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Why should I be grateful? The morality of gratitude in contexts marked by injustice

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Abstract

In philosophical and psychological literature, gratitude has normally been promoted as beneficial to oneself and others and as morally good. Being grateful for what you have is conceived as virtuous, while acts expressing gratefulness to those who have benefited you is often regarded as morally praiseworthy, if not morally expected. However, critical interrogations of the moral status of gratitude should also frame the possible cultivation of gratitude in moral education. This essay focuses on whether gratitude should be regarded as morally ideal, praiseworthy, or expected in contexts marked by social inequity and injustice. It considers competing articulations of gratitude in philosophical and psychological research and how gratitude can be conceived in some cases as praiseworthy and in others as potentially problematic. Finally it considers the implications of a multipronged view of gratitude for teaching for and about gratitude in social justice education.

Key words: gratitude, moral education, social justice, positive psychology, philosophy of education

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In philosophical and psychological literature, gratitude is normally promoted as beneficial to oneself and others and as morally good (e.g., Emmons & Crumpler, 2000; Emmons & Shelton, 2002; Fitzgerald, 1998; Berger, 1975; Card, 1988). Being thankful for what you have is conceived as virtuous, while acts expressing gratefulness to those who have benefited you is often regarded as morally praiseworthy, if not morally expected (Gulliford, Morgan & Kristjansson, 2013; McConnell, 1993). In relation, it is becoming commonplace today, particularly in the United States, to embrace practices of gratitude developed through positive psychology (for example, writing in gratitude journals), as means toward becoming a better, happier person, individually and socially (see Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008; Carr, Morgan & Gulliford, 2015). Against this backdrop, only recently have some theorists (Carr, 2013; 2015a) begun to critically interrogate the highly diverse philosophical and psychological conceptualizations of and justifications for gratitude with regard to their educational implications. As Carr rightly observes, before moral educators promote gratitude in their classrooms, they should develop a clearer view of what constitutes moral gratitude, alongside consideration of possible immoral forms of gratitude (2015b; see also Carr, Morgan & Gulliford, 2015). Additionally, contexts marked by social imbalances and social injustice have not been a focus in the literature on gratitude, which has tended to justify rather than problematize gratitude, overall.

This essay focuses on whether gratitude should be regarded as morally neutral, ideal, praiseworthy, required, or expected, with an emphasis on contexts of social inequity and injustice. First, I sketch some of the terrain of philosophical articulations of when and why one should demonstrate gratitude, focusing on situations of inequality. I follow McAleer (2012) in distinguishing two philosophical conceptions of gratitude, ‘targeted’ and ‘propositional’, and relate them to justifications for gratitude from psychological literature (e.g., Lambert, Graham & Fincham, 2009). Then I challenge the moral status, particularly of propositional gratitude, which some also describe as generalized ‘appreciation’ (Manela, 2016; Adler & Fagley, 2005), in situations of harm and injustice. I discuss how gratitude can be conceived in some cases (as

targeted gratitude) as generally morally ideal and praiseworthy and in others (as propositional/generalized gratitude or appreciation) as potentially morally problematic, despite possible psychological benefits of gratitude. Finally I consider the implications of this multipronged view for teaching for and about gratitude. I argue that while teaching gratitude in the classroom may generally be a good idea, as there are cases where gratitude may be morally *undesirable* teachers should be more precise in teaching for and about gratitude.

Gratitude, Gratitude, Everywhere

At the most general level, gratitude is chiefly praised as an individual's favorable, thankful response (as a state of being or type of behavior) to receiving something desirable, necessary, and/or beneficial, as a free gift rather than an object of exchange. As Fitzgerald notes (1998, p. 120), it is a sense of appreciation and goodwill, and a related disposition to act positively in response to someone or something. However from this general view, there are 'stricter' and 'broader' accounts of when gratitude may be morally expected, praiseworthy, or required (Gulliford, Morgan & Kristjansson, 2013). In philosophy McAleer (2012) distinguishes the major views of gratitude as 'targeted' and 'propositional'. This categorization interrelates substantially within those in psychological research, such as Lambert and colleagues' (2009) finding that lay people view gratitude as 'benefit-targeted' and 'generalized'.

Card elaborates a well-known stricter or targeted view, claiming gratitude may be morally expected and praiseworthy when (1) one receives something good, (2) that he or she wanted, (3) from a benefactor. In this case, gratitude is described as *targeted* by McAleer (and benefit-targeted in Lambert, Graham & Fincham, 2009), because there is a benefactor (target) in the situation, who possesses agency and intentionality, aiming to do something both benefactor and beneficiary see as good (2012, p. 55). Such a situation Card among others distinguishes from general (acts of) generosity, not specifically intended by the benefactor to the beneficiary, or desired by the beneficiary in the situation. As Card writes of this case (1988, p. 124), 'generosity

can be accompanied by insensitivity to others wishes' with regard to becoming obligated...Genuine benevolence is incompatible with disregarding others' willingness to be obligated'.

Such targeted gratitude is, McAleer notes, often regarded as morally ideal or praiseworthy, as it aligns with ethical and political principles that one should act reciprocally toward others and reinforce beneficence (2012, p. 58). One could say there is a moral duty or *debt* of gratitude in this case; however, most contemporary philosophers contend that gratitude's affective component disqualifies it from the realm of moral obligation (Fitzgerald, 1998, p. 120; Card, 1988, p. 117; Gulliford, Morgan & Kristjansson, 2013), while others hold this 'debt' as paradoxical in relation to the notion of a gift (Carr, 2015a; Card, 1988). Nonetheless, targeted gratitude is relatively uncontroversial when regarded as morally ideal or praiseworthy, rather than required or expected. I do not contest it here, apart from noting that there may be cross-cultural differences regarding particular communicative and interpersonal norms of benevolence and gratitude, and that in some instances gratitude may conflict with other moral principles, such as justice or non-maleficence (for instance, if one is grateful for corruptions that benefit oneself; Carr, Morgan & Gulliford, 2015). Targeted gratitude should not be held as *always* morally ideal or required, if it may generally be expected or praiseworthy.

A broader potential view of a kind of quasi-targeted gratitude is elaborated by Smilansky (1997). He argues that you should be grateful for people *not harming* you, broadening the category of intentional beneficence to include intentional non-maleficence. Non-maleficence, Smilansky contends, requires effort, at least a choice made to not harm, as one has opportunities and selfish reasons to ignore others' ends. In other words:

'not harming regularly requires concern and effort, and is clearly beneficial to people. To be ungrateful for such beneficial efforts is often not different in kind from ingratitude toward our (positive) beneficiaries, one of the most morally distasteful and socially harmful traits.' (1997, p. 593)

According to this way of thinking, I should be grateful you are reading this paper rather than plotting how to steal my money. Smilansky attests that one benefit to this model is to give greater, more equal moral standing to disadvantaged members of society, who cannot afford displays of good-doing yet deserve equal recognition as moral agents in society (1997, p. 597). However, with this move he also observes that this gratitude, although targeted to agents, is targeted to ‘a multitude of unknown people’, in a kind of double-blind moral ‘social bargain’, founded on greater general awareness (1997, p. 596).

Yet once the target or agent of gratitude becomes generalized, McAleer distinguishes such gratitude as *propositional* rather than targeted, as an agentic or intentional benefactor is not required: only that there is something good. (Carr discusses this as dyadic rather than triadic gratitude [2015b].) As the target is not identified or specified, there is no sense of reciprocity or obligation here. Rather, a more basic or thin disposition of thankfulness is morally praiseworthy, from this view. In psychological research, propositional gratitude, described as ‘generalized gratitude’ by Lambert, Graham, and Fincham (2009), is often adopted, as it can be seen to reflect lay people’s views, although this remains a controversial point in both philosophical and psychological literature, with some arguing that *appreciation* is a sub-factor of lay conceptions of gratitude, and others contending that it should be seen as separate and isolated from targeted gratitude (Mandela, 2016; Gulliford, Morgan & Kristjansson, 2013). Nonetheless, propositional gratitude, appreciation, or generalized gratitude remains worth examining from the viewpoint of social justice education, as it is linked to self-esteem, well-being, and prosocial attitudes and behavior (Froh et al., 2014; Bartlett & DeSteno, 2006; Algoe, 2012).

As an alternative to Smilansky’s quasi-targeted gratitude, where one is grateful to many intentional (in non-maleficence), yet possibly unknown others, Card argues that one can be grateful for a generous benefactor’s acts or existence that benefits oneself, without having or expressing gratitude toward the benefactor directly (see also Manela, 2016). Targeted gratitude to generous benefactors can be accompanied by a sense of indebtedness and guilt, shame, and

embarrassment (Card, 1988; Carr, 2015a; Morgan, Gulliford, & Carr, 2015; Morgan, Gulliford & Kristjansson, 2014). Such may be difficult to bear in contexts of extreme inequality, such as between a wealthy individual and a person living in poverty. A sense of subservience can have harmful implications for one's sense of self-respect. Hence, propositional gratitude is typically not seen to involve behaviors or interpersonal expressions of reciprocity or indebtedness. Instead, a more general feeling of recognition of good fortune, or 'responsiveness to goodness' (McAleer, 2012), is held as morally and psychologically good and beneficial, related to awareness of general mutual dependency and social connection.

Again, once the requirement of a benefactor with agency and (benevolent) intentionality is dismissed, a more generalized conceptualization of gratitude, for good weather or calm seas, may be promoted. Positive psychology especially in the United States encourages practices of gratitude chronicling/journaling, positive reframing (seeing 'silver linings'), and so on, that cultivate propositional gratitude (Morgan, Gulliford, & Carr, 2015; Froh et al., 2014; e.g., Aaronson, 2013). Yet if a dyadic, propositional/generalized conception of gratitude for society or aspects of life (a sunny day, an enjoyable afternoon), is combined with appreciation for the ever-present possibility of maleficence and a focus on *benefits* over *benefactors*, this implies people could (should?) be grateful for good luck and social privileges and advantages, as exploitation, oppression, and unjust suffering are also possible challenges one can face.

Indeed, one sees in instances of gratitude chronicling references to social privileges (e.g., Aaronson, 2013) which, as Morgan, Gulliford, and Carr (2015, p. 8) note, can preclude people's 'appreciation of the true nature—for good or ill—of an apparent benefaction'. Such gratitude may aid social cohesion and psychological well-being, but remain morally problematic in relation to the maintenance of unjust systems and status quos (Carr, Morgan & Gulliford, 2015).

Psychological considerations could be at odds with moral ones in such cases, if we applaud gratitude for being born into a wealthy family in a highly unequal society with limited social mobility, for example. Furthermore, it would seem that availability of things to be grateful for

and psychological benefits could correlate with relative advantage and disadvantage, exacerbating rather than ameliorating conditions of social inequality. It is worth noting here that no major psychological study thus far has centrally involved comparisons of gratitude's benefits in contexts of inequality or oppression, (quite reasonably) focusing instead usually on gratitude's benefits and manifestations in relatively affluent western contexts (e.g. Lambert, Graham & Fincham, 2009; Froh et al., 2014; Fox et al., 2015).

Yet disadvantaged members of society need not be excluded from propositional gratitude, as others argue that one can and should have gratitude even for exploitation, abuse, and disadvantage! This is an extremely broad form of propositional gratitude, wherein a good is to be found, unintended by a harming agent/sources, amidst malevolence or oppression. While Card (among many others, such as Berger [1975]) assume as fundamental to any moral expectation or ideal of gratitude that there is benevolence or a gift identifiable by a beneficiary, Fitzgerald contends that just about anything can be said to have a potentially positive benefit to an individual, from political oppression to physical abuse, arguing that (1) *being harmed* and (2) *helping others* are situations meriting gratitude. The source/benefactor of gratitude in a case of harm is not the author of the harm, but the educational benefit of the harmful event. As Fitzgerald contends, this kind of gratitude is:

‘a common ideal within Buddhism. The Dalai Lama often repeats this Buddhist teaching by telling his audiences that he is grateful to the Chinese for giving him the opportunity to practice love for his enemies [and for] training in patience and helping his development as a person.’ (1998, p. 124)

According to Fitzgerald, though benefits of harm are indirect and unintentional, having gratitude in such cases can nonetheless help to prevent (further) harm, promote or preserve interpersonal and communal relationships, and ‘aid in the development of virtues or help prevent the formation of vices’: what Fitzgerald calls ‘perfectionist reasons’ (1998, p. 130). Psychological studies indeed suggest that gratitude, and/or happiness derived in part from gratitude, even in

difficult times of hardship, can lead to prosocial behavior, compassion, and altruism (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008). This framing may seem to regard gratitude as instrumental for personal gain or external benefits in part (Morgan, Gulliford, & Carr, 2015); yet such perfectionistic justifications for cultivating gratitude are commonplace, and maintain a moral role for gratitude in connection with enabling compassion, altruism, and future moral prosocial behavior (Algoe, 2012).

Echoing Card, Fitzgerald views the capacity to maintain *self-respect* as essential within such states and/or expressions of gratitude. Fitzgerald relates three fictional women who have been abused by their fathers in elaborating this requirement. Dawn and Erin have inappropriate, misplaced gratitude, as they lack self-respect: Dawn ‘expresses gratitude by obeying [her father’s] abusive demands’, while Erin ‘believes that she doesn’t deserve any better’ (1998, p. 142-143).

But Faye:

‘thrived after she severed ties with her abusive father. She had no fear of other adversities in her life since they looked so small in comparison to the ones she had already survived. She became very compassionate because her own pain gave her insight into the suffering of others. She developed an unwavering passion to fight the kinds of abuse to which she had been subjected.’ (Fitzgerald, 1998, p. 143)

Here the outcome reflected by propositional gratitude is not ‘responsiveness to goodness’, or appreciation of good fortune or interdependence, as in propositional gratitude for benevolence and non-maleficence. Rather, the ideal response is a kind of compassion toward others based on understanding that people suffer through no fault of their own, and that one is in a sense ‘lucky’ to have survived in a situation that is not always psychologically or physically survivable. It also can be seen as gratitude for relative (at least in terms of time) non-maleficence (‘things got better’; ‘it could have been worse...’), which enables future optimism and good deeds. Likewise, Fitzgerald argues that helping another can create an opportunity for gratitude, as acting with benevolence can also help cultivate compassion, particularly in cases where a beneficiary cannot

be morally expected to give gratitude due to his or her self-respect needs. Such gratitude for helping others is again said to aid self-development, even if the beneficence is not recognized as such, or desired by beneficiaries.

If one were to combine the various views of gratitude presented here, in indirect causal chains one should be grateful for unasked-for gifts, and grateful to give people things they might not want, both beneficial and harmful! More problematic is a reading of Fitzgerald's argument for gratitude for harm as providing justification for, or at least enabling toleration regarding harming people, as no harm is seen as absolute here. Fitzgerald distinguishes resentment and anger as poor moral alternatives to gratitude, to justify gratitude for harm, suggesting that resentment and anger are rarely morally helpful, in contrast with gratitude. However, McAleer argues that 'propositional anger', that not directed to a person but to problems and social issues, can also reflect a good moral disposition aligned with propositional gratitude, as 'being angry that so many people are without enough to eat expresses a sense of justice or compassion' which can be likewise based on one's appreciation of benevolence in his or her own life (2012, p. 64). In this way, propositional gratitude need not be seen as potentially leading to acquiescence or acceptance of an unjust status quo, as Fitzgerald references Faye's fighting spirit, despite his care to not promote what he regards as damaging, angry feelings.

In sum, across philosophical and psychological literature gratitude is commonly seen as a good in society and relationships, which provides positive outcomes and decrease of negative, antisocial feelings, such as envy and resentment. The only exception is cases where one's self-respect might be compromised, but in this case propositional gratitude is often still seen as morally praiseworthy, though it is seen by some as a sub-factor of or as conceptually distinct from targeted gratitude in philosophy. In the next section, I examine more closely cases for propositional gratitude in relation to social injustice and harm. But before moving on, there are two interrelated issues worth addressing.

First, some readers may fear that a feeling or emotional state emergent particularly within the propositional sense of gratitude cannot be taught as well as simple behaviors of gratitude (aligned to the targeted conception, i.e., saying thank-you). Some thinkers employ more rational, less affect-related framings of morality, in alignment with the ideal of justice as impartial (Callan, 1997), and/or on the basis that liberalism entitles each to freedom over ‘private’ feelings and thoughts. As there is something about affect that cannot be controlled, even by oneself, some also suppose that such emotional education is unfeasible, unrealistic, or even akin to brainwashing (see for example, Meens, 2015). Relatedly, research in educational psychology may be critically investigated for possibly conflating taught elaboration of gratitude with teaching affective experiences of gratitude, as in Froh and colleagues’ (2014) study, wherein students express more gratitude after being educated about appraisal of benefits. In education, the relation between feelings, moral values, and student expressions is complicated by such structural conditions as educational authority in many cases.

Nonetheless, people are indeed taught how to feel in education, and are normally taught by parents and educators to feel gratitude (Carr, 2015a; McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001; Carr, Morgan & Gulliford, 2015). As with other emotions that have moral connotations, such as pride, guilt, and sympathy, children are normally taught to experience or not experience these feelings in particular situations. An early lesson in targeted gratitude is being guided to say thank you, and write letters to such benefactors as grandparents for toys, or guests who visit class. Clearly some internalization, not just of rational duty but of affective training, often takes place here, as the concept may be foreign to a toddler but develop within a cultural context as a deeply felt personal commitment. Relatedly, one can conceive many virtuous qualities like courage, tolerance, or patience, as having affective dimensions that are learned at the same time their moral value is understood within social relations. As Carr (2015a, p. 11) writes, ‘emotional or other states of pride, envy, shame or guilt are not just conditions of affective first nature, but complex intentional states... cognitively shaped to the pursuit or satisfaction of

humanly distinctive and definitive goals, institutions and practices'. Each student learns and feels distinctively; but as we do educate young people with regard to emotional development, such education should be explored rather than dismissed for being fuzzy or complex.

This perspective is bolstered by a second educational point that was briefly mentioned earlier. The prosocial and perfectionistic justifications which undergird much discussion of (particularly propositional) gratitude must also be understood as culturally bounded. As Morgan, Gulliford, and Carr (2015) observe, gratitude is often experienced as, or alongside different emotions in the United Kingdom than in the United States. From a broader perspective, as gratitude is tied up with particularities of social relationships and customs of gift giving—not to mention what counts as moral versus immoral emotional or affective expressions—one should avoid a simplistic endorsement of particular experiences or expressions of gratitude as a good in education. There is thus a sense that gratitude might be seen as a mannerism or habit that is culturally conditioned within particular contexts (influenced as well by subculture, religion, class, etc.). This is not to say that something like gratitude cannot be universal. However, at best gratitude can be (or is) good, as experienced and expressed within a particular moral and cultural context—just as is the case for other emotionally-based moral dispositions such as patience, compassion (Kang, 2006), or guilt, from Asia and Africa to Europe and North America (as examples). However, as I will go on, limitations regarding the morality of gratitude in contexts marked by injustice and harm still complicate the view of gratitude simply as a moral good within a western society.

Challenges to Propositional Gratitude in Cases of Injustice and Harm

I previously discussed two major conceptions of gratitude. The targeted (triadic) view requires a benefactor with appropriate, desired good intention (or non-maleficence) toward the beneficiary. This has been the more traditional view in moral philosophy, wherein some identify gratitude as a principle of justice or as morally required or expected. In education, in home and at

school, youth in western societies are taught to respond ‘in kind’ to receiving good things from others, by at least expressing thanks, if not also a sense of indebtedness or willingness or desire to return the favor. Psychologically such gratitude has been linked to prosocial behavior and well-being on relational and societal levels, in synthesis with intertwined positive emotional states such as happiness, and decreased levels of negative and harmful emotional states such as depression, anxiety, and stress (Frederickson, 2004; Emmons & Mishra, 2011).

Neither particularly problematic from moral or psychological perspectives, the educational implications of this view are straightforward. Educators can and should teach that it is customary and regarded as moral to express gratitude in such cases in culturally appropriate ways (by saying thank you, wishing benefactors well, etc.). This is moral for educators to do in two senses: first, it aligns with benefiting the students as members of society and as individuals; second, it is in line with relatively uncontroversial, widely-held moral values. Of course, there may be times when such targeted gratitude may not be a moral response: for instance, when it conflicts with other moral principles (one should not have gratitude if someone murders her sports rival, for example). But this only indicates that one should not treat gratitude as primary before all other moral considerations (Carr, Morgan & Gulliford, 2015).

There is an initial challenge to targeted gratitude to a benefactor, in relation to inequality and self-respect. If one lacks proper self-respect in relation to a generous benefactor gratitude may not be morally expected or praiseworthy as a response to a situation. A feeling of indebtedness can decrease positive feelings associated with gratitude, leading to guilt or embarrassment (Morgan, Gulliford & Kristjansson, 2014; Card, 1988). Therefore, propositional gratitude may be more productive psychologically and philosophically: good for the beneficiary and for social relations. The morality of gratitude in this case seems partly deemphasized and indirect here, in relation to other moral considerations, such as the need for reasonable self-respect and self-esteem, and positive feelings of recognition of and responsiveness to goodness.

Such a more generalized view of dyadic rather than triadic (generalized) gratitude additionally enables gratitude for non-maleficence in the world, a good from unknown (and known) others.

Yet when we more fully consider the justifications for propositional gratitude in cases of social imbalance, injustice, harm, and inequality, a more complex picture emerges. By some of the accounts given for propositional gratitude (and within positive psychology reframing), one should have gratitude (to society or good fortune, if not to a person) for a minimum-wage job, instead of no job. Yet this job may come with no benefits such as health care, and might cause harm, for example, if a woman has a weak back and the job requires heavy lifting. Or take the example of a woman who is grateful to marry a man who treats her like a second-class citizen, but treats her better than her parents did. Or, more relevant to education, a child who is neglected by his or her parents, but realizes some peers fare worse. Within a broader context of social justice, these situations constitute harms and malevolence rather than (or as much as) benevolence. It is true that with propositional gratitude, these individuals can recognize that people suffer more than (or as) they do, and use this compassionate awareness to make a positive impact in the world, and meet others with an appropriately persevering spirit, like Faye. However, to suggest that cultivation of gratitude should be a primary response to such cases risks undermining intolerance toward unnecessary and immoral ongoing harm. From a psychological view, gratitude may always have instrumental value, but it remains morally problematic if it enables continuation of suffering.

Apart from the Dalai Lama, Fitzgerald's examples of actors with praiseworthy gratitude for harm are limited to cases where the harm has been concluded/halted—otherwise Fitzgerald considers self-respect in the situation impossible. Arguably, one should not be grateful for a learning experience, when he or she ought to be resisting a situation (and indeed, the latter may be just as educational, for moral development). Otherwise, foregrounding propositional gratitude over fighting injustice could imply that black Americans protesting challenges to their civil rights should be grateful they can hide in their homes to better avoid getting shot by police officers (see

Puente & Cohn, 2015). Gratitude should not be expected in such a case, and encouraging gratitude in it could be seen as immoral to the extent that it incidentally maintains and/or implies toleration of oppression, disparagement of individuals and communities, or blameworthiness for failing to (incredibly) persevere, and see silver linings amidst oppression (Ehrenreich, 2009).

Thus, a dark implication of propositional gratitude in situations of harm and injustice is not merely that it indicates servility, but that it promotes ignorance toward or a turn away from life's problems and challenges. Promoting propositional gratitude to disadvantaged people of color in the United States, to manual laborers, people in abusive partnerships, or children in bad family situations may benefit the individual or people psychologically and instrumentally. Yet it may lead as well to denial of challenges faced, or irrational minimization of problems, when suggested as a coping mechanism or everyday practice across such contexts. Thus psychological well-being or related reflections of positive self-esteem may align with acceptance or dismissal of problems, as a critical, sustained focus on hardship (a fighting spirit) is framed as unhealthy, regardless of the moral or ethical 'health' of the society as a whole. From a psychological view a contented society may be ideal, but it may not be morally ideal if the society is unjust with many innocents suffering from harm and inequity. In these cases, a lack of gratitude may be a more moral response. This framing aligns more with McAleer's notion of propositional anger, an ideally useful and productive sense of disturbance about social injustice, distinct from resentment, interpersonal envy, or a simple view of propositional gratitude, wherein one witnesses harms in the world with a spirit of intolerance rather than rationalization, aligned with compassion and care for others.

A related example is given in *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison. In the first chapter, lack of gratitude is defended by the main character, a young black girl named Claudia, for receiving what might seem in the first place to be a harmless gift of plausible value: a pink-skinned baby doll. Yet in Morrison's narrative Claudia's lack of gratitude when she is expected to have or express it is an act of opposition to dominant aesthetic and relational values oppressive or

contrary to her own self-respect needs. As Claudia reflects (2007), ‘all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured. “Here,” they said, “this is beautiful”...I could examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable.’ Claudia dissects the doll, to discover how it cries. The adults are predictably outraged: “I-never-had-a-baby-doll-in-my-whole-life...Now-you-got-one-a-beautiful-one-and-you-tear-it-up” (2007, p. 21).

Here the value of propositional gratitude for a gift (‘better than nothing’; ‘better than what I had...’) is seen to risk enabling Claudia’s internalized oppression, as gratitude for what is valued in racist society implies in Claudia’s view acceptance or tolerance of racist beauty standards. It is not that Claudia is being mistreated by her family, but that loving the gift as a gift in a racist society conflicts with her critical attention toward racism and the social and psychological problems it presents for her. Sadly, as the story unfolds, Claudia’s righteous propositional anger (as framed by Morrison) is replaced by internalized oppression (‘I learned much later to worship Shirley Temple...’), and joy to have more than others in horrific circumstances (another girl, Pecola), in an exaggerated act of positive reframing resembling denial rather than psychological health. Indeed, as Morrison reveals, even gratitude for giving can be seen as a tool of self-righteousness and irrational grasping toward strength over others, as gratitude in such a case may be accompanied by a feeling of superiority, not necessarily the moral compassion Fitzgerald praises.

‘All of us—all who knew [Pecola]—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her...Her poverty kept us generous...We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength. And fantasy it was, for we were not strong, only aggressive...not compassionate, we were polite; not good but well behaved. We courted death in order to call ourselves brave, and hid like thieves from life.’ (Morrison, 2007, pp. 205-206)

Educating for propositional gratitude in light of harm and social injustice is another matter. Although propositional gratitude may be psychologically productive for individuals in societal conditions of imbalance and harm, in the context of formal education, the experience of deeply witnessing the world's evils that such a spirit of gratitude (for relative non-maleficence) implies is not adequately captured by philosophers' abstract cases, or McAleer's simple description: 'when one just appreciates the fact that so many others are not treated as they deserve to be treated' (2012, p. 62). As *The Bluest Eye* alludes to, to educationally nurture in children gratitude alongside awareness of disadvantage can be psychologically and morally challenging. Educators who focus on teaching compassion for prosocial aims in the classroom find that young people do not always develop intended or hoped for affective responses to moral lessons related to people facing injustice and evil. As a moral or psychological defense mechanism they may reject or dismiss the messages via strategies of rationalization of possible feelings of guilt (Warren & Hytten 2004). As Warren and Hytten (2004) note, students may serve only themselves by focusing on luck, the bright side, and token reactions to injustice, not effectively learning lessons that challenge their sense of being already morally 'complete' or ideal.

Furthermore, comparing oneself favorably with others in extreme cases can also be traumatizing to some young people, even in those cases where moral lessons are more clearly being learned. As Jackson (2014b; 2015) notes, educating for altruism and compassion can lead some students to feelings of helplessness, anxiety, and cynicism, when they broaden their views of those things in life that humanity cannot as a whole take for granted (as gratitude can lead to guilt, as mentioned previously; Carr, 2015a). Thus, in formal education it is not clear that an educator's good intentions will have the desired impacts, on students as moral actors and healthy children and young people.

Finally, as Carr (2015a) notes, such gratitude for general non-malevolence or good luck in the context of injustice and harm can be instrumentally self-serving. As Morrison describes Claudia and her friends, a competitive spirit can also potentially arise in positive reframing, as a

tool of painting contrasts, alongside a sense of self-satisfaction at having more than others. Young people are not always seen to become good doers (in impact or intent) by cultivating gratitude or compassion, caring, or altruism, despite the view that these are good, valuable affective dispositions to develop (Nussbaum, 2001). They may alternatively develop an unbalanced sense of compassion, toward peers similar to themselves, rather than those who suffer more serious tragedy (Nussbaum, 2001). Their responses and efforts toward enhancing social justice may be tainted with an unconscious sense of superiority, paternalism, and/or ethnocentrism, if they focus only on relative advantage and its (so-called) blessings, developing a view of others as deficient which is oversimplified and reinscribes inequitable relations and attitudes (Jackson, 2014a). I can be grateful to have a good job, and reflect from this gratitude, to improve life for others, helping job seekers and underemployed colleagues. But my gratitude hardly leads to the latter—I can also be grateful without giving back, or caring, to benefit myself more than others.

In sum, though Fitzgerald (among others) emphasizes resentment and anger regarding injustice as harmful, promoting gratitude in such cases by drawing a line between learning from harm (with self-respect) and tolerating wrongdoing (without self-respect), this line is harder to draw in real-life cases. Propositional anger as described by McAleer may be worthwhile in many instances, not only in rare, extraordinary cases. On the other hand, potentially precluding people's deliberation about societal ills, outrageous, horrifying, and angering, for the sake of cultivating gratitude can be wrong-headed, as injustice is sadly an everyday part of life for many people: not a rare, theoretically problematic exception. One might object that even in extreme cases in psychological literature the promotion and development of feelings of gratitude and forgiveness can be beneficial. One should not stew in resentment and anger, which can be unproductive and unhealthy; at the same time that one has anger he or she may also grow from the challenge of trying to be grateful things are not worse, or have gotten better. Yet if this stance is accepted in such a way as to preclude moral focus, questions, and deliberation about social problems faced by disadvantaged groups, it can be seen alternatively as paternalistic and as a type of dismissal or

tolerance toward moral wrongdoing in the world. To the extent that promoting gratitude could enable joyful ignorance of life's challenges, it should not be held as always ideal or praiseworthy relative to lack of gratitude. Intolerance of injustice and related lack of gratitude can be morally praiseworthy in some such cases in relation to self-respect needs, and should not be dismissed due to *a priori* status of psychological interests.

Gratitude in Education

Jonas (2012) argues that educators must teach against resentment and for gratitude. As he elaborates (2012, p. 43), 'We have come to assume that anger and resentment are necessary for justice to be done. This is not the case, however. In the same way that Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi were able to rectify injustices without violence, so are individuals able...without anger and resentment'. Relatedly, he argues that educators must avoid enabling students to think comparatively in social justice education, about privilege and disadvantage, lest half the students develop resentment in place of gratitude, when they witness the pleasure of easy gratitude in their peers. Froh and colleagues (2009) similarly articulate the potential for gratitude to increase satisfaction of youth in schools, to enhance social bonds and particularly to decrease adolescent unhappiness in education. There is always something we can be grateful for, as philosophers and psychologists attest, as one reflects on the potential and actual harms people face in the world, and one's relatively good position, through gratitude reframing or other habits of developing gratitude.

But what if encouragement of gratitude leads to ignorance of life's challenges, or joy to have more than others? Though positive psychology asserts that gratitude can lead to being more beneficent in the world around you, without critical interrogation of how social injustice operates as individual advantage and disadvantage, one can be led away from understanding its structural nature, in favor of pleasure seeking and naivety, through gratitude chronicling, or random acts of generosity to others. Such may benefit the individual, but possibly at the cost of a more just

community, particularly if one is lulled into relative inaction (or highly partial action), given the ease of gratitude reframing in contrast with the complexity of injustice in the world. If one is asked only to reflect on what is good in his or her own life, using understanding of injustice instrumentally to benefit oneself (or even oneself, as well as others around him or her), indirectly the lesson may be learned that identifying moral and ethical problems and challenges is immoral or unbeneficial (or less moral/beneficial), in contrast to psychological self-cultivation. If one sees him or herself as benefiting from good things in the world without also considering how he or her or others are suffering unjustly, an easy sense of self-satisfaction and complacency may arise. Thus there is a possibility that gratitude reframing or other activities in the classroom for gratitude could preclude a critical understanding of societal ills and one's position, active or passive, in relation to them. Students could learn that they are better off than youth in Syria today, without grappling with the challenges faced or developing an effectively compassionate or altruistic spirit.

Furthermore, despite the framings by Fitzgerald (1998) and Jonas (2012) particularly, resentment and ingratitude or lack of gratitude should not be conflated as a matter of course. Propositional gratitude can be accompanied by propositional anger, as McAleer notes. Martin Luther King Jr. was not always happy, gracious, and emphatically grateful. He also justified the violent riots of African Americans in the 1960s civil rights movement as a reasonable reaction to denial of their challenges and their inhumane treatment in a society which reflected a legacy of white supremacist laws and practices (King, 1963). Students might thus learn of propositional anger as well as propositional gratitude in this context: that outrage at injustice can be morally expressed, as well as appreciation for good fortunes or for things getting better. Repressing such mixed feelings at a personal or societal level can be morally as well as psychologically problematic, even if concerns may remain that resentment or feelings of rage can be risky and harmful.

Relatedly, the emphasis on gratitude in education has paternalistic overtones, as those in authority risk expressing through gratitude moralism that they know more than others do about what is best for them. As misplaced gratitude can harm self-respect, educators cannot know when whole-hearted expressions of gratitude are warranted for students, as they do not necessarily know a great deal about their lives beyond the school walls. Given educator authority, students may feel obliged to express appreciation or tolerance in relation to potential harms they face to a degree that may neglect their self-respect needs, if gratitude is treated as a primary moral or psychological priority above others, rather than as a potentially praiseworthy if psychologically difficult position to take in some situations. More generally, teachers promoting gratitude across diverse scenarios and contexts may suggest unwittingly to students that a condition of servility is warranted among disadvantaged groups, and a focus on social problems (and their resolutions) and social demands for justice is morally distasteful or psychologically unhealthy. If gratitude reframing for propositional gratitude is employed, so too should identification of social injustice that may enable propositional anger, for social ills from obscure sources that harm individuals and groups.

Such considerations should encourage educators and others to reflect more critically on the morality of judging others' gratitude or lack thereof, such as in diverse classroom settings. In regarding gratitude as a generally good thing for students to have, an educator can send a message to students that their particular challenges in life are not important, without knowing what those challenges are, by treating all students as if they are the same. In the area of affective education, educators cannot fully determine their impact in advance, or presume that a student's apparent lack of gratitude is based on life experiences known by the educator. One student may be brooding for being punished for wrongdoing, while another may be facing abuse at home. In this context, students' mixed response to a celebration of family and parents in the classroom should not be dismissed as immoral ingratitude. Children can face challenges and compromises to their self-respect and development (as all people do...) that may imply limitations to their capacity for

self-respecting gratitude. In a world where social injustice is rife in everyday inequality and inequity across race, class, gender, and other categories of social difference, there are certainly worse moral crimes than lack of gratitude, even within instances where gratitude may also conceivably be beneficial.

As Morgan, Gulliford and Carr (2015) note, in place of simplistic endorsements of gratitude and positive reframing, a more critical focus on teaching for and about gratitude could help students to understand nuances and complexities in age-appropriate real-life situations, to “appreciate the complex grammar of gratitude discourse” in a morally complex world (p. 12). As an alternative to teaching simply to cultivate gratitude or appreciation generally, teachers can facilitate students consideration of whether and how gratitude may or may not be warranted in cases marked by deceptive or self-interested ‘beneficence’, for instance, and how in some cases expecting gratitude may be unreasonable even if it is ideal, when people are facing hardships. Instead of teaching gratitude moralism, educators should question with students when and how gratitude can be good or bad, based on morally relevant features of the situation, such as whether one exhibits acceptance or inaction regarding unjust privilege, versus directing that gratitude and benefit toward making life better for less advantaged people. Students can also consider historical stories—for example, the case of German Christian rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust (see for example Oliner et al., 1992; also Fox et al., 2015)—to analyze how gratitude can be used for the good of others, rather than only for oneself. Such nuanced examples can frame cultivation of gratitude not as an *a priori* goal for life, but as one amongst many others in one’s path to be morally good and psychologically happy in a complex and unjust world.

In sum, despite the pleas of philosophers, educators, and psychologists who embrace gratitude in diverse situations, a lack of gratitude should not be simply regarded in classroom contexts as immoral and gratitude as always required, expected, or praiseworthy. Though in diverse cases there may be reasons to continue to strive toward gratitude, precluding opportunities to reflect on the possible moral reasons for a lack of gratitude in some instances can

risk students failing to recognize the needs of people for self-respect and respect for others and their ethical duties toward others in unjust circumstances. When it comes to gratitude, discussing moral decision making reflectively and critically with students, rather than emphasizing moral principles or psychological priorities of gratitude as absolute or required, can encourage a more effective moral education toward social justice in everyday life. Students in such contexts can learn that gratitude can be difficult and praiseworthy to strive toward in some instances and that lack of gratitude is not always morally problematic across diverse cases, while also learning of gratitude's merits and value from different philosophical and societal perspectives.

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