Can Gratitude Be Cultivated?

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This is an unpublished conference paper for the 4th Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel College, Oxford University, Thursday 7th – Saturday 9th January 2016.
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I maintain that gratitude is both a duty and a virtue.[i] A virtue is, at least, a character trait that disposes its possessor to act in certain ways for certain reasons in a certain manner as appropriate.[ii] If a person has the virtue of gratitude, then she will be disposed to accredit those who have benefited her in certain ways, to reciprocate the benefit if a suitable occasion arises, and do so gladly. One who is grateful is grateful to the right person, for the right reasons, and to a satisfactory degree.[iii] In the past decade or two, psychologists have done extensive work on gratitude. They have developed exercises or interventions that they claim will cultivate gratitude. And, in support of the cultivation claim, they have developed instruments which purport to measure gratitude in individuals. The starting point of this essay is to examine whether the instruments in question can reasonably be thought to measure whether an individual possesses the virtue of gratitude. I will argue that due to the nature of gratitude as a moral norm, it is difficult to measure whether an individual possesses that virtue. If, however, we distinguish between the question "Can we measure whether a person has the virtue of gratitude?" from the question "Are there strategies and interventions that are likely to enable a person to become more grateful?", then we need not view the situation as bleak.

Psychological Studies and Their Limits

In the past fifteen years or so, psychologists have done extensive work on gratitude. This work has occurred principally within the context of positive psychologist. Contributors to this literature have argued at length that gratitude is a positive (or healthy) trait, that there are things that people can do to cultivate or increase their sense of gratitude, and that when these things are done the subjective well-being of these individuals will increase significantly. Studies conducted typically assign randomly some subjects to a "gratitude condition" and others to a control group.[iv] Those randomized to the gratitude condition are then instructed to engage in a gratitude exercise. These are sometimes called "gratitude interventions" and many have been employed in these

studies.[v] One of the most common interventions is grateful recounting; this might involve constructing a list of things or people for which one is grateful. In some studies the exercise is done several times within a week, and in other cases one per week over a set period of time, such as ten weeks. Keeping a gratitude journal is a modified version of this intervention. Grateful reflection is another intervention; it is like recounting, only involves thinking rather than writing down the items. Grateful expression is yet another intervention. This might include writing a letter to someone to whom the subject feels grateful, or visiting a person to whom one feels grateful. And gratitude reappraisal instructs subjects to look back on negative or adverse events in their lives and look for positive aspects or consequences that ultimately resulted from it.

The general structure of these studies is as follows. Before being assigned to a group, the subjective well-being of all subjects is measured through a standard instrument. Subjects are then assigned randomly either to the gratitude condition or the control group. At the end of the study, the subjective well-being of all subjects is measured again; and consistently those randomized to the gratitude condition experienced a significant increase in subjective well-being. But what do these interventions do for the subjects' sense of gratitude? Researchers have developed instruments for measuring this as well. The best known of these is referred to as GQ-6 (the Gratitude Questionnaire Six Item Form).[vi] This questionnaire has six statements that concern various types of grateful feelings; participants respond to each statement and indicate their agreement/disagreement on a seven point Likert type scale. A more extensive measure is called GRAT (Gratitude, Resentment, and Appreciation Test).[vii] The initial version of GRAT had 44 items designed to measure a sense of abundance, simple appreciation, appreciation of others, and importance of expressing gratitude. Higher scores on GQ-6 and GRAT are correlated with a greater sense of subjective well-being. And interventions are correlated with increasing one's sense of gratitude.

If we are concerned about gratitude as a virtue, then both GQ-6 and GRAT are limited in their value. As all researchers in this field acknowledge, these instruments rely on self-reports, and that is a significant limitation. In addition, in some cases subjects are apt to figure out what the

researchers are measuring, and this will likely skew their responses (especially when some responses are thought of as more socially approved). A more specific problem is that GQ-6 focuses almost exclusively on feelings, and that is also a significant part of GRAT. Virtues do involve feelings and emotions, and these two measures do tap into those. But virtues also have an action component; in appropriate circumstances, the virtuous person acts as the virtue directs. Virtues have a cognitive component too; virtuous persons act and for the right reasons.[viii] These two instruments do not hone in on these features. Some studies have made a modest attempt to measure behavior (the action component). One study tracked whether preschoolers said "thank you" in response to favors; another observed the reactions of people for whom a small favor (such as opening a door for them) was done.[ix] While these studies do not rely on self-reports, they are still limited if the goal is to detect the presence of virtue. First, we cannot determine in these cases whether the subjects are acting from gratitude, or from some other motive, such as politeness or social expectation. And second, it is not clear that gratitude is actually owed in these cases. The studies seem to assume that gratitude is due whenever a benefit is provided; but that is too simplistic. As the situations are devised, it is doubtful that they call for gratitude in any morally robust sense.

A more recent set of studies by Froh and colleagues attempt to account for both the cognitive and behavioral components of gratitude.[x] In one study, elementary school children, ages eight to eleven, were randomly assigned either to an intervention that educated children about beneficial exchanges or to a control condition. One aspect of the intervention involved presenting the children with vignettes designed to measure cognitive perceptions underlying gratitude. In each vignette, the subjects were instructed to imagine themselves as the person in the story being helped. Questions addressed to the students included what the benefactor's intention was, what costs the benefactor incurred, and whether what was provided was really a benefit. The last question asked was how thankful they would feel, measured on a five point Likert scale. Pretest and posttest measures showed that those in the intervention group experienced significant increases in grateful

thinking and levels of gratitude.[xi] This part of the study was done in five days. The following Monday, the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) provided a multimedia presentation to all students. After the presentation, students were told that they had five minutes of free time. "You can use this time to write a thank-you card to the PTA using the paper provided or you can just hang out." The percentage of students in the treatment condition who wrote thank-you notes was 43.5%; in the control condition, it was 25.0%. The authors conclude, "Importantly, this is the first evidence that any intervention (in children or adults) focused on increasing gratitude actually leads to behavioral changes."[xii] They do acknowledge, however, that since differences in thanking behavior at baseline were not accounted for, there are limits on what conclusions can be drawn.

This study does go further than the measures discussed earlier with respect to cognitive and behavioral elements. But as a tool for measuring virtue, it falls short.[xiii] First, as noted at the outset, gratitude is a virtue with an action component. But gratitude is not due for just any benefit, and it is not obvious that students in this case owe the PTA gratitude for the multimedia presentation. The students' behavior may be mere politeness, and that may be fitting in the situation. Second, the students' grateful conduct – writing thank-you notes – was prompted; an affirmative suggestion was made. Conduct that follows from the virtue of gratitude is (normally) prompted only by the beneficiary's assessment of the situation and the nature of the benefactor's act. And third, even if the students' behavior indicates something about a morally desirable character trait, it is not yet full-fledged gratefulness. The subjects, ages eight to eleven, are too young to have a fully developed moral character. Still, if virtues develop in degrees and stages, the intervention examined in this study may show promise as one aspect of moral education.

Deeper Challenges

The action component of the virtue of gratitude poses a deeper challenge for psychologists. They reasonably want to be able to measure whether their interventions are successful; so if they believe that some of these interventions promote trait gratitude, they will want some way to demonstrate this. In the past, some well-known studies have examined the action component

associated with various virtues. These are most commonly cited in the context of the so-called situationist critique of virtue ethics.[xiv] One example is the famous study of honesty in children conducted by Hartshorne and May.[xv] They observed the behavior of thousands of school children in situations that tested honesty. They designed three situations to determine how many of the children would do what honesty dictates. In the "stealing situation," change was left on the table in an empty classroom and each subject had an opportunity to take it. In the "lying situation," another child will get in trouble unless the subject lies to the authority figure. In the "cheating situation," each subject is grading his own exam and has an opportunity to change his incorrect answers. Virtues are character traits and character traits involve a reliable disposition to behave in certain characteristic ways. Reliability is usually understood to include "temporal stability" and "cross-situational consistency." Individuals with temporally stable dispositions behave in the same way in response to multiple encounters with the same kind of situation. Individuals with cross-situationally consistent dispositions behave the same way in response to situations which, though variable, still are relevant to that trait.[xvi] The results of these studies were striking in that there was a low correlation not taking the change and not changing one's answers; a similarly low correlation between not changing one's answer and not making a false report; and a low correlation between not taking the change and not making a false report. So the behavior of these 0children showed little cross-situationally honest behavior. Since virtues require cross-situationally consistent conduct and since these three types of situations each seemed to call for honesty, the studies of Hartshorne and May suggest that few actually possess the virtue of honesty. And there have been similar findings regarding other traits in other studies.[xvii]

Though the studies of Hartshorne and May have been utilized in multiple contexts, the simple point here is that possession of a virtue, honesty, would lead us to expect that subjects would behave honestly in these different situations. So one assumption in the setup of these studies is that those who possess character traits will act in specified ways in appropriate circumstances. The often cited Good Samaritan experiment is based on a similar assumption.[xviii] This experiment

involved seminary students who were given personality tests. They were then told that they had to give a talk in another building. Some were told that they were to speak about the job market for seminarians; others were told to explain the Good Samaritan parable. Some in each group were told that they had to hurry to get to the next building. On the route to the next buildings, each subject saw a man, a confederate of the researchers, hovered over in apparent distress. We might reasonably expect that people who are beneficent or compassionate would stop to help the man in distress. So one thing that this study examined was the presence or absence of a virtue.[xix]

One of the ways that the studies of Hartshorne and May and the studies of Darley and Batson have been used is to advance the situationist critique of virtue ethics. The idea is that the behavior of people is driven primarily by situations and circumstances rather than by reliable character traits. But many think that virtue ethics can survive such a challenge.[xx] Regardless of how that debate goes, however, these studies can be seen as providing a road map for psychologists working on gratitude. Create situations where gratitude is called for and see if people who have experienced some of the gratitude interventions respond appropriately at a higher rate than those not subject to the interventions. That was one of the things that Froh *et al.* attempted to measure in the study mentioned above. I want to argue, however, that this strategy faces significant hurdles; indeed, the challenges are deep enough, I think, to warrant being skeptical about whether the connection between gratitude interventions and increased grateful behavior can ever be adequately measured. There are several reasons for this (some of which apply to other virtues, like honesty and compassion, and attempts to measure their presence based on actions).

For now, let us assume that an experimental situation can be created where there is a beneficiary, a prior benefactor, and an opportunity for the beneficiary to do something positive for the prior benefactor. The first problem is that failure to act – in this case, provide a reciprocal benefit – need not show that the beneficiary is lacking in gratitude. Gratitude does (on my account, at least) require reciprocal action in suitable circumstances. But while that provides the agent with a reason to act, other moral norms can apply to the situation; and in such a case, the agent may judge

that the other norm carries greater weight. In the case of gratitude, this problem may be avoided by researchers if the experimental situation is sufficiently confined. That may not always be easy, however. In criticizing the studies of Hartshorne and May, Gopal Sreenivasan points out that in the "lying situation" some of the children/subjects may have judged that they have a duty to protect their fellow student and that that duty is stronger than the duty to be honest.[xxi] A similar point might be made about the Good Samaritan study. Some of the seminarians who passed by the man in apparent need of help may have been compassionate; but they may also have been respectful of authorities and as a result have given greater weight to arriving at their scheduled talk on time than they gave to helping the man. Even if we believe that that reveals skewed moral thinking, it is nevertheless consistent with some of the seminarians possessing the virtue of compassion.[xxii] The same is true of gratitude.

Second, there is another way in which failure to act need not indicate that the agent lacks the relevant virtue, in this case gratitude. Virtue does not require perfection. The virtuous person characteristically acts in a certain way, but that is compatible with occasional omissions.[xxiii] The context of the omission or deviation is important. In the "cheating situation," students' changing their answers constitutes a serious departure from honesty, one that is difficult to square with attributing that trait to those students. But in the Good Samaritan study, it is easy to imagine circumstances in which failure to help the apparently injured man is compatible with being a compassionate person. For example, some seminarians may have been so preoccupied with their next assignment that they simply failed to notice the man. Something similar can happen with gratitude. Even if a beneficiary is ideally situated to help a prior benefactor, he may be distracted at a critical time and fail to do so.[xxiv] Details matter here. The prior benefactor's need may be so obvious and so great that failure to help is strong evidence that the original beneficiary lacks gratitude. But in many cases, the opportunity to reciprocate will not be as dramatic.

There is a third problem that may be especially challenging for psychologists who are trying to measure the efficacy of gratitude interventions. In devising studies that purport to detect the

possession (or absence) of character traits, it must be clear that the situation calls for a particular response from someone with the relevant trait. In the "cheating situation" in Hartshorne and May's study, changing one's answers is clearly incompatible with honesty. But in "stealing situation," is far less clear that taking the change constitutes dishonest behavior. If one does not know to whom the change belongs, it is not at all obvious that taking the change constitutes stealing.[xxv] The norms connected with honesty may not apply here; or at least some students may reasonably think this. There is a similar problem with gratitude. Researchers can no doubt devise situations in which there are benefactors (presumably part of the research team) and beneficiaries (presumably subjects). But that is not enough to ensure that gratitude is owed. At the very least, the benefits must have been provided intentionally, for the right sorts of reasons, and they must have been accepted by the beneficiary.[xxvi] Gratitude is certainly not owed for just any alleged benefit that someone provides to another. This is one problem with the study of Froh *et al.* discussed above. It is not obvious that the students regarded the multimedia presentation as a benefit, and even if they did so regard it, it is not clear that the benefit was provided to <u>them</u> intentionally and for the right sort of reasons.

There is a fourth problem for psychological studies that hope to show that gratitude interventions increase grateful behavior. Even when there is an increase in such conduct – as in the studies of Becker and Smenner (1986), Okamototo and Robinson (1997), and Froh *et al.* (2014), all discussed above – that will constitute evidence that the subjects are developing the virtue of gratitude only if they are acting for the right reasons. This means, at least, that the original beneficiary must recognize that his benefactor provided him with a benefit intentionally and for good reasons, that such conduct warrants reciprocation, and that the benefit he is providing is fitting. Even when subjects provide prior benefactors with a benefit, it will be difficult to ascertain whether they acted for the right reasons. Questionnaires can be administered, but they will have the usual weaknesses of self-reports. When subjects are adults, it is reasonable to worry that many will have figured out what the researchers are looking for and will tailor their responses accordingly.

When subjects are children, it is unlikely that their characters are fully developed and so unlikely that they have fully developed virtues. This is not to deny that studies regarding children's moral development can be quite helpful; but they are not apt to show whether virtues have been fully cultivated.

Virtue involves action. Virtuous agents act in appropriate circumstances. But this action component is difficult to measure. It is especially challenging for the virtue of gratitude. Honesty is owed to all people, and so studies can be devised that to some degree assess the subjects' honesty. Beneficence and compassion are owed to the suffering, and experimental situations can be created that prototypically call for beneficent acts. But gratitude is a merit-based, discriminating norm. It is merit-based because it is owed to those who benefited (or perhaps attempted to benefit) one by performing a morally significant act. It is discriminating in that it is owed to specific individuals, namely, some prior benefactors. It is difficult to devise experimental situations in which all of these elements are in place. And even if this difficulty is overcome, it is difficult to assess accurately the reasons for which the subjects responded. This is because the person who has developed the virtue of gratitude is grateful to the right people, for the right reasons, and in appropriate circumstances.

All is Not Lost

Among our family members, friends, colleagues, and casual acquaintances, it is likely that each of us knows people whom we would call grateful. It is equally likely that most of us know people whom we would call ungrateful, or at least often "not grateful." We probably have no way of experimentally verifying these judgments, and some of our assessments may be off the mark. Still, we seem to have some capacity to recognize virtues, including gratitude, in people with whom we interact. In any given case, we probably cannot determine why some people possess the virtues that the do, and why some seem to be so lacking. But we do have experience of our social and educational environment, and that may provide some clues.

Moral education may contribute to the cultivation of gratitude. One type of moral education is didactic instruction. Some of the psychological work seems to involve some instruction. In the

studies of Froh *et al.* mentioned above, the intervention group was given instruction about the importance of receiving a gift, about understanding the benefactor's intentions, and about understanding the costs incurred by the benefactor.[xxvii] In a similar vein, Philip Watkins delineates what he calls "the cognitive conditions" of gratitude, which include recognizing the gift, the goodness of the gift, the goodness of the giver, and the gratuitousness of the gift.[xxviii] This is a starting point, but it may not go far enough. As Morgan *et al.* (2015) say in discussing interventions of this sort, "[C]hildren and young people should be taught to reflect on gratitude with much greater discernment" than some of these interventions allow.[xxix] This may or may not contribute to the cultivation of gratitude, though we can hope that it does. But perhaps such a result should not be the aim of the education. I am inclined to agree with Morgan *et al.* when they write, "[W]e argue that the primary educational task should not be the prescriptive task of *making* children more 'indiscriminately' grateful, but of stimulating reflection on understanding the grammar and *meaning* of gratitude and its appropriateness in a given situation."[xxx]

A second type of moral education is more indirect. Values and norms can be learned through studying literature.[xxxi] Novels, short stories, and plays often depict situations that involve moral choices. These works may not always endorse specific values, but the best of them require readers to wrestle with their normative commitments and the implications of them. As a tool for moral education, literature is complex. No doubt younger students require guidance through these stories. But the best literature forces discerning readers to reflect on the relevant values, and this is a significant cognitive component.

A third source of moral education, as it applies to gratitude in particular, is what Philip Watkins calls "parenting styles."[xxxii] Certain actions of parents may encourage the development of gratitude. One mentioned by Watkins is "parental modeling of emotional responses." When parents display gratitude for benefits they have received, children learn from this. Another type of action is reinforcing children's emotional responses. These seem to be plausible tools for moral education. I would, however, add the caveat of Morgan *et al.* from above: this should not

encourage indiscriminate gratitude, but rather should focus on features that render gratitude appropriate. (It is worth noting that parental action may be far more central to moral development than what I say here. Michael Slote argues early parental love is a necessary condition for making all moral education possible.[xxxiii])

These are but three aspects of our social life that we might reasonably think impacts on the moral development of people. So we might reasonably think that they, in part, can play a role in the cultivation of gratitude in people, especially young people. But, I maintain, it is not reasonable to think that possession of the virtue of gratitude can be measured – at least not measured in the ways required in psychological literature. There are too many features of virtues the presence or absence of which are not easily discernible in simple experimental situations.

Reasons to be Humble

I suggested that it is likely that each of us knows people who are grateful. But I also suggested that such judgments are fallible; and this is not merely because of the usual human epistemic limitations. If an agent possesses a virtue, say, gratitude, she will treat all others as that virtue dictates. But given human nature and our experiences, it seems all too likely that many individuals treat <u>selected</u> others in accordance with the virtues, but only selected others. One may be grateful, generous, and compassionate to friends, but not to strangers. In short, virtues may be domain-specific.[xxxiv] As a result, our judgment that another is grateful may be off the mark. That other may be grateful to me because I am his friend, but he may be lacking in the virtue of gratitude in his interactions with others. So it is not merely the demand for empirical evidence required in psychological studies that makes it difficult to ascribe virtues to others with confidence.

There is another reason to be humble about our judgment that somebody possesses a virtue, including the virtue of gratitude. If we follow Aristotle and say that the virtuous person not only performs the appropriate actions, but chooses them knowingly and desires them for their own sake,[xxxv] we must concede that it is extremely difficult to know that another person desires something for its own sake. But this aspect of virtue – that the agent must desire the good for its

own sake – poses a significant challenge for the task of cultivating virtues. How, we might ask, can we get someone else to desire something for its own sake? How can we even get ourselves to do so? I have no answer to this, but Robert Adams makes some suggestive remarks.[xxxvi] He indicates that some attribute to Aristotle the view that through practice in acting well, a person can come to recognize and prize excellence. Adams goes on to say that those who hold that there are "real ethical facts" might well agree that these facts "can be recognized and that the recognition can move us." This gives rise to an interesting question. If desiring the good for its own sake is part of what it is to be virtuous, then is the truth of some form of ethical realism and the truth of some type of internalism both necessary conditions for being able to cultivate virtue?

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NOTES

[i] This is argued in McConnell (1993), Chapters 1-2.
[ii] See Hursthouse (1999), pp. 11-12.
[iii] Morgan and Gulliford (2015).
[iv] Some of the work has a third group, such as the "hassles condition," which purports to measure negative emotions.
[v] In summarizing this literature, I rely on Emmons (2007), Chapter 7 and Watkins (2014), Chapter 13.
[vi] McCullough *et al.* (2002).
[vii] Watkins *et al.* (2003).
[viii] Kristjansson (2013), p. 202 and Morgan and Gulliford (2015), pp. 9-10.
[ix] Becker and Smenner (1986) and Okamototo and Robinson (1997). See Watkins (2014), p. 30, for a discussion.
[x] Froh *et al.* (2014).
[xi] Froh *et al.* (2014), pp. 137-138.
[xii] Froh *et al.* (2014), p. 138.
[xiii] It should be noted that the authors do not claim to be measuring virtue as such.
[xiv] See, for example, Sreenivasan (2013).
[xv] Hartshorne and May (1928).
[xvi] Sreenivasan (2013), pp. 291-292.
[xvii] The work of Ross and Nisbett (1991) is cited by Sreenivasan (2013), pp. 294-295.
[xviii] Darley and Batson (1973). For a discussion, see Tiberius (2015), pp. 117-118.
[xix] The study more specifically looked at whether fewer seminarians who had been told to hurry to the next building stopped to help compared with those not told to hurry. The study also looked at the different of stopping between those who were told to talk about the job market versus those instructed to speak about the Good Samaritan parable (the latter group viewed as being "primed" with helping ideas).
[xx] See, for example, McAdams (2015), pp. 307-309.
[xxi] Sreenivasan (2013), p. 303.
[xxii] This raises a question about what to do when the virtues conflict. If in some cases of conflict there is an obviously correct resolution and an agent chooses wrongly, does that show that the agent lacks a relevant virtue?
[xxiii] Russell (2009), p. 112, writes, "It seems undeniable that being virtuous enough is a sufficient condition for being virtuous *tout court* – not perfectly virtuous or virtuous without qualification."
[xxiv] I describe such a case in "Gratitude, Virtue, and Moral Lapses" (unpublished manuscript).
[xxv] For a discussion, see Sreenivasan (2013), pp. 301-302.
[xxvi] McConnell (1993), Chapter 1.
[xxvii] Froh *et al.* (2014), pp. 135-136.
[xxviii] Watkins (2014), pp. 42-49.
[xxix] Morgan, Gulliford, and Carr (2015), p. 104.
[xxx] Morgan, Gulliford, and Carr (2015), p. 104.
[xxxi] For an excellent book discussing literature as a means of character education, see Carr and Harrison (2015).
[xxxii] Watkins (2014), pp. 206-207.
[xxxiii] Slote (2015).
[xxxiv] See Badhwar (1996).
[xxxv] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1105a 28-33.
[xxxvi] Adams (2006), p. 219.