitude but no *focus*. A review and discussion of the existing literature on gratitude, both in philosophy and psychology, will show that for the most part, this modality of gratitude does not captivate the interest of philosophers because at first glance, it does not appear to have any moral focus or import. And although some recent publications have

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<sup>2</sup> Cambridge English Dictionary.

indeed proposed that there might be a type of gratitude that is distinct from personal and theistic contexts (Aronson, 2008; McAleer, 2012; Walker, 1981; Roberts, 2014; Carr, 2016), there is still much to say about the definition of transpersonal gratitude and its place in psychological and philosophical theories of well-being and ethics.

### *1.2.3. Moral relevance*

If transpersonal gratitude is a modality in itself, what distinct role does it play, if any, in our individual, social and perhaps spiritual lives?

As we have already mentioned, accounts of personal and theistic types of gratitude discuss the importance that gratitude plays in nurturing and sustaining healthy relationships within society (personal) and with God (theistic). This makes it obvious not only why those modalities are of interest for researchers, but also why expressions of thankfulness are encouraged in society and taught to human individuals since childhood. It is not only polite to say “thank you”, but an appropriate expression of gratitude that will motivate further acts of benevolence. And this is good both for individuals and society as a whole.

Transpersonal gratitude, on the other hand, is not something that we actively teach our children. Popular language might carry some of its meaning through expressions such as “you should be thankful for your talents” but this does not teach that one *should* be grateful *for* something in the absence of a benefactor. Indeed, social and at times religious conditioning prompts us to find a recipient for such gratitude.



However, transpersonal gratitude seems to be naturally elicited in certain situations, such as peak experiences (Maslow, 2014). Individuals who experience a heightened sense of consciousness report feelings of thankfulness, inspired by the connectedness they experience (Maslow, 2014). This gratitude is not directed towards God – or another human being – and appears transpersonal in nature. The question that follows, then, is whether this gratitude, like its personal and theistic counterparts, has any bearings on one's moral and/or social behaviour.

This research argues that transpersonal gratitude has indeed strong implications for prosocial and moral behaviour. This influence can be threefold. In the most evident development, the feeling of vast gratitude (Nakhtnikian, 1961) that can't identify a specific benefactor, but nevertheless carries a recognition of having received a benefit, will find its focus in different social environments in an attempt to make a return. Additionally, this same recognition can enhance a sense of the goodness of life, which in turn creates a positive disposition towards fellow human beings. Finally, in most cases, the feelings of connectedness that are an integral part of peak experiences, will induce a stronger sense of empathy and sympathy towards others, thus inspiring prosocial choices.

Transpersonal gratitude, however, is not limited to peak experiences. It can be part of the ordinary moments of an individual's life, realising that they have a good life, and feeling thankful for it to no one in particular. In this case, and even if a strong feeling of connectedness is not present, the prosocial influence of the experience stays valid. In fact, the desire to make a return by benefiting others can be more efficient and gratifying when prompted by transpersonal gratitude rather than personal and/or theistic modalities, because of the absence of socially

and religiously regulated rituals. The appropriateness of the expression of transpersonal gratitude transcends the limitations of usual guidelines dictated by tradition or norms, leaving the individual free to reach within and find creative ways to realise their desire to make a return. This exercise allows one to feel the clarity of one's own moral compass, making benevolence a much rewarding act in itself.

#### *1.2.4. Disposition and virtue*

Another matter that is relevant to our moral life is that of virtues and how they regulate and motivate appropriate moral conduct. In this light, it is worth asking whether gratitude and transpersonal gratitude have any features or qualities that would make them virtuous.

Studies in psychology have accounted for a grateful disposition, that they generally define as a proneness to detect beneficial situations where the source of the benefit is outside of the self. This disposition also seems to motivate actions that tend to repay what is sometimes called the debt of gratitude. Moreover, it seems that such a disposition can be learned and cultivated through certain practices and habits.

Bearing these results in mind, we ask whether this grateful disposition can be a virtue of gratitude. Indeed, this is a question of some contention amongst philosophers as it seems that gratitude, although morally important, does not always fit the description of traditional moral virtues. However, this research argues that this problem can be overcome by considering the dyadic model of gratitude as a way to understand the virtue of gratitude.

### *1.2.5. Transpersonal gratitude and dependence*

A final argument that is based on the nature and the attributes of transpersonal gratitude is that of an equation of dependence. Personal and theistic types of gratitude are registered within an equation of reciprocity. In both cases, there is a clear source of benefits and the focus of gratitude is on that source. A benefactor bestows a gift and the beneficiary reciprocates the kindness as a show of gratitude. However, in those cases where there is no clear source or benefactor, and therefore no primary focus for the feelings of thankfulness, there is a need to consider a different register for those emotions. In a psychoanalytical investigation of gratitude, M. Klein links it to trust and dependence (Klein, 1975). In other words, the consistent and recurring experience of gratification is what gives birth to gratitude in the first place. From a philosophical point of view, C. Card speaks of an equation of trust that would do justice to the subtleties of gratitude beyond circumstances of reciprocal duties and obligations (Card, 1996). In a different context, R. Aronson suggests that individuals who don't necessarily believe in God can still experience a gratitude that goes beyond personal exchanges, by realising how much we depend on a series of dependencies such as nature and/or other human beings (Aronson, 2008). This same idea is present in Seneca's writings when he suggests that we should be thankful to the moon, the sun and the stars for always being there and letting us benefit from their presence. In the same line of thought, S. Smilansky makes a case for gratitude focused on the everyday dependence and reliance on others (Smilansky, 1997). This is not to say that dependence is the object of transpersonal gratitude but rather that this modality of gratitude is experienced in an inner context of trust and dependence, and not just direct reciprocityts

### **1.3. Methodological note**

This dissertation brings together current accounts of gratitude in philosophy and psychology, in an attempt to further our understanding of both interpersonal and transpersonal modalities of gratitude.

Psychological accounts rely heavily on empirical research, which often takes the form of studies where subjects self-report their experiences of directed and non-directed gratitude. Whether these self-reports reliably refer to gratitude is a question that can be addressed first in terms of the way those studies are conducted.

Studies asking subjects to self-report about their experiences put in place measures to minimise biases. Those measures include additional questionnaires, within-subject experiments and replicated studies in order to check the reliability of results. Using such methods, the studies discussed in this research have assessed and compared the participants' emotional, mental and physiological states that accompany the experience of both directed and non-directed modalities of gratitude. This comparison, within and across subjects, has shown that self-reports of non-directed gratitude are in crucial ways similar to self-reports of directed gratitude. In other words, when participants express non-targeted gratitude, they refer to an experience of recognition of benefits, feelings of appreciation and a wish to make a return, which are central elements to directed gratitude (Tsang 2014; McCullough, Emmons & Tsang, 2002; Emmons 2006; Teigen, 1997). This suggests that when agents self-report feelings of thankfulness in a dyadic context, they are referring to genuine experiences of gratitude.

From a different perspective, we can also argue that individuals who report feeling grateful for a benefit, but not to anyone in particular, need not be under the suspicion of not knowing their own emotions. If someone says that they are feeling grateful, it would be safe to assume that 1/ they have experienced this emotion before (possibly in a triadic context) and 2/ they are experiencing it again, this time in a non-triadic context; and they *know* this is gratitude.

We can compare this to experiences of fear. Most people would presumably be able to explain why they are afraid in a given situation; for example, someone is threatening them, and they are afraid for their life. However, as it is well documented in psychology and psychiatry, there are cases where individuals are afraid for no reason in particular: indeed, panic attacks can overwhelm an individual with a sense of doom and terror, and he or she would be unable to explain why they are scared. But in both instances, we would accept their description of their own emotion as fear. We would not question *that* he or she is afraid, even if we wonder *why*. We do not claim that an individual gripped by a panic attack is, in fact, feeling something else altogether and that he or she could only be afraid if there was something to be scared of. In the same way, there is no reason why we should doubt that a person reporting feelings of gratitude outside of a triadic context is, in fact, referring to an experience of gratitude.

#### **1.4. General presentation of the structure of the thesis**

This research is structured around the main arguments mentioned above: that transpersonal gratitude is a distinct modality in itself, that it enhances prosocial behaviour, and that it is the model for a virtue of gratitude. It also registers in an

equation of dependence, as opposed to the mutualistic equation of personal and theistic types of gratitude.

In the next chapter, in a review of the existing literature in philosophy and psychology, as well as select religious texts, we discuss personal and theistic modalities of gratitude, their nature and objects in addition to the moral requirements that regulate their expressions within a context of exchange of benefits and thankfulness. This review also allows us to determine some gaps in the conceptualisation of gratitude, namely the lack of attention to cases of gratitude without a recipient.

Chapter Three outlines and defends the central claim of this research as well as the main arguments presented in support of this claim. The chapter also defines the important terms used throughout this work to refer to experiences and modalities of gratitude.

Chapter Four examines several accounts of gratitude that attempt to conceptualise thankfulness in the absence of an intentional benevolent agent, such as propositional gratitude (McAleer, 2012), or the appropriateness of feelings of existential gratitude (Lacewing, 2016).

However, it is not only a matter of defining what transpersonal gratitude is, but also to clarify the role of key ideas such as intention and agency in its conceptualisation. Chapter Five of this research addresses the matter of intention and the agency requirement in the absence of an intentional benefactor and proposes that other factors come into play to render this requirement

unnecessary. This chapter also explores the notion of implicit attributions of intentional agency, as well as the case of unwitting agents.

Chapter Six focuses on the expression of transpersonal gratitude. Where theistic and personal modalities have a clear recipient, this is not the case for transpersonal gratitude. We consider psychological theories of action tendency in order to understand what a “wish to make a return” means in the absence of a benefactor. We then reflect on the possible ways of a transpersonal grateful expression, to conclude with the notion of appropriateness in this context.

Chapter Seven examines moral and social emotions, and the place of gratitude in theories of emotions, followed by a discussion of dispositions and personality traits in psychology, with a specific focus on grateful dispositions. This chapter argues for a virtue of gratitude using the transpersonal dyadic model.

Chapter Eight analyses accounts of negative feelings of gratitude. It also explores the possibility of negative feelings of transpersonal gratitude and proposes transpersonal resentment as the corresponding attitude and emotion.

Chapter Nine examines the feelings of connectedness that have been reported as part of the experience of transpersonal gratitude. It explores the links between transpersonal gratitude, empathy and humility, and discusses the role of transpersonal gratitude in a positive relationship of dependence between the grateful individual and the world he inhabits.

Chapter Ten concludes the dissertation by bringing together the concepts and arguments presented throughout the research and deliberates on the

philosophical and ethical implications of such a concept as transpersonal gratitude. It also offers some thoughts on possible future avenues of research and application.



## Chapter Two

### Personal and Theistic modalities of gratitude

#### *Literature review and discussion*

An growing body of literature on gratitude both in psychology and philosophy indicates a recent rise of interest in the concept, but also reveals the multifaceted nature of gratitude as an emotion and its expression(s). Indeed, gratitude can be analysed as an affect, a behaviour, a virtue and a personality feature or disposition, to name only a few. Within these distinctions, there are subdivisions that try to clarify if gratitude is a moral affect, if it is a duty or obligation and whether or not it is limited to an emotional response (as opposed to being a character trait). In general, these discussions of gratitude can be divided into two major groups: approaches that treat gratitude as an external phenomenon, a behaviour linked to obligations and duties; and approaches that focus on the internal phenomenon of thankfulness as an emotion. Of course, these two approaches overlap at times, especially in modern and contemporary writings. However, for the most part of the history of ideas of gratitude and until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, philosophers and theologians mostly focused on gratitude as an obligation and a duty, as well as a virtue, both in social and religious/spiritual terms. It is with the advent of positive psychology, preceded by humanistic psychology and before that, moral sentimentalism, that emotions and affects started being considered as worthy of attention as possible variables in moral choices and behaviour.

This chapter reviews the existing literature on gratitude. It follows the development of thought in philosophical, religious and psychological accounts of gratitude and is divided into two sections.

The first section (2.1) follows a chronological timeline, highlighting and discussing what prominent thinkers from Antiquity to modern times have written about gratitude, and how their writings have influenced contemporary concepts. More specifically, this part focuses on:

- The importance of duties of gratitude and intention in the writings of Cicero and Seneca.
- Gratitude as a spiritual virtue according to Aquinas and other religious figures of medieval philosophy.
- The place of gratitude in social contract theories, with particular focus on Hobbes's work.
- The role of gratitude as a moral sentiment, from Smith to contemporary writers.

The second section (2.2) of this chapter explores the main themes on which current philosophical and psychological accounts of gratitude are focused. These themes are:

- Obligations and duties of gratitude.
- Intention.
- Appropriateness of expressions of gratitude.

All of these accounts are concerned with the triadic model of gratitude of benefactor-gift-beneficiary.

## **2.1. Philosophical, religious and psychological accounts of gratitude from Antiquity to modern times**

### *2.1.1. Gratitude as a duty, or duties of gratitude*

The history of gratitude as a concept can be traced back to Antiquity, namely to Cicero and Seneca. It is with these two philosophers that gratitude as a moral obligation and virtue was analysed at length, and the groundwork was laid for a moral philosophy of gratitude. For both philosophers, gratitude was naturally considered to be a virtue, and there are no discussions or doubts on its nature itself. This will come under scrutiny only centuries later, by modern philosophers and psychologists. For Cicero and Seneca, gratitude is linked to the virtues of justice and generosity. Hence both have focused their efforts on describing the duties and obligations of gratitude and benevolence. At the centre of their arguments lies the conviction that gratitude is good for the individual who wants to lead a virtuous life, and it is beneficial for the society that strives for moral goodness and harmony.

In his *De Officiis*, Cicero puts the emphasis on the responsibility of a benefactor to choose a worthy beneficiary, taking into consideration the latter's need, their moral character, their attitude towards the benefactor, the existence of previous services rendered to the benefactor and the closeness of their relationship. These considerations suggest that the beneficiary should be someone who is likely to have a grateful reaction. In other words, it is better for society if we help those in need who are likely to know what their duty is: to show thankfulness for a benefit. This assures the reinforcement of benevolent behaviour and sends a message to other members of society that being morally good and knowing your duty is rewarded: "For when generosity is not indiscriminate giving, it wins most gratitude

and people praise it with more enthusiasm, because goodness of heart in a man of high station become the common refuge of everybody” (De Officiis, II – xviii: 63). However, discrimination is not required of beneficiaries, because according to Cicero, all kinds of benefits create debts of gratitude (cited in Leithart, 2004), including benefits ranging from services in return to previous help to unsought acts of kindness. If someone saves my life by accident, or even unwillingly, I still owe them a debt of gratitude. It is not clear why gratitude is owed in this case. I might feel thankful that my life was saved, but am I required to be grateful to the person who did not want to save me in the first place? And what kind of return could I make to such a benefactor? Or consider a scenario where I assist someone else solely because it serves my interests in some way. Do they owe me gratitude even though through their benefit, I only wanted to help myself? Cicero’s account does not address these issues, instead insisting that a return be made in all cases of beneficence.

#### *2.1.1.1. The importance of intention*

Seneca’s De Beneficiis in 54 BC brings some answers to these questions by making intention a central requirement for gratitude. His treatise, the first and for a long time the only one to analyse gratitude in minute details, explains what does and should give rise to thankfulness, and what are appropriate ways to give and receive benefits. Seneca's work has served as a basis for most of the publications on gratitude until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It identifies ingratitude as a most common vice and opposes it to gratitude which is a desirable trait and a virtue. Applying Stoic principles to gratitude, Seneca views the exchange of benefits and thankfulness from an egalitarian perspective. Gratitude is not inscribed within a hierarchy of relationships as it was the case with Cicero, but rather depends on intentions,

both the benefactor's and the recipient's. His effort is twofold: to offer a detailed philosophical analysis of gratitude and at the same time to reform the traditions of the time, based on Stoic principles.

The importance that Seneca gives to intention is the cornerstone of his work. He suggests that a benefactor must have the intention to add something good to the recipient's experiences. Without this intention to bestow a benefit, there can be no requirement of gratitude, even if someone's actions result in positive consequences for another person. At the same time, benefactors are encouraged to give before being asked, and once the good deed done, to forget about it and never to mention it again, especially not with expectations of expressions of thankfulness. With these conditions, Seneca puts the emphasis on the kind intention rather than the agent of beneficence. He insists that "the benefit lies in the goodwill of him who gives them" (*De Beneficiis*, I:V): the real benefit is not the object given, but the kind intention. This is how benevolence and gratitude make society a better place. A poor person who shares their pennies with the needy is more entitled to gratitude than a wealthy person who gives away what they don't need. Indeed, this makes them more virtuous than the wealthy person. What gives value to the benefit is the willingness, effort and kindness behind it. This allows Seneca to distinguish beneficence and gratitude from a mere exchange of commodities, and to give them a central role in the positive management of social relationships.

On the other hand, a beneficiary is required to have a real desire to make a return: any expression of gratitude that comes uniquely from a sense of duty or hides feelings such as anger and grudge is not considered an appropriate return. A genuine intention to make a return has to be expressed. In fact, recipients of gifts

are encouraged to demonstrate their gratitude in certain ways – namely in public and with cheerfulness, as this already counts as the first step of making a return: the benefit which consists of a kind action is considered repaid. Even though the “material debt demands a material return”, the beneficiary can carry on with a peaceful consciousness, having clearly shown their intention to make a return when possible. Furthermore, if the recipient never has the opportunity to make a material return, Seneca considers that a graceful receipt of a gift and the willingness to make a return are sufficient to discharge a debt of gratitude.

As it appears, intention is what creates a requirement of gratitude. When someone benefits us intentionally, it is our duty to show thankfulness. If there was no intention to benefit, then we don't owe them any gratitude, even if we actually feel grateful<sup>3</sup>. But can a grateful response be a duty? In our modern perspective, gratitude is a complex phenomenon with affective, cognitive and volitional elements. It would seem reasonable to argue that the volitional aspect might be cultivated with education and practice, but feelings cannot be requirements as one cannot feel a certain emotion as and when expected to. It sounds counter intuitive and goes against the widely held consensus among modern philosophers and psychologists that feelings cannot be requirements. However, from Seneca's stoic perspective, feelings arise from judgments and so does the affective element of gratitude. Therefore, feeling in a certain way can be a requirement. The lack of a proper feeling of thankfulness would be the result of false judgment, possibly that of not recognising the benefit or the intention of the benefactor. In this sense, Seneca's concern with intention is not a concern with

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<sup>3</sup> I discuss gratitude to unwitting agents and the appropriateness of such gratitude in Chapter 4.

one's emotions as independent from conduct. It is about duties of gratitude: recipients of benefits are obliged to act and feel in ways that show gratitude.

Seneca founded his theory of gratitude on the crucial role played by intention. This has become a factor that is taken for granted in all definitions of gratitude across the human studies fields. Thankfulness is only required when there is an intentional benefit or at least the perception of an intentional agent behind the benefit<sup>4</sup>.

### *2.1.2. Gratitude towards God: a spiritual virtue*

Seneca draws a parallel between this gratitude owed to fellow human beings and the gratitude we owe to God. He believes that a freely bestowed benefit, with no expectations – the way God bestows benefits upon humans – met with a clear expression of genuine gratitude is what brings the members of society together in a circle of virtuous equals. “Gifts ought to be given for their own sake, even to the ungrateful, because virtue – in this case the virtue of generosity – is its own reward” (quoted in Leikhart, 2014).

By drawing a parallel between the beneficence of God – or gods, or Nature, as Seneca uses the terms interchangeably – and the generosity of human benefactors, Seneca tries to emphasise, once again, the importance of giving without any expectations in return and the beauty of pure kind intention. Humans are so inferior to God that they can't possibly have anything to offer in return for the blessings they receive, and yet God never stops giving. This, for Seneca, is

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<sup>4</sup> Although Seneca did not elaborate on the notion of perception of benefits or intention, several authors in current literature in psychology and other humanities have developed an argument for the importance of perceived intention and agency (See, for example, Tomasello, 2010)

the model of beneficence: to give to those from whom we can't expect anything but to give generously anyway. And although he suggests that we owe gratitude to Nature – for creating man as the noblest creature with the intention of doing so, and for giving him bounties in abundance - it is not clear how this debt should be discharged. There is nothing that man can offer that would be an appropriate return for such a gift, and the least he could do is to take example on this generosity and give to his fellow human beings in the same way. With this, Seneca touches on a type of gratitude that is felt during a communion with Nature/God then discharged through beneficence in personal relationships; this gratitude seems to belong neither to the sphere of personal relationships nor to that of religious offerings of thankfulness. It is in fact a kind of gratitude that bears many similarities to transpersonal gratitude, such as the incentive it creates for prosocial behaviour. We will return to this idea when we discuss the definition of transpersonal gratitude in the next chapter.

The Judeo-Christian take on gratitude shares some similarities with Seneca's in that it too asserts God's unlimited generosity and man's basic inability to ever make a return for such benevolence. But this religious account goes one step further to say that man is not only unable to repay such a debt, but, being a sinner by birth, often repays God's beneficence with ingratitude. In Salvian of Marseilles' account, man is depicted almost as a vile creature who has "an inborn vice of belittling the blessings God gives, in order that they may not feel obliged to look on themselves as his debtors" (Salvian of Marseilles, n.d.). What is interesting here is the mention of gratitude as a possible burden which man tries to avoid. Man does not want to be under obligation towards God, which causes him to show ingratitude instead of thankfulness. From a religious perspective, this is a moral failure and a sin. But It is worthwhile asking if there is indeed something



about gratitude that is linked with a sense of burden, since different philosophers from different times, and more recently psychologists, have described the debt of gratitude as undesirable or too heavy to carry even within the context of interpersonal relationships. What makes gratitude such a taxing obligation for some? In the particular, religious perspective, the answer is simply man's nature, the inborn vice of ingratitude, the lack of willingness to acknowledge what we owe to God, which needs to be fought with the practice of praise and gratitude.

In *Summa Theologica*, Thomas Aquinas analyses gratitude and gives a Christian reading of the virtue (Aquinas, 1924). Like Cicero, Aquinas considers gratitude a virtue annexed to the cardinal virtue of justice, and many of his remarks show the influence of both Cicero's and Seneca's thoughts on gratitude. For example, he gives intention a prominent place in his account of requirements and obligations of gratitude. He, too, maintains that accepting a benefit with resentment or anger precludes an appropriate expression of gratitude. A thankful recipient must accept the benefit with grace and immediately show a desire to return the kindness.

A sharp distinction between Aquinas and Seneca's accounts of gratitude is the notion of hierarchy. Aquinas leaves behind stoic egalitarianism to suggest that through different types of gratitude, individuals are linked to each other on a continuous scale of obligations and duties of thankfulness. Thus, children owe gratitude to their parents, servants to their masters, citizens to the sovereign and man to God. By introducing this hierarchy, Aquinas establishes that the highest benefactor is God and that ultimately, all gratitude is owed to Him. Ingratitude thus becomes not only a moral failure, but also a sin; and, depending on its degree, a possibly mortal sin (Aquinas, II-II, 107.3). Aquinas' account of gratitude

is not concerned with how individuals actually feel, but rather with how they *should* feel and act towards God, namely grateful.

“In all things give thanks, for this is the will of God” instructs St. Paul (Thessalonians, 5:18). Is it possible to feel in a certain way just because one is commanded to do so? Some contemporary authors interpret this as a request to express thankfulness even if one does not feel grateful. In “The Power of Thanksgiving”, T. M. Moore suggests that gratitude towards God is a matter of obedience and trust. Faith means trusting that God, all-wise and all-sovereign, does all things well (Moore, 2015) and it follows that we should *give thanks* under all circumstances, even those that don’t make us feel particularly grateful. In other words, believers have to express thankfulness even in the absence of the emotion, because that is what God *wills* for them. And there is no reason to question this will, because of the complete trust in God. This certainly resolves the problem of feelings being requirements, by separating thankful actions from thankful emotions. Thankful acts don’t depend on, and don’t have to stem from, grateful feelings; one expresses gratitude because one trusts that when God says you should be thankful, He must be right. This removes the necessity of emotions as a basis for behaviour, by transferring the motivating force to the will of God. In Moore’s sense, gratitude is a matter of *practice* regardless of how one feels. It is this practice that is a duty and an expression of obedience.

It would however be a limiting perspective to reduce religious accounts of gratitude to just a matter of practice. Mystics of all faiths have put their focus on how it *feels* to be grateful towards the creator. Reflection on and contemplation of the requirements of a spiritual life, coupled with practice, informed these mystics of the emotions that arise when one commits to a relationship with God.

And gratitude is one of the emotions that both gives them access to this relationship and helps them maintain and develop it. Julian of Norwich, the 14<sup>th</sup> century mystic, writes that even sin is a God-given gift, because it allows man to realise how merciful and forgiving God is (Julian of Norwich, 1927). She *feels* thankful as a result of the acceptance of everything as a gift from God. She does not speak of it as a requirement, but as a natural product of her faith and trust. Similarly, the 17<sup>th</sup> century American theologian, Jonathan Edwards, speaks of a kind of gratitude that “flows” from the knowledge of the goodness of God, regardless of any specific favours received. This is a feeling that “comes from the heart as a response to the Divine” (J. Edwards, 2004, p.81). Gratitude takes meaning both as a practice and an emotion, both born from love towards God, and each bringing the recognition that he is the main and only real source of all benefits. This definition of gratitude can be found in Sufi mysticism as well, where gratitude starts first in the heart, with the understanding that “there is no blessing except that it is from God” as the Quran teaches (Q 16:53). So, it is not just a matter of submission to divine will, but rather an understanding that “all the blessings which have been conferred on the human being in this world (...) have been conferred with one end in mind: to help draw him close to God and experience the only real and lasting felicity possible” (Al Ghazali *in* A. Kahlil, 2016).

Through these religious texts, gratitude appears as a response to an intentional benefit. The ultimate gift is a communion with God, and this is the benefit behind all experiences of the human condition, including the abilities to sin and be ungrateful. The intentional agent behind this benefit is God. All benefits received from others fall under the grace of God, and the practice of gratitude shows our submission to his will. Gratitude to others is modelled on the gratitude towards

God. Intention, then, is crucial. It is what makes everything a gift. God *intends* to benefit us, even when we don't understand His ways. On the one hand, gratitude is a duty, a required behaviour of giving thanks and showing appreciation to the creator and his good will. On the other, it is a feeling that's not absolutely necessary for the act of thanksgiving, but one that can help us experience the ultimate gift; which is why God has commanded that we give thanks. In general terms, this is similar to Seneca's account of duties of gratitude, this time reflected on a relationship with the divine and not just with other human beings. And while mystic traditions present the feelings of thankfulness as natural responses to the recognition of blessings, in more traditional religious accounts of gratitude, emotion and conduct, remains a matter of obligation.

If one can embrace everything in life as a gift, is it necessarily by assigning a divine will to it all? Perhaps it is possible for an individual to adopt the view that something "is a blessing in disguise" without necessarily believing that this is the will of God. This thankfulness would manifest itself as a broader feeling that is not focused on a particular intentional agent. This will be discussed further in later chapters that argue for a transpersonal modality of gratitude.

### *2.1.3. A condition of sociability*

From Cicero and Seneca to the philosophers of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, accounts of gratitude were centred on specific themes and conditions both in religion and philosophy: the dyadic exchange between benefactor and beneficiary, the importance of intention, and the will and appropriate ways to make a return. As E. Harpham observes, thought had made little progress in the analysis of gratitude since Seneca's times (Harpham, 2004).

In early modern Europe, the rise of Nation-States and the transformations within the Church, as well as the new definitions of sovereignty and rule prompted philosophers and theologians to rethink the meaning and scope of duties and social obligations. In this very politicised atmosphere, interest in gratitude as a virtue or duty started to fade, and questions pertaining to the development of viable social systems and contracts took a focal place in philosophical debates.

In social contract theories, gratitude is one of the ingredients that keep members of society on a path of peace and harmony. It is not a virtue but rather a social rule, or, as Hobbes conceptualised it, a Law of Nature.

Hobbes devised a theory of laws of nature, which are precepts, or general rules "found out by reason, by which a man is forbidden to do, that, which is destructive of his life, or taketh away the means of preserving the same; and to omit, that, by which he thinketh it may be best preserved"(Hobbes, 1996, XIV:3, p.86). The fourth of these laws of nature is gratitude. To understand Hobbes' perspective on benefit and gratitude, it is important to keep in mind that he believes that it is a natural state of man that his own desires and instincts matter to him more than anything else (Leithart, 2014). In this state, self-preservation is a powerful instinct, from which Hobbes derives a natural law or the right of self-defence. Without laws of nature governing this right, the constant state of war - all against all - would be dominant and there would be no security or safety for anyone. Thus "general rules of reason" dictate that each person should strive for peace. This is the first law of nature, from which the second law, a law of contracting for peace, is derived: that every man be willing to give up his right to all things as long as everyone else is willing to do so as well; and to allow himself as much liberty as he would allow others. There follows a third law of nature, Justice, which for

Hobbes means that "men perform their Covenants made". Justice requires that men respect the terms of the social contract in which they have agreed, for the sake of peace, to renounce their right to all things (Hobbes, 1996).

It is in this line of thought that Hobbes discusses gratitude, the fourth law of nature. According to him, gratitude is one of the laws that help maintain peace. His reasoning is based on the idea that no gift is completely disinterested. "When the transferring of Right, is not mutual; but one of the parties transfers, in hope to gain thereby friendship, or service from another, or from his friends; or in hope to gain the reputation of charity, or magnanimity; or to deliver his mind from the pain of compassion; or in hope of reward in heaven; this is not contract, but Gift, Free-Gift, Grace: which words signify one and the same thing" (Hobbes, 1996, XIV:12, p.89) Sometimes a transfer of Right happens outside of the mutual contract, when one person puts himself in a position of giving without having the same from the other. However, Hobbes insists that this Gift is based on self-interest: "Whensoever a man transfers his right or renounces it; it is either in consideration of some right reciprocally transferred to himself; or for some other good he hopes for thereby. For it is a voluntary act: and of the voluntary acts of every man, the object is *some good to himself*" (Hobbes, 1996, XIV:8, p.88). This free gift, even if self-interested, nevertheless creates an "Antecedent Grace" on which gratitude depends. It is a prior free gift to which gratitude is the appropriate response because benevolent behaviour must be encouraged. The fourth law of nature states "that a man which receives benefit from another of mere grace, endeavour that he which gives it, have no reasonable cause to repent him of his good will"(Hobbes, 1996, XV:16, p.101) A recipient of benefit has to make sure that the benefactor does not feel frustrated after such an act of good will.

What follows is that the motivation of the benefactor is already assumed to be primarily self-interest. There might be a secondary intention to benefit the recipient, but the starting point is self-focused. This is somewhat in contrast to what classical philosophy had argued: that the intention of the benefactor must not be rooted in any sort of self-interested expectation, otherwise gratitude is not required and for Seneca it is not even appropriate. Hobbes, on the contrary, suggests that even self-interested acts of beneficence (and they are the only kind) must be met with gratitude, in order to encourage such pro-social behaviour.

Hobbes' account brings out an important question: is a completely altruistic act of benevolence really possible? After all, helping someone else might make me feel good; or it might satisfy my sense of virtuousness or that of doing my duty. Aren't those feelings in some way good *for me*? Indeed, they might be. A discussion of pure altruistic acts is outside of the scope of this research, but as far as gratitude is concerned, what matters is the intention *before* the act of beneficence. If I help a fellow human being *because I* want to feel good, then by the standards of classical accounts of gratitude I'm not owed any thanks. But if I act without any expectations, then even if I end up feeling good and *as long as that wasn't my self-serving goal*, I am due some form of gratitude. From Hobbes' perspective, both acts have to be met by a show of thankfulness and a return, binding and strengthening the existing social contract.

Hobbes' account of gratitude thus focuses on how it regulates relationships, not as a personal disposition to be cultivated, but as a law. Gratitude exists as part of a contract between individuals of a society. According to P. Coleman, this expresses the effort to replace personal obligations of gratitude to benefactors by the impersonal obligations of equal citizens under the law (Coleman, 2011), also

apparent in Rousseau's thoughts on gratitude. Society wouldn't – shouldn't - have to rely on personal virtuous dispositions or fear their absence, because "political obedience was to be ensured by the calculations of reason and the threat of external force" (Coleman, 2011, p.159).

Similarly, Hobbes does not discuss the details of what should be considered an appropriate grateful response. He suggests that making a return and expressing gratitude entails honouring the gift that the benefactor has offered; and a way of doing this is to "pay it forward" instead of going back to the benefactor. As noted above, what really matters in Hobbes' view is that gratitude is not just an interpersonal affair. It is a law of nature that helps promote sociability through benevolence and mutual help. Gratitude in response to benefits binds human beings in peace (Leithart, 2004).

#### *2.1.4. Gratitude: the emotion*

That gratitude has an affective component is a widely shared intuition and empirically observable fact. Hence the matter here is not to discuss whether gratitude is an emotion or not. In fact, conceptualising gratitude as strictly an emotion would be reducing it to one of its elements. Therefore, we will look at different theories of gratitude in philosophy and psychology that have defined the affective component of gratitude as a moral emotion, a sacred emotion, a social emotion and a personality trait, several of those concepts overlapping at times.

##### *2.1.4.1. Morality and Passions*

One of the first in-depth analysis of what we might call the psychology of gratitude can be found in Adam Smith's Theory of Moral Sentiments (Smith, 2009). Smith's



general argument is for morality being born out of emotions and not just reason. Emotions serve humans like compasses and help them make moral judgments and behavioural choices. In this line of thought, he understands gratitude as a basic social emotion, promoting a society founded on good will. “The sentiment which most immediately and directly prompts us to reward, is gratitude” states Smith (Smith, 2009, p.82) and concludes that “To us, therefore, that action must appear to deserve reward, which appears to be the proper and approved object of gratitude” (id.). In other words, the social emotion that is gratitude points us in the direction of rewardable actions, of what is morally good for the individual and the society. This allows Smith to discuss proper and improper responses of gratitude. His discussion, as his theory of moral judgment, relies on the notion of sympathy, not in the Humean sense of feeling what the other person is actually experiencing, but rather our inborn ability to imagine ourselves in someone else’s situation with the emotions that we conceive of in similar circumstances – which now we commonly refer to as empathy.

According to Smith, sympathising in this way with someone’s feelings is the same as approving of them: “To approve of the passions of another, therefore, as suitable to their objects, is the same thing as to observe that we entirely sympathise with them” (Smith, 2009). However, this is only one step in moral judgment. Smith explains that each individual has also a natural desire for others to feel what they are feeling, and for this purpose each person is willing to (and does) moderate their passions in order to make them more accessible to others. This is mutual sympathy and it acts as a powerful socialising force. Finally, moral approval is bestowed upon a feeling when we sympathise with it the way we think an impartial spectator would. When we witness someone receiving a benefit from another person, we imagine the joy and thankfulness he must be feeling – as we

think an impartial spectator would – and we view the benefactor as the beneficiary must be seeing him: as a good person who intended a benefit on a fellow human being. Through sympathy, the feeling of gratitude receives the moral approval of being the appropriate response to such beneficence. If we cannot sympathise with the feelings of thankfulness – for any reason, for example the benefactor acting out of pure self-interest - the way we imagine every impartial spectator would, then gratitude will be judged as an inappropriate reaction.

Smith offered a pioneering analysis of gratitude as an emotion that is reinforced and socialised through interactions with others and according to prevalent cultural norms. His account goes beyond the concept of the duty of gratitude and does justice to the complexity of the emotion and its expressions. By describing gratitude as a basic social emotion, Smith brings out its importance as a complementary factor to self-interest. Indeed, social exchanges based solely on interest are not enough to create harmonious social bonds between its members. A similar argument by Georg Simmel suggests that legal and social contracts and structures are not enough to regulate all forms of exchanges within a society, including those that create obligations of reciprocity. Gratitude prompts us to repay favours and to do well by our benefactors; it is the reminder of obligations of reciprocity and in that sense “the moral memory of mankind” (Simmel, 1964).

#### *2.1.4.2. A moral affect*

More contemporary accounts in psychology try to conceptualise gratitude as a moral affect, putting it in the same category as guilt, shame, empathy and sympathy. In this perspective, gratitude is characteristically linked to morality because it responds – and gives rise to – behaviour and emotions that are always

concerned with others, even when by “other” we mean introjected and imagined spectators. In other words, gratitude as an emotion has an essentially moral connotation because it expresses our recognition and approval of another’s kind intentions towards us. It also prompts us to make a return, thus reinforcing the benefactor’s behaviour, making sure that the cycle of giving and receiving is not broken. McCullough and Emmons suggest that gratitude acts as a moral barometer, sensitive to a certain type of personal interaction, namely a benefactor’s concern with the beneficiary’s well-being (McCullough *et al.*, 2001).

Does this make gratitude a moral emotion? It has been argued that moral emotions have two main characteristics. First, they are prompted by “disinterested elicitors” (events that do not directly affect the self); and secondly, they generate a prosocial action tendency (Haidt, 2003). Considering that gratitude is triggered by the perception that another person has benefited us, and that it creates a wish to repay the favour, it can be argued that it is an “other-oriented” moral emotion.

This sketch of gratitude as a moral emotion illustrates its functions and what triggers it but does not tell us much about its moral nature. Is there any moral dimension involved in the feeling of gratitude? Just because gratitude functions in the moral domain does not necessarily make it a moral emotion. It is definitely a social emotion because it exists within a relational context. Can we say the same about morality? Is the rise and experience of gratitude conditioned by our [imagined or real] conformity to moral norms, our understanding of right and wrong, thus making it a moral emotion? This is not always obvious. If we follow psychoanalytical accounts of gratitude, for instance, we will see that the ability to feel gratitude is born out of an introjection of good objects by the infant (Hiles,

2012); in other words, the identification with a gratifying agent gives us the basic ability to be a gratifying agent in return. There is no morality involved here as an infant cannot judge intentions nor has a clear concept of the “other”. Further psychological investigation suggests that children start to understand intention only around the age of two (Wellman and Phillips, 2001) and even then, gratitude slowly develops over the course of childhood and adolescence. Research into the development of gratitude shows that until the age of formal thought (as theorised by Piaget), children tend to practice “concrete gratitude” which is “repayment with a self-centred nature” (Freitas, Pieta and Tudge, 2011). They understand that a benefit requires a return, but they make returns based on what has value for them, and not necessarily for the benefactor. For example, they would give their benefactor their favourite toy car to thank them for a favour, thus showing their awareness that a return must hold some value; but basing their judgment on what matters to *them*. This gradually shifts with experience and maturity until adolescence where ‘finalistic gratitude’ becomes the most frequent form: an expression of thankfulness that includes the feelings and wishes of the benefactor (id.). This shows that gratitude is not necessarily always linked to what is morally right or wrong, although it will always follow prosocial norms. Thus, more discussion is needed to define its role in morality and whether it has any inherent moral value.

Gratitude is not moral in its essence but certainly social since the emotion is clearly born in inter-individual contexts. The moral dimension of gratitude is relevant through its regulatory function of exchanges that aren't simply trades of services and commodities. According to R. L. Trivers' theory of reciprocal altruism, we can find the basis of gratitude in the evolutionary need for an emotion that would “regulate human response to altruistic acts” (Trivers, 1971, p.49). Early

humans had to learn to evaluate such acts and their cost/benefit ratio, in order to decide whether, and how much, to reciprocate. Gratitude, an emotion sensitive to this ratio, evolved to determine the necessity and the degree of a return to be made. In other words, it identifies appropriate and required responses to beneficence.

Being sensitive to the cost/benefit ratio means that gratitude increases and decreases according to the cost of the gift to the benefactor as well as the value of the benefit to the receiver. Seneca offers a similar thought when he argues that a poor man sharing his pennies with another human being deserves more gratitude than a wealthy person who gives away what he does not need anymore. But while Seneca is concerned mostly with obligations of gratitude, the theory of social evolution puts the emphasis on the social nature of gratitude and its moral functions.

An intriguing distinction between the moral and social aspects of gratitude is made by R. Weiss in her paper "The moral and social dimensions of gratitude" (Weiss, 1985). Weiss suggests that all expressions of gratitude are requirements of social norms, and the only moral requirement is to *feel* gratitude when a free gift is received. Her argument follows the reasoning that a) gratitude is distinct from justice because it is based on a free gift which justice does not accommodate and b) a benefactor bestows a gift freely, without any expectations, hence "we" (third parties, society) cannot impose requirements of return on the beneficiary. "If gratitude, unlike justice, requires feeling, yet gratitude, unlike justice, can require no return, then gratitude can only require feeling" posits Weiss (Weiss, 1985, p.494). These feelings cannot be expected or owed; they are simply the proper response of the moral agent to the free gift. And since feelings

can hardly be requirements, a duty of gratitude is that of “cultivating” a grateful attitude, which will allow us to feel appreciative under the proper circumstances. The absence of a grateful response in terms of acts and words is only the transgression of social norms, whereas not feeling grateful is a “more serious, moral failure”.

But there are a couple of problems with this analysis. The first is the assumption that feelings can be requirements. The author argues that psychologists have managed to teach many how to manage certain emotions like anger and envy. But there is a difference between controlling a feeling that has already arisen and the necessity to feel a certain way as and when required. Learning to calm down in certain circumstances when the feeling is already there is not the same as getting angry on command when there is no trigger – from within or outside - for the emotion. How can one feel grateful when one just is not feeling it? This is a paradox in itself. To resolve this, Weiss suggests that we ought to cultivate a certain grateful attitude. But although this settles the issue of certain feelings being requirements, there is still the matter of defining the cultivation of such an attitude.

Indeed, we are not told what it means that a “duty of gratitude is to cultivate the grateful attitude under the appropriate circumstances” (Weiss, 1985, p.494). Are we to spend 5 minutes a day trying to develop a grateful disposition, thinking about the good things we have in life? Should we be teaching our children how to feel grateful? Or are we just required to try and feel grateful when we receive a gift? Weiss proposes that “morally (...) the challenge is to feel grateful when gratitude is called for, even when one is not so disposed naturally” and “morality requires that they try to feel appreciative even when they are not naturally so

inclined” (Weiss, 1985, p.498). Introducing the element of natural disposition only complicates matters further. Not to forget that feelings of gratitude, although a requirement, can’t be owed or expected. They are more of a “necessary ingredient in the moral personality”. Putting it all together, it would seem that Weiss is suggesting the following: *The only moral requirement that comes with gratitude is to feel thankful when we receive a gift. If we are naturally inclined to the feeling and when this feeling arises within us under the proper circumstances, we will have satisfied the moral requirement of gratitude. If not, we ought to try to feel appreciative, to cultivate a grateful attitude, otherwise we will have registered a moral failure. People should know to feel grateful.*

What is a natural disposition of gratitude? There is little to no evidence to suggest that we are born with a compass of gratefulness. Human babies are born with a great capacity to develop a belief system, but the content and values of this system are the result of socialisation and life experiences. Perhaps Weiss means to talk about people who have learned to be appreciative earlier on in life and it has become like a second nature to them. Either way, whereas the absence of grateful feelings might, in some situations, denote a flaw of moral character, it is better to treat dispositions and feelings separately, and then perhaps argue that it is morally preferable to have a grateful attitude.

Perhaps Weiss is trying to echo Kant’s view that “there can be no duty to have moral feeling or to acquire it; instead every man (as a moral being) has it in him originally. Obligation with regard to moral feeling can be only to cultivate it and to strengthen it through wonder at its inscrutable source (...)” (Kant, 1996, p.160). But even then, it is a matter of debate whether we can draw such a clear demarcation line, as Weiss does, between the moral and social dimensions of

gratitude, to assert that if one receives a gift and feels grateful, one will have fulfilled all obligations of gratitude even if one does not even say a thank you to the benefactor. All expressions of gratitude are put in a bundle of social know-how and intricacies of proper responses. But even before the identification of an appropriate response, there is the matter of *there being a response* at all. That we ought to express gratitude should not be confused with how we ought to express it. The expression of gratitude is not just a socially desirable encouragement of generosity and benevolence. It is also the expression of a recognition, an acknowledgement of a good intention. Showing gratitude is to take up the opportunity “to unite the virtue of gratitude with love of man, to combine the *cordiality* of a benevolent disposition with *sensitivity* to benevolence (...) and so to cultivate one’s love of man” (Kant, 1996, p.204). In other words, it is in line with my moral being to express my thankfulness, as I should, and that is how an obligation of gratitude is discharged. Besides, how can man live as a moral being if moral feelings did not require words or actions as their continuation? Suppose I accidentally hurt someone. Wouldn’t there be a moral requirement to express my guilt in some way – say I’m sorry - or make amends? It would seem strange to say that as long as I feel guilty about it, and even if I take no action to make amends, I am morally irreproachable.

Gratitude, then, can be conceptualised as a social emotion – born in relational contexts – that creates moral obligations for the beneficiary. The feeling of gratefulness cannot be a requirement, but gratitude can be formulated as an attitude to be consciously cultivated.

The variety and diversity of the accounts on gratitude are a testimony to the complexity of the phenomenon and the attempts to conceptualise it. As a social



emotion, gratitude serves the moral function of regulating and encouraging beneficence and returns in the domains of both subjective and objective experiences. This prompts certain behaviours of thankfulness, of which many, , fall under requirements of duties towards others and God.

## **2.2. Main themes in current philosophical and psychological accounts of gratitude**

“Debt of gratitude” is a commonly encountered expression in both philosophical and psychological accounts. It is meant to convey the idea that there is such a thing as the obligation to make a return to a benefactor. It is our duty to show thankfulness whether through words or actions, or both.

### *2.2.1. Obligation and duty*

We come back to the question of whether or not gratitude can be a duty. The observation of our social life and interactions reveals that there is indeed an aspect of obligation that comes with gratitude. We do feel obliged towards someone who benefits us, and furthermore, we seem to be expected to show some form of gratitude. Ingratitude has been vilified through the history of literature as a vice and undesirable trait, confirming this intuition. But what is a duty of gratitude? Does it apply to both its behavioural and emotional aspects?

To discuss this question, we will adopt the distinction suggested by C. Card between obligation and duty: obligation is a bond whereas a duty is a kind of responsibility which fulfils an obligation when discharged. “Duties are owed; obligations are not owed but are the bases of duties” (Card, 1988, p.121). The discussion that follows suggests that gratitude can be an obligation – a bond –

but an informal one, as opposed to contractual obligations (which include social ones such as etiquette). “Living up” to this obligation – by making appropriate returns – strengthens the relationship within which the exchange of the gift takes place (Card, 1988.). We can then reformulate our question: is there an obligation of gratitude that is the basis of duties of gratitude? And would this question be pertinent to both its emotional and behavioural aspects?

To start with the latter, it is not clear whether Card is talking about feelings of gratitude or the behaviour, or perhaps both at the same time. Obligation is a sense that “I owe” (someone, something, for some reason). But this sense of “I owe” can’t be owed in the case of gratitude. I might feel obliged towards my benefactor, but I don’t owe (him) to feel obliged. This puts the informal obligation, acting as a bond, close to the social emotional sphere whereas the duties it produces, that can be owed, would link to grateful expressions and moral requirements.

We can now investigate whether it is possible to identify this sense of obligation and what gives birth to it. The obvious answer would be the benefit. When another person bestows some good upon us, we feel thankful for it and wish to return the pleasure. But why is there a sense of obligation too? P. Camenisch suggests that the obligation arises when the beneficiary *accepts* the gift. This is based on the idea put forward by Mauss that a gift, no matter how objective, represents its donor and hence carries “something of the giver’s spirit” in it (Mauss, 2002). Any benefit “has a continuing identification with the donor’s will or intention in giving it and is not totally at the recipient’s disposal as wages would be” (Camenisch, 1981, p.2). This reasoning leads to two statements: first, that by accepting a benefit or a gift, a beneficiary consents to the moral relation with the donor.

Second, that the beneficiary has a duty of “grateful use” of the gift. This is how the benefactor’s and receiver’s intentions meet; giver and receiver enter into a relationship where both parties recognise “the goodness of what is happening between them (...), the goodness of this sort of relation among persons, the goodness of the different roles each now plays in the relation” (Camenisch, 1981, p.8). Recognising this goodness and that they have both consented to endorse the requirements of such an exchange create the moral grounding of the obligations of gratitude. This obligation translates into duties of grateful conduct.

According to Camenisch’s account, the use of the gift is part of the required grateful response. If one wastes the benefit, this would qualify as ingratitude. But what interests us here at this point is the idea that the beneficiary becomes responsible for a gift that is beyond an objective benefit and carries the idea of benevolence itself. This can be compared to what C. Card calls a “metaphor of trust” when it comes to gratitude. She suggests that a gift or benefit is like something entrusted unto the beneficiary, and the metaphor of trust can capture the obligation involved better than that of a debt of gratitude (Card, 1988). The beneficiary is deemed trustworthy to receive a gift, to use it in a grateful way and to express her gratitude, in appropriate ways.

In “Obligations of Gratitude and Correlative Rights”, T. Manela makes the case for a different perspective (Manela, 2015). He argues that there are strict obligations of gratitude because we would expect a conscientious agent to give priority to morally compelling reasons in his inner deliberations. Thus, a grateful agent would be held to strict obligations of gratitude, namely: not to refuse a benefactor’s request for help and to abstain from harming the benefactor even if otherwise it would have been permissible. He gives the example of a

businessman who, while planning to open a new shop, realises that this would put out of business someone who had saved his life years ago. Manela argues that in this situation, we would expect a change in the deliberations of the businessman and that we would find it wrong if he nevertheless went ahead and opened his new shop. Another example is that of someone who babysits for a friend, and one day needs said friend to reciprocate the favour by looking after his children. In this instance too, we would find it wrong for the beneficiary to refuse without good reason (Manela, 2015). The argument is that in those two cases, there are morally compelling reasons that create strict obligations of gratitude, and a duty to fulfil such obligations. While it is true that in such circumstances, we would expect beneficiaries to show their gratitude by not harming the benefactor or by helping them, it does not necessarily follow that we can speak of strict obligations of gratitude. We could still find the beneficiary's conduct morally amiss. Their lack of gratitude could say something about their moral character. But it is not clear why this should be grounds for a binding obligation towards the benefactor the way promise keeping is (Manela, 2015). Indeed, not harming a benefactor and responding to their request for help are different from other opportunities of grateful expression only in that they bring into focus an element of indebtedness that is part of inner deliberations of gratitude. Emphasising the indebtedness aspect of gratitude runs the risk of reducing it to a duty of reciprocity, rather than a morally grounded goodwill response to a benevolent intention. Therefore, a metaphor of trust would be more suitable to relations of gratitude because it distances it from indebtedness, while keeping the essential sense of obligation that accompanies it. This would make sense in terms of religious gratitude as well since it is built on an absolute trust in God.

And in those cases when gratitude has no focus, the metaphor allows an argument for an equation of dependence for transpersonal gratitude.

An interesting argument about debts of gratitude comes from S. Smilansky, who suggests that we should be thankful to others for not harming us (Smilansky, 1997). He does not insist that this is a duty, but rather an obligation to express thankfulness in the sense Card defines it. Smilansky challenges “the basic tendency of common-sense morality and common-sense moral philosophising to down-play (...) the gratitude we owe to others for not harming us” (Smilansky, 1997, p.586.). Based on Sidgwick’s claim that our gain, i.e. personal benefit, is one of the two main considerations in assessments of owed gratitude (Sidgwick, 1981), Smilansky concludes that we owe gratitude to other people because they do not harm us, which is our gain. He makes his case by arguing that there are three kinds of non-maleficence that we ought to be grateful for: 1/ when people would have to expend effort/time/money to avoid harming others; 2/ when people might profit from harming another, but they resist the temptation and 3/ when people refrain from harming others when they have the opportunity to do so but not reason to do it. Thus, we should not take this for granted, but rather consider such cases of non-maleficence as actual benevolence. Smilansky argues that this would enhance our appreciation of social interdependence, but it is not clear what an appropriate grateful response might be in this case. However, this links to some expressions of transpersonal gratitude, as we argue in later chapters.

### *2.2.2. Intention*

Many modern psychologists and philosophers have taken up Seneca’s argument that intention is a crucial factor in exchanges of gift and thankfulness. A

benefactor must intend to bestow a benefit on the recipient, otherwise no thankfulness is owed. Accidentally or unknowingly saving someone's life does not entitle anyone to gratitude. This view is well represented in Simmons' take on gratitude and obligations (Simmons 1979), as well as R. Roberts' discussion of the link between thankfulness and well-being (Roberts, 2004). While Simmons argues about situations when gratitude is *owed*, Roberts focuses on circumstances where gratitude is actually *felt*. Is intention important in both cases, if at all?

Psychological research suggests that there is a positive correlation between the perceived intention of the benefactor and the gratitude felt by the beneficiary. People tend to feel more grateful when they believe that the benefactor acts intentionally rather than accidentally (Tsang and McCullough, 2004). In this context, the difference between intentional and accidental is the effort that a benefactor makes to bestow a benefit, in other words the cost of a beneficent act. This seems to match Trivers' view, mentioned earlier, that gratitude has evolved as an emotion sensitive to the cost/benefit ratio. It makes sense, then, that the higher the cost, the more intense the feelings of reciprocity and thankfulness. Perhaps this is why Gulliford, Morgan and Kristjánsson call intention "nothing more than an intensity variable" (Gulliford, Morgan and Kristjánsson, 2013, p.303), one that enhances gratitude. However, there is more to intention than that, at least in this case, because it is an intention perceived as a *good* one, something that current discussions don't seem to take into enough consideration.

Perceiving someone as having good intentions towards us is not limited to making an assessment of the effort they are willing to put into benefiting us. It is also a recognition or realisation that they are making a *moral choice* by deciding to bestow upon us a gift. They are choosing to be an agent of goodness and this

choice is expressed by how they take part in the experience of a specific other, namely by benevolence. This realisation – of being chosen, favoured – is what triggers the rise of feelings of gratitude (the intention to benefit must be focused on the beneficiary), whereas the intensity of the emotion might be conditioned by the cost of the gift to the benefactor. Otherwise, if feelings of thankfulness only arose to evaluate our reciprocal response, we would be in the sphere of exchanging equal services, without including the moral element that gratitude brings in. As Berger states “Gratitude (...) does not consist of the requital of benefits but in a response to benevolence. It is a response to a grant of benefits (or the attempt to benefit us) which was motivated by a desire to help us” (Berger, 1975, p.299).

Two questions follow from this discussion: Is gratitude only owed when there is an intention to benefit? And is kind intention a necessary condition for gratitude to be considered appropriate?

#### *2.2.2.1. Owing thanks*

An act of benevolence, showing an intention to benefit, produces an obligation of gratitude and its duties. A couple of conditions have to be present for gratitude to be owed, as summarised by McConnell: a/ The benefit must be given willingly, intentionally and not for any self-serving reasons; b/ the beneficiary must accept the benefit of his own free will (or would if certain conditions were created); c/ the benevolent act must involve some effort or sacrifice on the part of the benefactor to provide a significant benefit; d/ the benefit must be intended for the beneficiary (McConnell, 1993). These conditions clearly outline the situations where a grateful response is owed to the benefactor. Since grateful feelings cannot be requirements, even though they have “moral import in spite of the fact that they

cannot be produced on demand” (McConnell, 1993), only duties of showing gratitude and making a return are owed to the benefactor.

McConnell insists that benefaction cannot have self-serving motives (id.). This is a reasonable argument because self-serving reasons on the part of the benefactor would transform the relation into an exchange of commodities rather than benevolence. Therefore, thankfulness expressed to benefactors who openly admit self-serving reasons is part of social etiquette, and not genuine gratitude.

Similarly, unintentional benefits do not lead to duties of gratitude. The absence of intention turns the benefit into a simple object, devoid of the “given” value (Camenisch, 1981) and the benevolent purpose, without which we cannot speak of obligations of gratitude. Thankful feelings, on the other hand, do not follow the rules of requirement. They still can, and sometimes do arise even when a benefit is conferred accidentally, or when the benefactor is acting out of self-interest or out of duty (or for any other “disqualifying reason”). For example, a doctor who successfully undertakes a complicated surgery will be said to be performing his duty and therefore not owed any gratitude. But it is very likely that the patient whose life he saves will feel thankful for it and express these feelings at the very least by saying “thank you”. The difference is that these feelings do not bind the doctor and patient in a relationship of obligations of gratitude since the benefit was bestowed out of a sense of duty or conscientiousness at work. The patient might want to benefit the doctor in some way, but he does not owe him to do so.

To take a different example, let’s say a homeless person wakes up one morning to find a package next to him. In the package, there is a pair of shoes, which he desperately needed. There is a writing on the package saying “enjoy”, but there is no name or signature. In this case we have a gift, a beneficiary and an



anonymous benefactor. Is it not plausible that the homeless man will feel grateful *towards this unknown donor and will want to express his gratitude if he ever has the chance to do so?* Is it not also (maybe remotely but still) possible that this anonymous donor just left the shoes next to the homeless man because he wanted to get rid of them after a fight with a friend for whom the shoes were originally intended? The intention of the anonymous benefactor cannot really be clarified. The feelings of gratitude of the homeless man are based on an *attribution* of kind intention, based on a gift that has value for him. In other words, our subjective experience of thankfulness is not always a straightforward result of circumstances and conditions. At times, what we *think* is happening is enough to give rise to certain emotions. We might be wrong, objectively speaking. Nevertheless, as long as there is a perception of a good intention, gratitude arises in response and seeks expression.

We must then ask what makes an appropriate grateful response.

### *2.2.3. Appropriateness*

#### *2.2.3.1. Making a return*

Since Seneca's time, the appropriate response of gratitude has been defined in relation to the benefactor and his benevolent act. Expressions of gratitude should first and foremost show a recognition and appreciation of this benevolence, as well as a genuine wish to make a return. Additionally, this return can't be made too quickly or too scrupulously because an overzealous discharge of a duty of gratitude denotes ingratitude. It refuses the beneficiary the pleasure of his good action. Part of the moral relation between benefactor and beneficiary is "the recipient's willingness to live graciously with an imbalance which favour him or

her until an appropriate opportunity to repay arises” (Camenisch, 1981, p.12). This willingness is important because it carries the recognition of the benevolence and the value it has for the beneficiary. A hasty return of gratitude is nothing more than a repayment and falls short of the moral requirements associated with thankfulness. An appropriate “discharge behaviour” must be responsive to the needs and desires of the benefactor (McConnell, 1993).

Are shows of grateful attitudes enough to fulfil moral requirements of a return or does one have to *feel* grateful as well in order to discharge one’s obligations appropriately? There is a discomfort in the literature on this topic. On the one hand, it is widely accepted that feelings cannot be requirements. But on the other, an expression of thankfulness without genuine feelings would seem to be missing the point. “It seems to make a moral difference whether one carries out one’s debt of gratitude willingly or begrudgingly” states McConnell (McConnell, 1993, p.54). And Berger recommends that one shouldn’t accept a gift if one is not feeling grateful (Berger, 1984). How we feel while we express gratitude, then, matters in terms of appropriateness as well. If one is saying “thank you” but feeling resentment towards one’s benefactor, it will seem to us that there is a moral failing in the exchange. Adam Smith’s impartial spectator can hardly sympathise with this moral shortcoming and hence the gratitude expressed will be deemed inappropriate.

Going one step further, Berger identifies a “pathology” of gratitude, which consists in viewing “every act under the sun which benefits someone else” as requiring gratitude (Berger, 1975, p.304). His concern is that such pressure will either make it impossible for gratitude to blossom or will reduce it to a mere practice of etiquette and rituals. But if “every act under the sun which benefits someone” is

indeed (perceived as) coming from a good intention, then each and every one of those acts will produce obligations and duties of gratitude. And, all things being equal, it is an impossible task to separate the benefits which can do without a requirement of gratitude from those that can't. Besides, finding every benefit worthy of gratitude might be an indication of cultivating a grateful attitude (as recommended by Weiss, 1985) or that of a religious person following St Paul's instructions to give thanks to God for everything.

#### *2.2.3.2. Feeling grateful*

If we return to the case of the homeless man, we can say that even if he does not know who his benefactor is, he still perceives him as someone with the intention to benefit. His feelings of gratitude are then appropriate because they recognise the benevolence and respond to it. But what if the benefit he received was something completely different? Let's say he was sitting in a corner on a cold, grey day, thinking how nice a bit of sunshine would be. And at that moment, the wind blows moving the clouds, and a ray of sunshine falls exactly on the corner where he is sitting, warming his bones. Feeling appreciative of this rare occurrence, he feels somehow favoured – although not by anything or anyone in particular – and thankful for that. Perhaps he then feels motivated to make a return and decides to share his food with his friend. It is difficult to explain this thankful conduct in a traditional sense of gratitude and yet it hardly seems right to consider them inappropriate. There is recognition of a benefit, of being somehow favoured and the wish to make a return as well as its expression. Similarly, when someone benefits us accidentally, we don't owe them any gratitude, but feelings of thankfulness might nevertheless arise. We cannot

account for these feelings of thankfulness in terms of our current concepts of gratitude, nor address their moral bearing.

Perhaps Berger is right in saying that “traditional ways of talking about morality have so far led to an insufficient picture of what it is to have a morality” (Berger, 1975, p.306) and maybe widening our horizon of understanding gratitude will allow us to incorporate new concepts into the picture.

#### *2.2.3.3. The notion of undeserved merit*

One notion that is mentioned in almost all investigations of gratitude nowadays is that of "undeserved benefit". This is the idea that gratitude typically arises in situations where the recipient has not done anything to deserve a gift or feels that he has not deserved it. Put in a nutshell, as R. Emmons states, “Gratitude is the positive recognition of benefits received (...) At the cornerstone of gratitude is the notion of undeserved merit” (Emmons, 2004, p.5). The grateful person recognises that he or she did nothing to deserve the gift or benefit; it was freely bestowed (id.). As we will see again in later chapters, this is currently a widely accepted premise in philosophical and psychological writings on gratitude. However, the philosophers of antiquity had a different view. Seneca describes man as the noblest creature that Nature has created and even though he does note that the ungrateful still receives benefits from the gods, there is no mention of these benefits being undeserved. On the contrary, Seneca tries to convince his readers to embrace their worthiness of God’s unlimited generosity. Judaism, however, and later on Christianity, transformed man’s relationship to God into a sinner-forgiver relationship. The origin of man on earth was said to be rooted in sin, and sinners don’t deserve any benefits. It is only because of God’s forgiving nature and his generosity that man can hope for some goodness in his life. This

shift in perspective changes not God's nature – He is still good and magnanimous-, but man's essence from a noble creature to an undeserving sinner. For centuries, this relationship between a benevolent God and undeserving humans was the example on which all exchanges of beneficence and thankfulness were modelled on. Scholarly writings and teachings reflected this Judeo-Christian perspective and it is possible that the link between gratitude and undeservedness gradually became an integral part of man's perspective on benefits and gifts.

It seems important, then, to make a distinction between undeserved and unearned, although both terms are used interchangeably by most authors when it comes to defining a benefit that requires or gives rise to gratitude. Unearned simply means something that one hasn't worked towards, has not made any effort to receive. Undeserved, on the other hand, carries a judgment of worth, of being unworthy of a benefit received. It is not clear that the notion of worthiness has a place in the discussion of the appropriateness of gratitude. One can receive an unearned benefit and still feel worthy of it. This does not necessarily make his gratitude inappropriate. It might be argued that someone who feel unworthy of the benefit would have more intense feelings of gratitude, but that does not make the notion of undeservedness the foundation of gratitude. I would thus reformulate Emmons' statement to say that "at the cornerstone of gratitude is the notion of *unearned benefit*". That is to say that what matters is that the gift was bestowed without the recipient having asked for it or worked towards it in some way. Then gratitude can be both required and appropriate. Gratitude is closely linked to the notion of gift, and a gift, whether deserved or not, is something that one does not earn, does not have to work towards. On the other hand, when one works towards a benefit and earns it, then we can speak of deserved reward. If I

am a hard-working student but have no views of receiving help, and a wealthy person decides, out of kindness, to offer me a scholarship, then I have not earned it since it was not my aim to gain this particular scholarship. In this case, I have received a well-deserved gift for which I owe gratitude. On the other hand, if I work hard with the view of being chosen for a scholarship offered by a wealthy benefactor and I get selected, this is not a gift but a deserved reward. According to our current concepts of gratitude, I do not owe it since I did not receive a gift.

The question is how to account for feelings of gratitude that I might nevertheless experience. If the notion of “unearned benefit” is the cornerstone of gratitude, then it would seem that my gratitude is inappropriate. But this would be a strange conclusion. One way of addressing this issue would be to consider that my gratitude is, in fact, non-directed. It is better formulated as “gratitude for the opportunity” or even “gratitude that such benefactors exist”. This makes more sense because 1/ I earned the scholarship, it was not given to me as a gift, and 2/ the wealthy donor’s intention was not concerned with me specifically. This kind of gratitude cannot be accounted for by current concepts of triadic gratitude.

We can also consider a slightly different scenario. If I have a job that fulfils me and I feel thankful for having the job I have, is my gratitude inappropriate? It could be argued that it is appreciation, not gratitude that I’m feeling. But let’s say that this appreciative recognition is accompanied by a clear sense of having received a benefit and a wish to somehow make a return, to benefit someone else the way I have been blessed. This would surely register as gratitude, with the recognition of something good that has come to me in my life and the desire to benefit in turn. But this gratitude cannot be accounted for by current concepts either. Even if I perceive my job as a blessing, I have worked for it. It hasn’t come into my life

“through no merit of my own” (Emmons, 2004) because I spent years studying and gathering experience. In other words, I earned it and deserved it. But surely, I cannot be said to be grateful to myself. We might then reach the conclusion that my gratitude for having a job I love is inappropriate. But that does not seem a fitting judgment either.

It is apparent that there are cases of gratitude that our current concepts of gratitude do not account for in a satisfactory way. This research proposes the conceptualisation of a distinct modality of gratitude, that explains gratitude for something in the absence of a benefactor without necessarily raising issues of inappropriateness of the emotion. The next chapter outlines the main arguments that support the conceptualisation of this modality as transpersonal gratitude.

## Chapter Three

### Transpersonal gratitude

In accounting for cases in which we speak of gratitude, philosophers have mostly focused on the use of the term as referring to a triadic relation between benefactor, gift and beneficiary. Gratitude is thankfulness to a benefactor for a benefit. The predominance of this approach is made abundantly clear in the literature review in the previous chapter. Only in recent years, researchers have turned their attention to what McAleer has called propositional gratitude (McAleer, 2012), depicting a dyadic relation between beneficiary and a good state of affairs. Propositional gratitude is thankfulness that something is the case. However, the concept of propositional gratitude is often left out of philosophical analyses of gratitude, as it seems to be identical with the concepts of gladness and appreciation. When I say that I am grateful that it was sunny on my birthday, it seems that I'm merely saying that I'm glad that it was the case.

However, not all expressions of dyadic gratitude are cases of misworded appreciation. There are cases where gratitude for some benefit, in the absence of an intentional benefactor, is a proper expression of thankfulness. The concept of transpersonal gratitude refers to such cases.

This chapter outlines the main claims of this research and defines the terms used to refer to different kinds of gratitude. It proceeds as follows:

- 3.1. Definition of terms referring to gratitude.
- 3.2. Presentation and discussion of the central argument of this work: that transpersonal gratitude refers to a unique modality of thankfulness.



3.3. Outline of the main claims that support this argument, and which are further discussed in subsequent chapters.

### **3.1. Definition of terms referring to different kinds of gratitude**

Throughout this research, the terms triadic and dyadic gratitude are used to refer to three term and two term contexts of gratitude.

*Triadic gratitude* refers to a three terms context, where there is a benefactor, a benefit and a beneficiary. This gratitude is directed, or targeted, in the sense that it is aimed at the benefactor.

*Dyadic gratitude*, on the other hand, refers to a two terms context, where there is no benefactor, only a benefit and a beneficiary. This gratitude is non-directed, or non-targeted, as there is no benefactor to express thankfulness to.

Further, more specific terms are used to refer to certain modes of triadic and dyadic gratitude.

#### *Modes of triadic gratitude*

*Personal gratitude* refers to a human interpersonal context, where there is an intentionally benevolent agent, a benefit intended for the recipient, and finally the thankful beneficiary. Personal gratitude is expressed as “*X is thankful to Y for Z*”. It is directed towards the benefactor.

*Theistic gratitude* refers to thankfulness towards God or any higher power that is attributed intentional benevolent agency. This gratitude is expressed as “*X is thankful to Y for Z*”, where Y represents God or the higher power who is said to have bestowed a benefit upon the recipient. It is directed towards God or a higher power.

### *Modes of dyadic gratitude*

*Propositional gratitude* refers to a non-directed mode of gratitude which is expressed in the form of a proposition: “X is thankful *that* P is the case”.

*Transpersonal gratitude*, which this research argues for, refers to a non-directed mode of gratitude which is expressed in a prepositional form “X is thankful *for* R”.

Propositional and transpersonal modalities of gratitude have in common the absence of an intentional benevolent agent. However, I argue that they refer to two distinct cases of gratitude, as there are important differences in the definition of their objects and scopes. Namely, propositional gratitude does not account for the personal significance of the benefit for the recipient. “I am grateful that heroes exist” (McAleer, 2012) does not account for any significant benefit, but rather expresses a general sense of gratitude and it can be easily replaced by “I am glad that heroes exist”. Admittedly, there is such a general modality of gratitude which can be referred to as propositional. Being grateful that it did not rain on my birthday is a case of propositional gratitude as McAleer suggests (McAleer, 2012). It shares many features with appreciation or gladness. On the other hand, being grateful for a warm sunny day in the middle of winter for my birthday implies that my thankfulness stems not only from an event that I appreciate, but also that I interpret it as a personal benefit with an awareness that it might have been different.

The concept of propositional gratitude does not represent this dyadic mode of gratitude which gives a central place to a personally significant benefit. The research proposes to use the term “transpersonal gratitude” to account for a non-directed mode of gratitude, which is centred around a personally significant

benefit in the absence of a benefactor and argues that it is best expressed in the prepositional form of “being grateful *for*”.

The sections below outline the main claims of this research.

### **3.2. Transpersonal Gratitude: being thankful for something but to no one in particular**

The central claim of this research is that gratitude *for* something, to no one in particular, is a proper modality of gratitude, distinct from the interpersonal kind. Saying “I am grateful for surviving the plane crash where everyone else perished” refers to a unique experience of thankfulness, which is not mere gladness nor interpersonal gratitude. I propose to call this modality *transpersonal gratitude*: a gratitude that goes beyond the interpersonal exchanges between beneficiary and benefactor, human and divine alike.

The main characteristic of this modality of gratitude is the absence of an intentional beneficent agent and thus the “non-directedness” of the grateful response. However, these are not enough to determine the context within which we can speak of transpersonal gratitude. The following features of experience and circumstance must also be present to distinguish this kind of gratitude from appreciation or gladness.

#### *3.2.1. The benefit*

In all cases, there must be a benefit for the person concerned. This is one of the requirements traditionally associated with gratitude, and it is what prompts a recognition of being favoured. Similarly, transpersonal gratitude has a benefit as its object. The nature of the benefit differs from one situation to the other, and according to Hlava and Elfers it is a benefit that is not material or tangible in

essence (Hlava and Elfers, 2016). However, it can also be an unearned material gain or unexpected help from a stranger. In all cases, it must be a personal benefit to the individual. It is not enough that something is the case, as McAleer suggests. The benefit has to bring a good into the individual's life, either directly or by clearly benefiting someone with whom the individual has strong emotional links. This is what elicits a thankful response, as the emotion represents the value of the good received (Lacewing, 2016).

### *3.2.2. The gratuitousness of the benefit*

The benefit must be free and unearned. It has to come to the individual through no effort or merit of their own. In accounts of personal and theistic gratitude, this gratuitousness is usually linked to the kind intention of the benefactor. According to Seneca and Cicero, it is even a moral failure for a benefactor to give a gift with expectations of some return. Modern authors agree with this perspective, arguing that expectations of return engage benefactor and beneficiary into a relationship of exchange of goods, not generosity and gratitude.

With transpersonal gratitude, there is no benefactor and thus the gratuitousness of the gift means that the benefit received is not the result of the individual's effort in any way. There is no issue of expectations from the (non-existing) giver in this scenario.

### *3.2.3. The absence of an intentional agent*

One of the main features of transpersonal gratitude is the absence of an intentional agent. In personal and theistic modalities of gratitude, the source of the benefit is clear for the recipient: it's either another person, or is perceived to

be the highest source, God. We can add to this all personified versions of the universe, the cosmos, superhuman agents/entities and life. Indeed, what matters here is the perception of an agent with the kind intention to bestow a gift. This agent, in turn, becomes the focus of the grateful emotion, “who I’m thankful to”.

In the context of transpersonal gratitude, the benefit, whether great or small, does not stem from another person or entity. It is the recognition of a personally significant benefit that elicits feelings of thankfulness, without ascribing a source to said benefits.

#### *3.2.4. The wish to make a return*

An important component of the experience of gratitude is the wish to make a return. Whether considered an obligation from a moral perspective, or as an emotional aspect of recognising an intentionally personal benefit, this desire usually focuses its expression on the benefactor. In religious traditions, thanks are given to God for the blessings bestowed in one’s life. In a secular context, it’s the other person, the intentional agent, who becomes the focus of such thankfulness.

Therefore, transpersonal gratitude must account for a wish to make a return, a wish that seeks expression. But since making a return implies that there is someone to make a return *to*, it might seem that transpersonal gratitude fails in this aspect.

Robert Solomon (2007) tries to answer this quandary by suggesting that the question “to whom?” is misplaced in the case of what Roberts has called “cosmic gratitude” (Roberts, 2014). Rather, he says, we should focus on “being humble

about one's place in the world" (Solomon, 2007, p.270). In other words, we need to sidestep the matter of making a return in cases of transpersonal gratitude because it just is not applicable. In Solomon's view, such a gratitude has one's life and its blessings as its object and belongs to the spiritual sphere of human experience. This sphere is defined by the search for meaning and purpose for those individuals who don't believe in a personal God. Gratitude for life in this context means "appreciating the bigger picture and having a chance to play a role in it, no matter how small" (Solomon, 2007, p.270).

The link between gratitude and humility is certainly relevant in a discussion about gratitude and virtues. However, focusing on this particular aspect here does not answer the question of the desire to repay in the absence of a benefactor. The "to whom" question might be misplaced, but it does not necessarily follow that there is no wish to make some kind of benefit *in turn*. Personal gratitude is gratitude *to* someone. I propose that transpersonal gratitude refers to an experience of thankfulness that elicits a wish to benefit *in turn*. In saying "I am grateful for this unexpected opportunity", I mean that I recognise a significant and unearned benefit to me personally, and I wish to benefit others in turn. This is in line with the logic of the concept of gratitude, which requires a will to reciprocate; at the same time, it allows for a conceptualisation of thankfulness in the absence of benevolent agency.

To sum up, the central argument of this thesis is that transpersonal gratitude refers to a unique modality of thankfulness, where 1/ a beneficiary recognises a personally significant and 2/ unearned benefit, 3/ where there is no particular benefactor and 4/ which elicits a will to benefit others in turn.

### **3.3. Agency, expression and moral significance**

Based on the concept of transpersonal gratitude, this research makes further claims that address the matters of the agency requirement, the expression of transpersonal gratitude, duties and obligations of gratitude and the moral significance of the transpersonal modality. These claims are outlined here, and each is further developed in subsequent chapters.

#### *3.3.1. The matter of agency*

In the majority of philosophical accounts, gratitude refers to a case where there is an intentional benefactor acting in a certain way for the good of the beneficiary. This agency is also what generates obligations and duties of gratitude (McConnell, 1993).

In this account of transpersonal gratitude, I propose that agency is not a necessary requirement to speak of gratitude. The intention of the benefactor can have a central place in some cases of gratitude, but it is not clear why it should be an indispensable condition. Gratitude does not have to be understood as gratitude *for X to Y*; it can be gratitude *for X*.

In cases of triadic gratitude, the benevolent intention of the benefactor brings into focus the unmerited nature of the gift and its significance to the beneficiary. My argument is that in cases of transpersonal gratitude, other factors continue to play this role.

In terms of the significance of the benefit, I join Lacewing's perspective on the evaluative aspect of gratitude (Lacewing, 2016). Emotions play an evaluative role

in assessing an object of experience in relation to the subject's concerns. When we speak of gratitude, we refer to an experience where the benefit becomes salient by virtue of such an evaluation. Evidently, this is not an aspect unique to transpersonal gratitude; the same could be said about triadic gratitude. But this also highlights the fact that such an evaluation does not necessarily depend on the source of the benefit, or on there being a source at all.

A more challenging aspect of this claim concerns the unmerited nature of the gift. If gratitude is to be considered a response to "unearned benefits" (Emmons, 2004), then in triadic gratitude, it is the kind intention of the benefactor that makes the beneficiary "somehow deserving" of the gift, and therefore grateful to the benefactor for singling her or him out, for benefiting her or him personally. When it comes to transpersonal gratitude, the intentional act of benefiting the subject is absent, and it might seem that there is no cause to speak of gratitude.

However, I argue that an unexpected or unlikely good can elicit the same sense, provided the benefit is personally significant to the individual. When I say "I am grateful for my existence", I mean that I consider existence significantly good for me and I recognise that I have been "somehow favoured" (Walker, 1981) since I might not have existed at all, having no way of earning or deserving such a benefit.

Therefore, while the agency requirement is meaningful in cases of triadic gratitude, this does not entail that the absence of an intentional agent makes it impossible for us to speak of gratitude. Transpersonal gratitude can refer to those cases when one is grateful for something that one considers to be significantly good, recognising that this benefit might not have come into one's experience at all.



### *3.3.2. The expression of transpersonal gratitude*

There is a consensus in existing literature that when one receives a benefit from an intentionally benevolent agent, one's expression of gratitude has to correspond to the needs and desires of the benefactor (McConnell, 1993). Although transpersonal gratitude has no such directedness, the requirement of a commensurate benefit in turn can still be applied to its expression. I propose that an appropriate expression of transpersonal gratitude has to be commensurate to the mental and emotional states that the experience elicits.

As the benefit that is central to the experience of transpersonal gratitude is evaluated in relation to the beneficiary's personal concerns and well-being, so must any expression of such a gratitude focus on the personal concerns and well-being of the recipient. Since there is no benefactor to whom this gratitude is due, there are no further conditions on the expression of transpersonal gratitude. This focus on the needs and well being of others guides the expression of transpersonal gratitude in what psychologists call the "pay it forward moral life" (Hlava and Elfers, 2016).

### *3.3.3. Transpersonal gratitude and duties of gratitude*

Owing gratitude and duties of gratitude refer to cases where the benefit comes from an intentional, benevolent source. When someone benefits me out of kindness, I owe them some form of gratitude. But it is not clear whether I owe them to just show gratitude in some way (making a commensurate return), or if I owe them to feel thankful as well. The current approach in philosophy commonly recognises that while "making a return" can be a duty, emotions, on the other hand, cannot be requirements, and therefore we cannot have a duty to feel

thankful. However, we can have a duty to cultivate an attitude of gratitude which, will, presumably, foster feelings of thankfulness (McConnell, 1993; Card, 1988; Weiss, 1985).

Similarly, when considering whether transpersonal gratitude generates duties or not, we can claim that the emotional response cannot be a requirement. The only requirement that can be placed in terms of feelings is to cultivate an attitude that nurtures them. However, the parallel with personal gratitude ends here. Transpersonal gratitude does not register in interpersonal exchanges and therefore does not generate duties to make a return. It should rather generate duties to benefit *in turn*. But there is a problem with this claim. As Card suggests, duties are responsibilities that once discharged, fulfil an obligation (Card, 1988). This obligation is a bond created in the relationship between benefactor and beneficiary, through the gift-giving and the acceptance of the gift (Camenisch, 1981; Card, 1988). In the absence of an intentional benefactor, we cannot speak of such an exchange nor of a bond between giver and receiver: there is no obligation that serves as a basis to a duty. Therefore, transpersonal gratitude does not generate duties to benefit in turn. In the same line of argument, we can claim that transpersonal gratitude cannot be owed.

I propose that the moral significance of grateful behaviour in the case of transpersonal gratitude is not concerned with the fulfilment of obligations. That kind of “owing” can be a requirement for personal gratitude, which we understand in terms of the principles of social morality. This does not apply to transpersonal gratitude as it does not refer to an interpersonal exchange. Our understanding of the moral significance of such transpersonal grateful behaviour must come from

a different approach: we must think of it in terms of moral character and virtues. This leads us to the next argument defended in this research.

The first claim concerning the moral significance of transpersonal gratitude is that is a greater indicator of character traits than personal gratitude, because of the absence of social and religious codes regulating its expression.

The expression of personal gratitude usually has codes of conduct, where religion and/or social and cultural norms dictate the most appropriate ways to repay a debt of gratitude. Major religions in the world require their followers to express their thankfulness in certain ways, whether by praising God, leading a morally exemplary life to show appreciation for the gifts received, or being generous towards others as God has been generous with them. Non-monotheistic religions too, like Buddhism, instruct disciples to express joyful gratitude for blessings and hardship alike. In all cases, certain acts and behaviours are already chosen as (appropriate) ways to show thankfulness to a higher power who is a kind and benevolent agent in everyone's lives.

Likewise, the expression of personal gratitude is regulated by social and cultural norms around the world. In some middle eastern cultures, for example, the expression of thankfulness has to reach a certain degree of profuseness. Any less is considered ungrateful, and more is offensive (McConnell, 1993). From etiquette to repaying a "debt" created by benevolence, cultural and social beliefs set certain values and perspectives which in turn decide of the appropriateness of the grateful expression.

Religious and cultural practices regarding the expression of thankfulness aim to manage the relationship between benefactor and recipient with the goal of preserving and encouraging generous acts and behaviour that generally benefits the strength of social bonds.

In the absence of an intentional agent, the parameters are different. There is no relationship to regulate nor is there any particular group that would benefit from such regulation. Social and religious codes of conduct need not apply. Therefore, in the case of transpersonal gratitude, the wish to benefit in turn must find expression based on an individual's personal moral and emotional compass. Such grateful behaviour becomes a good indicator of character as it reveals one's attitude - and resulting choices - in the absence of social and interpersonal expectations. In other words, transpersonal gratitude reveals a grateful disposition which might not always be obvious in cases of personal gratitude.

The second claim concerning the moral significance of transpersonal gratitude is that this grateful disposition is a virtue. The virtue of gratitude presents a conceptual problem for philosophers, mainly because on the one hand, the triadic model comes too close to relationships of reciprocity, leaving out a wider moral vision of the common good of human life; and on the other hand, the dyadic model seems to lack structure and foster an indiscriminate thankfulness for everything (Carr, 2013; 2014).

I argue that both those issues can be addressed with the adoption of a dyadic model of the virtue gratitude. More particularly, the transpersonal mode of dyadic gratitude offers a path to the conceptualisation of gratitude as a virtue: the focus on the centrality of the benefit in the absence of a benefactor offers the structure and discrimination that propositional gratitude lacks, while the disposition to

recognise unearned benefits and their significance in one's engagement with the world brings in the larger moral vision necessary for the virtue of gratitude.

Finally, I argue that there is a corresponding vice to the virtue of gratitude, expressed by a failure to recognise unearned benefits and goodness outside of the self, and a failure to deliberate on the appropriate behaviour in response to such benefits, resulting in conduct that expresses entitlement and resentment.

This chapter outlined and discussed the central claim of this research, as well as the arguments that support this claim. It also defined the terms that will be used throughout this work to refer to different modalities and contexts of gratitude. These claims will be further examined and defended in subsequent chapters. The next chapter looks at different philosophical accounts that explain modalities of gratitude beyond the interpersonal and compares them to the concept of transpersonal gratitude.

## Chapter Four

### Gratitude Beyond the Interpersonal

Several recent accounts both in philosophy and psychology have turned their attention to the dyadic kind of gratitude, in an attempt to explain the features of such an experience of gratitude and its role in the moral life.

This chapter discusses these accounts and compares them to the concept of transpersonal gratitude argued for in this chapter.

#### 4.1. Transpersonal gratitude and gratefulness

In the book “The psychology of gratitude” (McCullough and Emmons, 2004), the term transpersonal gratitude is used by R. Emmons and D. Steindl-Rast to refer to a modality of gratitude that does not seem to fall into already defined categories of the sentiment. Both authors assign certain features to transpersonal gratitude, such as a vast thankfulness, a mystic quality and a feeling of connectedness, but they don’t appear to agree on a clear definition of what transpersonal gratitude is. What brings them together is only the observation that a certain type of gratitude transcends the current understanding of the concept, and that this deserves further exploration.

Emmons describes transpersonal gratitude as “the gratitude that one feels when contemplating a starry sky or a majestic mountain peak” (Emmons, 2004, p.7). He distinguishes between transpersonal gratitude and theistic gratitude on this basis. He adds that this gratitude can be directed towards God or towards the cosmos in general. His distinction between personal and transpersonal gratitude

is linked to the nature of the benefit that has given rise to the thankful feeling. According to Emmons, transpersonal gratitude is what one feels when one enjoys a benefit that transcends the boundaries of a personal experience of goodness in life. If we follow this reasoning, transpersonal gratitude occurs both in those who believe in God and those who don't. It is not the absence of an agent that distinguishes it from other types of gratitude, but rather the fact that the benefit is not limited to the individual. For instance, a bright sunny day might not be intended solely for me, but I can still feel grateful for it, to God or to the cosmos. This, according to Emmons, is an experience of religious or spiritual nature and is one of the characteristics of transpersonal gratitude. (Emmons, 2004).

Emmons, in order to illustrate his point, mentions Nakhnikian's account of a "vast feeling of thankfulness" which he "could not appropriately express to any human being", nor to God since he is not a believer (Nakhnikian, 1961, p.161). While it is true that Nakhnikian has described such feelings of gratitude, the experience that he has presented as the cause of this thankfulness is not a majestic moment of contemplation, but rather an incident where his two-year-old daughter escapes a car crash by virtue of what he calls "plain luck". This is hardly the case of a realization of the majesty of life and nature, and although it might be argued that there is a mysterious quality to "just luck", Nakhnikian's account shows that transpersonal gratitude is not necessarily the spiritual dimension of thankfulness as proposed by Emmons.

Of course, Emmons does not offer his thoughts as a final definition of transpersonal gratitude, but more as an invitation for more research and investigation of the concept. What is worth retaining from his interpretation of Nakhnikian's experience, as relevant to this chapter's aim of formulating a

working definition of transpersonal gratitude, is the following statement: “*Such a vast thankfulness (...) occurs in the absence of a belief that a favor has been intentionally conferred upon a person by a benefactor*” (Emmons, 2004, p.7).

David Steindl-Rast goes more into details in his discussion of what transpersonal gratitude is (Steindl-Rast, 2004). Aiming to introduce a distinction between thankfulness and gratefulness, where gratefulness means transpersonal gratitude and thankfulness is defined as personal gratitude, he offers an analysis of the nature of gratitude and its different modalities.

In a blog published on his website in 2000, Steindl-Rast proposes the idea that gratefulness occurs when someone catches “a glimpse of something greater than the limited self” (Steindl-Rast, 2000). He calls gratefulness the joy that accompanies such moments, in the sense of a full appreciation of an undeserved kindness. He expands on this notion in his chapter titled “Gratitude as Thankfulness and Gratefulness” (Steindl-Rast, 2004) through what he calls five theses in his attempt to analyse the ways we experience gratitude. The best way to present Steindl-Rast’s rather intricate analysis of the personal and transpersonal modalities of gratitude would be to follow his reasoning as he offers his ideas in the above-mentioned chapter.

Steindl starts by proposing that gratitude is essentially a celebration (thesis 1). Celebration, in his perspective, means “an act of heightened and focused intellectual and emotional appreciation” (act being a mental operation), characteristics which we can observe in the experience of gratitude too (Steindl-Rast, 2004, p.283). However, even if strong feelings of appreciation are an intrinsic part of gratitude and might even be argued to be its essential component, this is not enough to maintain that gratitude is essentially a form of celebration.



Gratitude is always concerned with a gift and suggests a wish to make a return. Celebration, on the other hand, can show appreciation and/or remembrance without necessarily acknowledging a benefit or expressing a wish to make a return. Perhaps celebration can be an expression of gratitude at times, but again, this only shows that the two experiences have appreciation in common.

Furthermore, Steindl states that celebration can be a pure inner experience, without any expression whatsoever. In that case, it is difficult to see the difference between elation and celebration. Aren't appreciation, celebration and gratitude being mixed in a general definition of happiness and joy, especially when we are discarding the expression that each takes in our experience? After all, joyful feelings without a hint of gratitude may arise when one hears good news, for example, and we can still observe "heightened and focused intellectual and emotional appreciation".

There is no clarification on those points from Steindl, as he moves on to his second thesis: that gratitude differs from other forms of celebration by its object, which is undeserved kindness. "Invariably, something undeserved is the formal, constituent object on which gratitude focuses" and this "undeserved something is kindness" (Steindl, 2004, p.284). We are presented here with a definition of kindness as the expression of a "mutual belonging": an act of kindness, from one person to another, shows that the first one acknowledges the other as a kin, that there is solidarity between them. This recognition is what triggers feelings of gratitude in the receiver, by means of giving them a feeling of belonging. With this definition, Steindl wants to assert that the object of gratitude is always kindness. Perhaps he means that solidarity and recognition of each other in a "mutual belonging" are always considered benefits in one's life and that gratitude arises

when such a gift comes into one's experience through no merit of one's own. The fact that this kindness must be unmerited in order to deserve gratitude is not a new notion, as it has been mentioned in almost every philosophical and psychological text dealing with gratitude. But Steindl's definition leaves out important factors such as intention, personality and circumstances in which kindness is shown. Indeed, all of those factors influence both the rise and the appropriateness of feelings of gratitude. And it's not clear why we should assume that gratitude is "invariably" a response to a display of mutual belonging. It's understandable that such belonging would be deemed desirable and appreciated, maybe based on Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs (where "belongingness" has an important place). But wouldn't it be more accurate to speak of satisfaction, or perhaps contentment, when a need is met, rather than gratitude? And if, admittedly, such satisfaction can become a source of gratitude, that does not necessarily mean that nothing else can give rise to gratitude. What of those situations, for example, where one receives a benefit of great value from someone who did not intend to be helpful in any way? In the movie "Schindler's list", there is a scene where one of the Jews employed in the enamel factory, an elderly man, meets with Schindler and expresses deep gratitude to him for having spared his life by hiring him. "Thank you, thank you" he says, "you are a good man". This is at the beginning of the story, where Schindler's sole motivation is to make money by taking advantage of the very cheap labour force selected from the Jewish population. There is no "display of mutual belonging" and yet, there is a benefit (a life saved) and there is gratitude for it. Is this gratitude inappropriate? Did the old man misinterpret Schindler's intention as kindness? Obviously, gratitude can and does arise in response to a benefit even if the intention of the giver is unclear. If we are to insist that the object of gratitude is "invariably"

kindness, then we need to discuss perceived kindness as well, even if we are defining kindness as a “display of mutual belonging”. Benefit does not always signify a display of kindness, and gratitude cannot invariably be a response to kindness as Steindl defines it. He does not make room for perceived kind intention, but rather suggests that there is something greater out there, which has the ability to show such kindness.

It is this particular approach to gratitude as “a celebration of display of mutual belonging” that Steindl uses to elaborate his definition of transpersonal gratitude. In Thesis 3, he proposes that during peak moments (Maslow, 1970), one experiences this exact feeling of mutual belonging, but this time with the cosmos. Gratitude arises as a response to what he calls a “cosmic kindness” or a feeling of a universal belonging, a connectedness with everything. This gratitude is transpersonal because it is not focused on an instance of giving and receiving a benefit; it is universal: “Gratitude for a personal kindness focuses on one specific instance of undeserved belonging; the gratitude integral to peak experience is universal” (Steindl, 2004, p.285). This universal gratitude is, again in Steindl’s words, “spontaneous, unreflective, unconditional and transpersonal” as opposed to personal gratitude which is “deliberate, reflective, conditional and specific” (id.).

However, it is not clear exactly who is responsible for this display of cosmic kindness for which one feels grateful. If kindness is used in a sense of kinship or, as Steindl says in a previous paragraph “an (undeserved) admittance into a state of mutual belonging”, who is admitting the (grateful) individual into a state of mutual belonging? Words such as “display” and “admittance” have an active quality and they presuppose the existence of a subject. This is a weak point in

Steindl's otherwise interesting analysis, and it might derive from his attempt to explain transpersonal gratitude as the basis of religious experiences.

Indeed, in theses 4 and 5, Steindl proposes that the transpersonal modality of gratitude be called gratefulness, and the personal one thankfulness, while also arguing that gratefulness is the mystical dimension of gratitude and the "ground zero of religious experience".

His distinction between transpersonal and personal modalities of gratitude is based on a distinction between transcendental and social realities within which gratitude is experienced. In this perspective, transpersonal gratitude can be directed towards God or the cosmos, either way "something greater" than the limited self (Steindl, 2000). Personal gratitude is directed towards other humans who benefit us. The main argument that Steindl presents is that gratefulness is the mystic dimension of gratitude and that we are challenged to explore it "with reverent, yet resolute scrutiny – as the ground zero of religious experience". But if transpersonal gratitude transcends the personal relationships between human individuals, does this necessarily mean that it only registers as a religious experience, within the context of a relationship with something greater, or God? Can it not be found in the more regular experiences of everyday life?

Given the religious connotation of Steindl's analysis, his "something greater than the limited self" can be understood as a reference to God or a divine entity. However, he also mentions the Cosmos and "life itself" as the greater something that we sometimes catch a glimpse of. And the examples that he uses in order to support his theses are almost exclusively based on instances where an individual is exposed to the greatness of nature and its elements, such as "the solitude of a mountain top", the "high dim-starred sky" and "the silent stars" (Steindl, 2004,

p.285). Even Maslow, when explaining what triggers peak experiences, relies – although not solely – on exposure to great art or music, or to the beauty of nature. It is evident that there is an aesthetic aspect to those experiences depicted by Steindl, as they all appeal to the faculties of perception and apprehension, prompting certain emotions and intuitions in the presence of something great. In this sense, the feeling, or rather the state of mind, that Steindl calls gratefulness seems to bear some similarities with the sublime in Aesthetics.

The first and most obvious point of comparison is the greatness of the object that grabs the individual's attention. There is an immensity and vastness that the mind tries to comprehend and to which it surrenders with a sense of elevation. In almost all texts on the sublime in Aesthetics, greatness is an essential component of the experience. In some accounts, the sublime is closely linked to the qualities of the object. Burke, for example, lists a number of qualities that an object must have in order to produce "the strongest emotion that the mind is capable of feeling" (Burke, 1990, p. 36), which is the sublime. Those qualities range from vastness and infinity to power, magnificence and even obscurity. They all contribute to making the impact of the object on the mind an almost violent one, translating into astonishment and awe. It is easy to see those elements gathered in Steindl's examples: The starry sky, for instance, is at once vast, infinite and magnificent. Burke himself uses a similar example as an illustration of his ideas: "The starry heaven, though it occurs so very frequently to our view, never fails to excite an idea of grandeur" (Burke, 1990, p.71). The contemplation of such a sky, especially during peak experiences, produces a sense of "grateful wonder" (Steindl, 2004, p.286).

One of the main differences between Steindl's and Burke's observations is what the latter calls a 'delightful terror', which is absent from Steindl's analysis, at least at first glance. Indeed, Burke maintains that the sublime is linked to feelings of terror, fear and pain. The source of this terror is not an imminent danger, but rather the idea of a danger aroused by the greatness and magnitude of the object. It is a 'delightful terror' because there is a sense of being removed from the danger while at the same time aware of the power of the object on which the senses are focused. A good example would be the following passage from M. Shelly's *Frankenstein*, where Victor describes a thunderstorm:

*"When I was about fifteen years old, we had retired to our house near Belrive, when we witnessed a most violent and terrible thunderstorm. It advanced from behind the mountains of Jura; and the thunder burst at once with frightful loudness from various quarters of the heavens. I remained, while the storm lasted, watching it progress with curiosity and delight"* (Shelly, 2012).

The senses are affected by the greatness of the object (the thunderstorm), arousing ideas of "grandeur"; and even though the thunderstorm is "frightful", there is a feeling of delight in its contemplation from a safe distance.

This aspect of pleasurable terror seems to be missing from Steindl's perspective. However, as he often mentions "a glimpse of something greater than the limited self", it is justifiable to wonder if the exposure to this "something greater" can be a purely positive experience for the senses and the mind. Is there no fear that comes with the realization of being "something lesser"? It is clear, of course, that Steindl is not referring to just a visual glimpse of the vastness of the starry sky or the magnitude of the mountain top. He is rather talking about an inner realization, where the self finds itself limited, engulfed in the infinity of life. But this realization

springs from an exposure to something that has an aesthetic impact first: “Remember a night when you stood outdoors looking up at the stars, countless in the high, silent dome of the sky and saw them as if for the first time. What happened?” (Steindl, 2000). It is in relation to this greatness, or rather through a “glimpse” of it, exposing the limitedness of the self, that feelings of elevation and joy arise. In other words, there is an interplay between an intuition of being limited and a transcendence of that limitedness with feelings of being part of the absolute great: “greater than my own life ... to Life itself” (O’Neill *in* Steindl, 2000). A closer scrutiny of this investigation reveals, yet again, noteworthy similarities between Steindl’s gratefulness and the sublime, this time as defined by Kant.

In Kant’s Aesthetics, the sublime is not so much in the objects than it is rooted in our ideas: “It is the disposition of the mind resulting from a certain representation occupying the reflective judgment, but not the object, that is to be called sublime” (Kant, 2000, p. 134). He distinguishes the mathematically sublime from the dynamically sublime, where the first is concerned with objects of great magnitude and the second with things that hold a great power in relation to us. In the mathematically sublime there is, at first, an attempt at an aesthetic estimation of the magnitude of the object; for instance, the starry sky. However, imagination (as capacity to represent sensible particulars) fails to comprehend this object as a whole because the starry sky cannot have boundaries within our sensory field. Thus, comprehension must come as an intellectual representation of infinity, as an idea of reason, to which no sensible representation can be a match. The mathematically sublime, then, is the enjoyment of the failure of the imagination, in that it makes it possible to appreciate the capacity of reason to represent the supersensible. It can be argued that some elements of Kant’s mathematically sublime can be found in Steindl’s portrayal of a wild joy and happiness after

looking up at the starry night; for example, an aesthetic estimation of the starry sky (“stood outdoors looking up at the stars”), the attempt to comprehend it as a whole (“countless in the high dome of the sky”) and a resulting feeling of enjoyment and elevation.

The dynamically sublime, on the other hand, is linked to objects that are great in power. This state of mind supposes both a representation of the object as powerful and frightful, and a certain distance allowing a sense of safety in relation to the object: “Nature considered in an aesthetical judgment as a power that has no dominion over us, is dynamically sublime” (Kant, 2000, p. 143). The sublime springs from the representation of a terrifying object and ideas of being independent from it and thus superior to nature.

What is common to the mathematically and dynamically sublime is a characterisation that Kant describes as “a rapidly alternating repulsion from and attraction to one and the same object” (Kant, 2000, p.141). Indeed, the sublime in Kant’s theory is not purely a pleasurable state of mind: there is fear in the dynamically sublime and displeasure of the failure of imagination in the mathematically sublime. Enjoyment arises by means of assertion of the “supersensible vocation” of the faculties of senses, through a failure which enables the exhibition of the ideas of reason.

The realization that, as rational beings, we have the ability to take ourselves beyond the world of the senses and engage with ideas of the absolute, reveals what Kant calls a “supersensible destination”. The sublime brings us to the acknowledgement of a purposiveness that is not determined by, nor dependent on, the faculties of the senses. Reason can judge every sensible object to be small in comparison with its idea of absolute totality, even as imagination fails in



its attempt of estimation. “The sublime” says Kant “is that in comparison with which everything else is small” (Kant, 2000, p.134). The ability to judge the sublime thus reveals the sublimity of the mind itself, and accordingly, the Idea of humanity within ourselves becomes a source of joy and elevation.

The sublime appears to be a human experience *par excellence*, and a good illustration of the complex interplay of pleasure and displeasure involved can be found in the following passage, taken from an interview with astronaut Chris Hatfield about spacewalking:

*“A spacewalk is very much like that, in that the opening of the hatch is probably step 750 of the day. And steps 1 through 749 were all boring and miniscule and each one was in a checklist and you had to do everyone right, so you were very painstaking. But suddenly you do this one step, and you are in a place that you hadn’t conceived... how beautiful this could be. How stupefying this could be. And by stupefying, I mean, it stops your thought. (...) But it was just overwhelming! It is like coming around a corner and seeing the most magnificent sunset of your life, from one horizon to the other where it looks like the whole sky is on fire and there are all those colours, and the sun’s rays look like some great painting up over your head. You just want to open your eyes wide and try to look around at the image, and just try and soak it up. It’s like that all the time. Or maybe the most beautiful music just filling your soul. Or seeing an absolutely gorgeous person where you can’t just help but stare. It’s like that all the time. So, it’s an extremely distracting place to work. But it also really puts yourself into perspective because this human creation is right next to you and it’s inherently, massively beautiful, like the prow of the Titanic or something where you feel this great human achievement of building this great structure that takes us to a place we’ve*

*never been. But then you notice that even though it is huge and capable, it's just a speck between everything which is on your left and all the colors and textures of our planet that are just pouring next to you on the right. And you are this little peephole of a microcosm in between those two things, both physically and historically. And you're very much aware of that the whole time"* (Hatfield, 2010).

The description above is unmistakably that of the sublime state of mind: the aesthetic experience of something far greater than the individual self or its abilities to comprehend the object, coupled with responses of astonishment, awe and a sense of elevation. And it is apparent that the experience is mainly a pleasurable one. Perhaps it might be argued that this usually is the case with the sublime: that due to the intensity of the feelings of elevation, the less pleasurable responses, although present in the actual experience, tend to fade away from one's memory.

However, fear, displeasure and terror are important elements of the sublime not only for Kant and Burke, but also for other philosophers such as Schopenhauer, who defines the sublime in the presence of an overpowering object that *could* destroy the observer (Schopenhauer, 1969); and Mendelssohn, who speaks of "agreeable horror" when describing the struggle of the senses in grasping the object and connecting it in one idea (Mendelssohn, 1758). Even Longinus, who writes about the sublime mainly in rhetoric, finds it in what is distressing enough to cause wonder and fear (Longinus as cited by Monk, 1960).

This brings us back to the question about whether or not Steindl's "something greater", embodied by the starry sky and the mountain top, contains an element of fear. The obvious answer would be negative; Steindl does not mention terror

or any similar emotion in his description of gratefulness. However, a short statement in his text calls for further attention. In Thesis 3, Steindl claims that gratefulness includes a willingness to “make oneself vulnerable to say an unconditional yes to all that there is” (Steindl, 2004, p.285). “All that there is” is the “something greater” which Steindl often refers to. And since there appears to be some vulnerability involved in the experience, and a willingness to allow it, then there must be a triumph over fear at a previous stage, or at least the *idea* of fear. And although Steindl does not expand on this statement, it could be argued that this is another parallel between the sublime and his analysis of gratefulness. There is an element of the sublime in the experience of gratitude in the absence of a benefactor. This element is manifest in feelings of connectedness to others and the world in general as reported by Maslow (Maslow, 2014), that Steindl-Rast refers to as a form of “kinship”.

It appears, indeed, that there are many similarities between the sublime state of mind and the experience of elevation and elation that Steindl focuses on. And it seems justified to maintain that gratefulness, as defined by Steindl, has a clear aesthetic dimension. It is important, then, to establish whether or not this mostly aesthetic and arguably mystical experience should be considered a modality of gratitude.

In fact, Steindl’s analysis focuses on the nature of transpersonal gratitude mainly in terms of feelings. It is not clear who this gratitude is owed to and in which situations it would be considered an appropriate (or inappropriate) response. He considers transpersonal gratitude to be the mystic dimension of gratitude and this approach sets the limits of his investigation. One problem that arises from this limitation concerns the sphere of expression of transpersonal gratitude.

According to Steindl gratefulness is essentially a state (as opposed to action) and that there is no action associated with it: it is “the full response of a person to gratuitous belonging”. In other words, this gratitude is just an awareness of being connected with everything and the feeling of joy that might arise from that awareness. In an earlier article published on this same topic, Steindl writes that gratefulness is a “wild joy of belonging” and it is a state of “full awareness” (Steindl-Rast, 2000). It seems that this definition drifts away from the notion of gratitude. If there is no expression of thankfulness whatsoever, not even a desire or good will to make a return, we find ourselves in the realms of happiness and elation, rather than gratitude.

However, Steindl’s analysis remains valid in pointing out that there is a modality of gratitude that goes beyond the exchanges of benefit and thankfulness usually observed in personal relationships and social contexts. That this gratitude arises mainly during peak experiences, as a mystic dimension of thankful feelings directed towards “something greater” but without any form of expression, is where his theses call for further clarifications.

#### **4.2. The distinction between gratitude and gratefulness**

In a paper titled “Gratefulness and Gratitude” (Walker, 1980), A.D.M. Walker too has argued for a distinction between gratitude and gratefulness, but his concern is with a better understanding of gratitude through an exploration of gratefulness as a wider notion. Although he does not mention transpersonal gratitude as a modality, he states that “gratefulness need not always be focused upon another person, does not always have to be gratefulness to someone, and hence cases of gratefulness cannot always be cases of gratitude” (Walker, 1980, p.45). By this Walker wants to argue that gratefulness is the “natural background” for gratitude.

He thus introduces a difference between benevolence and favour, where benevolence is the proper object of gratitude and favour is that of gratefulness. Benevolence, Walker says, is linked to benefits that come into one's life through personal relationships, where the giver is another person identified as the benefactor. Favour, on the other hand, as the object of gratitude, is defined as "what one sees as (undeserved) good received", where this good can be something as general as being thankful for the weather on a certain day. One feels grateful when one feels favoured. This is not to be understood in terms of favouritism. "The notion of favour is (...) meant to allow for gratefulness where one is favoured other than by human agency" (Walker, 1980, p.49).

In other words, when an individual feels that something good has come upon him or her without the involvement of another person, the feeling of thankfulness that arises (if and when it does) is gratefulness. Gratitude is contained within this wider notion as a response to a triadic relation of giver, gift and receiver. Some of the examples that Walker uses allow for a clearer understanding of his arguments and a further investigation of their implications. "Though circumstances cannot literally do us a favour, we can be favoured by circumstances: we may possess an undeserved advantage (a talent, perhaps, or good looks) or an opportunity denied to others; we may emerge from a situation better than others through no effort of our own, or simply receive some good which could not reasonably have been expected (as sunshine and blue skies in January)" (Walker, 1980, p.49).

Although all of the examples above are cases of being somehow favoured by circumstances, there are differences between them that should be accounted for. Walker puts "having a talent" and "unexpected good weather" in the same group of circumstances, but there is a difference between them: a talent brings a

specific benefit to the individual, perhaps allowing them to win competitions or excelling in their career. Good weather is not a specific benefit for the receiver (unless of course it results in one). As true as it may be that good weather is usually enjoyable, thus qualifying as “something good”, it does not register as a benefit or a personal gift. It seems important to underline this, because if we remove both the agency of the giver and the notion of benefit, we might be better off speaking of the response as happiness instead of thankfulness.

However, Walker’s examples do point to a modality of gratitude that transcends the personal relationship between human individuals. What is noteworthy here is that he applies this notion to benefits that don’t relate to experiences of peak moments, and thus are devoid of the mystical quality that Steindl has described. Walker acknowledges that the case can be made about this gratefulness to be ultimately focused on a superhuman agent such as God, but he does not elaborate on that. He is more concerned with accounting for gratefulness as a general background to a more focused experience of gratitude between people. But his remarks about one being “favoured other than by human agency” are relevant to an attempt of defining transpersonal gratitude.

Walker also makes an interesting comparison between gratefulness and revenge: “One necessary point can be made by stressing the parallel between gratefulness and the desire for revenge. The grateful man wants to favour another because he has been favoured as the vengeful man wants to inflict harm on another because he has been harmed himself”<sup>5</sup> (Walker, 1980, p.49). This

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<sup>5</sup> In “Human, All Too Human”, Nietzsche draws a parallel between gratitude and revenge too, placing them both in the realm of justice. In this account, gratitude is the expression of a power game: a benefactor violates the beneficiary’s sphere with his benevolence, and “through his act of gratitude, the powerful man requites himself by violating the benefactor’s sphere. It is a milder form of revenge” (Nietzsche, 1984, p.46)

widens the definition of gratefulness and clarifies the distinction Walker wants to introduce between gratefulness and gratitude. It also has implications for the expression of gratefulness, and that of transpersonal gratitude. Indeed, the matter of making a return, which is an integral part of gratitude, needs more clarification when it comes to situations where there is no benefactor identified.

Steindl and Walker have seemingly divergent perspectives on what they both call gratefulness. However, a common element is that both describe it as a wider notion than gratitude. In both accounts, gratefulness seems to be a “ground zero” or a “natural background” within which a more focused gratitude can develop. But that is as far as the similarities go between the two perspectives.

While Steindl approaches the topic from a theological/religious perspective, Walker does so from a more philosophical and, for lack of a better word, secular point of view. On the matter of agency, Walker has a clearer perspective: gratefulness implies no human agency. However, he does not expand on the argument that it might be focused on a divine one. On the other hand, Steindl insists on the mystical quality of gratefulness and on it being the basis of religious experience. He suggests that a form of divine or superhuman agency is somehow involved in the cosmic kindness that gives rise to gratefulness. As for the object of gratefulness, there seems to be yet again another gap between Walker’s and Steindl’s perspectives. From an “undeserved admittance into a state of mutual belonging” (kindness) to “something good (and unmerited) received” (favour), it appears difficult to find a common ground. For Steindl, the object of gratefulness is the kind “act” of admittance into kinship by a superhuman agency; whereas for Walker, it’s a material benefit in the absence of a human agent that constitutes the object of the sentiment. It might be relevant to mention here that the

paragraph that Steindl has selected from Maslow's account of peak experiences, states that "people in peak experiences feel lucky, fortunate, graced" (Maslow, 2014, p.75). This description seems closer to what Walker calls "feeling favoured" rather than a recognition of a cosmic kinship. Had Steindl defined kindness as benevolence, or had Walker defined favour as a display of sympathy, their perspectives might have met. But they each seem to be offering a different angle of approach to what gratefulness is and what it entails in terms of expression and contexts.

There is not a great amount of literature on gratefulness and its distinction from gratitude, and the above accounts are only attempts at explaining a certain modality of gratitude that seems to go beyond personal and relational exchanges.

### **4.3. Propositional gratitude**

Perhaps the difficulty in defining this wider notion of gratitude stems from the fact that philosophy, as a tradition, has so far had a pronounced preference for targeted gratitude (A's being grateful to B for x) as Sean McAleer suggests in his paper "Propositional gratitude" (McAleer, 2012). Indeed, most philosophical accounts focus on personal and/or theistic kinds of gratitude. In an attempt to rectify this imbalance, McAleer introduces the idea of propositional gratitude to describe "A's being grateful that *p*" (id.).

In this account, propositional gratitude appears to be directed but non-targeted (hence the choice of the term "propositional"), its main feature being the absence of an intentional benefactor. This raises the question of the agency requirement, which current philosophical accounts consider to be the central feature of



experiences and obligations of gratitude: it is the intentional agent's benevolent actions that give rise to gratitude and duties to make a return. McAleer argues that it is in fact appropriate to call gratitude instances of *thankfulness that* something is the case. Experiences such as "being grateful that heroes exist" or "being grateful that x is a hero" are cited as examples of propositional gratitude, in contrast to "being thankful to x for acting heroically on occasion o". Additionally, it appears that the difference between targeted and propositional gratitude is one of "logical scope" rather than of semantics. In other words, it's the same "sense" of gratitude, sometimes targeted and sometimes not. (McAleer, 2012).

McAleer's discussion is valuable in that it is one of the few in philosophy that account for gratitude in the absence of an intentional agent/benefactor, and his arguments on propositional gratitude deserve a closer examination.

Discussing the classical view of gratitude, and in particular the requirement of agency, McAleer analyses cases where gratitude arises in the absence of a benefactor. He argues that these cases should not be dismissed as gladness or just being pleased that something is the case. In his first example, he points out how targeted gratitude towards non-agents "falls afoul of the agency requirement" (McAleer, 2012, p.57) since a mountain, to follow his example, cannot have the intention to confer benefits and thus no matter how much wealth it's given us, we cannot have any duties of gratitude towards it. But does this mean that feelings of gratitude towards nature's bounty are inappropriate or misplaced? In McAleer's view, philosophers too often dismiss this kind of thankfulness as gladness or try to satisfy the agency requirement by reducing this gratitude to a covert form of targeted gratitude (McAleer, 2012, p.57). He instead suggests that the issue arises *because* of the rigidity of the agency requirement, and that it is the benefit

that is the primary source of gratitude, rather than the intention of a benefactor. In his second example, McAleer revisits cases of propositional gratitude, where “there is gratitude but no benefactor at all”: being grateful that x is a hero. He points out that in this equation, asking “who is x?” does not make sense. He argues that the agency requirement should apply only to targeted gratitude, allowing for propositional gratitude to have a wider scope without “turning into something else – such as merely being pleased” (McAleer, 2012, p.58). He concludes that propositional gratitude, in the absence of the agency requirement, will show to have strong links with humility as a virtue. I will return to this argument in a later chapter where I discuss gratitude and dependence.

McAleer’s account highlights the importance of reviewing current concepts of gratitude in order to understand phenomena that challenge the benefactor-benefit-beneficiary view of gratitude. However, there is an important aspect of gratitude that McAleer omits to examine: that the benefit must be intended for the beneficiary. In other words, it’s not enough to discuss agency or the absence of a benefactor. We must also consider the sense of personal benefit that triggers feelings of thankfulness. As M. Lacewing puts it, “to feel gratitude, a creature must have some sense of the good being good *for it*” (Lacewing, 2016, p.146). Otherwise, it would indeed be very difficult to distinguish between feeling glad that something is the case and feeling thankful that something is the case. In the example of the hero, there is indeed agency – satisfying the agency requirement - but the benefit is not intended for the person who is said to be feeling thankful (unless the hero helped them personally - in which case we talk about personal gratitude - being thankful *to* the hero for helping me). It would then be more appropriate to say that one is *glad* that heroes exist, rather than thankful. And to talk about gratitude only when there is a sense that one has been somehow

favoured, as A.D.M. Walker suggests, or received a benefit that is beneficial *to them*. For example, someone who is *thankful that a hero was there* to save their life (without necessarily excluding thankfulness *to the hero* for their help).

So, is propositional gratitude, gratitude at all? The question is whether one can be said to feel personally favoured that something is the case even if there is no direct benefit to the person. I can be glad that there are generous people in the world, but why would I feel thankful that it's the case? We can consider a few scenarios as possible explanations. First, if I'm a religious person, I can feel thankful to God that there are generous people in life. But this is a case of theistic gratitude as the agency of the benefit is ascribed to God. Second, I might not believe in God, but I might have the conviction that the universe (or the cosmos, or life) has some intentional power and can bestow benefits on us. I might then feel thankful to the universe that there are generous people in the world. But again, this is a case of gratitude through personification of non-agents and hence, it should be considered to be personal gratitude. Finally, I might have a strong sense of connectedness to everyone else in the world. If I hear of someone who receives a large donation that helps them get the surgical intervention they need, I might feel thankful that such benefactors exist. At first glance, this case might be discarded as appreciation as there is no personal benefit *to me*. However, the matter of feeling connected to others needs further consideration.

We are often thankful to someone for helping those we love. A very common example is that of a mother who is grateful to the doctor for saving her daughter's life. This is a genuine case of gratitude by virtue of the love that the mother bears for her daughter. Indeed, when we care about someone, the goodness in their life feels like a personal benefit to us because our personal feelings and interests

are concerned. In the same way, we can speculate that the partner of someone who survives a plane crash will feel thankful *that it was the case* even if they don't target their gratitude towards God or the universe. Their loved one has been somehow favoured and since their personal feelings are involved, they feel favoured too, and thus thankful. Perhaps we can say then, that if someone has a strong sense of kinship with the rest of humankind, they would feel thankful for the goodness that occurs in anyone's – strangers and loved ones alike – experience. Still, the sense of connection to others would have to be a very strong and consistent one, and there would have to be a specific instance of benefit, rather than a general appreciation that there are good people in the world. This might be a plausible way to explain gratitude that something is the case in the absence of a benefactor, but we are now far from propositional gratitude. This description is closer to transpersonal gratitude - being thankful for something but to no one in particular – which also accounts for a sense of the good being good for the person concerned.

#### **4.4. Existential gratitude**

Another argument to address the agency requirement in the absence of a benefactor is that other factors and experiences may make this requirement unnecessary. This is the case made by Michael Lacewing in his attempt to understand whether non-theists can appropriately feel existential gratitude (Lacewing, 2016). Lacewing starts by a discussion of what he considers to be “non-directed gratitude”, as opposed to personal gratitude that is directed towards the donor of a gift. He allows that the existence of such a modality of gratitude is defensible, provided that the feeling is focused on the “undeserved, gratuitous, contingent nature of the gift”. And that there is, of course, personal benefit to the

receiver. Those are two major differences from the way McAleer describes propositional gratitude, and they bring the experience in question closer to thankfulness rather than joy or gladness.

The more important question, however, is that of the gift. If there is no “giver”, then the good received is just that, good. If there is no giver, how can we determine whether a certain good is gratuitous or not? In other words, in the absence of an intentional *giving*, how does one evaluate a good as a favour, or a personally targeted benefit? Lacewing answers this by referring to emotion theories according to which emotions are the expression of an inner evaluation of an object in relation to the well-being and concerns of the subject. Fear of a scorpion is the evaluation of the object (scorpion) as potentially dangerous for the subject, and thus elicits a fearful response. The emotion focuses on certain salient features of the situation and prompts a reaction, all of it in the context of our ideas about our own well-being and general ideas of good and bad. In this line of thought, gratitude as an emotion focuses on the gratuitousness of a good and thus elicits a thankful response: “Gratitude presents the undeserved nature of a good as a reason for experiencing gratitude” (Lacewing, 2016, p.150) On the other hand, the emotion that focuses on the goodness of the gift prompts joy - gratitude and joy being non-exclusive of each other.

This analysis indeed brings more clarity to the discussion on gratitude and its appropriateness in the absence of a benefactor. The gratuitousness of the gift, the undeserved – or rather, unearned – nature of a good that comes into our lives is an essential part of the experience of gratitude. However, it should be added that gratitude is not just about recognising the unearned nature of a gift. Indeed, it has to also focus on an object or event as *personally benefiting* the subject, as

Lacewing himself asserts that “to feel gratitude, a creature must have some sense of the good being good *for it*” (Lacewing, 2016, p.146). When there is a benefactor with clear intentions to benefit me, there is no confusion about whether the benefit is intended for me or not. What, then, in the case of non-directed gratitude, where there is no giver, creates the perception of being “somewhat favoured” as suggested by A.D.M. Walker? Consider this blogger who often posts about gratitude and who has put up a picture of a rainbow with the words: “I’m grateful for the double rainbow I saw today” (Mobypicture, 2010). Why the experience of gratitude and not just awe, for example? Is it wishful thinking, or a form of anthropomorphism where one believes to be the recipient of an (intentional) gift from the universe or life? Based on other entries of this same blog, the writer does not seem to hold such beliefs. She just posts pictures and notes expressing her gratitude for certain events in her daily life. It seems that several factors must converge for this “personalised” experience of non-directed gratitude to occur. Perhaps we can call on the emotion theory again to argue that within the relation of the self with the outside world, strictly individual ideas about what is good for the subject create the context where gratitude is again the appropriate response for an otherwise ordinary occurrence. The thought of “seeing a rainbow is a good/pleasant/useful thing *for me*” together with that of “I happened to see a double rainbow through no effort or merit of my own” elicit a thankful response both because of the gratuitous and personal nature of the “gift”. This being one possible interpretation, what we want to note here is that non-directed gratitude is closely linked to the way one perceives and interprets events that occur independently of one’s own actions. We will discuss this in further length when we explore the phenomenology of gratitude.

To return to the matter of agency, Lacewing argues that in the case of non-directed gratitude, the emotion is still appropriate in the absence of intentional agency, as it still reveals the value that an unearned good has. And indeed, it seems that the requirement of agency becomes less exigent in this account. Based on this argument, Lacewing then proposes that gratitude for one's existence, outside of a theistic belief system, should at least be *not inappropriate*. This is so because non-directed existential gratitude, when it occurs, represents existence as being an undeserved good for the individual. This is not a misinterpretation in any way but rather "marks something of genuine value, in a culturally specific way" (Lacewing, 2016, p.11). Hence even if one does not believe in God, one can still be thankful for existence, and this wouldn't be an inappropriate emotional response.

Existential gratitude, according to the author, is different from all other instances of non-directed gratitude, in scope and in intensity. It is not the same to feel thankful for the timely arrival of the bus and to feel thankful for my existence. In the second case, the thoughts and emotions involved are much stronger and they encompass more than a moment's relief. According to Lacewing, existential gratitude means being "deeply struck by the undeserved, contingent nature of my existence, and its dependency on the wondrous fact of the existence of anything, the contingency of evolution, and the many activities of other living things and people" (Lacewing, 2016, p.160). Two features of existential gratitude are noteworthy here in relation to this research. First, it seems that there is an element of the sublime in the experience, while the mind tries to grasp the immensity of the good that is existence. As we will see later, it is worth investigating whether heightened emotions and the sublime are characteristic of certain experiences of non-directed, and more specifically of transpersonal

gratitude. Second, dependence on others and on existence in general, and the recognition of such a dependency has been mentioned by several authors trying to render an account of non-directed gratitude. In particular, R. Aronson has made a case of such dependence being an essential part of gratitude for life in non-theists, arguing that its acknowledgment replaces the need for a superhuman agent in considering life a gift (Aronson, 2009). In subsequent sections, we will be discussing the relevance of these features in the definition of transpersonal gratitude. For the moment, they seem to suggest that existential gratitude could be a form of transpersonal gratitude, focusing on a specific good: existence.

In conclusion, the accounts examined in this chapter all have different elements in common with the concept of transpersonal gratitude proposed in this research. Steidl's discussion of gratefulness gives a central place to the benefit, which seems to be necessarily linked to "something greater", inducing mental states similar to that of the sublime. However, his analysis insists that such a gratitude is of spiritual nature and limits his account to a religious understanding of thankfulness. Further, Steidl claims that this gratefulness is mainly an inner experience and does not entail any expression or grateful conduct. It is not clear why this should be the case; perhaps it is the greatness of the gift that makes it impossible to fathom any kind of return. But if the experience does not motivate some form of desire to benefit in turn, then the experience that Steidl refers to seems to be closer to joy and elevation rather than gratitude.

Some limitations are apparent in Walker's account as well, particularly when he claims that the grateful return must be directed towards other agents. I agree with McAleer that this is not a necessary condition. Grateful conduct, motivated by



what Walker calls a feeling of being “somehow favoured”, could very well be directed towards the natural environment and non-agents. However, his distinction between gratitude and gratefulness mostly agrees with the concept of transpersonal gratitude, as it refers to a modality of thankfulness in the absence of a benefactor, eliciting a recognition of being the recipient of a benefit and motivating the will to benefit in turn.

Similarly, propositional gratitude gives an account of thankfulness in the absence of a benefactor. However, the expression “being grateful that something is the case” does not cover an important condition of gratitude: that a benefit must be good for the individual concerned. Therefore, propositional gratitude appears to be too general, too loose, and very close to concepts of appreciation and gladness.

Finally, Lacewing’s account comes closest to the concept of transpersonal gratitude. It is focused on the salience of the gift in the individual’s experience and the role that emotions play in evaluating the object of gratitude. The difference between the two concepts is that Lacewing’s account is concerned with one particular benefit: existence. Therefore, existential gratitude cannot explain cases of transpersonal gratitude for different benefits and this is a limitation of the account.

Transpersonal gratitude therefore refers to a unique modality of thankfulness, despite the elements it shares with the accounts discussed here. The next chapter examines this uniqueness in terms of the absence of benevolent agency.

## Chapter Five

### Transpersonal Gratitude and Intention

Gratitude for something but to no one in particular is a concept that raises the challenge of defining a modality of gratitude in the absence of an intentional benefactor. This chapter addresses this matter to argue that the agency requirement can be rendered unnecessary by other factors defining this kind of gratitude. It also discusses the possibility of implicit attributions of intention in such cases, the role of intention in cases of unwitting benevolence and the particular instance of theistic gratitude in relation to transpersonal gratitude in terms of intention. The discussion is organised around the following themes:

- The matter of intention in the concept of gratitude and the factors that render the agency requirement unnecessary in cases of transpersonal gratitude.
- Implicit attributions of intentional agency.
- Unwitting agents.
- Theists and transpersonal gratitude.

#### 5.1. The matter of intention

Traditionally, intention is one of the most important elements in an exchange that involves gift and gratitude. The kind intention of the benevolent giver as well as the thankful intention of the beneficiary define the social and moral functions of gratitude in a triadic context of giver-gift-receiver. In philosophical literature, gratitude usually falls under the umbrella of the virtues of generosity and justice and a prominent role is given to intention as the expression of a virtuous moral

attitude. As a consequence of this perspective, moral philosophy focuses on the obligations and duties of gratitude, rather than the phenomenology of the experience. Experiences that include elements of thankfulness but don't satisfy the requirements of intentional agency have been, so far, explained away as appreciation or happiness.

Since Seneca, philosophers generally agree that it is only the presence of a kind intention on behalf of the benefactor that creates a duty of gratitude. It is in fact this intention that constitutes the real gift since it represents the kindness of one human towards another and gives the gift its unique value. Simmons (Simmons, 1979), Camenisch (Camenisch, 1981) and McConnell (McConnell, 1993) reprise this theme when they insist that the benefit must be intentional, otherwise there is no obligation of gratitude. On the one hand, a benefactor must have a selfless intention to help the beneficiary, and in this sense, intention embodies a generous and altruistic attitude towards another individual. In recognition of this kindness, the beneficiary responds – is expected to respond - with thankfulness, be it with words, actions or perhaps with only an intention to make a return when appropriate/possible. This is how gratitude comes to be part of the moral life.

In positive psychology, intention plays an equally important role, this time as the trigger of *feelings* of gratitude. The focus here is on the perception of a kind intention behind the actions of the benefactor, and the correlation between such perception and the intensity of the thankful feelings.

Empirical research in modern psychology seems to strengthen the position of importance that intention plays in an exchange of gift and thankfulness. Indeed, it suggests that the perception of a kind intention triggers feelings of gratitude,

and that the intensity of the feelings depends on the perceived effort from the benefactor's behalf. Early on, at its beginnings, Attribution Theory gave a very central place to this perception: "We do not feel grateful to a person who helps us fortuitously (...) Gratitude is determined by the will, the intention, of the benefactor" (Heider Fritz, 1958, p.265). In other words, we must be convinced that the other person intended to bestow a certain benefit on us, otherwise we would not feel thankful to them. In his paper on "An Attributional theory of Achievement Motivation and Emotion", B. Weiner quotes several experiments in social psychology to explain that "gratitude toward another is elicited if and only if the act of the benefactor was under volitional control and was intended to benefit the recipient" (Weiner, 1985, p.563). More recently, Tsang and McCullough reprise the theme of intention in relation to gratitude and, through a series of social psychology experiments, conclude that the perception of intention is what triggers feelings of thankfulness in the recipient, because it shows the degree of sacrifice and/or effort made by the benefactor (Tsang and McCullough, 2004).

Intention thus appears to be a most important element that defines and regulates a relationship of beneficence. Can we do away with intentional agency and still speak of gratitude for a benefit received? What would trigger feelings of thankfulness in that case, and would gratitude still have some moral importance?

#### *5.1.1. Gratitude in the Absence of Agency*

Investigating gratitude in the absence of intentional agency requires us to discuss it outside of a triadic context. Indeed, the difficulty of conceptualising gratitude

without factoring in intention is due to the focus on interpersonal relationships<sup>6</sup> with a clear equation of giver – gift – receiver (with a few exceptions in recent literature quoted in previous chapters). A change of perspective, with the *experience* of gratitude at the centre of our analysis rather than the social or religious situations where thankfulness arises/is required, might indicate that intention is not always a requirement nor is it always the trigger of grateful feelings.

For example, one blogger writes: “I personally do not think that a feeling of gratitude requires a “giver” to whom one is thankful. I may not believe in a god or “Creator”, yet when I look at the wonders of the world, I feel grateful in many difference ways. Looking at the stars above, I am grateful for the knowledge and appreciation of what I am actually seeing. I am moved by the majesty of the mountains and feel grateful for the ability to live in (or visit) a place with such beauty” (Quilt, 2011).

These experiences are not limited to times spent observing nature’s beauty or majesty. As we have seen in Nakhnikian’s example (Chapter Three), there are everyday life situations where we feel thankful but to no one in particular: he felt a “vast thankfulness” for his daughter escaping a car crash, and he describes it as a “feeling of thankfulness minus the belief that someone has done us a good turn” (Nakhnikian, 1961, p.159). Or consider what a blog reader says about something good happening unexpectedly: “There are times when the lights all go my way on the way home and I feel grateful for my good fortune. I am not about

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<sup>6</sup> To be understood here in the wider sense, including relationships not only to other humans, but also to God, to the Universe and any “other” who is attributed with the ability and will to bestow benefits.

to start worshipping traffic lights. I feel grateful for my situation” (Caz Fans – Greta, 2011).

What makes these experiences gratitude and not appreciation or happiness? Surely some instances are just cases of being happy for something good that comes into one’s life. For example, if I’m on a walk in the woods and I see a beautiful flower, I might feel a deep appreciation for the wonders of nature and for the aesthetic enjoyment that moment brings into my life. On the other hand, I could also feel thankful for it. In both cases, there is no giver or benefactor. What, then, makes for an experience of gratitude rather than appreciation?

In his analysis of non-theists’ gratitude for life, Lacewing suggests that appreciation makes the goodness of the object more salient, whereas gratitude brings its undeserved nature into focus (Lacewing, 2016). While this is a relevant differentiation between the two emotions, it does not completely explain gratitude in the absence of intentional agency. Upon seeing a beautiful flower, I am aware that I did not earn it or bring it about in any way. But this is not enough. Additional elements or conditions must be present for a conceptualisation of gratitude outside of a triadic context.

#### *5.1.1.1. The centrality of the gift*

As we have seen, in the traditional equation of benefit and gratitude, intentional agency plays a pivotal role. It overshadows the importance and value of the gift itself, in that it is the effort and the sacrifice made by the benefactor, as well as his intention to benefit, that shape the experience and expression of gratitude. Seneca goes as far as to say that the kind intention is the real gift, regardless of the material or objective benefit. While intention might indeed be the most

important factor in a triadic relationship of benevolence, it does not follow that in the absence of intentional agency a benefit loses its value as a trigger and cause of gratitude. Hence in trying to conceptualise transpersonal gratitude, we must first allow that in such cases where there is no benefactor, the gift/benefit keeps a central place. It is the context that changes from a triadic one to a dynamic interaction of several more factors involved in the experience of transpersonal gratitude. This is obvious in A.D.M. Walker's and McAleer's analyses of gratefulness and propositional gratitude respectively. They both consider the benefit (for example a sunny day, gratitude that heroes exist) and the surrounding circumstances to be responsible for feelings of gratitude in the absence of a benefactor (Walker, 1980; McAleer, 2012).

#### *5.1.1.2. Unexpected and/or unlikely*

Certain events in life seem more probable than others. If dark clouds are gathered in the sky, it will seem likely that it will rain. In the middle of winter, we expect cold days rather than hot, dry ones. We develop certain expectations based on what we learn about the world and our place in it, and this holds true about our relationships with other humans as well. For example, when we are in any kind of need, our expectations of help turn towards our family members and friends, rather than strangers. Similarly, if we were to wonder about the possibility of receiving an expensive birthday present, we would consider it more likely to come from a parent rather than one of the neighbours. Certain events are more probable than others, and certain people are more likely to benefit us than others. These expectations influence our experience of gratitude. On the one hand, we might assume that expected benefits are more likely to trigger gratitude. After all, it is a good thing to know that we can rely on a friend's support and this is

something to be thankful for. On the other hand, however, an unexpected benefit might be more likely to engender feelings of gratitude exactly because it occurs in the absence of other social relational factors such as commitment, friendship and duty. Recent research seems to support the latter: the more a benefit goes beyond one's social expectations, the higher the likelihood of it resulting in feelings of gratitude. As Ph. Watkins puts it in "Gratitude and the good life", there seems to be "an important surprise factor in gratitude: one is more likely to experience gratitude when a benefit surprises them" (Watkins, 2014, p.47). Watkins suggests that these results can be explained by the gratuitous nature of a gift: something that is given to us beyond our expectations (id.) Perhaps the surprise factor emphasises the unearned nature of the gift and this is more likely to trigger feelings of gratitude. This is not to say that predictable events cannot trigger gratitude in any way. My argument is that transpersonal gratitude refers to such cases where the benefit is personal, significant and unlikely at least to some extent.

We can find a similar perspective in theistic gratitude. In one of the Bible stories, Jesus explains to his disciple that those who are forgiven much are the most grateful. He tells the story of two men who are unable to repay their debts but are forgiven by their debtor. "Which one, then, will love him more?" "I supposed the one who was forgiven more" Simon replied. "You have judged correctly" Jesus said (Luke 7:43). This seems to suggest that those who have sinned most have the lowest expectations of receiving the gift of forgiveness, and they are the ones most prone to feel grateful when they are granted such a gift.

It might be objected that the one "who was forgiven more" is grateful not because of the unexpected or unlikely forgiveness, but because he had more to lose.



However, the corresponding emotional response to that particular recognition would be relief, not gratitude. That forgiveness has granted him such a relief is the trigger of gratitude, and that acknowledgement carries a speculation that such forgiveness was unlikely.

Therefore, the unexpected nature of a benefit appears to be a strong trigger of gratitude in both personal and theistic modalities. We will add that the same can be said about the unlikeliness of an event that brings some goodness into one's life: when such an event is considered unlikely, its occurrence is an unexpected benefit.

In the cases of personal and theistic gratitude, intentional agents (other humans or God) are credited with the unexpectedness of gift. They are the ones who surprise us and are the focus of feelings of thankfulness. But intentional agency is not a necessary condition for good things to happen, such as winning the lottery or suddenly finding the long-lost ring inherited from a beloved relative. In those instances where the benefit is unlikely and/or unexpected, gratitude can be triggered despite the absence of an intentional agent. What changes, once again, is the context in which the individual becomes the recipient of the gift: outside of a triadic relationship, the benefit takes on a more central role and when it goes beyond our expectations, it can elicit feelings of thankfulness, namely transpersonal gratitude.

One of the survivors of the 9/11 attack, Deb Feldman, describes her feelings of gratitude in the face of her unexpected and unlikely escape from the tragedy that struck the United States in 2001. "Even though I still carry grief and guilt, I have allowed myself to feel true gratitude for having survived (...) I'm thankful that my story is both remarkable and unremarkable – unremarkable because I escaped

without injury and have not had to make significant changes in my life's course because of what happened. But remarkable because it happened, and because I was there – and because I survived when so many did not" (Feldman, 2016).

The unlikelihood and the unexpectedness of surviving such an attack clearly gives rise to many complex emotions, of which gratitude for having stayed alive is one. In this example, the author does not identify an intentional agent who might have bestowed upon her the benefit of surviving. She does not attribute it to a benevolent God, nor to another human being as she says "I was at my desk when the first plane hit, on the stairwell when the second one did. Incredibly, I was a few blocks away by the time my building disintegrated and collapsed before my eyes" (Feldman, 2016). It is not clear who helped her and yet she feels thankful. This is a case of transpersonal gratitude where grateful feelings arise in recognition of the unlikely and unexpected nature of a great benefit. We can then argue that when a benefit takes central place in an individual's experience, and when this benefit goes beyond said individual's expectations, transpersonal gratitude is an appropriate response. The perception of an intentional agency is not a prerequisite of all experiences of gratitude.

#### *5.1.1.3. Significance*

In all modalities of gratitude, the benefit must have some significance for the receiver. It might satisfy a need or provide unexpected enjoyment. It might simply be significant because of the effort and intention of the benefactor. In all cases, we can hardly feel grateful for something that holds no value for us and/or which is given to us begrudgingly or by accident.

In the personal modality of gratitude, it is the intention of the benefactor that gives the gift its significance. Seneca argued that no matter what the objective value of

the gift, gratitude is only due when the benefactor is giving willingly, with the intention to benefit that specific person. This is also one of the conditions that McConnell proposes in identifying situations where gratitude arises and is due: The benefit must be intended *for* the beneficiary (McConnell, 1993). The intention of a benefactor not only shows willingness, selflessness and generosity, but also a choice to assist or benefit a certain beneficiary. It makes the benefit *personal* (id.). In some cases, the benefactor will know the beneficiary's needs first-hand, and choose to help them in specific ways that meet those needs. In other cases, this choice will take the form of fostering the well-being of individuals that are not personally known to the benefactor, but whose needs are known to her. For example, funding a scholarship aimed at helping individuals from a certain minority group still shows the choice to meet the needs of certain beneficiaries, thus making the benefit personal for those individuals who identify as members of said group.

The question we must answer, then, is what makes a benefit personal when there is no intentional agency behind it. The simplest answer is that a benefit brings some goodness into a recipient's life and experience, and therefore it must feel like a personal gain. But this does not fill the gap left by intentional agency. If I catch sight of a beautiful meteor shower while watching the starry sky, I might feel positively surprised and happy. But why should I feel thankful *for* it? Recognising the pleasure that such beauty brings to me does not seem enough to justify gratitude. Perhaps part of the answer comes from the unexpected and unlikely nature of this gift. But is this always enough to warrant a grateful response?

If we consider the above words of the 9/11 survivor, it will appear that the unlikelihood of the benefit reveals what we will call an “an awareness of what might not have been”. As Deb Feldman states, she could have perished with many others and yet she did not. Her survival and her life after that might not have been. Similarly, when I catch a glimpse of a meteor shower, I know that that moment might not have happened. In her depiction of her gratitude for her life, S. Quilt too adds: “(...) I do know that people can simply be at the wrong place at the wrong time. Given the number of calamities in which I would have very little control, I am grateful that I am still relatively safe and healthy” ( Quilt, 2011). Another blogger adds: “Being grateful is simply the recognition that what we have, did not have to be this way. If you look at the stars, they did not have to exist, or the earth could have been naturally so cloudy that one couldn’t see them if we wanted to, or even if there were no clouds, we could have been born blind. There is so much that did not have to be this way and anyone who is not able to see this is truly sad” (Acevedo, 2011). These all point to an awareness of not only the unlikelihood of a benefit, but also to an awareness that things could have happened differently, and the benefit might not have been at all. This awareness amplifies the significance of a benefit and makes it personal for the individual. Beyond the unexpectedness and the unlikelihood of a benefit, there is an awareness of a bigger picture, where coincidences come together to allow us to enjoy a certain benefit; events over which we have no control, that we have not earned or created in any way. To borrow A.D.M. Walker’s expressions, sometimes we find ourselves “somehow favoured” (Walker, 1980). In these instances, “it might not have happened, but it happened, and it happened to *me*” is a realisation that gives a greater significance to the gift as a personal benefit.

Psychological research seems to back this perspective. One experiment showed that when asked to reflect on their own deaths, subjects subsequently experience enhanced feelings of gratitude for their lives (Frias et al., 2011). Another project asked participants to mentally imagine the loss of a loved one or the absence of a benefit they enjoyed in their lives. The results indicated that after this mental exercise, the majority of the subjects reported feelings of gratitude for their lives and experiences (Algoe et al., 2008). While these experiments actively encouraged the subjects to contemplate “what might not have been”, we can argue that unexpected benefits similarly increase this awareness, opening the way to grateful feelings.

To return to our original question at the beginning of this section: can we do away with intentional agency and still speak of gratitude? It seems that transpersonal gratitude can be conceptualised as the appropriate response to a benefit which is unlikely and unexpected, unearned and significant. Those aren't features that are necessarily exclusive to benefits in the absence of intentional agency. But giving the benefit a central place and adopting a wider view of the experience of gratitude removes the absolute prerequisite of an intentional agency and allows transpersonal gratitude to be conceived as a third modality of gratitude.

A further question would be whether the absence of an intentional agent would diminish the moral and normative importance of gratitude. Does transpersonal gratitude have any moral significance? These questions will be discussed in Chapter Six which analyses the virtue of gratitude and the impact of transpersonal gratitude on moral choices and prosocial behaviour.

Having argued for transpersonal gratitude in the absence of intentional agency, we will now discuss some additional questions that might still arise regarding the perception or the attribution of intention.

## **5.2. Attribution of intention and transpersonal gratitude**

In an online interview about gratitude and thanksgiving, one of the editors of “The Psychology of gratitude”, M. McCullough, states that humans always look for agency behind events: “One of the things that’s really interesting about the human mind is that we seem to want to see agency in the world, almost intuitively (...) The mind really craves an explanation, for the good and the bad, in terms of agency” (Green and McCullough, 2014). We have a strong inclination to see agency even where there is no intentional agent, to perhaps presume a divine intervention when an unexpected benefit is bestowed upon us. In the case of transpersonal gratitude, this raises an interesting question: is there an underlying attribution of some vague form of benevolent intention that triggers feelings of thankfulness? Ph. Watkins suggests exactly that: “How can one attribute good intentions to a giver when there is no apparent giver? (...) I submit that in these situations the beneficiary is implicitly attributing benevolent intentions to some giver, whether it is a divine giver or a personalisation of forces such as luck” (Watkins, 2014, p.46) and later, while explaining why the majesty of nature would trigger feelings of gratitude, he adds: “it is possible that as people viewed these natural beauty scenes they became at least implicitly aware of the beauty given by a divine creator” (id.).

Consistent with theories of interpersonal gratitude, Watkins assumes that the experience of gratitude must necessarily entail an attribution or perception of

good intentions from an external agent. As we have seen, this is not a requirement in the wider context of transpersonal gratitude. However, the question of an implicit attribution remains, and if we are to examine it, we first need to understand how humans come to make attributions of intentions in the first place.

### *5.2.1. Intention and rational agency*

A study of the developmental stages of understanding agency and intention indicates that infants as young as 12 months old can understand an agent's intentional actions. In "Taking the intentional stance at 12 months of age", Gergely et al. argue that "infants' theory of agency (...) contains an assumption of rationality of actions" and that intention is inferred from observing goal-directed actions of a rational agent (Gergely *et al.*, 1995, p.172). Their research shows that when an infant observes an action that does not meet the requirement of rationality, she abandons the intentional analysis of the object's behaviour (Gergely *et al.*, 1995). Tomasello's research into cognitive development and language corroborates these results. He adds that around the age of 1, a "social cognitive revolution in the child's development makes it possible for her to perceive others as intentional agents whose attention, emotion and behaviour to outside objects may be actively followed into and shared" (Tomasello, 2010, p.154).

What this all means is that the inference of intention comes after the observation of the goal-oriented actions of a rational agent. If an agent's actions seem erratic, aimless or irrational, the search for an intention behind them is abandoned. In other words, if what I'm doing does not seem to make any sense, an observer will not be able to infer what my intentions are, nor that I did have intentions in

the first place. If we transpose this approach to a situation of benevolence and gratitude, it would seem to agree with the importance of intention in a triadic context.

Consider someone who falls in a river and is in danger of drowning. A passer-by stops and starts reciting poetry. Another one stops and proceeds to quickly removing his shoes. If we were to infer their intentions towards the drowning man, it is obvious that we would say the second passer-by intends to save him, whereas we wouldn't know what the first one is trying to achieve. One is choosing an optimal manner to reach a goal relative to a set of background conditions (Gergely, 1995), the other is not.

So, the inference of intentions is mostly dependent on an agent's actions satisfying the rationality requirement. This would make sense with personal gratitude. When someone's deliberate and goal-oriented actions help me, I infer their good intention from those actions and I feel thankful to them.

However, this equation is more difficult to apply when it comes to theistic gratitude. Indeed, God is not an agent that we can observe. His actions aren't visible to anyone, except through the results they produce. Believers must rely on their faith and trust that He is an agent with good intentions, whose rationale is not always in line with human thinking. In the case of theistic gratitude, then, inferring intentions from goal-oriented actions does not help. The goodness of God's intentions is a given, not something that needs to be speculated about.

With transpersonal gratitude, there is no agent to speak of. There is no possibility to infer intentions from an agent's actions. If we follow Tomasello's and Gergely's reasoning, the absence of a rational agent in itself would serve as a deterrent



from an intentional analysis of events. And it is not clear why we should assume that an “implicit attribution” is made, nevertheless.

### *5.2.2. Interpersonal and transpersonal contexts*

Watkins gives the example of a survivor of a tsunami as a case where there is no giver who rescues this survivor. He asks “how is an attribution of intention made” in this instance? And in an effort to explain the gratitude of such a survivor, he offers the argument of an implicit attribution of intention to a divine or personalised force (Watkins, 2014, p.46).

However, it is the question that creates the problem here. There is no need to ask, “how is an attribution of intention made?” because it is not necessarily true that an attribution was indeed made. It is only in an interpersonal context that the perception of a benevolent intention and the experience of gratitude are essentially linked. In a transpersonal context, gratitude is the product of a situation where the benefit and its unique features take a central place in the experience of the beneficiary. The transpersonal gratitude of a tsunami survivor is thus an appropriate response to such a situation. The attribution of benevolent intentions in the absence of agency becomes problematic only when we apply the conceptual frame of personal thankfulness to all modalities of gratitude.

### **5.3. Unwitting agents**

In the 1981 sci-fi movie *Time Bandits*, a young boy named Kevin is dragged into a time-travel adventure, meeting different popular and mythological figures from the past. In one of the scenes, while jumping from one period of time to another, Kevin lands in the middle of a battle between Agamemnon and a Minotaur.

Kevin's sudden arrival distracts the monster and Agamemnon slays it. Out of gratitude, the King befriends Kevin and decides to adopt him.

This is an example of a benefit bestowed unintentionally. Kevin has no control on when and where he travels to, and he had no intention of helping king Agamemnon. And yet his arrival creates a benefit to which the king responds with gratitude.

Another example of unintentional benefits could be the case of a woman who goes home having lost her job. She lives alone, and an empty house awaits her. While she is sitting contemplating a dark future, a friend who is unaware of her situation phones her to ask a question. The conversation continues for a while, after which the woman realises that she has been distracted from her gloomy thoughts and she is feeling better. At the end of the phone conversations, she thanks her friend for helping her overcome her desperation, even though her friend did not know about her plight and couldn't have called with the intention to alleviate her sadness. However, the benefit is there, and so is the grateful response.

In both of the above instances, gratitude is expressed in return for a benefit that is conferred unknowingly or by accident. In other words, the agency involved is unintentional. This gives rise to some questions about the nature of the gratitude triggered in such situations, and whether or not this gratitude is owed and appropriate.

### *5.3.1. Owing gratitude to unwitting agents*

Philosophical discussions of gratitude all link the duty and obligations of gratitude to the benevolent intention of the benefactor. As discussed it in the first section

of this chapter, the absence of intention removes the requirement of making a return. In a straightforward sense, this reasoning is valid: there is no reason why I should owe anything to someone who benefits me unwittingly, since they did not make any effort or sacrifice nor showed any kind intention towards me.

However, as McConnell puts it, something seems “morally amiss” when we are completely indifferent towards someone who has helped us, even unintentionally (McConnell, 1993). Perhaps this is not ingratitude in the proper sense, because no moral code is really broken. If the woman in our example had said nothing to her friend, even realising the benefit that the phone conversation brought her, we couldn’t judge her as ungrateful. But we wouldn’t praise her behaviour either. She hasn’t failed in terms of the morally right thing to do, but maybe there is more to say here about the morally *good* thing to do.

Imagine someone stranded in a strange neighbourhood far away from home. It is night-time and it’s raining. The streets are deserted, and the man is starting to worry about his own safety and health. Suddenly a friend comes driving along. Now consider two possibilities: 1/ this friend, having somehow realised that the man is late to return home, has spent the whole evening searching for him and finally found him to bring him home. 2/ this friend just happened to pass by that particular street on his way back from a party.

In the first instance, gratitude is a requirement. Whether the man feels it or not, it is a moral obligation to show thankfulness for his friend’s kind intention, including the time and effort spent to find him. Now the man might – probably will - also feel grateful, and relieved. But that is of secondary importance; as long as gratitude is expressed in some way, the duty is discharged.

In the second scenario, there is no obligation of gratitude. Said friend just happened to be there and perhaps he only stopped to have a chat with the man, not even realising that he was in trouble. If the man shows no sign of thankfulness, we cannot say that he has failed in his duty. However, we will find it strange and consider his behaviour somehow ungrateful. It seems that we make an inference about the man's character, rather than a judgment about his obligations in the given situation. It might not be morally wrong of him to not express any gratitude but it's certainly not morally good either. Alongside moral duties, virtues matter too. And that is why when someone does not show gratitude to an unwitting agent, we find that their moral failure is more of a character matter. Even Cicero and Seneca encourage benefactors to choose their beneficiaries wisely, i.e. to help individuals who are more likely to show gratitude, in other words individuals who are virtuous or at least are committed to living a virtuous life.

The question of owing gratitude to unintentional agents thus seems to have two different answers: deontologically speaking, no gratitude is owed to a benefactor in the absence of a kind intention. But in terms of moral character, gratitude is not necessarily conditioned by intention. We don't owe it to an unwitting agent but when it is there nevertheless, it is the sign of a virtuous character.

### *5.3.2. The modality of gratitude towards unwitting agents*

What is the modality of gratitude towards an unintentional benefactor? Can it be considered transpersonal by virtue of the absence of intention?

Transpersonal gratitude is thankfulness for a benefit to no one in particular. It is not only intention that is absent from this equation, but agency too. The survivor of the 9/11 attack did not feel grateful to someone who helped them unknowingly

or accidentally: she feels grateful *for* having survived but her gratitude does not have a specific focus. She is not thankful *to* someone for their intentional or unintentional actions.

On the other hand, gratitude to an unwitting agent does have a focus. The man in our example is grateful *to* his friend *for* his albeit unintentional, help. Even in the absence of a kind intention, this is still personal gratitude as it is directed towards an agent.

However, this same situation can also produce gratitude that goes beyond the agent. For the sake of clarity of concepts, we must distinguish this gratitude from the personal one. If the man is thankful *that his friend was there* – by some coincidence or chance – then McAleer’s concept of propositional gratitude would apply and McAleer would be right to suggest that it is the same sense of gratitude, at times targeted and at times not (McAleer, 2012).

#### **5.4. Theists and transpersonal gratitude**

As benefits come into one’s life in different ways and through different channels, we can argue that more than one modality of gratitude is experienced by an individual during their lifetime. For example, one can feel personal gratitude towards a neighbour for helping them move houses. At another time, the same individual can experience transpersonal gratitude for surviving life-threatening disease. Yet again, upon hearing that a doctor helped his daughter at the site of a car crash, he might feel propositional gratitude that the doctor was there. It appears that most modalities of gratitude aren’t mutually exclusive.

A separate case, however, must be made about theistic and transpersonal modalities of gratitude. Transpersonal gratitude is a response to benefits that occur in the absence of intentional agency. But if there is a belief in an omnipotent and omnipresent God, it does not seem possible to still feel “somehow favoured” by no one in particular. Accepting the pervasive, immanent agency of God means that everything that happens, including benefits that come into one’s life, must be credited to God’s will. For any benefit that one feels thankful *for*, God provides a focus. And this is true about great and small benefits alike.

When Nakhnikian describes his daughter’s highly unlikely escape from a fatal car accident, he says that had he believed in God, he would have lit candles to thank Him for saving his little girl. However, he is not a believer and he just embraces the “vast feeling of thankfulness” that the benefit has left him with (Nakhnikian, 1961). This seems to suggest that a “cosmic feeling of thankfulness” is what replaces theistic gratitude for non-theists who receive an unexpected gift in the absence of intentional agency. In “Counting blessings: Towards a Spiritual Virtue of Gratitude”, D. Carr argues for a secular analogue to theistic gratitude, in an attempt to account for feelings of gratitude that non-believers experience “for the good things that have generally come their way and which they can also see might not have come their way” (Carr, 2016, p.171). This modality that Carr calls spiritual gratitude is defined by the transpersonal nature of the benefits that prompt the grateful emotion: a beautiful sunset, one’s good health, a haunting Beethoven sonata (id.). We discuss this account’s implications on our understanding of a virtue of gratitude in Chapter Six. For now, we will consider it evidence of the intuition that theistic and transpersonal modalities of gratitude are indeed mutually exclusive. The absence of intentional agency is an essential

condition of transpersonal gratitude and theistic gratitude cannot incorporate this absence without becoming non-theist.

We will conclude this chapter with a highlight of an argument that appears throughout this research in different discussions: that frequently, the confusion around the conceptualisation of gratitude and the difficulty of a unified account stem from an effort to apply a triadic framework to the concept. Thus, for example, McAleer's attempt to satisfy the agency requirement in his account of propositional gratitude removes the focus and discriminatory qualities of gratitude and renders the concept so loose as to be almost reduced to appreciation (McAleer, 2012). In turn, Watkins argues that gratitude in the absence of a benefactor is only seemingly non-targeted and that there is, underlying the experience, an implicit attribution of intention or agency to personalised forces of the physical world (Watkins, 2014). However, it is unnecessary to restrict the conceptualisation of gratitude with such requirements. As we have seen so far, several other elements such as the salient personal significance of the gift, its unexpectedness and unlikelihood and an awareness of what might not have been can provide a context within which both dyadic and triadic modalities of gratitude can be understood.

With that in mind, the next chapter examines expressions of transpersonal gratitude in the absence of a benevolent agent.

## Chapter Six

### Expressions of Transpersonal Gratitude

*“Gratitude, that delightful emotion of love  
to him who has conferred a kindness on us”*

*- Thomas Brown,*

*Lectures on the Philosophy of the Human Mind, 1851.*

As previous chapters argued, transpersonal gratitude is thankfulness for a benefit in the absence of a benevolent giver. This modality of gratitude goes beyond relationships marked by personal reciprocity and social bonding. The question that we need to address now is that of the recipient of such an emotion. Indeed, if there is no benefactor, what is the target of transpersonal gratitude? In an attempt to answer this question, the present chapter first examines psychological and philosophical accounts of appraisal, action tendencies and upstream reciprocity. It also discusses the expression of transpersonal gratitude from a moral perspective of appropriateness. These discussions are organised into the following sections:

- The wish to make a return.
- Transpersonal gratitude: to whom?
- The three movements of transpersonal gratitude.
- The moral perspective on expressions of transpersonal gratitude



## 6.1. The wish to make a return

Gratitude is expressed through returns made to the benefactor. The wish to make a return is an integral part of the experience and is specific to gratitude as an other-oriented, positive emotion.

Psychological research on the link between emotions and actions has established that emotions influence actions by offering an appraisal of an event. In any given situation, the emotional response evaluates whether the circumstances are of concern to our well-being or not, and whether they are good for us or not. While the higher cognitive functions process an event in terms of more complex individual, social and moral codes, the emotional response lays the groundwork for possible actions. Emotions thus influence actions in two ways: action tendency and decision to act. In terms of expressions of gratitude, what interests us here are the action tendencies, defined as “states of readiness” to perform and execute certain actions in certain ways that are appropriate to the feeling (Zhu and Thagard, 2002). For example, the action tendency for fear can be an avoidance behaviour, such as running away or hiding; for anger, it might be a readiness to aggressive behaviour. It must be added that for humans, the action does not necessarily follow that readiness to act, as humans have developed the ability to manage their emotional responses and/or postpone expression or gratification (Frijda, 1987).

Applying this appraisal theory approach to gratitude, McCullough and collaborators have suggested that gratitude, due to its adaptive and evolutionary history, is an emotion with a specific action tendency “to contribute to the welfare of the benefactor (or third party) in the future (McCullough *et al.*, 2001). Similarly, P. Fitzgerald underlines this tendency integral to gratitude when he describes its

“three components: 1/ A warm sense of appreciation for somebody or something; 2/ A sense of good will towards that individual or thing; 3/ A disposition to act which flows from appreciation and good will” (Fitzgerald, 1998, p.120). Finally, in his paper “Gratitude and Gratefulness”, A.D.M. Walker suggests that “What distinguishes being grateful from being (merely) pleased or glad is the grateful person’s desire to make a return” (Walker, 1981, p.49).

What follows from this is that alongside the recognition of a benefit and the intention of the benefactor, the will to make a return is one of the defining elements of the experience of gratitude. Social and other conditioning elements will shape its expression in time into actions appropriate to the feeling. Even when the action corresponding to the feeling is not immediately initialized, the disposition stemming from the emotional appraisal remains. It is thus possible for a beneficiary to wait for the right time or right circumstances to repay a favour to his benefactor.

This is indeed observable in real life situations. In his Memoirs, the Armenian author S. Vratsian relates the story of a poor boy, K., from a remote village who had a great desire to go to school and further his studies. Not having the means to pay his tuition fees, at 14, he has no choice but to refuse the place allocated to him in a city college and resigns himself to become an apprentice for the local metalsmith. However, a last minute benevolent gesture from one of the wealthier villagers allows him to pursue his dream. In that moment, the 14 year old boy has no way to discharge his gratitude other than orally expressing his thankfulness. Years later, however, the occasion presents itself. The previously destitute boy becomes a well-educated and successful company owner. With the changes in political realities, the benevolent villager has lost his wealth and his own son is

left to beg for food. Learning of their misery, K. reaches out and helps them in every way he can, providing them with work and shelter. When they try to thank him, he says “no, this is *my* gratitude”. (S. Vratsian, 1963, Vol. 3).

Perhaps it is precisely *because* gratitude does not have to be discharged right away that its moral aspect becomes evident, through its reflective and deliberative qualities. More than the immediacy of the grateful response, it is its appropriateness that matters and the fact that the obligation is fulfilled when possible.

This is a favourite theme with Seneca, for whom the wish or the willingness to make a return mattered much more than the thankful act itself. Not to say that a grateful feeling completely repaid the kindness in his perspective, but as long as the will to make a return is there, the thankful action can wait until the right time. And if the right time never comes, if circumstances never arise to allow a beneficiary to repay a favour, then the obligation of gratitude is still considered discharged if the gift was received with grace and the intention of making a return made clear.

We are back to the importance of intention, this time from the perspective of the thankful individual. Most authors agree that a debt of gratitude must be repaid with the intention of contributing to the welfare of the benefactor. As Th. Brown puts it in *Lectures on the Philosophy of the Human Mind*, “(...) to be assiduous in repaying what can be repaid not from an eager wish to shake off the obligations, which is truly in itself a species of ingratitude, but from the sincere desire of increasing the happiness of one who is sincerely loved, and who has given so much reason to love him” (Th. Brown, 1851, p.340). First, we have to repay what can be repaid. Beneficiaries don’t have to make as big a return as the gift was.

Just intending to make a return and doing our best is good enough to satisfy the requirement of returns. Second, this must be done with the clear motivation to meet the needs and desires of our benefactor, in other words, to “return the love”. Needless to say, if we are making a return just to be rid of our burden of gratitude, then it is not gratitude at all. “Returning the love” also satisfies the requirement of “commensurate return” put forward by McConnell (McConnell, 1993). This is different from the equal return point of view, where a beneficiary must make a return that is equal in value and cost to the benefactor. The problem with such an approach is that 1) some debts of gratitude might become virtually impossible to discharge (id.) and 2) it registers gratitude more in an exchange of commodities and services rather than benevolence and generosity. The commensurate return approach, on the other hand, focuses on returning the kind intention. The benefactor’s kind intention must be repaid by an action that shows the same type of intention from the beneficiary: to add goodness into the life of the recipient, by helping them meet their needs or desires.

Let’s take the example of organ donations. Recipients of the organs almost always express feelings of thankfulness to the donor and their families, despite usually sad circumstances surrounding the donation. On an Australian organ donation website, a recipient shares his feelings about the moment he was told that a matching organ was found: “It’s impossible to describe the roller coaster of emotions that phone call triggered, but at the top of the kaleidoscope was a mixture of relief and immense gratitude, to the donor and their family. Thanks to them my daughters would have a father and my wife a husband” (Chwal, 2015). On the same website, another recipient states: “Of course, transplantation is impossible without our selfless donor families. And for this reason, all recipients are eternally grateful for their gracious gifts” (id.). The list of testimonies goes on

and gratitude is always part of the emotions that are expressed by the recipients. If we were to adopt the equal return point of view, gratitude would require that these individuals make a somewhat equal return to their benefactors. But that would make their obligation of gratitude impossible to satisfy since they cannot give an organ in return or give life back to the donor. But if they were to make a commensurate return, by showing equal kindness of intention towards the donor families, then they could support them through very hard times, for example, or give them any aid that they might need. The requirements of gratitude owed would thus be fulfilled.

Another example of how the equal return point of view is problematic can be found in filial gratitude and obligations. There is much debate about whether children do owe any gratitude to their parents or if parents owe their children the care and support that they need. But let's say that one does feel grateful towards his parents even if he does not owe it to them, how is one to repay such a debt? From the equal return point of view, this is impossible. It is not only that it's an unsurmountable challenge to measure the cost and sacrifice invested by parents in the upbringing of their children. Even if such a feat was possible, would gratitude mean to pay them back the amount of money that covers their costs, time and effort? That would seem more like a completed transaction rather than a debt of gratitude discharged. On the other hand, if a person were to grow up with loving parents and then equally lovingly look after them in their old age, this would be more likely to be considered an expression of his gratitude. Thus, the commensurate return view is more adequate to describe expressions of thankfulness where the beneficiary shows a recognition of the gift and an intention to contribute to the welfare of the benefactor as well. The material debt must be repaid when possible, but its value is not only in reciprocating the gift,

but also in the kind intention that motivates it. It is in this sense that A.D.M. Walker places gratitude closer to generosity than justice: “Gratefulness (...) is not a matter of somehow wanting to “equalise” a situation (...) The grateful return has about it a gratuitous and indefinite quality which aligns it with generosity rather than justice. This is especially clear when gratefulness lacks a personal focus, and there is no particular person whom the grateful man wants to favour” (Walker, 1981, p.50).

#### *6.1.1. Expressions focused on other persons and God*

Through this discussion, the wish to make a return appears as an essential aspect of gratitude, motivating and targeting its expression towards the benefactor. Indeed, the two main modalities of gratitude that philosophy and psychology have mostly concerned themselves with are personal and theistic gratitude, the first directed towards another human individual and the second towards God or a divine entity. In both cases, the wish to make a return is the expression of a disposition to benefit the “other”, a human individual or a divine one. This wish materialises in different forms, depending on circumstances, possibilities and personal beliefs/values.

Expressing personal gratitude means showing thankfulness towards the person who benefited us. If a friend offers to replace the babysitter who cancelled last minute, thus making sure I don't miss a crucial meeting at work, then my gratitude will be directed towards her. I will be thankful to my friend and I might express my gratitude by one day returning the favour, or by being there for her when she needs support of any kind. In the final scene of “It's a Wonderful Life”, the main protagonist, George, is thankful to the townspeople who come together and raise

enough money for him to avoid jail time. Personal gratitude is clearly targeted towards the benefactor as the source of a benefit.

The focus of theistic gratitude is obvious too. Gratitude is directed towards God as the provider of benefits in one's life. The expression of this gratitude takes form as prayers, spreading the word of God and obeying His commands. In several places, the Bible encourages praise as a valued practice of thanksgiving: "Oh that men would praise the Lord for his goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men!" (Psalm 107:8). Showing gratitude to God can also be accomplished by benefiting other individuals and helping those in need in His name. This is still targeted gratitude, with a clear focus on a divine benefactor. In both instances of personal and theistic gratitude, the wish to make a return finds the appropriate object of the feelings of gratitude as being the benevolent intentional agent at the source of the benefit.

It is worth asking whether a debt of personal gratitude can be discharged to a third party, much in the same way obligations of gratitude towards God can be expressed by focusing on other individuals. If an anonymous benefactor helps a family pay the hospital expenses for their child who is battling cancer, and if later on the child's parents, grateful for the generous though anonymous gift, decide to start a fund to in turn help other children in similar situations, is their obligation of gratitude discharged? Simply applying the rules of requirement – according to which the grateful return must meet (at least some of) the benefactor's needs and desires – does not help. The benefactor is not there, and it is impossible to meet or satisfy any need that they might have. Perhaps starting a fund is a way of celebrating their generosity and this might be considered a gift in return. But what if the anonymous donor did not want a celebration? What if they stayed

anonymous because they did not want a public recognition? Again, the question remains about the discharge of such a gratitude. Perhaps in some cases, when the intention of making a return is commensurate to the generous intention of the benefactor, any action that stems from it and that benefits others can be considered not only an expression of gratitude but also a fulfilment of the duties of gratitude.

This is still personal gratitude, since the recipients are thankful *to* someone for their generosity, even if they have never met. But such cases show the complexity of the phenomenon of gratitude and raise questions about the centrality of the benefactor in expressions of gratitude.

## **6.2. Transpersonal Gratitude: to whom?**

Bringing together what has been discussed so far, we can now discuss the matter of a grateful response in cases of transpersonal gratitude, where there is no benefactor to speak of and no intentional agency behind a benefit.

### *6.2.1. The wish to make a return in the absence of a benefactor*

The first question relates to the wish to make a return as the motivating disposition behind any thankful action or expression. Since this wish focuses on the benefactor in cases of personal and theistic gratitude, will it still be there if there is no benefactor to speak of? To answer this, we must separate the roots of the wish to make a return from its materialisation. In other words, we need not assume that, since the wish to make a return focuses on the benefactor in most cases, it only arises in response to the intentional kindness of another agent. The



wish to make a return is not there *because* of the benefactor. As we have seen at the beginning of this chapter, recent research shows that a readiness to contribute to the welfare of the benefactor *or a third party* is an action tendency specific to the emotion of gratitude (Emmons, 2004). It is there whenever gratitude arises. It is the rise of the emotion of gratitude that has strong links with the intentional agency of a benefactor, or, in psychological terms, it is the appraisal of the situation as being good for our welfare and resulting from another person's actions that prompts feelings of thankfulness. But even then, we have argued in Chapter Four, a benefit can take central place in the experience of gratitude and factors such as unexpectedness and significance can be enough to trigger the emotion in the absence of an intentional agent. Perhaps the wish to make a return finds a reasonable and easy focus in personal and theistic modalities of gratitude, but when a benefit elicits gratitude, the action tendency specific to the emotion is present too, regardless of whether there is a benefactor or not. Perhaps we have assumed, based on a long tradition in philosophy, that the wish to make a return is linked to the kind benefactor's intentions and actions; but phenomenologically speaking, there is nothing to suggest such a restrictive condition.

### *6.2.2. The recipient(s) of transpersonal gratitude?*

It remains to understand how the wish to make a return finds a focus in the absence of an intentional benefactor. Several authors, who otherwise don't agree on the nature and object of what we call transpersonal gratitude, try to answer the same question: to whom do we express gratitude when there is no giver of the benefit?

Hlava and Elfers suggest that the “desire to reciprocate the receipt of perceived benefit may be accomplished in a *pay it forward* moral life. Passing along the blessings or the benefits that one has received to others who were not the source of the benefits helps to complete the cycle of reciprocity. This pay it forward strategy, also known as upstream reciprocity, is one of the possible motivations for altruistic behaviour” (Hlava and Elfers, 2016, p.117). Candace Vogler takes a similar perspective when she talks about expressing gratitude for her blessings or the joy she experiences in nature: “In transpersonal gratitude, I seek to carry the good I enjoy forward in a way that will benefit people I will never meet in ways that go beyond what I can imagine. Knowing the centrality of education to the life that I have made, I seek to support educational institutions and policies that will benefit young people after I am gone by opening possibilities for them that I cannot foresee. Knowing the joy, peace and pleasure I have had by having opportunities to spend time in nature, I support efforts to produce and nurture green spaces in my city, where people I may never meet may benefit in more ways that I know by being able to take a walk under the trees” (Vogler, 2015).

Hlava and Elfers are speaking of transpersonal gratitude for benefits received from “otherworldly sources” (Hlava and Elfers, 2016, p.117). Their definition of transpersonal gratitude tries to account for instances of thankfulness that are spiritual but non-religious in nature. By this they mean sources of benefits “that are unclear or unavailable” or “elusive and less objectified” (id.). The difficulty in this definition is that it is not very clear. The authors seem to still attribute some form of agency to the elusive source of benefits. Is the benefactor the universe? Immaterial beings? In terms of the challenge of expressing gratitude to such a source, this is more akin to the situation of an anonymous benefactor rather than an absence of agency altogether.

In Vogler's examples of transpersonal gratitude, the source of the benefits she enjoys are people she could never meet as they are her ancestors, or "indefinitely many strangers whose lives and deaths produced or prop up the world I trust and enjoy" (Vogler, 2015). The way she expresses this gratitude is commensurate to the gift she feels she has received, as she takes actions aiming to make the world trustworthy and enjoyable for others too. Does Vogler attribute a form of intentional agency to her ancestors and the many strangers who made the world what it is now? At first glance, it seems that her account does not include such an agency. But if she sees herself as an agent who deliberately wants to benefit those who come after her, then it is not clear why we shouldn't assume the same about those who came before her. Again, it is the elusiveness of the source of her benefit, rather than the absence of agency that prompts the search for third-party recipients of gratitude.

In that sense, and despite disagreements on the definition of transpersonal gratitude, both accounts stand as good examples of how the wish to make a return is not dependent on the source of benefits and how it can materialise into action by finding its focus in other people around the beneficiary.

This seems to be A.D.M. Walker's conclusion as well. Arguing that gratitude to no one in particular should be considered gratefulness, Walker suggests that the expression of such a gratitude has only one condition: "The only limit, then, on the content of the grateful return is that it consist of non-obligatory action done to benefit, help, please etc another person. But this is enough to secure a close link between gratefulness and good will" (Walker, 1981, p.50). In other words, if gratitude without focus is expressed towards third parties, this is enough to show the kind intention of the beneficiary in making some form of return for benefits

received from no one in particular. And in the perspective of the commensurate return, this is an appropriate discharge of the feelings of gratitude. We will discuss the appropriateness of such expressions in a later section. What needs to be underlined here, is that the wish to make a return does not disappear when there are benefits in the absence of intentional agency. Moreover, it seems that most authors on the subject agree that a natural– and perhaps appropriate – expression of such gratitude is to “pay it forward”.

Indeed, if the wish to make a return is a flexible disposition that is not conditioned by the identity of the benefactor or its existence, then benefiting others because we feel somehow favoured might be a good way to express transpersonal gratitude. However, we must be careful not to consider this an answer to the question “to whom?”. When I win the lottery and feel so grateful that I want to in turn help my fellow human beings, I am not being thankful *to them*. I am still grateful *to no one* in particular but expressing my thankfulness by benefiting others (who had nothing to do with my winning the lottery).

Robert Solomon’s approach presents a tempting answer to the question “to whom” to be grateful when there is no benefactor. Solomon suggests that the question itself is misplaced in the case of a cosmic gratitude for one’s life as a whole, but his argument does not have to be limited to a particular object of gratitude. Indeed, it is not only a good life or existence that can trigger transpersonal gratitude, but other benefits as well such as missing a flight that subsequently crashes, meeting the right person at the right time when in need of help. Solomon’s argument is that this kind of gratitude has to be severed from interpersonal emotions: “We should reject the easy move from gratitude as an interpersonal social emotion to cosmic gratitude for one’s whole life. This may

make good sense for a theist (...) And one can, of course, personify the universe as Camus does, but I think there is another solution more radical in that it severs gratitude for one's life altogether from the interpersonal emotions" (Solomon, 2007, p.270). In other words, trying to define transpersonal gratitude in the same terms as interpersonal gratitude is what creates the problem of the recipient of such a gratitude. As argued in Chapter Four, we have to allow for gratitude outside of triadic contexts, and outside of morally and socially defined situations of benevolence and returns. This modality of gratitude, according to Solomon, is linked to humility and the awareness of one's place in the world. Other authors, namely McAleer and Lacewing, make the same suggestion. This argument is relevant to transpersonal gratitude as we will reprise it in Chapter Seven.

For the moment, it appears that transpersonal gratitude is not expressed *to* anyone in particular. Rather, it finds expression through third parties, by benefiting those around us that had no agency in the benefit we received, but out of gratitude *for* it. In an old Bedouin folktale, it is said that a man had seven daughters and he was desperately hoping for a son to become his heir and continue the family name. When, after long years, his wife gave birth to a son, the man started to shout, "I am lucky, I am blessed!" and, out of gratitude for his blessing, he distributed money to his neighbours and the beggars sitting outside his tent. The story goes on about the adventures of his son, but our interest here is in the expression of the father's gratitude. Assuming his gratitude wasn't to God (there is no mention of this in the tale), this is an example of transpersonal gratitude to no one in particular – after all, no one had any intentional agency in the child's gender being male – but focused on benefiting third parties as an expression of thankfulness for what the man perceives as a gift.

### 6.3. The Three movements of transpersonal gratitude

In his book “Thanks! How the new science of gratitude can make you happier”, Psychologist Robert Emmons defines two basic stages of gratitude: First, the acknowledgment of a goodness in life, and second, the recognition that the source of this benefit lies outside of the self (Emmons, 2007). Emmons mostly discusses personal gratitude, but these two stages can be a start to defining the three movements of transpersonal gratitude<sup>7</sup>.

#### 6.3.1. *Recognition of a benefit, no source*

As with all grateful experiences, the first stage is that of a recognition of something good happening in one’s life. This can be a specific benefit like an unexpected gift or a general realisation of having a good life. This first step of recognition includes the emotional appraisal of an event as positive in terms of personal welfare. In personal and theistic gratitude, this is when the source of the benefit is identified as having good intentions and lying outside of the self. In the case of transpersonal gratitude, there is no identification of an intentionally benevolent agent, but the realisation that the source of the benefit is outside of the self is there. In other words, in the first stage of transpersonal gratitude, the beneficiary is aware that any benefit that has occurred in their experience wasn’t the result of their own effort, it wasn’t earned.

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<sup>7</sup> I am calling these movements and not stages, because the focus is not on the order in which they occur but rather on the phenomenological structure of the experience.

### *6.3.2. The willingness to make a return and the search for a recipient*

As transpersonal gratitude arises in response to a benefit, it is accompanied by the action tendency specific to gratitude: the disposition to add to the welfare of the benefactor. But since in this case there is no benefactor, the disposition to make a return is a readiness to act in the benefit of third parties, or just a good will to somehow reciprocate, do good in turn.

### *6.3.3. Expression*

While expressing transpersonal gratitude, the wish to make a return focuses on all potential recipients who could benefit from a favour or help. Thus, instead of a benefactor receiving thanks from the beneficiary, we have a grateful individual whose wish to make a return motivates benevolent actions towards individuals who weren't otherwise connected to the original benefit. This specific modality of expression of transpersonal gratitude might be linked to feelings of connectedness with other human beings, as well as empathy and sympathy as motivators of pro-social moral choices.

## **6.4. The moral perspective on expressions of transpersonal gratitude**

Discussing expressions of transpersonal gratitude means we also need to ask the questions related to moral conditions, namely if transpersonal gratitude can be owed and if it can, what its requirements are.

### *6.4.1. "You should be thankful for your blessings"*

The requirement of owing gratitude is based on the premise of a benevolent benefactor benefiting the recipient. In personal and theistic gratitude, we owe a

debt of gratitude to those who, through their kind intentions, bestow benefits upon us. Ignoring their intentions and actions is considered morally reprehensible, and ingratitude a moral vice. How much of these considerations can be applied to transpersonal gratitude? in the absence of intentional agency, can this modality of gratitude be a moral requirement? Am I ungrateful if I win the lottery and act entitled instead of thankful? Or upon witnessing a beautiful sunset, do we owe gratitude – to no one – but can this modality of gratitude be owed?

The challenge of understanding whether gratitude can be owed or not, as we have seen, comes from the fact that whereas feelings cannot be requirements, their absence can nevertheless be somewhat morally amiss. We have already argued that when it comes to the emotion itself, gratitude can at best be cultivated, not required. However, its expressions are morally and socially expected, regulated. So, with personal and theistic gratitude, we can allow that even when one is not feeling thankful towards one's benefactor, one should still show gratitude and even if something is morally amiss in the absence of emotions, the obligations of gratitude are still considered fulfilled.

Can the same be said about transpersonal gratitude? In terms of feelings of thankfulness, the recommendation of cultivating gratitude stands. That is the most that can be expected without claiming that emotions can be requirements. But the issue here is that even if we separate thankful feelings from thankful expressions, we can hardly explain why the expression matters, morally speaking. If the purpose of grateful expressions is to encourage more generosity, then expressions of transpersonal gratitude have no moral importance: there is no one to encourage to give more, or again. Perhaps we are not required to express transpersonal gratitude after all. When someone considers all the good



things they have in their life and are filled with gratitude for them, they are not required to say thank you to anyone nor to make any kind of return.

However, this kind of “owing” is only suitable as a requirement for personal and theistic gratitude. As argued above, we need not apply to transpersonal gratitude the principles of social morality by which we understand personal gratitude, since transpersonal gratitude does not register in interpersonal exchanges. Perhaps if we look into this problem bearing in mind what the absence of intentional agency means in this context, we can better grasp how the expression of transpersonal gratitude has moral implications.

As it has been said in almost every account of personal gratitude, the intention of the benefactor is what makes a certain action a gift or a benefit. It is not a gift if a benefit is bestowed with the purpose of assuring some kind of gain for the benefactor, for example. In the absence of an intentional agent, we have seen that the benefit takes central place in the experience of gratitude. And although the benefit itself has certain specific features (such as unlikeliness, unearned etc), the perception of the beneficiary plays a major role in giving it significance as a gift. This perception is present in personal gratitude too, of course, but it shares its gift-defining role with the intention of the benefactor.

To clarify this argument, let’s compare two versions of a scenario where someone is standing at the edge of a cliff, looking at the scenery when he suddenly loses his balance and is in danger of falling off the cliff. In the first version of this scenario, another person who happens to be there notices the man’s plight and holds him back, saving his life. In the second version, the man is alone on the cliff but as he loses his balance, a sudden gust of wind pushes him in the other

direction, with enough strength for him to find back his balance and stand on his feet.

In both situations, the benefit is that the life of the man was saved. He did not fall off the cliff to his death in the first version thanks to the stranger's action, and in the second version through an unexpected set of circumstances. In the first version, the benefit is a gift not only because it's good for the man, but also because of the kindness of the stranger. It's true that most of us consider it a moral duty to save someone's life if we can, but this stranger could have been scared to fall off the cliff himself or paralysed by the horror of what he was witnessing, or he could have even not cared whether the man died or not. But he did care, and he did take action with the intention of saving the man's life, perhaps even risking his own by getting too close to the edge. His benevolence probably triggers a grateful response from the man he saved, and if the latter just walks off without even showing some gratitude – regardless of how he felt – we would judge him as ungrateful. In this case of personal thankfulness, gratitude is expected and owed to the benefactor.

In the second version, where the benefit is the same, the circumstances surrounding it are different. First, there is no saviour with intentional agency. We cannot assume that the man would feel grateful without the recognition of someone else's effort and kindness. Perhaps he will just feel glad that he did not die. But *if* gratitude arises, it is transpersonal gratitude, as it is thankfulness for having escaped death but to no one in particular. Second, if the man feels grateful, it is based on his own perception of the unlikeliness and significance of the circumstances that saved his life. Those circumstances could not have happened, it could have been a windless day or in his panic, he might not have

managed to find his balance. As the benefit takes central place in the absence of an agent, the man's awareness of what happened and of what might not have been triggers his gratitude. This gratitude is not owed in the way he would owe it to the stranger who saves his life. If the man leaves the cliff just glad to have survived, we wouldn't judge him to be ungrateful. But imagine that as he tells of his misadventure to his friends, he displays a complete lack of recognition of the unlikeliness of the circumstances that came together and saved him. Someone might then tell him "you should be thankful for having survived", reminding him of the significance of the gift that came into his experience. This is akin to correcting the man's perspective, redirecting his perception towards the fact that he has been somewhat favoured and that this is something to recognise with thankfulness.

On the one hand, transpersonal gratitude cannot be owed. On the other hand, however, it seems to be expected as an expression of the recognition of benefits in one's life. Perhaps this expectation is based on an intuition: that acknowledging positive and unlikely occurrences as gifts says something about our moral character, our ability to receive graciously and an openness to the goodness in the world, all desirable traits for a virtuous and good life. Being very closely linked to an individual's personal interpretation of events, transpersonal gratitude is not owed as an obligation, but it is a morally desired manifestation of good will and humility.

#### *6.4.2. Appropriate expressions of transpersonal gratitude*

Generally, when we talk about the appropriate expression of gratitude, we mean what McConnell formulates as "a return commensurate to the needs and desires

of the benefactor” (McConnell, 1993, p.58). We also take into consideration factors such as timing and not being overzealous. In other words, an appropriate grateful return demonstrates some form of practical wisdom, where the grateful agent knows to express himself or herself at the right time, in the right commensurate way, under the right circumstances. In cases of personal gratitude, this is usually an achievable goal and as long as it stems from a genuine desire to enhance the welfare of the benefactor, the grateful return fulfils the duties of gratitude. If I am grateful to my friend for looking after my grandmother for three weeks while I was away for work, writing a “Thank You” note would not be enough as an appropriate return, although not ungrateful *per se*. On top of genuine thankful feelings and an intention to return favours, an appropriate expression of my gratitude would be a kindness that helps her in a similar way or at least engages effort and time on my part in a similar way. In theistic gratitude, the debt is discharged by following God’s commands - which presumably represent His desires – whether by offering praise, spreading God’s word or helping those in need in His name. In both cases, such expressions are considered appropriate because they meet the needs or desires of the benefactors, human or divine.

Expressions of transpersonal gratitude, however, cannot possibly meet this criterion for the simple reason that there is no benefactor with needs and desires. The challenge is to define the conditions, if any, that make expressions of transpersonal gratitude appropriate.

#### *6.4.2.1. Paying it forward*

The strategy of paying it forward is often described as the expression of gratitude in the absence of a benefactor: discharging gratitude by benefiting third parties.

In strict psychological terms, this equates to acting according to the prosocial action tendency of the emotion and returning to a point of organismic emotional balance. However, it is not always clear if there are particular actions that are more fitting to an expression of transpersonal gratitude than others. And there is the question of *what* exactly it is that we “pay forward”. Perhaps if I win the lottery at a time of financial hardship, I then share some of my winnings with others as an expression of my gratitude. But this is not enough to be an appropriate expression of such thankfulness. Whereas in instances of transpersonal gratitude we don’t have the so-called condition of it being expressed to the right person, we still have to account for what such an expression should be commensurate to, in order to be an appropriate response.

What if, for example, I see a beautiful sunset and experience a joyful feeling of gratitude for it, for being there in that moment to witness its splendour? I feel the urge to make some form of return, to *benefit in turn*, but how can I make an appropriate return commensurate to the needs and desires of a non-existing benefactor?

I would like to suggest that the appropriateness of a transpersonal grateful return requires that it reflects the experience itself through actions that are commensurate to the emotional and mental states induced by transpersonal gratitude. The experience itself is often described as “vast” (Nakhtnikian, 1961) and “cosmic” (Roberts, 2014). Maslow states that during and after peak experiences, non-believers often experience a feeling of gratitude (which we have argued is transpersonal), an “all embracing love for everybody and for everything, leading to an impulse to do something good for the world, an eagerness to repay, even a sense of obligation and dedication” (Maslow, 2014,

p.76)<sup>8</sup>. Thus, if transpersonal gratitude prompts feelings of connectedness either to nature or other humans in general, or both, then an appropriate expression of such gratitude would correspond to those feelings. We are not arguing for an undifferentiated expression where one would just have to benefit everyone and everything in one's life. This would be analogous to an overzealous return of personal gratitude and would be inappropriate. Therefore, as a second provision stemming from the first, we suggest that an appropriate expression of transpersonal gratitude is to take actions or conduct oneself in such a way that focuses on those who need help.

To continue with the example of witnessing some beautiful sunset triggering feelings of transpersonal gratitude, we would argue that an appropriate expression of this gratitude could be to, for example, go and donate to a charity, but not to go home and invite several friends over to dinner even if one is feeling joyful and wanting to celebrate (unless said friends are homeless and hungry). This is not to deny one the right to celebrate a good fortune, but to emphasise that such a celebration would not be a grateful response without a sense of making a return and focusing this wish on others.

Ultimately, the appropriate expression of transpersonal gratitude is to take actions that show an awareness of our connectedness and dependence on others, and an appreciation of our own "modest place in the world" (Solomon, 2008, p.270).

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<sup>8</sup> For believers, this feeling of gratitude focuses on God (Maslow, 2014).

#### 6.4.2.2. *Which third parties?*

Does the expression of transpersonal gratitude need to focus on other agents? In his discussion of A.D.M. Walker's paper on gratefulness, McAleer argues for the contrary: "It is unclear why the grateful return must involve actions benefiting another agent, especially given the absence of agency in the good fortune for which one is grateful" (McAleer, 2012, p.56). Although Walker does not appear to particularly insist on this, the question is interesting. Does the grateful return have to focus on other persons? It would seem counter-intuitive to affirm so. One can feel grateful for the companionship of one's beloved dog and out of this gratitude dedicate one's life to helping abandoned pets, for example. This is a perfectly possible scenario. But non-human animals aren't devoid of moral agency (Shapiro, 2006). To different degrees according to species, they can appreciate benefits and show friendship and loyalty in return. We should then ask whether a grateful return of transpersonal gratitude can focus on nature. For example, one can be grateful for the natural beauty of the world, and out of gratitude for it, spend one's time and money planting trees. This is another possible scenario and it is doubtful that we can argue about trees intentionally reciprocating this kind of benefit. It seems, then, that the expression of transpersonal gratitude through a pay it forward approach can focus on non-agents. This is an appropriate expression as it is rooted in feelings of connectedness to the natural world. And if it is more common to focus our gratitude on agents rather than non-agents, it might just be an adaptive strategy as agents are more likely to take benevolent action in a chain of upstream reciprocity.

Having argued that the tendency to make a return inherent to feelings of gratitude is not conditioned by the presence of an intentional benefactor, this chapter has focused on expressions of transpersonal gratitude and what makes them appropriate or not.

We now turn our attention to the moral significance of transpersonal gratitude. Is there a grateful disposition or a grateful personality trait that can be cultivated to contribute to a morally good life? The next chapter aims at answering this question through the examination of philosophical and psychological accounts of moral emotions and virtues.



## Chapter Seven

### The Moral Significance of Transpersonal Gratitude

This chapter examines the moral import and significance of transpersonal gratitude. It examines the role of the emotion of gratitude in social and moral life, as well as gratitude as a disposition and character trait. It argues that the virtue of gratitude can be conceptualised based on a dyadic transpersonal model.

The chapter proceeds as follows:

- Gratitude as an emotion: moral and social considerations. This section discusses emotion theories and the role of the emotion of gratitude in moral and social life.
- Gratitude as a virtue: this section examines gratitude as a character trait or disposition, and argues for a virtue of gratitude following the dyadic transpersonal model.

#### 7.1. Gratitude as an emotion: moral and social considerations

When it comes to the links between gratitude and morality, there are two questions that matter the most: 1/ does gratitude have a moral significance as an emotion? And 2/ if there is such a thing as a grateful personality trait, can it be considered to be a virtue? In Chapter Two, I argued that gratitude is a social emotion that is not intrinsically moral but plays an important role in mediating prosocial and moral behaviour. Here we discuss some relevant theories of social and moral emotions, in order to examine the social nature and moral implications of gratitude as an emotion.

### *7.1.1. Gratitude as a social emotion*

Moral emotions are characteristically included in theories of social emotions. Most such literature in social psychology focuses on the social dimension of all emotions and not what makes certain emotions specifically social. Some exceptions have tried to highlight the features of those emotions that make them specifically social.

#### *7.1.1.1. Social and prosocial nature of gratitude*

All emotions can have a link to our social experiences with others and the environment. For example, a person can experience surprise when they realise that their car has run out of petrol. The same person can feel surprised when he opens the door to his house and sees his friends gathered there for his birthday. In the first example, surprise isn't in response to a social event as it is in the second one. However, some emotions seem to exclusively depend on social concerns. For instance, it would probably be impossible to find a situation where one would experience envy outside of a social environment. The experience of envy presupposes that there is another person, who seems to have something that one doesn't, and envies them for having it. Feeling envious when I'm on my own would not make much sense, unless I am thinking of someone I envy, in which case the emotion is arising from a social context, albeit imagined.

In their article "What's social about social emotions", Hareli and Parkinson suggest that certain emotions are specifically linked to social concerns and only arise in response to those concerns. Defined as "matters that people care about because of their social importance", social concerns always have an intrinsic link with social emotions (Hareli and Parkinson, 2008, p.131). Power, acceptance and

recognition are some examples of concerns that are social in nature. In contexts where such matters come to the forefront of the situation, the emotions that arise in response are social as well. For example, pride is concerned with success whereas shame is focused on a socially embarrassing or humiliating event. However, not all social emotions are directed towards others. One can feel shame for something that one has done in secret. One can feel ashamed for having an affair, for instance, even if one's spouse is completely unaware of it. Or one can feel proud of oneself for achieving a very difficult or dangerous task that others have failed to complete. In such cases, even though the emotion is still concerned with a matter of social importance, it is directed towards the self.

In a meta-analysis of 9 studies of emotional appraisal, Hareli and Parkinson (2008) have highlighted four emotions that seem to always be associated with social appraisal: envy, admiration, gratitude and schadenfreude. Appraisal theory argues that emotion arises from the meaning that an individual attaches to an event (Tony Manstead, 2005, the psychologist) and appraisal is social when it processes social information (hareli and Parkinson). This means that gratitude, envy, admiration and schadenfreude always arise when the perceived change or event is linked to interactions between the individual and others, whether it is a real interaction or just imagined.

Indeed, gratitude can be linked to a number of social concerns, depending on circumstances as well as individual experiences and personality traits. Receiving an unearned gift from a benevolent person shows that one is recognised and embraced as kin, as a member of a group or a human being deserving of love and compassion as Steindl has argued (Steindl, 2004). This speaks to a very profound human need, that of being accepted by the group, and evolutionary theories have traced the origins of this need to a time when being ostracised was

equivalent to almost certain physical death. In a very basic way, gratitude is a response to this kind of recognition, a positive response that expresses appreciation and a willingness to make a similar return to the benefactor. In this sense, the concern of gratitude as a social emotion are recognition and acceptance, as well as reciprocity by virtue of its action tendency, to name only the most salient ones. These are matters of importance for not only the survival of the individual, but also for the consolidation of harmonious relationships in the social group.

However, why insist that gratitude is social in nature, i.e. that it only arises within contexts of interaction with others? As we have seen, people sometimes report feeling grateful in the absence of a benefactor and, at times, even in the complete absence of any human agency (see Chapter Four, this research). The objection that this emotion is not really gratitude, but a form of appreciation, does not hold. In "Gratitude and Justice", P. Fitzgerald discusses the case of the Dalai Lama being grateful to the Chinese government (Fitzgerald, 1998). He claims that this is indeed a case of gratitude towards the perpetrator in the absence of a direct benefit. While I would argue that this would be a case of gratitude towards unwitting agents (the benefit being the spiritual growth that the Dalai Lama has gained through his ordeal), I agree with Fitzgerald that while we can wonder *why* someone feels gratitude, "it seems strange to question *that* he is grateful. To question *that* he is grateful is to question his understanding of his own emotions. And I think the Dalai Lama understands his own emotions" (Fitzgerald, 1998, p.151). There is no reason why this should not apply to any person expressing an emotion.

Second, research shows that gratitude reported in the absence of a benefactor still has the same features as triadic gratitude, except the focus on the benefactor.

In Chapter Three, we discussed several philosophical approaches that try to make sense of what Teigen calls the “impersonal category of gratitude” (Teigen, 1997). Psychological studies over the last few years have come to confirm that there indeed is a modality of gratitude that goes beyond the triadic context (McCullough, 2002, 2004; Emmons, 2006; Tseng, 2002), with the same emotional components and action tendencies as personal gratitude. This is what we have called transpersonal gratitude in this research.

Thus, we cannot insist that gratitude always arises within social contexts when there are reports of experiences of gratitude in non-social circumstances, and when research supports the claim that this is gratitude, albeit a different modality from personal gratitude.

Another point of contention regarding the exclusively social nature of gratitude is the case of theistic gratitude. Is thankfulness to God a social emotion? If so, in what sense?

This short poem illustrates well the relationship of benevolence and gratitude between believers and God:

### ***My Crown***

As my crown will be in heaven,  
May I take the gifts  
You have given me on earth  
And use them  
To Your glory;

Returning them to You  
Not quite the same,  
Because they go back  
With all my love.

(Glenda M. Palmer, 1986, p.25)

The triadic nature of theistic gratitude is salient in this poem. God is presented as the benefactor, bestowing gifts on his beneficiaries – in this case the poet; and, to apply a psychological approach to the emotion, the action tendency is to repay the benefactor with gifts that are important to the latter – in this case, gifts of love and praise. But the triadic nature of the experience does not necessarily mean that theistic gratitude is a social emotion. In Chapter Three I argued that theistic gratitude is a kind of personal gratitude, since it is directed to an “other”, albeit a different kind of other. Still, this does not make theistic gratitude a social emotion.

If we take Hlava and Parkinson’s definition, then a social emotion should have social concerns (Hlava and Parkinson, 2008). It should be concerned with matters of social importance, such as acceptance, recognition and success or failure. Even if gratitude to God can be said to sometimes focus on such interests, it is only in relation to God and not to other individuals in society. In their editorial of *The Social Nature of Emotions*, Kleef et al. state that “emotions are inherently social – they tend to be elicited by other people, expressed toward other people, and regulated to influence other people or to comply with social norms” (Kleef, Chestin, Fischer and Schneider, 2016). In a similar vein, Jankowski et al. argue that “Social emotions are affective states elicited during social interactions, and

integral for promoting socially appropriate behaviour and discouraging socially inappropriate behaviour” (Jankowski et al, 2014). In other words, it is not only the focus of an emotion that makes it social, but also the role it plays in regulating an individual’s behaviour in society. This pertains to human society, of which God is not a member. Thus, in their view, theistic gratitude, although triadic in nature, cannot be said to be a social emotion.

A final point about the social nature of gratitude, and how it came to be characterised as such in psychological literature, is the fact that the analyses and meta-analyses to date (such as the one done by Hlava and Parkinson) focus on studies on gratitude experienced mainly within an interpersonal context. Indeed, social scientists typically investigate what we have called the personal modality of gratitude: when the emotion is triggered in a triadic equation of benefactor- gift-beneficiary. In most studies, it is the interaction between human individuals that comes under the microscope, and centres on understanding the conditions that give rise to gratitude, and how the emotion in turn shapes an individual’s behaviour towards others (Hlava and Elfers, 2016; McCullough and Emmons, 2004; Algoe, 2012; Emmons, 2007). Had those studies included different modalities of gratitude, the emotion might not have appeared to be exclusively social.

Thus, it seems that gratitude as an emotion cannot be argued to be exclusively social. Certain modalities of gratitude arise within dominantly social contexts, namely triadic personal gratitude in a relationship of benefactor-benefit-beneficiary. However other modalities, such as theistic gratitude and transpersonal gratitude, can and do arise in circumstances that do not necessarily involve social norms, social relationships, or human agency.

This conclusion indicates that transpersonal gratitude belongs to a sphere that is beyond or at least different from social contexts. In the next chapter, I will discuss some of its features that might mark transpersonal gratitude as a transcendent<sup>9</sup> emotion or experience. But the question that begs an answer here is how an emotion that arises in non-social circumstances can elicit prosocial action tendencies and behaviour.

The key is to differentiate what triggers an emotion from what the emotion itself elicits as action tendency and subsequent behaviour. Indeed, it is not always the case that prosocial behaviour stems from emotions that arise in social contexts. For example, I might have a very vivid and recurrent dream of dying an untimely death. This dream might leave me with a desire to do more with my life and as a result, I might start to pay closer attention to those in need around me and help whenever I can. This could be true the other way around as well. If a person is promoted at work, for instance, he or she will probably feel proud and experience a sense of social success. But this does not guarantee or suggest that he/she will engage in prosocial – or even social – behaviour. He/she might just decide to book a few hours at a spa as a reward and celebration. The point here is that it is the action tendency of an emotion that is decisive of an individual's behaviour, and not the context in which the emotion was triggered.

There is considerable research on how gratitude enhances prosocial behaviour. Psychological studies have so far shown that when someone feels grateful, it immediately enhances prosocial action tendencies (Watkins, 2014; Tsang, 2006; Bartless and DeStenno 2006). In fact, gratitude promotes prosocial behaviour in

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<sup>9</sup> I use the term transcendence here in the sense used by Peterson and Seligman in their classification of character strengths and virtues (Peterson and Seligman, 2004): transcendence is a connection to something higher or larger than the purposes of the individual self. It builds on Frankl's description of what he called self-transcendence of the human existence, the idea that being human finds meaning in a directedness towards something or someone other than the self (Frankl, 1946/2004).



a unique way, different from good mood or good disposition. It appears that a grateful person will engage in prosocial acts even when it does not feel good to do so (id.) One might, out of gratitude towards a benefactor, engage in an emotionally costly behaviour – for example, refrain from a pleasurable activity for the sake of not hurting the benefactor’s feeling. This will preserve a good relationship on the long term, a delayed gratification serving the consolidation of social bonds. Authors argue that these features are what make gratitude different from other prosocial emotions: its strong prosocial sensitivity and action tendency (McCullough, Kimeldorf and Kohen, 2008).

These studies have mostly focused on personal or triadic gratitude. However, some of the outcomes can help us understand if and how transpersonal gratitude promotes prosocial acts as well. In a 2017 study, Tsang and Martin have tested four theories on gratitude: 1/ that gratitude is affected by similarity; 2/that the intention of the benefactor influences gratitude; 3/that prosocial behaviour is motivated by egoistical interests to receive more benefits and 4/that prosocial behaviour is motivated by the need to represent the self in a certain way (Tsang and Martin, 2017). Where their results show that gratitude is not shaped by egoistical motives, it is the second theory that interests us here. Indeed, the authors have found that “intention affects the experience of gratitude but not the prosocial behaviour” (Tsang and Martin, 2017, p.10) This means that the intensity or the modality of the experience can vary according to the presence or the absence of a benefactor, as well as the kind of intention the latter holds, if any (as is the case with unwitting agents). However, the experience of gratitude will always elicit prosocial action tendencies and behaviour, whether the kind intention is there or not.

To conclude, we can argue that transpersonal gratitude can arise in non-social contexts – and thus it might not be a social emotion per se. However, the absence of a social context does not diminish the role that transpersonal gratitude plays in motivating behaviour that is benevolent towards others. As Fitzgerald suggests, gratitude elicits and enhances “a disposition to act which flows from appreciation and good will” (Fitzgerald, 1998, p.120).

### *7.1.2 Gratitude and moral emotions*

If transpersonal gratitude is linked to prosocial behaviour, we must now ask about the moral worth and significance of the emotion/experience of gratitude. The questions that this section will try to answer pertain to the moral nature of emotions and its implications on gratitude and its transpersonal modality. What are moral emotions? Are there specifically moral emotions? What makes them so? And is gratitude a moral emotion?

We do not intend to examine the nature of emotions here. However, it must be noted that the discussions in this research are based mostly on what is called the Multidimensional Appraisal Theory of emotions. In this view, the main idea is that emotions depend on how we interpret a stimulus or the object of the emotion in relation to the world around us in a certain context (Arnold M., 1960; Lazarus R. 1994). Although this is sometimes referred to as the cognitivist view of emotions, it is different from the so-called judgmentalist theories in that it does not claim that appraisals are cognitive states involving evaluative concepts (Solomon, 1976; Nussbaum, 2001). Appraisals in this view gauge an event according to parameters that typically pertain to the goal relevance and congruence of a stimulus, as well as the coping potential of an organism. In other words, appraisals consist of assessing whether an event is relevant to the organism’s

needs, whether it promotes or hinders the organism's goals and whether said organism has the capacity to handle the task (if incongruent) or take the opportunity offered by the event (Pineda, 2015). Furthermore, the Multidimensional Appraisal theory argues that emotions are causal processes: triggered by the appraisal of a stimulus that brings about physiological responses and action tendencies, and finally the "feeling component" of the emotion which is the "phenomenological representation of most of the elements involved in the previous stages" (id., p. 19). This view allows for a clearer understanding of how emotions affect behaviour, and, more relevant for this research, moral behaviour and character.

#### *7.1.2.1. What are moral emotions?*

Psychologists classify moral emotions as a sub-category of social emotions. If social emotions are concerned with matters that are important for an individual in his or her relationships with others (real or imagined), then moral emotions are those concerned with the conformity and obedience to, or the transgression of, moral rules within the larger context of those relationships.

One theory that seems to adopt, at least partly, an approach based on concerns is that of J. Prinz who, in "Emotions: Non-Moral and Moral" (Prinz, 2007) and later in "The moral emotions" (Prinz 2009), addresses the question of the role that emotions play in morality. Prinz holds a view of emotions that attempts to bring together what he calls the James-Lange theory and the cognitivist theory (Prinz, 2006, "Gut Reactions"): he suggests that emotions are somatic signals and not cognitive states (James-Lange), but they represent concerns (Cognitivist theory) (Prinz, 2007). He also maintains that there are only a few basic emotions, such

as fear, joy and anger, and that all other emotions come about as a result of their blending and calibration. Pride, for example, can be the result of joy fine tuned to one's own achievements. Thus, different emotions can have the same somatic signals, but distinct concerns according to contexts and situations. In the same line of reasoning, Prinz argues that there are no basic moral emotions, but that they arise as a blend of basic emotions in contexts of moral connotation (Prinz, 2007). Guilt, for instance, is a mix of sadness within a context of transgression.

Prinz goes on to distinguish different groups of moral emotions, based on the role they play in morality. The first group is that of evaluative emotions of blame and praise, which help us assess an event as good or bad within a moral context. These are epistemic emotions in that they inform us about the features of the situation and circumstances, and in turn enhance certain behaviours depending on their action tendencies. Examples of evaluative moral emotions would be (other-directed) moral disgust or (self-directed) shame. The second group of moral emotions are prosocial emotions, those that motivate us to act in morally good ways. Examples from this group would be sympathy and concern. However, certain emotions of blame and praise can also serve to promote prosocial behaviour by way of punishments and rewards (Prinz 2007; 2009).

Prinz's account of moral emotions is based on functions and action tendencies of blended and calibrated emotions in moral contexts. In his concluding remarks, he suggests that there are "no emotions that are dedicated to morality and do not serve other important functions" (Prinz, 2009, p.536). One could agree that indeed, basic emotions in this account could not be dedicated to morality, or to any other particular aspect of human experiences. Being the foundational pillars for all other emotions, they would have to have the potential to be directed towards any concern. However, it could also be argued that certain "blends" are

typical of situations with moral connotations. For instance, guilt is an emotion that is almost never mentioned in non-moral situations. Prinz suggests that this overlooks circumstances where guilt can be “an anxious sadness elicited by the harms we have caused” (Prinz, 2009, p.535). We can “feel sad about harming people in our in-group because doing so threatens attachment relationships” (id.) But is the awareness of having caused harm not already a recognition of having transgressed a moral or social norm? Otherwise why is the emotion not simply sadness or anxiety? It seems to me that guilt requires some form of judgment or evaluation of non-conformity, to be a self-directed emotion of blame. Prinz mentions survivor’s guilt as an example of the emotion in a non-moral situation (Prinz, 2009, p.535). But it is only at first glance that survivor guilt does not appear to be linked to any form of transgression. In fact, psychological research shows that individuals gripped by survivor’s guilt feel that they have failed or even harmed those who didn’t survive (Hutson S., Hall J. and Pack F., 2015; Juni S., 2016). This interpretation can be real or imagined, but it is nevertheless part of the experience of guilt. There is an aspect of culpability in survivor’s guilt which makes it perhaps more relevant to moral values and beliefs than “regular” guilt. The difficulty in Prinz’s account of moral emotions is the insistence on defining emotions as somatic signals that do not necessitate a cognitive component, at the same time attempting to introduce the idea of concern to explain appraisal of situations and events. He challenges the idea that certain emotions depend on moral judgment and evaluation in response to situations of transgression and conformity (Solomon, 1976). However, his account fails to provide a clear view of moral emotions. Perhaps it can be conceded that in the case of blended emotions in response to moral situations, some form of cognitive appraisal becomes significant, or even necessary.

In this discussion of moral emotions, Prinz briefly mentions gratitude as an emotion of praise – a category of morally positive emotions (Prinz, 2009). The particularity of these emotions of praise is that they vary according to who performs a certain act and not the actions themselves. For example, generosity towards others elicits my admiration, whereas generosity towards me triggers gratitude; my own generosity towards others makes me feel proud (id). In other words, moral emotions of praise are more concerned with the agents and beneficiaries rather than the events. It is not clear why this would be the case and Prinz does not elaborate more. Perhaps his speculation that emotions of praise serve as “safeguards against adversity” (id) offers some explanation: if we praise and thank benefactors, we encourage kindness and generosity, which in turn would enhance prosocial behaviour in adverse situations such as natural disasters. A similar argument from McCullough and collaborators, in “An adaptation for altruism? The Social Cause, Social Effects, and Social Evolution of Gratitude” (McCullough *et al.*, 2008) puts gratitude in the category of social, and prosocial, emotions. Gratitude has moral worth in praising good actions and encouraging prosocial behaviour; however, it is not a moral emotion in that it does not *always* arise as a form of praise. For example, transpersonal gratitude is a feeling of thankfulness, but it does not celebrate the actions of a benefactor.

In the film “Gratitude in Britain” produced by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, interviewees share their stories and experiences of gratitude in everyday life. One such couple are Ian and Sasha, who live with their children on an isolated farm surrounded by meadows and rivers. They express a form of gratitude which is not targeted: “We feel very grateful for the place where we’ve ended up living, all our hard work has come to fruition. I’m very grateful for the way I live” says Ian, and Sasha adds “Very grateful for the small things in life, it’s

all the little things that matter that make the bigger picture, we're grateful for all the things we've got". (Gratitude in Britain, 2015). In this scenario, gratitude arises as a response to benefits, in an awareness of "All the things I have that others don't have", as expressed by one of the couple's children (id). Classifying gratitude as an emotion of praise that serves to safeguard against adversity reduces the emotion to its triadic version and does not fully illustrate its moral implications.

Another account of moral emotions that places gratitude with emotions of praise is J. Haidt's "Moral Emotions" (Haidt, 2003). Haidt proposes to define moral emotions according to two axes: disinterested elicitors and prosocial tendencies. He considers these two axes as the most relevant features of moral emotions, in an approach borrowed from the prototypical analysis of emotions (Russell J.A. 1991; Shaver Ph., Schwartz J., Kirson D and O'Connor C., 1987). Prosocial tendencies are the action tendencies of an emotion that encourage social bonding, reciprocity and all behaviour that supports and enhances social life. Disinterested elicitors refer to event and stimuli that trigger an emotion. As some emotions are intensely focused on the experiences of the self (such as fear of being hurt, for example), other emotions can be elicited by actions that have no direct impact on the self (for example, anger at an injustice suffered by someone else). Haidt argues that the more an emotion is self-disinterested and prosocial, the more relevant it becomes to our moral life (Haidt, 2003). In this view, gratitude is defined as a self-interested prosocial emotion in the family of other-praising emotions. It is a self-interested emotion, the author argues, because it is concerned with the repayment of one's *own* debt to the benefactor. Hence, the moral significance of gratitude is closer to that of sadness and happiness than to that of guilt and compassion (id.)

Whereas a prototypical approach to gratitude can indeed help explain the multiple aspects of the emotion, Haidt's account has two flaws. First, similar to Prinz, Haidt only considers triadic gratitude and thus leaves out a whole array of experiences of gratitude which are not emotions of praise. And even some examples of triadic gratitude do not satisfy Haidt's requirements. For instance, if someone accidentally benefits me, and I feel grateful towards him or her, is this an emotion of praise? Praise would entail some form of recognition of the choice that the other person made to help me. If that intention is clearly absent, my gratitude is a case of appreciation and desire to make a return. There would be no cause for praise. Second, Haidt describes gratitude as focused on the repayment of one's own debt, concluding that it is a self-interested emotion. While it is true that gratitude has close links with indebtedness and reciprocity, it is also concerned with the welfare of the benefactor. Gratitude is equally sensitive to the benefactor's kindness and intentions, which are expression of the *other* person's behaviour and character. Moreover, defining gratitude as concerned mostly by indebtedness again leaves out modalities of gratitude that are not personal. In the example of Ian and Sasha, it is hard to see how their gratitude is concerned with the repayment of a debt. It would be reasonable to imagine that given the opportunity, they would be motivated to help others in need. This is different from the repayment of a personal debt. Is their gratitude morally less relevant? It would seem counter-intuitive to make such a statement. Thus, if we are to describe the moral significance of gratitude according to Haidt's two axes, we need to either examine these features separately for each modality of gratitude or define the disinterested elicitors in a way that includes the different degrees of self-interest of each of those different modalities. In the first case, we would have several kinds of gratitude appearing on Haidt's graph, some more prototypical of moral



emotions than others. However, if we want a somehow unified account of gratitude, we need to choose the second option. Haidt explains the disinterested elicitors in the following way: “(...) some emotions are easily triggered by triumphs, tragedies, and transgressions that do not directly touch the self, whereas other emotions are not. The more an emotion tends to be triggered by such disinterested elicitors, the more it can be considered a prototypical moral emotion” (Haidt, 2003, p.854). Perhaps it would be more fitting to say that certain emotions are triggered easily by events that touch the self as experiencing a sense of connection with others. This would allow for a better understanding of the moral significance of emotions such as transpersonal gratitude.

What becomes apparent from the above discussions is that the definition and categorisation of moral emotions is not a straightforward task. Much depends on the general theoretical background and the features of experience that one chooses to analyse. But is it necessary to always examine the particular features of an emotion to determine its significance to morality? Maybe it is just a case of defining how exactly emotions exert an influence on moral and prosocial behaviour and why they matter at all for morality.

In his article “Moral Emotions”, R. De Sousa suggests that all emotions can be relevant to ethics (De Sousa, 2001). Putting aside stoic, cognitive and sentimentalist traditions of morality and emotions, De Sousa offers an account that builds on the Aristotelian view: that moral education means learning “The right emotion, the right degree, at the right time” and that “the value of emotions is in their nature as components of the good life” (De Sousa, 2001, p. 110). This raises two questions that De Sousa attempts to answer. The first pertains to the naturalness of emotions as constituents of a good life. And the second is what he calls the Euthyphro Questions: is an emotion in response to an objective feature

of a situation, or should situations be assessed by the kind of emotion they elicit?  
(De Sousa, p. 2001).

After discussing several theories on the naturalness of emotions, De Sousa argues that our emotions result from a combination of natural dispositions and social conditioning and concludes that there are a few elements to consider before allowing that emotions, although linked to natural dispositions, are relevant to our moral intuitions. These elements are complexity, universality and altruism. Thus, in this view, if emotions have some worth in morality, they must first have a certain degree of complexity. The author seems to differentiate between innate dispositions and “emotions proper” (De Sousa, 2001, p. 113). For example, fear of heights, which is an innate response even in babies, cannot be seen as relevant to moral assessment. A network of concepts and values, however primitive, needs to be present in relation to an emotion for it to be important for moral assessment. Second, we must consider whether the universalizability of an emotion is indeed key to its significance in ethics. Arguably, emotions cannot satisfy this requirement. In the experience of an emotion, there is hardly any exercise of reflective balance, the author argues (id.). For example, when we feel compassion towards another, we don’t simultaneously wonder about everyone else in the world who might need the same or more help. However, the way out of this is to remember that all deliberations on justice must start with a sense of fairness and be sharpened by repeated applications of a method of reflective equilibrium. Thus, we need not completely abandon the idea that emotions might provide a “relatively natural” way to understand morality (id., p.114). Third, we need to understand altruism since it has always been considered to go against natural inclinations of self-preservation and survival. Does the existence of altruism reveal an irreconcilable gap between morality and emotions? How can

we explain behaviour that sometimes puts another's welfare before one's own if not by reason being the main force behind moral motivation? There is a long tradition of considering natural instincts as evil and social conditioning as the only way to rule them in, and an opposing view that there is something innately natural to morality. De Sousa offers a third solution to this dilemma, one supported by the discovery of "mirror neurons", which allow an individual to mimic or simulate another's behaviour and expressions of their emotions. Accordingly, the idea is that altruism is born from this ability to mind read: "If I feel what you feel, I may better know what you will do; but I also may be motivated to do what you might do" (id., p. 116). In other words, altruism would have been developed as a side effect of an evolutionary more useful ability of mind reading. This, according to the author, allows us to view altruism as having natural roots, thus concluding his discussion of the three elements which need clarification if we are to accept that emotions have moral worth even if they stem from natural dispositions polished by social training.

Before discussing De Sousa's Euthyphro Question, we will take the example of gratitude to try and illustrate his arguments so far. Gratitude is not on the list of emotions that are traditionally considered to be "moral" (at least not until recently and even then, to a much lesser degree), such as compassion which is the example in De Sousa's article. We must bear in mind that the author is arguing about *how* we should think about the moral importance of emotions rather than naming those that matter. This, then, is not an attempt to name gratitude as a moral emotion, but to open the way to a discussion, in subsequent sections, as to its moral worth as a component of the good life.

We have already examined the phylogenetic evolution of gratitude: theories of evolution put the innate disposition to gratitude within the sphere of reciprocity as

a tool of survival of the species and the strengthening of social bonds (Chapter 2, this research). Thus, assuming that there is a form of innate disposition to reciprocate – as Dawkins calls it the “debt calculator in our brain” (Dawkins, 2011) - we can argue that gratitude is built on this disposition as a child is taught to express thankfulness, and to appreciate the kind intentions behind a gift – although this in no way limits the development of gratitude to an inner disposition to reciprocate. Nevertheless, the innate disposition and the social conditioning are apparent.

Is gratitude a complex enough emotion to have some moral worth? In other words, is there a network of values and concepts that make it an “emotion proper” in the sense meant by De Sousa? Psychological research on the ontogenesis of gratitude shows that very young children, even when saying “thank you”, do not yet understand its real meaning and are repeating what their parents have taught them, even if they can detect agency and intention behind actions earlier in life (Gergely et al., 1995; Tomasello, 2010). It is only later, when brain and mind have matured enough, that concepts such as the other, the other’s intention and kindness are formed (Wellman and Phillips, 2001; Freitas, Pieta and Trudge, 2011). Additionally, children are taught the importance of showing their appreciation towards a benefactor or for the good things they have in life. They are also perceptive of societal norms, albeit not strictly moral in the sense of punishment for transgression, that encourage gratitude and disapprove of ingratitude. Consequently, gratitude is based on a system of values and beliefs and appears to be complex enough to qualify for an emotion that might have some moral significance for the good life.

What about the requirement of universalizability? If our understanding is correct, the problem with the universalizability of emotions is that they are passive, as De

Sousa argues, in the sense that we don't "do" our emotions. We cannot feel anger or joy at will, and the fragile link between will and emotions is what stands in the way of the universalizability of the latter. We cannot feel grateful at will, in the same way as we cannot just decide to feel happy when we're overwhelmed with sadness. In his example, De Sousa refers to a sense of fairness that can be cultivated. This *might* solve the issue of the universality of compassion, but it is not very clear how this can be applied to all emotions in terms of moral import. Does this mean that this sense of fairness concerns all emotions? For example, in triadic gratitude, the beneficiary is focused on the benefactor and does not include, in his or her deliberations, all other benefactors who are helping other individuals. Should we prescribe that every beneficiary reflect on their own experiences and those of others like them around the world? Perhaps then one could declare "I ought to show gratitude to my benefactor" as some kind of universal law. But this does not resolve the problem that we encounter when we try to make duties out of emotions. We could formulate the maxim in different ways: "I ought to feel grateful towards benefactors" or "I ought to show myself thankful to my benefactor", but we would end up with the same predicament: the thankful behaviour alone does not constitute gratitude, and the emotion of it cannot be a requirement. This is true for compassion as well. Perhaps, then, the requirement of universality cannot be applied to emotions in our examination of their moral worth. Indeed, universalizability is intrinsically linked to the exercise of the will, and as such, it might only be relevant to rational moral choices and actions.

We can now briefly turn our attention to the Euthyphro Question as formulated by De Sousa: Do emotions reflect objective features of a situation or should we describe a situation based on the kind of emotion it triggers? (De Sousa, p. 111,

116). The author offers the axiological hypothesis as a way to answer this question: In addition to being morally assessable, emotions are themselves “revealers of value” (id., p. 120). They inform us, give us knowledge of the value of things, facts and situations by virtue of their own features (id.) However, this is not enough to say that emotions are components of the good life. To assess whether they are appropriate to their target and that they hold motivational power, we must consider “axiological holism”, by appealing to other perceptions and emotions, as well as background knowledge, logic and reason (id., p. 122). To return to the author’s original statement, stemming from an Aristotelian view of the good life, an emotion will have moral worth only inasmuch as it is the right emotion, to the right degree, at the right time. If we apply De Sousa’s approach to gratitude, it might seem that only triadic gratitude has moral worth. Gratitude to unwitting agents cannot be a component of the good life, since other perceptions would tell us that the benefit was not intentional. Therefore, we would not recommend the cultivation of such gratitude, since it would be a kind of excess. The same might hold true about transpersonal gratitude, because not only the benefit is not intentional, but there is no benefactor at all. It is only triadic gratitude that can be considered to have moral worth, as an emotion directed to the right target (the intentional benefactor), for the right reason (the benefit), the right purpose (recognition of a benevolence and a return in kind) and maybe even at the right time (when the benefactor is in need or when the opportunity to make a return presents itself).

We can address this issue of the moral importance of transpersonal gratitude by appealing to perceptions concerned with the significance of the benefit. Even if the emotion is not targeted, it can still be said to have a right reason: an event or a fact that is perceived as a significant benefit for the individual. As for the right

degree, transpersonal gratitude lies between a total lack of appreciation for benefits and good things, and an over-appreciation of every little thing, no matter how insignificant. Finally, there can be a right time for transpersonal gratitude: when it is experienced in the moment of the realisation of a benefit, and the enhanced awareness of what might not have been. If we return to the example of Sasha and Ian mentioned above, we can find all those elements present in their experience. Their gratitude has the right reason, as a response to the significant benefit of the life they enjoy. Their emotional response shows neither a lack of appreciation nor an exaggerated sense of bliss. It is experienced in the moment, when they bring their attention to all that they have and how good their life is (Gratitude in Britain, 2015). Thus, if we are to base our view of emotions on an Aristotelian account of their moral worth, we can say transpersonal gratitude can indeed be a component of the good life, as illustrated by Sasha's and Ian's case (id.).

To conclude the discussion of gratitude and moral emotions, it appears that gratitude can be linked to morality in several ways. It is an emotion that is involved in the strengthening of social relationships, but also in the acknowledgment of another person's moral choices and behaviour. It also carries moral worth in situations where benevolence is recognised as morally good, and where it determines both attitudes and conducts appropriate to such recognition. However, since gratitude can arise in situations that are not necessarily marked by moral requirements (for example propositional and transpersonal gratitude), considering it to be moral in nature would be overreaching. We hold that the same applies to transpersonal gratitude: that it is not a moral emotion *per se*. However, similarly to personal gratitude, it has considerable moral implications, and

perhaps even more so as an emotion that enhances empathy and a general attitude of appreciation for the good in life.

If both personal and transpersonal modalities of gratitude have significant moral import as emotions, what does this say about grateful dispositions and conduct? Is gratitude a virtue? We examine this in the next section.

## **7.2. The virtue of gratitude**

In his now seminal article “Gratitude”, F. Berger suggests that “gratitude shows the role of the affective life in morality in an especially cogent way” (Berger, 1975, p.307). He argues that the moral import of gratitude is not in the act itself, but in the fact that it demonstrates the attitudes and beliefs of the person expressing it (Berger, 1975). His view is that gratitude is a virtuous emotion in that it shows the character of the thankful person. More recently, R. Emmons, one of the pioneers of the psychological investigation of gratitude, claims that ingratitude is a vice. In fact, “the king of all vices” since it violates the natural law of reciprocity. Ingratitude, states Emmons, is “a way of inflicting harm” upon a benefactor (Emmons, 2012). And according to J. Haidt, ingratitude elicits moral disgust in others and drives them to shun the ungrateful person (Haidt, 2003). Literature offers many examples of gratitude being hailed as a virtue and ingratitude vilified as a vice. Shakespeare famously wrote: “*Ingratitude, thou marble-hearted fiend, more hideous, when thou show’st thee in a child than the sea-monster*” (Shakespeare, King Lear, 1608, 1987), and Cicero’s claim that gratitude is the queen of virtues has prominently been used as a preliminary to discussions on the moral significance of gratitude.



What do we mean when we say that gratitude is a virtue? Is it indeed a virtue in the same way courage or honesty are? Philosophical accounts on gratitude do not always agree to consider it a virtue, albeit there is always a sense that there is a virtuous quality to it. In the following sections, I argue that a grateful disposition can be conceptualised as the virtue of gratitude.

### *7.2.1. Gratitude: trait and emotion*

Before analysing the virtuousness of gratitude, we must distinguish between the state of gratitude and the grateful disposition, or in other words, the emotion from the trait. R. Roberts defines the disposition of gratitude as a character trait: “You are formed, as a person, in such a way that you are prone, over a fairly long stretch of your life, to episodes of gratitude on certain kinds of occasions or when contemplating certain situations” (Roberts, 2004, p.60).

In recent years, various psychological studies have focused on the grateful disposition, or gratitude as a trait. McCullough, Tsang and Emmons have defined this disposition as “a generalized tendency to recognise and respond with grateful emotion to the role of others’ benevolence in the benefit one obtains” (McCullough, Tseng and Emmons, 2002, p.112). Implemented while psychological research on gratitude was taking its first steps, the study does not take into account cases where there is benefit but no benefactor. The authors find, however, that the trait of gratitude has strong correlations not only with positive emotions, but also with other traits of personality, namely prosocial and spiritual traits. It is in this last category that they briefly mention the absence of an intentional benefactor. Their findings show that people who display a grateful disposition are also “more spiritual and religious-minded” (id.). And when there is

no intentional agency behind the benefit, this proneness helps them to acknowledge that the benefit came from outside the self, and to feel grateful for it. McCullough, Tseng and Emmons do not elaborate this point further. But their study is a first step towards a broader definition of a grateful disposition, beyond a triadic account.

A more recent study on trait and state levels of gratitude leaves the benefactor or the intentional agency out of the equation. In “A Social-Cognitive Model of Trait and State Levels of Gratitude”, Wood and his colleagues characterise trait gratitude in terms closer to Roberts’ above definition. They take the grateful disposition to represent the “average frequency with which affects and moods of gratitude are experienced in daily life” (Wood, Martby, Stewart and Linley, 2008, p.281). Their investigation reveals, here too, strong correlations between trait gratitude and other prosocial traits, such as altruistic dispositions. The authors propose that a grateful disposition introduces a “characteristic interpretive bias in appraising prosocial situations” that mediate the relationship between trait and state levels of gratitude (id.). In other words, a person disposed to gratitude will interpret social events with a particular appraisal of benefits, thus giving rise to the emotion of gratitude. In this social-cognitive model, intentional agency is not a significant element of the grateful disposition, and it is not clear that the authors are referring to triadic gratitude when they discuss the link between trait and emotions of thankfulness. Their argument, however, seems to support the idea that gratitude can be elicited by a focus on a significant benefit, and that an intentional benefactor is not necessarily relevant to all modalities of gratitude.

Both the above-mentioned studies touch upon the concept of a more generalised sense of gratitude, without elaborating further as to its place in a theory of gratitude, nor to its practical and empirical implications. But they both

demonstrate that there is a disposition of gratitude, different from the emotion, which is a proneness to experience gratitude in certain circumstances and which fuels emotional states of gratitude.

Examining these studies and other psychological investigations of gratitude, “Gratitude and Well-being: A Review and Theoretical Integration” by Wood, Froh and Geraghty suggests that we must allow for a “life orientation conception of gratitude” (Wood, Froh and Geraghty, 2010). The authors point out that what has become apparent throughout many studies is that “gratitude involves more than an interpersonal appreciation of other people’s aid” (id). They base this on numerous examples of participants reporting feeling grateful for something that they interpret as good, to no one in particular: individuals often talk about “waking up in the morning and other events, where gratitude does not appear to be directed towards a particular benefactor” (ibid.). Hence, the authors propose that there are lower and higher orders of trait gratitude factors. Lower order factors are those traits and tendencies that represent different aspects of gratitude, such as appreciation of other people, feelings of awe, and behaviours that express gratitude. The higher order gratitude factor “covers the full breadth of the people and events which people report eliciting gratitude” (id.), implying that there is a latent grateful personality that involves each of these aspects. It represents what the authors call a “life orientation towards the positive, with a worldview towards noticing and appreciating the positive in life” (id.). This account of a latent grateful personality further demonstrates that on a dispositional level, gratitude is focused on detecting benefits and the good things in life, and that identifying the source of the benefit is characteristic of certain modalities of gratitude, but not all. As Wood et al. conclude: “The process applies more widely than simply through the recognition of interpersonal aid. With gratitude drawing attention to the perception

of *anything* to appreciate in the world, and this appreciation making the person more likely to behave in personally and socially productive manner as a result” (Wood et al., 2010, p.3).

These findings provide some empirical support to our definition of transpersonal gratitude as a modality that is not conditioned by the agency of a kind benefactor. However, this is not to say that transpersonal gratitude *is* this higher order gratitude factor. Although there are many similarities between the concepts, transpersonal gratitude does not cover the whole spectrum of the diverse aspects of gratitude as the positive life orientation does. Transpersonal gratitude is one modality which is non-targeted and does not include appreciation of another person as source of benefit. Additionally, the life orientation, as a disposition, has no object. It is not gratitude *for* something, whereas transpersonal gratitude has an object but no recipient.

Nevertheless, psychological research, as illustrated above, shows that there exists a disposition, a proneness to experience grateful feelings under certain circumstances, which is distinct from the emotion as a state. It is this disposition that is the object of the discussion on the virtue of gratitude.

### *7.2.2. Is gratitude a virtue?*

Gratitude as a disposition can be a personality trait, but is it a virtue? R. Roberts points out that a personality trait can be defective, but a virtue cannot. He argues that even a grateful disposition can be defective, if, for example, it is geared towards gaining favours and benefits. In contrast, the virtue of gratitude is the excellence of the trait (Roberts, 2015, p.898). How would we define this excellence? Roberts suggests that “the virtue of gratitude is the disposition to feel

*genuine* (emotional) gratitude *in the right way*" (id.). This is not a deontological requirement to feel a certain way as part of a duty of gratitude. Rather, it states that an individual possessing the virtue of gratitude would experience genuine gratitude under particular circumstances. The right way of feeling this genuine gratitude is a matter of debate. For certain authors, the morally justifiable way to feel gratitude is in the presence of a benevolent intention of another person (Krisstjánsson, 2015). It would have to be a predominantly positive feeling directed towards a benefactor (Tudge, Freitas and Obrien, 2015). And yet others argue that this gratitude might be "a matter of rational deliberation between a range of positive and negative emotions" (Carr, 2015, p.442). Moreover, it is not always enough to refer to feelings of genuine gratitude experience in the right way to justify the virtuousness of gratitude. If it is a moral virtue, then gratitude has to motivate behaviour in a way that shows a persistent disposition to act in a morally praiseworthy way.

In "The virtue of gratitude: a developmental and cultural approach", Trudge, Freitas and Obrien emphasise the importance of this behavioural component, without which, they argue, gratitude would not be a virtue. Thus, in addition to genuine emotions of thankfulness, they describe three specific features that distinguish gratitude as a virtue: 1/ free and intentional benevolence on the part of the benefactor; 2/recognition, by the beneficiary, of this kind intention and of the value of the benefit; and 3/ the free will of the beneficiary to repay or return the kindness. They add, in line with the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis*, that a virtue of gratitude also necessitates "thoughtful assessment", an understanding of when it is appropriate and how to "use the virtue appropriately without necessarily having to think about it" (Trudge, Freitas and Obrien, 2015). Their account states that only triadic gratitude can be a virtue, for the obvious reason

that other modalities do not necessarily entail the benevolent agency of another and therefore cannot have the necessary moral grounding.

This condition of a triadic structure for a virtue of gratitude appears often in philosophical accounts. D. Carr describes accurately the uneasiness that the consideration of a dyadic modality of gratitude brings to the discussion of a virtue of gratitude: he argues that whereas the dyadic sense of gratitude might fare better in terms of understanding the moral significance of gratitude (as a global attitude of appreciation of what comes one's way), it still might seem too loose and indiscriminate to offer a model of gratitude as a virtue (Carr, 2014). We will examine a possible transpersonal model of the virtue of gratitude in more detail towards the end of this section. For now, we continue discussing those accounts which attempt the conceptualisation of gratitude as a virtue.

Most approaches to gratitude as a virtue take an Aristotelian perspective. One such article is written by K. Kristjánsson, who offers to reconstruct gratitude as an Aristotelian virtue, although gratitude is not in Aristotle's account of virtues (Kristjánsson, 2015). He starts his analysis by considering several theories of the concept of gratitude, based on which he suggests that an Aristotelian gratitude would have the following features: 1/ A stable emotional trait of 2/ Feeling thankful 3/ In a morally justifiable way 4/ To a benefactor 5/ For a benevolently intended favour 6/ That you would like to return somehow and 7/ Where the feeling is dominantly pleasant although it may also be mixed with painful pangs of guilt obligation and burden. 8/ Possessing this emotional trait must be intrinsically valuable, an indispensable constituent of the flourishing life (Kristjánsson, 2013). This detailed description of the virtue of gratitude finds support in what psychologists, and especially McCullough and Emmons (McCullough, 2003; Emmons, 2004) have claimed about gratitude as a moral

affect. Krisstjánsson adds the requirements of intention and benefactor as sine qua none conditions for gratitude to be a virtue. However, it is the last point, the intrinsic value of gratitude as a component of the good life, that presents the biggest challenge.

There are two issues that need to be addressed. The first one, is Aristotle's account of the megalopsychos, who appears to not value gratitude. On the contrary, the megalopsychos would prefer not to be grateful, as this would stem from a sense of weakness and inferiority vis a vis a benefactor. Krisstjánsson argues that the megalopsychoi are "a unique group of people". In other words, what applies to them need not apply to the rest of us who are not paragons of virtue and for whom gratitude, as a recognition of intentional benevolence, is important: "The description of the megalopsychoi's lack of gratitude does not necessarily undermine the value of gratitude for ordinary people" (Krisstjánsson, 2015, p.510). The question remains, however, whether we should all strive to leave gratitude behind to become more virtuous. Perhaps what is meant is that generosity is a better and more complete virtue in an Aristotelian sense, and thus it is better to be generous than grateful in order to live the good life.

The second issue that Krisstjánsson discusses is the role that gratitude plays in eudaimonia. Finding that so far philosophical and psychological accounts have failed to demonstrate this role, he suggests that we look at gratitude as an emotion of justice in the sense of nemesis rather than a distributive or institutional virtue. Nemesis, or poetic justice, would mean that one feels joy for good or bad fortune if deserved, and feels pain at them if they are undeserved (Krisstjánsson, 2015). Gratitude, then, is an emotional virtue as an "overall pleasure at the intention of a benefactor who has exhibited a moral virtue in bestowing or attempting to bestow a favour upon us". We want to reward this exhibition through

our acts of gratitude. This feeling of gratitude is, the author suggests, intrinsically valuable for ordinary people. It follows that gratitude is a moral virtue that “instantiates this special form of poetic justice” (id.). This analysis of the virtue of gratitude according to the concept of nemesis, while thought-provoking, raises a few questions.

First, it is not clear why one would feel joy at another person’s exhibition of morally good behaviour. Gratitude is a self-interested emotion, not in an egoistic sense but in terms of a benefit to the self, a benefit that comes from an outside source. Therefore, emotions of appreciation and recognition of efforts on the part of the benefactor do not always warrant a reaction of joy. Second, it has been argued that gratitude does not always feel good, for example, when the cost to the benefactor is too high (Manela, 2016). Therefore, even in instances of triadic gratitude, it is not always clear that the beneficiary would feel the kind of pleasure described above. Imagine a situation where one’s life partner gets seriously injured while saving one’s life and ends up in a coma. It is doubtful that there will be an overall sense of pleasure at this kind of benevolence, and yet we would accept that such a beneficiary would feel grateful towards the benefactor. In fact, we might judge them to be ungrateful if they acted entitled and indifferent to the plight of their saviour. On another hand, are we to say that this painful gratitude is not virtuous? What if this particular person is generally prone to recognise and appreciate acts of benevolence, exhibiting a stable trait of gratitude? Perhaps we will discard this experience as gratitude and refer to it as indebtedness, but we have no reason to do so if the recipient describes their emotion as gratitude. Feeling pain at someone’s undeserved misfortune would fall under the overarching emotional attitude of poetic justice and could be part of an emotional virtue of gratitude. However, there is no need to determine that such gratitude



would be dominantly pleasant. We might be better off defining this kind of virtuous gratitude, under the umbrella of poetic justice, as a sensitivity to the intentions of a benefactor who has exhibited a moral virtue, rather than joy. This would still allow us to say that this sensitivity motivates us to “reward them for their display of virtue, and by giving as good as we get, through gratitude, we reward them in this way” and it would still be “a constituent of the flourishing life” (Krisstjánsson, 2013).

Similarly relying on Aristotle’s account of virtues, in “Varieties of Gratitude” D. Carr argues that in order to account for gratitude as a virtue, “we have to have principled grounds upon which felt gratitude contributes or conduces to the moral benefit or flourishing of grateful agents or those to whom they are grateful” (Carr, 2013, p.23). In this analysis, and in a subsequent article titled “From gratitude to lamentation” (Carr, 2014), the author examines triadic and dyadic accounts of gratitude in an effort to determine which modality would offer a better model to understand the nature of gratitude as a virtue. He argues that on the one hand, triadic gratitude, though more structured, can sometimes come too close to social reciprocity, leaving out a broader sense of thankfulness or an appreciative awareness of larger benefits in life. On the other hand, dyadic gratitude offers a model that is closer to a grateful disposition and might offer more insight into the moral significance of gratitude and its place in the moral life. However, this latter modality presents some issues: first, it is often difficult to distinguish it from appreciation and gladness; and second, it is not always clear that being grateful for everything is necessarily morally good. With this in mind, Carr abandons the dyadic model of gratitude for the time being, in favour of the triadic model as a better way to conceptualise gratitude as a virtue (Carr, 2013; 2014).

In his evaluation of gratitude as a virtue, Carr also emphasises the importance of developing deliberative powers that are associated with the notion of practical wisdom (Carr, 2014). He suggests that gratitude as a virtue might not be a distinct emotion, but rather “a matter of rational negotiation between a range of positive and negative emotions” (Carr, 2015, p.442). This highlights the cognitive dimension of gratitude as an emotion which is more than a primitive affect. Indeed, the reflective deliberation involved in the experience of gratitude can be apparent in some instances of grateful behaviour and discourse. In the film “Gratitude in Britain”, we meet another couple who tell us about their daughter whose life was saved thanks to an organ transplant, and their gratitude towards the donors but also towards the nurses who supported them through their ordeal. While the parents describe their gratitude, they mention contradicting emotions of pleasure for the gift they have received but also pain in the knowledge that someone else had to die for their daughter to live. They constantly alternate between “we are so happy” and “that poor family”. Their inner deliberation is centred around the clash between their “selfish” (by their own description) desire to see their daughter saved and the value that another human being’s life holds in their eyes. The resulting gratitude motivates them to contact the donor’s family and to express their gratitude in terms of not only appreciation for the gift, but also recognition of the morally good thing that they have done (Gratitude in Britain, 2015). Carr further adds that a virtue of gratitude might not be a moderation of a deficit or excess of gratitude, but this very deliberation stemming from a stable trait of character and leading to the morally right action (Carr, 2014). In other words, virtuous gratitude is not gratitude to the right degree, but rather a stable disposition towards felt thankfulness with a cognitive dimension, that engages in reflective deliberation and enables morally praiseworthy behaviour.

However, it is not enough to point at this deliberation to conclude that gratitude is a virtue. Such deliberative powers associated with practical wisdom and the ability to recognise the morally salient features of a situation, as well as a stable grateful disposition, might seem to give gratitude all the moral markings of a virtue. However, we must also examine whether gratitude has any intrinsic ethical benefit (Carr, 2015). Indeed, several authors have pointed out that one might be grateful towards a benefactor for a significant benefit without taking any other moral implications into account (Tsang, 2006; Carr, 2015; Hlava and Elfers, 2016). Take the example of a mob boss who generously helps one of his gang members in financial need. The latter might be thankful for this benevolence even in the knowledge that the help he received was the result of a great injustice towards another person. He or she might even help the mob boss hide from the police, in an effort to reciprocate the original benevolence. Therefore, in the light of such cases, it appears that we cannot claim that gratitude always contributes to the human flourishing. And, as Carr points out, arguing that this is the case for many virtues – such as courage - does not solve the problem for gratitude. Indeed, perhaps gratitude can be a virtue only if we adopt and promote “a larger moral vision that fosters genuine concern for justice and the common human good” (Carr, 2015, p.1483).

Certainly, promoting such a vision would contribute to not just virtuous gratitude, but to other personality traits that otherwise can be advantageous to the individual without always being morally good. However, I would like to argue that the difficulty of accounting for gratitude as a virtue also stems from the focus on a triadic model that brings with it the requirement of describing the scope of a state of character. The objection to a dyadic model is that it might be too loose to offer an understanding of gratitude as a virtue as it does not have a scope that is

different from appreciation. But if we consider the transpersonal mode of dyadic gratitude, then we can claim that the object of gratitude is not just *any* good thing in the world. It is a benefit, something good that comes into the agent's experience without the agent's participation and benefits him or her in a certain way. What is generally good is different from what is personally beneficial to the agent. The personal significance of an event, the awareness of what might not have been, and the unlikely and/or unexpected nature of the benefit come together to engage the agent in an experience of gratitude more intimately than propositional gratitude does. By virtue of this engagement, transpersonal gratitude is situated between a loose sense of thankfulness (propositional) and a structured sense of targeted gratitude (triadic). It presents both the characteristics of a grateful disposition and offers some of the discriminatory features that dyadic gratitude lacks (Carr, 2014).

Thus, in terms of a virtue of gratitude based on a dyadic transpersonal model, we would not claim that someone should be thankful for all and any good things, but that they should be thankful for benefits. Removing the benefactor from the equation helps to define gratitude as a virtue, as a state or disposition acquired through experience, knowledge and associated to deliberative capacities, serving as a foundation to grateful emotions and conduct. Such a dyadic disposition to recognise unearned benefits and their value to the individual would entail that one has gone through personal, moral and social experiences that teach the value of life and the merit of love, thus providing the broader moral vision necessary for the virtue of gratitude. The deliberative dimension of such a virtue would be the negotiation of emotions of entitlement on the one hand, and emotions of humility on the other and it would, indeed, be a component of the good, flourishing life. Instances such as the example above, cases of unjust

gratitude would denote a lack of the awareness and discrimination characteristic of a virtue of gratitude, and as such could be examples of a vice or moral deficiency. In other words, being grateful to someone who saves my life by murdering a friend would denote a flaw of moral character producing blameworthy conduct. To take another example, surviving cancer frequently elicits a grateful response on the part of the patients. This gratitude usually targets doctors and other health practitioners, but it often includes transpersonal gratitude for surviving, for a second chance at life, perceived as a benefit or a gift. One such person is Rob Feakins, a neck cancer survivor who describes his feelings of gratitude in an online post shared with other survivors. He writes that before cancer, he considered himself “lucky” (his emphasis) that he had a loving wife and wonderful children as well as a good career. But after surviving cancer, this has been replaced by feelings of gratitude: Grateful for another chance at life, as he “attacks his bucket list”. He also writes that by virtue of this gratitude, he has become a caring person because, before cancer, he would have never spent time volunteering at the local hospice and supporting others through their pain (Feakins, 2017). This display of gratitude is virtuous because it shows an appreciation of the value of life, of its precarity, of the importance of “being there for each other” as humans and prompts a morally good course of action stemming from a disposition that has developed through the agent’s experiences. I would argue that there is a vice correlative to gratitude which is different from ingratitude understood in triadic terms and which illustrates an attitude of entitlement linked to a general attitude towards the meaning and value of life. Imagine if, after surviving cancer, Rob had expressed gratitude to his doctors and joyful gratitude for being alive, but then gone and spent the rest of his days engaging in behaviours detrimental to his health and not pursuing any life goals in any way.

We might not say that Rob was being ungrateful, because he did genuinely thank his doctors. On the other hand, there is no one to thank for the gift of being alive, but his conduct would still be blameworthy as it illustrates a defective grateful disposition, through the waste of a precious gift denoting a lack of understanding of what truly matters for the good life.

To sum up, gratitude is a virtue as a disposition or state of character sensitive to benefits, developed through personal experiences and growth, that negotiates, through the deliberative capacities of phronesis, positive and negative emotions of humility and entitlement. This disposition enables the right action, based on a recognition of unearned benefits as representative of goodness in the world, motivating, when circumstances arise, a conduct of making a return that reflects this recognition of goodness and its value. Thus defined, the virtue of gratitude is a constituent of the flourishing life.

### *7.2.3 Transpersonal gratitude and the spiritual virtue of gratitude*

In “Counting blessings: towards a spiritual virtue of gratitude”, D. Carr makes the case of a secular virtue analogue to the gratitude that theists experience for benefits that they attribute to the benevolence of God (Carr, 2016). What is meant by spiritual gratitude here is the experience of a “general but “quasi-directed” appreciation of positive things that we have been on the receiving end of in our lives” (id.) In an attempt to explain such a gratitude and its moral significance, Carr defines non-religious spirituality as an attitude and a capacity “for transpersonal valuation of intrinsically worthwhile objects or goods” (Carr, 2016, p.177) In other words, this capacity allows for the appreciation of something as valuable beyond any personal concern for or attachment to it. This kind of

“unselfing” does not, however, mean that one would lack any attachment to what one considers as having intrinsic value: it is only the personal attachment that is not there. For example, one could recognise the intrinsic value of a Van Gogh painting without being personally concerned with it. And furthermore, it does not mean that such detached attachment would not provide a moral motivation; so, the author states “while I do not take the intrinsic value of a Van Gogh painting or this stretch of natural beauty to be at all dependent on my own appreciation of, desire for or pleasure in it, I may still be drawn to preserve it or protect it from harm” (Carr, 2016, p.178). The gratitude that arises for this kind of intrinsically valued object, then, is a result of it being considered as an objective source of benefits, with the awareness that, had circumstances been otherwise, “we might have missed it, to the considerable impoverishment of our lives” (Carr, 2016, p.179). Carr concludes that this kind of gratitude is a form of piety, and thus a virtue; and to be untouched by it would denote the absence of a “quality of humanly definitive spiritual and moral significance” (id.).

Carr’s account of what he calls spiritual gratitude bears many similarities with transpersonal gratitude and, as we have mentioned in previous chapters, transpersonal gratitude and theistic gratitude do seem to be mutually exclusive. However, the major difference between the two concepts is the notion of “unselfing” (Carr, 2016). Transpersonal gratitude entails the interpretation of an event or an object as being personally significant to the individual concerned. A beautiful sunset, for example, elicits gratitude insofar as it is witnessed as something bringing more beauty to one’s moment. Whereas it might be true that said sunset is beautiful whether I appreciate it or not, however it is my appreciation of what it brings into my experience that elicits my transpersonal gratitude. Spiritual gratitude, on the other hand, depends on regarding something

as a source of benefit and being thankful for it. But is this not where the personal concern makes a return? We must wonder whether we would really consider that the absence of something would have impoverished our lives if it did not on some level relate to personal preferences. If I am thankful for a painting of Van Gogh, is it not because the awe and the sense of elevation that it elicits are personally pleasing to me?

Nevertheless, spiritual gratitude joins transpersonal gratitude in being a response to benefits “construed as something like the gifts of providential fortune rather than mere strokes of luck” (Carr, 2016, p.179). While spiritual gratitude offers a secular alternative to theistic gratitude for the blessings of life, and transpersonal gratitude additionally addresses instances of ordinary life (such as surviving an accident), both point out at a transcendent dimension of gratitude, which we will discuss in the next chapter.

This chapter examined the moral emotions in general and gratitude in particular, in an attempt to clarify the moral importance of gratitude. I argued that personal and transpersonal modalities of gratitude, beyond being strongly prosocial emotions, both have clear moral implication as they enhance the recognition of morally good conduct and encourage behaviour that expresses such recognition. We also investigated gratitude as a trait, with the aim of determining whether a grateful disposition can be a virtue. Our analysis focused on the issues that arise from a triadic model of the virtue of gratitude and we suggested that the virtue of gratitude is better understood via the dyadic model. This led us to a definition of the virtue of gratitude based on the dyadic transpersonal model of gratitude. A discussion of spiritual gratitude as a secular alternative to theistic gratitude highlighted the transcendent dimension of transpersonal gratitude that will be discussed in Chapter Nine.



## Chapter Eight

### Negative gratitude and transpersonal gratitude

In previous chapters, we have discussed in depth the prosocial qualities of gratitude and how grateful behaviours and dispositions strengthen social bonds, encourage generosity and contribute to the good of the society as a whole. We have also examined the moral significance of gratitude as a virtue, contributing to the flourishing life.

However, there have been accounts in literature where gratitude is described either as an undesirable trait, or a weakness and even a burden. In the novel *Ignorance*, one of Milan Kundera's main characters, Irena, reflects on gratitude and her own disposition to show gratitude: "She knows she is good at gratitude; she has always prided herself on that as her prime virtue (...) But was that something to be proud of? Isn't gratitude simply another name for weakness, for dependency?" (Kundera, 2002).

This chapter explores accounts of the negative aspects of gratitude and asks whether these might apply to cases of transpersonal gratitude too. Finally, it discusses what negative transpersonal gratitude might mean in terms of morality and moral character.

#### 8.1. Burdens of gratitude

*"I feel my heart to be ungrateful from the very fact alone that gratitude is a duty."*

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Letter to Malesherbes*

Can gratitude be a burden of weakness? In *Lectures on Ethics*, Kant argues that benefits are to be accepted only when one is in dire need and if one can trust the benefactor not to have further expectations. Generally speaking, accepting favours is a breach on one's duty towards oneself, because gratitude is a debt that can never be repaid: "We should sooner go without, then accept benefits. For beneficence creates a debt that can never be repaid. Even if I return to my benefactor fifty times more than he gave me, I am still not yet quits with him, for he did me a good turn that he did not owe me, and was the first in doing so. Even if I return it to him fifty times over, I still do it merely to repay the benefit and discharge the debt. Here I can no longer get ahead of him; for he remains always the one who was first to show me kindness" (Kant, 1997, Col. 27:443). This sounds like a very heavy burden to bear. Although Kant's focus is on one's duty towards oneself, we can still deduce from his argument that being forever in debt is not a pleasant situation. This "nondischargeability" (Smit and Timmons, 2011) is the main reason why gratitude is a sacred virtue, as Kant suggests in *The Metaphysics of Morals*: "But gratitude must also be considered, in particular, a sacred duty, that is, a duty the violation of which can destroy the moral incentive to beneficence in its very principle. For, a moral object is sacred if the obligation with regard to it cannot be discharged completely by any act in keeping with it (So that one who is under obligation always remains under obligation). (...) One cannot, by any repayment of a kindness received, rid oneself of the obligation for it, since the recipient can never win away from the benefactor his priority of merit, namely having been the first in benevolence" (Kant, 1996, p.203). We have briefly discussed the moral significance of the duty of gratitude for Kant, namely as a virtue of love in Chapter Two. We focus here on Kant's repeated claim that a debt of gratitude can never be fully repaid *because* the benefactor was first to initiate

kind moral conduct. Thus, even if we accept benefits from someone who we know does not have any expectations of return, we are still indebted to him without any hope of ever being free of our obligations towards him. It is not clear why the fact that a benefactor is first in benevolence should create such long lasting obligations. Perhaps, as Smit and Timmons suggest, it is because an act of pure altruism can never be matched, no matter how genuine the grateful response (Smit and Timmons, 2011). Kant sees this as a potential breach of one's duties toward oneself, perhaps in terms of duties of self-respect and to avoid servile disposition. Therefore, we should not accept benefits lightly, unless we are "in direst need", then "we have to swallow our pride and accept these things under pressure of necessity"<sup>10</sup> (Kant, 1997, Col. 27:443). There is, then, something about humility and pride that is involved in experiences of gratitude, and although Kant does not discuss the phenomenological aspect of gratitude, we can argue that feelings and thoughts of indebtedness may indeed prompt associations with concepts such as self-respect and dignity in response to a benevolent favour<sup>11</sup>.

Nietzsche has similarly expressed the intuition that gratitude can become a burden. In "Human, All Too Human", he states that when someone bestows a great benefit, he or she should not expect gratitude because "the recipient, simply by accepting it, already has too much of a burden" (Nietzsche, 1984, p.180). However, he adds to this the differences between the attitude of a noble soul and that of a "slavish soul" as he claims that the former "will be happy to feel itself bound in gratitude (...) and will likewise be at ease later in expressing gratitude"

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<sup>10</sup> In which case we then have a sacred duty of gratitude towards the benefactor.

<sup>11</sup> For instance, recent studies aiming to examine gratitude from the standpoint of the layperson have found that in the UK, gratitude is frequently associated to concepts such as guilt, indebtedness and awkwardness (Gulliford, Morgan and Kristjánsson, 2013).

(Nietzsche, 1984, p.188), whereas the latter will either resist gratitude or “carry their thanks for favours so far that they actually strangle themselves with the rope of gratitude” (Nietzsche, 1984, p.242). A graceful grateful attitude seems to be the mark of the noble soul.

Whether we agree or not with Nietzsche’s description of the noble soul or Kant’s claim that gratitude can never be completely discharged is a separate matter. However, what is relevant here for us is that both accounts highlight that gratitude can be a burden and a weakness depending on the kind of person one is, or the kind of person one should be (or should want to be) in terms of one’s self-definition and relationships with others. We can argue that this is close to the concept of gratitude as a virtue. If I am a virtuously grateful person, then perhaps I will not object to being bound in gratitude because I know how to receive a gift with grace and make an appropriate return; and I will not object to having an ongoing obligation of gratitude because I will not see it as an injury to my sense of self-respect, but as a welcome sense of dependence between myself and others.

R. Roberts defends a similar view in “The normative and the empirical in the study of gratitude” (2015) and subsequently in “Gratitude and humility” (2016). He suggests that there is a difference between debts of justice and debts of grace and that debts of gratitude are of the second kind. This debt of grace is not to be paid off or paid up, but it is to be paid *by* a token or a gift that serves to bind the benefactor and the beneficiary in a relationship of affection. Such a bond, he argues, is something that we wouldn’t want to end. Thus, a grateful person would not want to dissolve his debt because it would end a great relationship. (Roberts, 2015). Robert’s efforts aim at demonstrating that gratitude is a fully pleasant

emotion and that indebtedness is a distinct experience. He rejects that resentment, guilt or embarrassment can be part of an experience of gratitude and instead argues that those emotions are separate from it, and that if one's thankfulness feels like a burden, then their response falls short of gratitude (id.). Furthermore, Roberts suggests that some social science researches show a confusion between gratitude and indebtedness as a result of a fallacy, a conceptual mistake: assuming that a negative emotion in a situation of benevolence is gratitude, while it's not, though "we may think that gratitude would be the most *fitting* response" (Roberts, 2016, p.59). In other words, philosophers and psychologists who speak of negative feelings of gratitude do not take into consideration that people can respond to situations that call for gratitude with other emotions (id.). He gives the example of the Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva who had to depend on the benevolence of others to survive through the harsh oppression of the Bolshevik system in 1917. However, it appears that Tsvetaeva's response was not gratitude, but humiliation, as a result of which she chose to imagine that the hand that gave her food was just that, a hand; and that the receiver was just a stomach. She could not bear thinking of herself as weak and inferior to the giver, thus she "depersonalised" both giver and receiver. Roberts argues that this does not mean that Tsvetaeva had a painful experience of gratitude, but that her response to the situation was just another kind of emotion (Roberts, 2016).

Whereas it is true that we do not always respond to benevolence with gratitude, one problem with Roberts' discussion on this particular matter is that it is not clear if he is speaking of the emotion of gratitude or the virtue. On the one hand, I agree that in terms of an emotional response, Tsvetaeva has just displayed a different emotion than gratitude. However, this does not necessarily mean that a case

cannot be made for negative feelings of gratitude. I will discuss this later in this chapter when exploring Manela's account (Manela, 2016). For the time being, we can accept that at least in this particular instance, the Russian poet did not display negative feelings of gratitude. However, I would add that it says something about her moral character. Someone with a disposition of gratefulness would not feel aggravated for receiving a gift. He or she would be able to appreciate the benefit for the self from an outside source and respond to it with appropriate gratitude. Resentment or anger would seem ungrateful responses to a benefit. Removing the benevolent intention of the giver because it makes her feel inferior to be on the receiving end of such benevolence, is a case of ungratefulness. Indeed, "depersonalising" the giver, as Robert describes it, is a violation of what grounds an experience of triadic gratitude: the recognition of the giver's morally good choice to benefit us in our time of need. Presumably, the person who reached out to help her was sharing the harsh conditions of the Bolshevik regime, at least to some extent. And we can reasonably imagine that this benefactor made some significant effort to help another human being who was starving. In response, he or she finds that the beneficiary decides to altogether ignore the kind intention behind the benevolence, as well as the cost that the benefactor has incurred, because this makes her feel inferior. This is a case of ingratitude and cannot be reduced to "just" a different emotion in response to benefaction. What Roberts – and Komter before him (Komter, 2004) - overlooks is that Marina Tsvetaeva *did* accept the food she was offered. Had she refused it out of a desire to be free of gratitude, it would have been a different matter. But accepting a benefit, enjoying the good that it brings into one's life and yet refusing to show thankfulness for it is simply ungrateful response and conduct, a moral failure as far as benevolence and gratitude are concerned.

Roberts further discusses the association between gratitude and indebtedness to suggest that even if the two concepts are associated, this does not mean that they are part of one another. In other words, gratitude and indebtedness may be linked, but this does not mean that indebtedness is part of the experience of gratitude (id.).

Indeed, indebtedness is commonly considered to be part of gratitude, as the motivational source behind obligations of gratitude and grateful conduct but also as a negative component, an unpleasant feeling part of gratitude (Haidt, 2003; Manela, 2016). However, recent psychological research shows that this might not be a completely accurate assumption. In *Gratitude and The Good Life*, Ph. Watkins discusses the results of a study on the debt of gratitude, that shows gratitude and indebtedness as separate emotional states with different action tendencies (Watkins, 2014; Watkins, Scheer, Ovnicek and Kolts, 2006). Another study by C. Peng, Nelissen R.M.A. and M. Zeelenberg has similarly found that it is possible to distinguish between gratitude and indebtedness in terms of their action tendencies and emotional valences (Peng, Nelissen and Zeelenberg, 2017). Both studies conclude that while indebtedness motivates reciprocal action with the aim of restoring equity, gratitude enhances prosocial actions of proximity and recompense (Watkins et al., 2006; Peng et al. 2017). Another interesting find is that there is a positive correlation between gratitude and benevolent intention on the one hand, and indebtedness and the expectations of the benefactor on the other hand. The higher the benefit, the more it elicits gratitude; and the bigger the inequity created, the more it elicits indebtedness (id.). Finally, gratitude and indebtedness themselves are highly correlated as they rise in response to the same event. Watkins concludes that prosocial returns, motivated by gratitude, are not viewed by the grateful agent in terms of exchange: “The grateful person

may respond with grateful recompense, not necessarily to discharge the debt, but rather to establish and encourage the interdependent relationship with his/her benefactor” (Watkins, 2006, p.239). This can be compared to Roberts’ argument about gratitude creating a debt of love, and not of justice (Roberts, 2016).

Be that as it may, does this allow us to argue that any burden of gratitude is, at the end of the day, a misguided way of expressing indebtedness? There are two issues to take into consideration here: First, however much joy and indebtedness fluctuate according to the inequity of the situation and the benefit, phenomenologically speaking we hardly experience them as distinct and separate emotions. When a friend does me a great favour, at some cost to himself, I experience happiness for the benefit and a wish to make a return, mixed with a sense of obligation to recognise his good will in some way. This leads us to our second consideration: gratitude is not just an emotional reaction to benefit. It is an emotional state that has a cognitive dimension of appraisal and deliberation, which allows for a unified experience of gratitude. Grateful conduct and expression stems from this emotional state, and not only from the emotional reaction to a benefit. Therefore, it is unnecessary to argue that the positive emotional reaction and the grateful emotional state – which can include elements of indebtedness and other negative emotions – must be mutually exclusive, or that gratitude is purely an emotional experience. The fact that gratitude can be a mixed emotional state does not strip it of its moral significance nor sever its links from virtues such as humility. On the contrary, it shows that a truly grateful agent is sensitive to the moral aspects of the benevolent situation, including a concern for the welfare of the benefactor.



Indeed, indebtedness may not be the only negative emotion involved in an experience of gratitude. We argued in the previous chapter of this research that gratitude presents a sensitivity to the benevolent situation, which might not translate into joy if, for example, the benefactor is badly hurt in the process of doing me a favour. In “Negative feelings of gratitude”, T. Manela similarly suggests that there is no one positive feeling of gratitude and continues to argue that in certain cases it might even be morally required that a beneficiary feels negative emotions (Manela, 2016).

Manela investigates cases where an act of benevolence causes serious harm to the benefactor, wondering what kind of emotions gratitude warrants when the cost to the benefactor is extremely high. He takes the example of a benefactor losing her hand saving the beneficiary’s hands from a malfunctioning equipment. In such cases, we would surely not expect the beneficiary to feel only joy for having been saved, without any regard for the benefactor. We would not find him ungrateful for not exhibiting joy. In fact, Manela argues, that negative feelings are sometimes “called for in response to acts of benevolence; and insofar as a grateful beneficiary should sometimes have negative feelings, we can say there are negative feelings of gratitude – painful or aversive feelings that the properly grateful beneficiary ought to have” (Manela, 2016, p.134). It should be noted that Manela speaks of negative feelings *of* gratitude, rather than saying that gratitude does not feel good as an emotion. We find that this corresponds to the idea that gratitude is an emotional *state*. What is illustrated in this example is a sensitivity not only to the benefit, but also to the welfare of the benefactor. When the cost to the benefactor is too high, the negative feelings are more intense, thus resulting in an experience of gratitude more focused on the well-being of the benefactor than the beneficiary himself (although there must also be some feelings of relief

for not having lost his hands). Consequently, the negative feelings involved do not need to be described as indebtedness or at least not only indebtedness. They can be sorrow, or guilt<sup>12</sup>, which are more compassionate and stem from a concern for others rather than an impulse to restore equity. We then agree with Manela that some instances of benevolence might elicit negative feelings, but we would add that those are part of the experience of gratitude, which would include some, albeit less intense, positive feelings for the benefit as well. Further, it seems reasonable to expect that a grateful agent be concerned with the misfortune of the benefactor. This would hold true even in cases where the benefit, or the cost, are not very great. If you are taking part in a marathon and I notice that you are thirsty and come running to you with a bottle of cold water, and just as I reach you, I trip over a road bump and fall down, you would be expected to show some concern for my well-being and not just happiness for having a much-needed drink.

Manela continues to argue that a grateful beneficiary should experience negative feelings even when the benefactor suffers in the future (Manela, 2016). In this perspective, gratitude can only be positive if the benefactor fares well now and in the future. Thus, if someone one day murders one's benefactor, a grateful beneficiary *should* feel negative feelings of gratitude (id.). If it is always blameworthy to stay indifferent to a murder, it would be even more so for a beneficiary not to care about the benefactor's murder, or stay indifferent to his or her suffering, even if the act of benevolence has taken place in the past. This sounds intuitively plausible. We would find it surprising, if not shocking, if one did not care about one's benefactor's welfare just because the benefit was conferred

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<sup>12</sup> The Japanese term "Sumanai" (often meaning "thank you, sorry" to a benefactor or a dependent) captures the expression of such mixed feelings of gratitude.

in the past. However, this would not be detrimental to some social relationships as Manela claims (Manela, 2016).

Manela's argument is that my gratitude towards my murdered benefactor would enhance feelings of resentment, for example, towards the murderer. But if we claim that that a beneficiary *should* feel negative emotions of gratitude for this murder, we are prescribing certain emotions only to claim that those emotions are bad for social relationships (and consequently undesirable). If we remove the normative requirement and claim that a grateful agent simply *could* experience negative feelings for the suffering of his or her benefactor, then we resolve this paradox. Although, it is still not clear that this would be detrimental to social relationships. To be sure, negative feelings towards a murderer cannot be considered damaging to such relationships or society in general. In this case, the experience of gratitude clearly functions as a moral barometer and reinforcer (McCullough *et al.*, 2001) rather than a socially detrimental motivator.

It appears from the discussions above that there is a difference between gratitude as an emotional reaction (which is positive in terms of joy and happiness) and the unified experience of gratitude, which includes its cognitive and deliberative aspects (and can be negative or mixed). The latter is what is commonly referred to as gratitude and the former is the first state of appraisal that we have discussed in previous chapters. Thus, Roberts' argument that gratitude is a positive emotion stands true insofar as it concerns an appraisal of benefits and good intentions. However, the experience of gratitude itself can be a mixed emotion, as is the case with other emotions with cognitive components (such as envy and pride). More importantly, it is evident that negative and positive feelings of gratitude alike focus on moral aspects of a benevolent situation, not only in terms of the kind intentions

of the benefactor, but also his or her welfare, the grateful agent's welfare and a more general concern with what is the morally good thing to do. With this in mind, we turn to examine a particular account of gratitude by S. Smilansky, who suggests that gratitude has a darker side which creates morally ambiguous requirements. under certain circumstances.

## **8.2. "Crazy Gratitude"**

In "Gratitude. The Dark Side", Smilansky claims that there are some situations of gratitude that are perverse (Smilansky, 2016). He argues that since our existence is the result of a myriad of past contingencies, we should examine the nonidentity problem and the gratitude we owe (id.). For example, if it so happened that my grandmother was molested in her youth, but then because of this horrible incident she broke up with her then fiancé and eventually met the man who became my grandfather, I ought to be grateful, at least in the weakest sense of gratitude, that my grandmother was molested. Another example that Smilansky offers, is that of all the people who fought the Nazis in World War II and made victory possible. Evidently, we owe those people our gratitude. However, we must also be grateful that they died (we cannot wish that they had not), in exactly the way they died (including that they lost some of the battles) because the slightest change in history could have affected our existence, assuming of course that we are happy to have been born (id.). This leads the author to conclude that indeed, there are some strange cases where gratitude is owed in a rather perverse way. Smilansky calls this "crazy ethics", where "common, reasonable expectations from morality disappoint in a significant way and lead to discordant and irrational situations" (Smilansky, 2016, p.135).

However, to start with the example of the grandmother, I would argue that this is a case of unwitting agency. Surely, my grandmother did not make a choice to get molested exactly then and there with the intention of paving the way to my existence, nor did the kind neighbour who intervened just in time, or the teacher who drove my young grandmother to the park, worry about me being born several years later. As argued in Chapter Five, we do not owe gratitude to unwitting agents. But do I owe a general form of gratitude *that* my grandmother was harmed, because otherwise I would not be me? Smilansky argues that this is a reasonable expectation from morality; that if I am glad to have been born, I am expected to be grateful that certain circumstances made it possible, including ones that are harmful to others and thus morally bad. But this is not very convincing. For anyone's existence, we can go back far enough in time to find a morally bad incident and point to it as a reason for perverse gratitude. But the expectation from morality cannot be an indiscriminate form of gratitude. If it is a moral requirement, then it should include some discernment between what deserves gratitude and what does not. And what deserves gratitude is not only what is good for *me* (although this is part of it), but also what is representative of some beauty and goodness in life. As we have argued in previous chapters, this is how transpersonal gratitude gains its moral significance. In other words, that my grandmother was molested, even with the end result of my existence, is not something that is deserving of gratitude, and we cannot owe such gratitude. On the other hand, being glad that my grandmother was harmed because I benefited from it is a form of egoistical celebration, and indeed, perverse.

As for the case of gratitude to people who have died for us to survive, it is not clear why this gratitude should be perverse. Presumably, the soldiers and all the people who fought in WWII did not go to war unaware that they might die. On the

contrary, our pride in their courage stems from a recognition that they knew the risks and yet fought anyway for the higher good of humanity. Thus, it is proper gratitude to be thankful for their sacrifice. Smilansky's argument, however, is about the implications of such gratitude, specifically that we cannot both be grateful that they died for our existence to continue *and* wish them well. Arguably, this is because they are our benefactors, and proper gratitude should be concerned with the welfare of the benefactor. In other words, this is an instance where the benefit comes into our experience through great cost to the benefactor. One response could be that this is similar to what Manela describes in "Negative feelings of gratitude" (Manela, 2016). We might be thankful but at the same time sorrowful that our benefactors paid such a high price for our benefit. But since the benefit is our existence, the sorrow will mean that we are not, in fact, happy to exist. But can we not be grateful, indeed very grateful, that they showed such commitment to the good of humanity and at the same time sad that things had to happen the way they happened? In fact, that they died in the way they died – committed to moral goodness – gives rise to a gratitude that reinforces our own commitment to be deserving of such sacrifice and thus lead morally good lives too, both as a society and individuals.

On a more positive note, Smilansky suggests that the same situations which create such discordance in the case of gratitude, also show that we have many people to be grateful to, that we are not alone and that we can depend on others' goodwill (Smilansky, 2016). He continues with reference to another one of his articles, which discusses whether we should be grateful to others for not harming us (Smilansky, 1997)<sup>13</sup>. Indeed, in "Should I be thankful to you for not harming me?",

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<sup>13</sup> We have discussed this article in terms of obligations of gratitude in Chapter 2.

the author argues that very often people have the opportunity to harm others, or even reasons to harm others, but they do not. This is something that literature on gratitude has not discussed enough, arguably because not harming others is what is normally expected in society. However, Smilansky continues, we owe these people our gratitude, because they resist temptation or simply make the choice not to take up opportunities of harming others. They are agents who make constant choices, and we should honour them for being always guided by ethical and humane considerations (id.). Such gratitude would make us realise that “we are all dependent on the goodwill of others and *ought not take such good will for granted*” (Smilansky, 1997, p.596.).

Perhaps it would be difficult to feel grateful towards each and every person we meet every day that do not harm us. However, Smilansky’s comment is more about an attitude of gratefulness, a perspective on life that keeps reminding us of the good in the world, and of our interdependence as human beings.

For now, we continue our discussion of negative feelings of gratitude, to see if there is case to be made for negative feelings of transpersonal gratitude.

### **8.3. Negative feelings of transpersonal gratitude**

To recap what we suggested about negative personal gratitude, we argued that the emotional reaction of gratitude might be always positive, but what we commonly refer to as gratitude is an emotional state, involving cognitive elements and deliberation. Thus, a grateful emotional state that it directed towards a benefactor can be a mix of positive and negative feelings. This is because at times, for example when the benefactor’s welfare is threatened, indebtedness and emotions such as guilt and sorrow can become part of the experience of gratitude and introduce a negative valence to it.

In the case of transpersonal gratitude, there are a few elements that are missing from the equation, namely the benefactor and with it, feelings of indebtedness, guilt and sorrow concerned with the welfare of the benefactor. How, then, does a negative feeling of transpersonal gratitude arise?

Consider a man walking home on a cold winter night, lost in worrisome thoughts about his financial situation. He looks up, and as he notices the unusually clear sky, he contemplates the starry sky and he lets himself to be immersed in the beauty and majesty of the view. For a moment, he feels somehow privileged to be in that place in space and time to witness such splendour, he recognises the good this brought into his experience and he feels grateful for it. He feels a sense of connection with the world around him, of being part of something much greater than himself. In this state of transpersonal gratitude, the emotion is positive.

But imagine that at the same time, the contemplation of the vast starry sky elicits some emotional discomfort, as he also thinks of the transience and littleness of his existence in the face of such vastness. This does not prevent him from recognising the benefit of that moment in his experience, but the emotional aspect is not purely positive. I would argue that those are negative feelings of transpersonal gratitude, where the benefit elicits both positive and negative emotional responses. It would make sense, in this case, if the man in question did not experience feelings of elation, but a more sober sense of gratitude for that moment.

Evidently, such negative feelings cannot be said to represent some moral failure on the man's part. They are part of a state of gratefulness with a negative valence, still acknowledging the good that the benefit brought into his experience.



However, there is a form of negative response to good things in life that reveals a flaw of moral character. The following section explains this particular form of response to benefits, which I propose to call transpersonal resentment.

#### **8.4 Transpersonal resentment**

In “Messy bodies, or why we love machines”, M. Hauskeller points out that the urge to improve our bodies with the aid of technology denotes a resentful attitude towards our human bodies, finding them vulnerable and faulty (Hauskeller, 2015). Indeed, machines seem much more durable, as well as capable of doing things that we cannot. This makes us feel inferior and we resent that we have to put up with such fragile, decease-prone, dying bodies: “Human bodies are feeble, messy things. The ageing body, the diseased body, the body in decline, only brings this essential messiness to the fore (...) Thus it seems only too understandable that many people are not happy with their bodies, or more precisely with the *kind* of body they have” (Hauskeller, 2015, p.95). However, these bodies are what we have. We might not be able to fly, and we might get old, but there is also a lot that we can do. Our bodies enable us to live a full life and to engage with the world in countless ways. Hauskeller suggests that a change of perspective, focused on the positive aspects of having the bodies we have, might diminish the urgency of bio-enhancement (id). The resentment mentioned in this case is transpersonal, since it is not directed towards anyone. It is also morally amiss. Indeed, we could – and perhaps should - be grateful for the bodies we have, and for the fact that they enable us to do so much, even if we eventually age and die. The vulnerability itself that bio-enhancement proposes to do away with, is what makes the goodness of life salient. Thanks to this vulnerability, we are able to recognise the value of our individual lives, but at the same time, acknowledge our humble place

in the greater cycle of life. Indeed, gratitude is a more fitting response to such benefit than resentment.

To conclude this chapter, it appears that much like the personal modality, transpersonal gratitude is not always a state of pure positive emotions as it can arise as a mixture of positive and negative emotions and thoughts. Additionally, there are cases of transpersonal resentment, representing negative responses to benefits that come into one's life through no intentional benevolence. In both instances, the morally praiseworthy attitude is that which recognises beauty and goodness outside of the self, and gracefully accepts such benefits that connect the individual to such goodness.

Negative feelings of transpersonal gratitude seem to be indicators of character flaws or at least of some misguided interpretation of benefits that come into our experiences in the absence of an intentional benefactor. Additionally, this kind of ungratefulness shows a sense of entitlement, closely related to what Roberts identifies as an insistence on self-sufficiency that frustrates humility (Roberts, 2016). The next chapter examines the link between transpersonal gratitude and humility, as well as the relationship between transpersonal gratitude and empathy, through a discussion of the sense of connectedness in the experience of transpersonal gratitude.

## **Chapter Nine**

### **Transpersonal gratitude, humility and dependence**

The account of transpersonal gratitude that we have argued for so far describes it as an emotion and a virtue, a disposition to feel grateful towards benefits that come into one's life in the absence of an intentional agent. What has become apparent is that transpersonal gratitude is not an experience that can be situated within a relationship of exchange or reciprocity like personal gratitude. While personal gratitude is defined in terms of mutual intentions and corresponding conducts between benefactor and beneficiary, transpersonal gratitude is characterised by an interpretation of beneficial events in the absence of a benefactor.

This chapter argues that transpersonal gratitude plays an important role in a positive relationship of dependence between the grateful individual and the world he inhabits. It further argues that this role depends on its links with humility and empathy, fostered by feelings of connectedness reported in experiences of transpersonal gratitude. The chapter starts with the discussion of the feelings of connectedness. It then examines the links between transpersonal gratitude and empathy as well as the links between transpersonal gratitude and humility. Finally, it considers the relationship between connectedness, dependence and humility on the one hand, and transpersonal gratitude on the other.

#### **9.1. Connectedness**

Throughout this research, we have made several references to the feelings of connectedness that are part of the experience of transpersonal gratitude. Specifically, we discussed the notion of connectedness in terms of peak

experiences (Maslow, 2014; Steindl-Rast, 2004), in the context of propositional gratitude (McAleer, 2012) and the features of transcendental gratitude (Hlava and Elfers, 2016), as well as in our discussion of expressions of transpersonal gratitude (Chapter Six). Here, we examine what this sense of connectedness means.

In his analysis of gratefulness, Steindl-Rast mentions a cosmic kinship, an experience which creates feelings of thankfulness (Steindl-Rast, 2004). His discussion suggests that this is the “ground zero” of religious experience, with a recognition of the existence of “something greater” that admits the subject into a relationship of kinship/kindness. In other words, this cosmic kinship is a very basic experience of being connected to a divine source of everything. In his analysis of mystical experiences, W. James similarly compares them to religious states of mind, to conclude that mystical states “open out the possibility of other orders of truth, in which, so far as anything in us vitally responds to them, we may freely continue to have faith” (James, 1982, p.423) But is the recognition of something greater than the individual self necessarily an experience that bears the mark of spirituality? I propose that such a sense of connectedness can be a secular phenomenon, where the “something greater” is the natural world.

Such feelings of connectedness have also been reported in studies on transpersonal gratitude. In a research published by Hlava and Elfers (Hlava and Elfers, 2016) participants describe a sense of connection when asked about their gratitude beyond personal relationships. One of them says “Well, nature provides me with a sense of the oneness or the connection of all things being connected” (id., p. 119) and another one states that “it was a feeling of – like I had a connection, some connection outside of myself, and it’s a wonderful feeling” (id.).

It appears that connectedness, in the context of transpersonal gratitude, refers to a specific experience of connection to something greater, of being part of something larger than the self. This definition has prompted some authors to argue that this modality of gratitude is transcendent, in the sense of going beyond the boundaries of the self. In the following section, I discuss the main claims made on this subject and argue that transpersonal gratitude might be said to be transcendent only in a secular sense.

#### *9.1.1. Transcendent emotions and transpersonal gratitude*

*“I think when I’m in those moments [of gratitude], there is a sense of connection to something greater than me, whatever that is (...) the sense that everything is okay just as it is. I’m a part of that; I’m not separate from that (Allison)”*

– in Hlava and Elfers, 2016.

The terms transcendence and self-transcendence are often used in psychological literature to describe emotions that go beyond the boundaries of the individual self. Gratitude is often discussed as such an emotion. In “Is gratitude queen of virtues?”, for instance, Emmons argues that gratitude has an “ethereal, spiritual and transcendent dimension” which stems from a sense of connection to others, and to the divine. He puts the emphasis on what he calls the spiritual nature of gratitude both for theists and non-theists, but he does not elaborate on what such spirituality might mean for non-believers (Emmons, 2016). D. Steindl-Rast proposes a form of self-transcendence stemming from a vast feeling of gratitude as the core of mystical religious experiences, in acknowledgment of “something greater than myself”. However, it is not clear what this would mean for non-theists

(Steindl-Rast, 2004)<sup>14</sup>. Therefore, it is important to clarify what we mean when we talk of transcendence and self-transcendence in terms of emotions and in particular, transpersonal gratitude. We will consider two accounts that discuss the transcendent dimension of gratitude in more detail than intuitive claims: Hlava and Elfers's study of experiences of gratitude (Hlava and Elfers, 2016) and Peterson and Seligman's discussion of virtues and character strengths (Parkinson and Seligman, 2004).

For Hlava and Elfers, self-transcendence is “an ability to connect with dimensions of experience that are beyond the discernible world, including spirituality” (Hlava and Elfers, 2016, p.101). It involves a “dissolving of the psychological boundaries that define the self” and reaches “beyond into a fuller expression that open doors for human awareness and perception beyond the self”. It is essentially “a selfless experience and this selfless attitude grounds altruistic intentions and behaviour” (Hlava and Elfers, 2016, p.164). Transpersonal gratitude, in the authors' definition, is a response to benefits that come from transcendent sources, i.e. from sources that are beyond the discernible world, including God. In chapter 3, we discussed their account of transpersonal gratitude and proposed to call it transcendental gratitude since it includes some intentional agency and is defined by the transcendent focus and the object of the experience. What interests us here is their definition of self-transcendence as an ability to shift the focus from the self to what lies beyond. Perhaps the sense of connectedness involved in transpersonal gratitude denotes such a shift. However, it is not clear what the authors mean by “dimensions of experience” and what is “beyond the discernible world”. Perhaps they mean a connection to supernatural or divine realms of

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<sup>14</sup> Discussed in chapter 3.

experiences, as suggested by their mention of spirituality. If that is the case, then transcendent emotions would arise in religious, spiritual or mystical states of mind. This is not always the case for transpersonal gratitude despite some similarities between the phenomenological aspects of the experiences. Thus, this is not the mode of transcendence that we would associate with transpersonal gratitude.

In *Character Strengths and Virtues*, Parkinson and Seligman present a classification of human virtues and character strengths, based on a historical and cross-cultural review of philosophical, psychological and theological accounts (Parkinson and Seligman, 2004). Their classification includes six broad families of virtues: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance and transcendence. It is the last group that is of interest to us, since we are examining what transcendence might mean in relation to gratitude and the authors have categorised gratitude as part of the virtue of transcendence.

Parkinson and Seligman define the virtues of transcendence in a broad sense of connection to something higher, the belief that there is meaning or purpose larger than ourselves – this is not spirituality or religion, although both can come under the virtue of transcendence. Indeed, they argue that “transcendence does need to be sacred but does not need to be divine” (id.) By sacred, the authors mean experiences that remind us “of how tiny we are but that simultaneously lift us out of a sense of insignificance” (id.) Thus, in this sense, transcendence is not concerned with dimensions of experience that are not within our grasp but rather with those that are perfectly human, “earthly”, and yet give us a sense of purpose and meaning. The appeal of this perspective is that it includes both religious and spiritual experiences on the one hand, and everyday events on the other.

Transcendence is not a connection to something “out there”, but a connection beyond the self, and with the world at large. In their view, what marks gratitude is “the psychological response to the gift, whatever its nature, and the experience, however briefly, of the transcendent emotion of grace” (id.)

Evidently, this account is closer to our description of the sense of connectedness involved in transpersonal gratitude. Thus, if we understand transcendence as a connection to something larger than the self, to a sense of purpose and meaning, then we can argue that transpersonal gratitude has indeed a transcendent dimension. It is closely linked to the sacred when it elicits feelings of connectedness to the world at large and goodwill to give something back in return: the first reminding us of “how tiny we are” and the second showing us that we have a unique place and agency in the world.

In the next section, I argue that this sense of connectedness elicited by transpersonal gratitude enhances empathy and broadens its scope.

## **9.2. Transpersonal gratitude and empathy**

In the following discussion, we understand empathy in the way conceptualised by A. Coplan in “Understanding Empathy: its features and effects”: “A complex imaginative process in which an observer simulates another person’s situated psychological states while maintaining clear self-other differentiation” (Coplan, 2014, p.5). In this view, empathy is a simultaneously affective and cognitive process, with three essential features: 1/ affective matching – where the observer’s affective states are qualitatively identical to the target’s, although they may vary in intensity, 2/ other oriented perspective-taking – where the observer imagines being the target undergoing the target’s experience, and 3/ self-other



differentiation – in the process of taking the target's perspective, the observer still differentiates the self from the other, keeping an optimal distance from the other, allowing for a successful empathy (id.). This account differentiates empathy from sympathy. Indeed, defined this way, empathy can relate to both positive and negative experiences. One can empathise with another person whether they are worried about their missing puppy or celebrating a promotion. Sympathy, on the other hand, is a form of empathic concern, where we adopt the perspective of another person *in need*, especially if this person is seen as vulnerable or at risk (Lishner et al., 2016).

Several studies in psychology have investigated the link between empathy and personal gratitude to find that experiences of gratitude enhance empathy. Lazarus defines gratitude as one of the empathic emotions: Giving a gift means putting oneself in the position of the recipient. To receive a gift graciously means the same, since in reaction with gratitude one usually senses the donor's positive intention (Lazarus and Lazarus, 1994). Therefore, one way in which gratitude is linked to empathy is through the ability to relate to the benefactor's goodwill, as part of the appraisal of a benevolent situation. Similarly, McCullough and his collaborators have found that gratitude relates to higher empathic concern for others (McCullough *et al.*, 2002). They view empathy as a form of concern for others, conceptually closer to sympathy, making the beneficiary's grateful conduct sensitive to the needs of the benefactor. In this sense, empathy is described in the terms of the "empathy-altruism hypothesis" (Batson and Shaw, 1991), as a "sympathetic, tender, compassionate feelings for another, born from taking the perspective of the other in need" (Batson and Shaw, 1991, p.113). The empathy-altruism hypothesis suggest that this empathy evokes altruistic motivation and encourages prosocial conduct. Indeed, this is very similar to

sympathy, but with the difference that the empathy resulting from gratitude makes one sensitive to the joy of the benefactor too. It is not just a matter of being concerned with the welfare of a benefactor when the latter is in need, but also being happy for him or her, *with* him or her, when he or she has cause of celebration. Therefore, gratitude enhances a sense of empathy that brings giver and receiver closer in a relationship of mutual support and affection. Building on this hypothesis in “A grateful heart is a non-violent heart”, DeWall and colleagues have tested the idea that gratitude, as a positive emotion associated with empathy and generosity, lowers aggression (DeWall et al., 2012). Their study shows that indeed, grateful individuals are less aggressive, not only towards their benefactors but also towards third parties. It also demonstrates what the authors call “the direction of effect”, namely that the effect flows from gratitude towards aggression, through empathy (id.). In other words, when one is in receipt of a favour, and feels grateful for it (to a benefactor or not), one’s gratitude enhances a sense of empathy and motivates compassionate conduct towards others, whether they are the source of the benefit or not.

It seems reasonable to argue, at this point, that transpersonal gratitude has the same empathy enhancing effect as personal gratitude. In the context of personal gratitude, the kind intention of the benefactor plays an important role in enhancing empathy. But the perception of such goodwill is absent from the transpersonal modality. We cannot claim that in instances of transpersonal gratitude, this intention is replaced by a feeling of being “somehow favoured”, because, while this feeling is part of the experience of transpersonal gratitude, it is not one of its more salient features and if it were to become prominent, it would turn into “being favoured *by*” and we would be talking about a personification of the universe, or life, or the cosmos; in all cases, it would not be transpersonal gratitude anymore.

How, then, is empathy elicited in an experience of transpersonal gratitude? I would argue that it is a sense of connectedness that enhances empathy in a transpersonally grateful agent, by eliciting emotions such as love. In his study of peak experiences, A. Maslow has indeed observed that people who experience transpersonal gratitude (although he did not use that term) also experience an “all-embracing love for everyone and everybody” (Maslow, 2014, p.76). This feeling of love, of a positive affectionate concern for the world at large is what enhances empathy in instances of transpersonal gratitude.

In Chapter Six, I argued that an appropriate expression of transpersonal gratitude has to be commensurate to the mental and emotional states associated with the experience. I will add here that this same sense of connectedness not only enhances empathy by inducing feelings of love, but also broadens its scope by bringing the world at large into one’s awareness. It is not a matter of matching the feelings of everyone in the world or taking billions of different perspectives to imagine what their experiences are, but a loving concern with what is good for the world, humankind and all life, as one feels connected to it all. Such that, the willingness to make a return, the “impulse to do something good for the world”, as Maslow puts it, becomes the motivating force behind the grateful conduct, as opposed to doing something good for others or for one particular other in the case of personal gratitude.

To sum up, transpersonal gratitude has strong links with empathy and enhances it in a way that brings into focus the significance of one’s own place in a vast universe, a goodwill and a sense of agency for the good. We now turn to examine what this sense of connectedness means in terms of humility and dependence.

### 9.3. Transpersonal gratitude, humility and dependence

In the New Humanist magazine, S. Rahman describes feelings of connectedness and gratitude in the following terms: *“I can only describe it as an acute sense of the sublime, to feel its awe and succumbing to its wonder (...) I recall a moment standing on a cliff’s edge looking down towards the sea, watching the waves below beating at its sides, the mountains above cutting through the clouds... and I could feel something much greater than myself (...) I remember lying on the grass underneath a clear night sky, gazing up and seeing more stars than I could imagine (...) I felt humbled to be a part of them (...) And there are simple, everyday moments too: being with good friends, the magic of frolicking kittens (...) Humility is simply recognizing our muted relevance in an infinite universe, and being grateful for it doesn’t require a someone or a something to be thankful towards (...) Understanding provides me with the depth of perception to view the world as profoundly and with as much empathy and compassion as humanly possible”* (Rahman, 2014).

Rahman refers to these experiences as his “spirituality, loosely using the word spirituality”. The experience(s) that he describes bear all the marks of transpersonal gratitude: recognition of gratuitous benefits, the absence of a benefactor, the grateful response, a sense of empathy, motivation for compassion and the transcendent sense of connectedness to something larger than the self. But in addition to all those emotions and thoughts, the writer talks about his experience of humility as a sort of natural component of his gratitude.

During our discussion of gratitude as a virtue, and more generally its importance in morality, we argued that the virtue of gratitude is a deliberative process between negative emotions of entitlement and positive emotions of humility.

However, this is not the only link between gratitude and humility. Indeed, several philosophical accounts highlight the relationship between gratitude and humility, both with personal and transpersonal modalities of gratitude, and what this means in terms of the morally good life.

In his discussion of propositional gratitude, McAleer suggests that the moral importance of such a modality lies in its close links with humility (McAleer, 2012). He argues that receiving an unmerited gift reveals one's dependence on others, on nature and on good fortune. This requires an appreciation of one's finitude (in a Kantian sense of a finite rational being with needs). Thus, propositional gratitude is an expression of humility, which in turn is important for a morally good life (id.). However, as we have pointed out in chapter 3, propositional gratitude lacks the personal significance of the benefit to the grateful individual. Therefore, it is hard to see how it would remind one that the satisfaction of their needs sometimes depends on others. If I am grateful that it didn't rain, then I am just glad that it didn't rain. This will not make me think or realise that I depend on others or on good fortune for this benefit. But if I mean that I am grateful that it didn't rain on the exact day I had a very important interview and had to walk wearing my best clothes, then I am grateful for it because of its significance to me, in which case this is an instance of transpersonal gratitude. Nevertheless, McAleer raises a good point about the link between gratitude and humility, and the unmerited nature of the gift.

Other philosophers, too, have examined the nature of the gift as a basis for feelings of humility in relation to gratitude. Discussing M. Sandel's idea of the giftedness of life, and his argument that the drive to mastery undermines humility (Sandel, 2009), M. Hauskeller examines what makes a gift and how its

appreciation relates to humility (Hauskeller, 2011). He argues that something can be considered to be a gift if it benefits us in some way, is unearned, is accepted with grace and gratitude, and elicits a grateful return (id.) In this discussion, he emphasises an important idea in terms of gratitude and humility: that we do not have the right to be given a gift. Indeed, if we believe that we are entitled to gifts, or happiness, then we will fail to appreciate unexpected or unearned benefits as gifts, and of course, we will not respond with gratitude. In fact, we might even respond with resentment or anger, as mentioned in our discussion of transpersonal resentment. On the other hand, if we are aware that we do not have “some kind of natural right to happiness” (Hauskeller, 2011, p.64), then we will be more open to seeing good things as benefits and gifts. Moreover, as a consequence of our gratitude for them, we will in turn give back to our benefactor and to others around us. Hauskeller argues that humility, understood as a lively appreciation of the giftedness of life, is indeed a virtue “at the heart of all human solidarity” (Hauskeller, 2011, p.67). Thus, the unearned nature of the gift, and our appreciation of the fact that it was given to us nevertheless, through human agency or not, remind us of how small we are and yet how significant. Gratitude and humility are interlinked, as R. Solomon puts it, by “not merely being thankful to someone but being properly humble about one’s own modest place in the world” (Solomon, 2007).

Taking a slightly different perspective on gratitude and humility, R. Roberts proposes that humility is a necessary component of a genuinely grateful person’s response to benevolence (Roberts, 2004). He elaborates this further in a later publication, “Gratitude and Humility” (Roberts, 2016). Roberts’ argument is that real gratitude will not be aversive to having a debt of love towards the benefactor. if gratefulness is experienced as a burden, then there is an underlying vice of

pride and of self-sufficiency. Self-sufficiency, in this account, is an insistence on “doing it on my own” and feeling resentful that I need anyone else’s help. In other words, one cannot be grateful and resent being dependent on the benefactor at the same time. This is so because humility and gratitude recognise the importance of dependence, whereas pride rejects it and undermines both humility and gratitude (id.). Roberts seems to focus on the personal modality of gratitude, as he centres his argument on our dependence on other human beings. However, his account can be valid in terms of transpersonal gratitude too. We can speculate that if a person resents having to depend on others, he or she will at least be indifferent to benefits that have no intentional source. As Hauskeller points out, it is about an attitude towards life that allows us to perceive certain things as gifts or prevents us from seeing the good in beneficial situations. Thus, too much pride and self-sufficiency, the way Roberts describes it, can rob us from the ability to appreciate the goodness in life.

Thus, it appears that gratitude and humility are often, if not always, interlinked. I would argue that transpersonal gratitude has a closer association with humility by virtue of the sense of connectedness that it elicits. Personal gratitude reflects back to us our place in human society and our dependence on others. Transpersonal gratitude reminds us of our place in a vast world and universe, and our dependence not only from other humans, but also from nature and the world in general. In *Living Without God*, R. Aronson relates such a sense of gratitude and dependence when he suddenly comes upon a beautiful hidden lake while hiking: “My moment of gratitude while hiking opens a window of awareness into some of our most intimate yet impersonal relationships with the cosmic and natural forces, and the processes that make us possible” (Aronson,2008, p.46). Humility helps us accept this dependence with grace and appreciation.

To conclude, while transpersonal gratitude is first and foremost gratitude, arising in response to a significant benefit to the individual and motivating grateful conduct, it is also closely associated to, and interlinked with important components of our engagement with the world. Having examined its links with empathy and humility, as well as its transcendent dimension, it has become apparent that transpersonal gratitude is not about reciprocity, or if it is, only in a weak sense. As an emotion, a disposition and a virtue, transpersonal gratitude enhances empathy and humility through feelings of connectedness that it induces. It fosters a positive attitude towards our reliance on each other, on nature and the universe. Therefore, it must be understood and conceptualised as a component of the morally good life.

The next and final chapter brings together the main arguments presented throughout this research and suggests possible routes for future research.



## Chapter Ten

### Conclusion

This research has aimed to investigate and understand the transpersonal modality of gratitude, arguing that it is distinct from the personal and theistic modalities and has unique implications for the conceptualisation of gratitude in general and our perspective on its place in morality and the good life.

This research contributes to the existing body of knowledge on gratitude in the following ways:

It examines transpersonal gratitude and offers a conceptualisation of this unique modality of gratitude, its features and its significance to the philosophical and psychological understanding of morality and the morally good life.

It proposes a phenomenological profile of transpersonal gratitude, as a first step in the understanding of its links and associations with other virtues and morally relevant emotions, as well as its impact on morally desirable choices and behaviour.

This research also addresses some challenges raised by the commonly accepted and traditional accounts of gratitude built on the triadic model and proposes that a transpersonal model of gratitude is better suited for an examination and theorisation of the virtue of gratitude.

Finally, it proposes to account for the transpersonal modality of gratitude in terms of an equation of dependence that takes into consideration its moral worth in the flourishing life.

We now revisit the important findings and arguments presented throughout this dissertation, and address the main questions laid out in the introduction. Finally, we offer some thoughts on possible future avenues of research and applications of the concept of transpersonal gratitude.

### **10.1. Transpersonal gratitude: definition, features and expressions**

Our review of the existing literature of gratitude reveals that most of the philosophical and psychological accounts focus on what has come to be called the triadic model of gratitude in an equation of the benevolent agent with a kind intention, the gift and the grateful beneficiary who accepts the gift with grace. In this personal modality of gratitude, the benevolent intention of the giver has central place. It is the motivation behind the generous conduct but also the trigger of grateful emotions and behaviour on the part of the beneficiary. Such accounts are mostly preoccupied, in philosophy, with the deontological aspect of gratitude, the duties and obligations it generates and the appropriate ways of expressing thankfulness. On the other hand, psychology is concerned with the examination of the nature of both the emotion and trait of gratitude, in an effort to understand its links to well-being and to further its clinical applications. Such accounts, however, leave out genuine grateful experiences that do not accommodate the triadic model. It is relatively recently that both philosophers and psychologists have begun to investigate what gratitude would mean and how it could be conceptualised in the absence of benevolent agency.

### 10.1.1. Definition

I have argued that there is indeed a distinct modality of gratitude *for* something but to no one in particular and proposed to call this modality transpersonal gratitude, to indicate that it goes beyond the personal exchange between benefactor and beneficiary.

Often, this type of gratitude is dismissed in literature as gladness or appreciation since it seems to lack the focus and discrimination of personal gratitude. Indeed, in the absence of a benevolent giver, the features that are commonly ascribed to the experience of gratitude – such as recognition of a kind intention – change. But this does not necessarily mean that the experience itself is not gratitude and a close examination of such experiences shows the particular features of the transpersonal modality. In fact, there are numerous reports of individuals in psychological studies as well as online mediums that express non-targeted gratitude for a benefit. Thus, there is a need to look into the specific qualities and features of such thankfulness in order to claim it as a modality of genuine gratitude.

### 10.1.2. Features and phenomenology of transpersonal gratitude

The first and most apparent feature of transpersonal gratitude is the *absence of a benevolent agent*. Typically, this modality of gratitude arises in situations where an individual feels that he or she has received a benefit, but there is no source of benevolence. For example, gratitude felt for an unexpected moment of respite in the middle of a hectic day would qualify as transpersonal gratitude. So would a vast feeling of gratitude for an awe-inspiring natural scenery. On the other hand,

thankfulness towards the universe or any other personified force, no matter how broad, is still personal gratitude as it is directed towards a source of intentional kindness.

However, even in the absence of benevolent agency, transpersonal and personal gratitude share a common characteristic that pertains to the *unearned nature of the benefit*. In both instances, what gives rise to gratitude must be a gift, in the sense that the grateful individual has not worked towards it or deserved it in any way. The gift must be perceived as coming from outside the self. In personal gratitude, it is the intention of the giver - and the absence of expectations of a return - that turn a benefit into a gift. In transpersonal gratitude, circumstantial and interpretive elements of perception emphasise the gratuitous nature of the gift and its significance.

Thus, another feature of transpersonal gratitude is the *perception of the benefit as unexpected or unlikely*, or both. A most obvious example is surviving a natural tragedy where numerous others lose their lives. The unlikeliness and the unexpectedness of a benefit bring into focus an awareness of possible alternative outcomes, or an *awareness of what might not have been*. This results in a sense of being favoured and triggers emotions of thankfulness for being the recipient of such a benefit.

Subsequently, in the experience of transpersonal gratitude, the gift takes central place, as something of *personal significance* to the individual. Indeed, I have argued that it is not enough to be grateful *that x happened*. Such propositional gratitude is still too loose to be clearly different from simple appreciation. Therefore, the event that triggers gratitude must take on a personal meaning for the individual.

Another phenomenological feature of transpersonal gratitude is a *feeling of connectedness* to others and the world at large, elicited by the nature of the benefit. This sense of connectedness links to empathy and humility, giving transpersonal gratitude a moral anchor.

Finally, inherent to the experience of transpersonal gratitude is *the wish to make a return*. In instances of personal gratitude, this action tendency often focuses on the benefactor, and is sensitive to the latter's welfare. Transpersonal gratitude broadens the scope of this sensitivity to include others in need and arguably the needs of the natural world.

Transpersonal gratitude is the result of inner deliberations and interpretation of the world and as such it has closer links than personal gratitude to the grateful agent's character, as well as his or her worldview, values and beliefs.

### *10.1.3. Expressions of transpersonal gratitude*

Expressions of personal gratitude are generally regulated by social and moral norms that place requirements and conditions on grateful behaviour. Over-zealous returns, for example, are not considered to be appropriate responses to benevolence. However, transpersonal gratitude is non-targeted and thus, has no benefactor to thank. I have argued that as transpersonal gratitude broadens the scope of grateful conduct, its expressions take the form of pay-it-forward responses, focusing on the need and welfare of others and the world in general. Additionally, such conduct is considered appropriate only if it is commensurate to the mental and emotional states that transpersonal gratitude elicits, a reflection and recognition of goodness as experienced by the grateful individual.

## 10.2. Transpersonal gratitude and morality

Gratitude has a clear social role. Its moral import, however, is not always easy to define. Indeed, prosocial does not always mean morally good. Thus, we had a closer look at accounts of gratitude and its moral implications in order to understand if it is morally relevant. Our discussion concluded that gratitude, both as an emotion and disposition, has significant moral implications.

### *10.2.1. Transpersonal and personal emotions of gratitude and their moral worth*

Psychological and philosophical accounts often mention the emotion of gratitude in classifications of moral emotions of praise and reciprocity, as well as indebtedness. While this approach might serve to demarcate the lines between different groups of emotions, it does not always succeed due to the fluid and mixed nature of emotions. I have proposed that the exploration of the ways emotions exert an influence on moral and prosocial behaviour is more relevant to our understanding of their importance to morality.

In that view, I have argued that the moral significance of gratitude goes beyond a strengthening of social bonds. Indeed, personal gratitude is morally relevant because it arises as a response to benevolence, and as such it represents an acknowledgment of another person's moral choices and behaviour. In a similar vein, transpersonal gratitude motivates prosocial behaviour, but its moral worth resides in the way it enhances empathy through feelings of connectedness, and induces feelings of affectionate concern for others, as well as a goodwill and a sense of agency for the good.

### *10.2.2. Transpersonal gratitude as a character trait and virtue*

From our literature review of psychological accounts of gratitude, it becomes clear that there is a grateful disposition that founds and guides grateful responses to benefits. Philosophically, what interests us is the matter of gratitude as a virtue. I have adopted and argued for a view that presents virtue as a deliberative process of practical wisdom and an ability to recognise the morally salient features of a situation, rather than a balance between deficit and excess of a given trait. This process is a negotiation between the cognitive and emotional components of a character trait, both positive and negative. In this view, gratitude is a deliberation and negotiation between emotions and thoughts of entitlement on the one hand, and humility on the other.

Still, the conceptualisation of a virtue of gratitude based on a triadic model of gratitude is not always convincing, because it does not solve the problem of scope created by the condition of benevolent agency. In other words, such a virtue of gratitude does not promote a larger moral vision. To address this problem, I have proposed that the dyadic model of gratitude offers a better understanding of its intrinsic moral value for the flourishing life. Indeed, removing the benefactor from the equation allows us to define the virtue of gratitude as a stable character trait, sensitive to benefits, acquired through experience and knowledge, with associated deliberative powers, offering a foundation for grateful responses and conduct.

### *10.2.3. Transpersonal resentment*

Transpersonal gratitude, as per its nature and features, cannot be owed. Thus, we do not have duties of transpersonal gratitude in the same way we have duties of personal gratitude. However, its absence does not go unnoticed and someone

who does not appreciate his or her good fortune, for example, and instead reacts with negative attitudes and emotions, is considered to be ungrateful. I have argued for the concept of transpersonal resentment as referring to a failure to recognise what is morally relevant to a good life, revealing a blameworthy flaw of character in the ungrateful individual.

### **10.3. Transpersonal gratitude and dependence**

Feelings of connectedness are an important part of the experience of transpersonal gratitude. They enhance empathy and motivate grateful conduct towards third parties, human or otherwise. But more than that, they elicit an awareness, in the grateful individual, of a sense of dependence on others and the world in general. This is often a realisation of not only how much we depend on others, but also how good it is that we indeed *can* depend on them. A graceful acceptance of such dependence and a wish to do something good for the world in return, are associated with a recognition of one's small but important place in the world. Thus, transpersonal gratitude appears to have close links with humility and promotes one's goodwill as a morally good agent.

Throughout the examination of the features of transpersonal gratitude as well as the discussions of traits and emotions linked to its experience, it has become evident that it is not adequate to define this modality of gratitude in terms of reciprocity or justice as is often the case for personal gratitude. Therefore, I have proposed that it is best captured in terms of an equation of dependence which fosters trust and a positive attitude towards our reliance upon each other and the world at large. Thus understood, transpersonal gratitude can be conceptualised as a unique modality of gratitude, and a component of the morally good life.



#### **10.4. Possible avenues for future research and applications**

One of the challenges of this research was to find relevant literature and empirical data on the transpersonal modality of gratitude. Non-academic publication spaces - such as the online world of blogs, self-help books and magazines - abound with self-reports and descriptions of experiences of gratitude that illustrate instances of transpersonal gratitude in everyday life, as well as what it entails in terms of character and worldview. There has been a recent rise in the number of psychological and philosophical publications on dyadic types of gratitude. However, there is still room - and need - for further research focused on non-targeted gratitude, and specifically transpersonal gratitude, not in terms of a loosely generalised thankfulness but rather as a phenomenologically distinct experience implicated in moral behaviour. This research is an attempt in that direction, and further empirical and conceptual work on the topic will enrich the existing literature and improve our understanding of gratitude.

There are also various avenues of research open in those fields of social sciences that are concerned with well-being. Indeed, psychologists have published extensive studies on gratitude as an emotion and as a practice that enhances well-being through cognitive and emotional shifts of focus. Interestingly, this is one domain of practice where gratitude is not only encouraged as thankfulness to benevolent or kind others, but also as a general recognition of benefits, in terms of gratitude *for*. Patients are encouraged to keep gratitude diaries, making lists of all the small and bigger things that they appreciate in life. Empirical data suggests that such practices are often helpful as they inspire one to entertain a more positive outlook on one's life. Thus, it might be relevant to further this research

into an examination of the therapeutic applications of transpersonal gratitude in terms of its motivational force but also its implications in an individual's moral beliefs and attitudes towards others.

Still in the field of social sciences, cross-cultural studies of transpersonal gratitude can add to our understanding of the experience itself, supporting a more informed philosophical conceptualisation. Indeed, this research examined accounts of mostly western and analytic tradition. Thus, an investigation of transpersonal gratitude in the context of different philosophical outlooks, such as far eastern philosophies, for example, or those inspired by religious traditions such as Buddhism would certainly shed some more light on the links between targeted and non-targeted modalities of gratitude on the one hand, and individual worldviews as formed by cultural and social realities on the other.

Another avenue of research is the conceptualisation of transpersonal gratitude in terms of aesthetics. Some features of this modality of gratitude seem to open the way for such an interpretation: the cognitive aspect of appraisals and deliberation, the vast feelings of connectedness and the response to beauty, both natural and human made, such as music and paintings. One possible approach could be in terms of Kant's aesthetics of judgments of taste. In this research, we have briefly discussed the vast feelings induced by transpersonal gratitude in relation to the sublime. This could be explored further, in addition to a discussion of gratitude in response to beauty and Kantian judgments of beauty. We have argued that transpersonal gratitude, by virtue of feelings of connectedness to the world, encourages a recognition of the morally good. Thus, it might be worth to examine this account of transpersonal gratitude in terms of Kant's claim that judgments of beauty and the sublime contribute to an account of moral feelings.

The feelings of connectedness to the world at large also point at a possible link between transpersonal gratitude and environmental awareness. One can hypothesise that such strong feelings of connectedness, in addition to the wish to make a return, could be guided towards an appreciation of the natural environment and a willingness to care for it. Thus, transpersonal gratitude might have some implications for environmental ethics. However, more empirical and theoretical research is needed to support this proposition.

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