

## **Is Gratitude Queen of the Virtues and Ingratitude King of the Vices?**

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“Gratitude is the alpha, the point from which all virtues must begin...it is the heavyweight champion of virtues” –Jonathan Last, *The Seven Deadly Virtues*

It is impossible to envision the good life without gratitude. Gratitude is a virtue with unusual power. It makes life better for self and for others. Awareness of its importance raises inescapable big questions: How gratefully or ungratefully will each of us live our own lives? Why will we choose to do so, and with what effects on ourselves and those around us? Writing in the *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics, and Public Policy*, Elizabeth Loder (2006) noted “Gratitude affects how a person conceives the world and expects others to behave. It increases interpersonal receptivity. It seeps into one’s being and affects all dispositions pervasively” (p. 176). One-half century earlier, famed sociologist Georg Simmel declared that gratitude is “the moral memory of mankind.” If every grateful action, he went on to say, were suddenly eliminated, society would crumble.

Regardless of one’s worldview, faith tradition, or philosophical leaning, gratitude is much admired. A smattering of quotes reveals the power and potential of this virtue: “Whatever you are in search of—peace of mind, prosperity, health, love—it is waiting for you if only you are willing to receive it with an open and grateful heart” (Breathnach, 1996). Elsewhere the same author refers to gratitude as “the most passionate transformative force in the cosmos” (p. 2). Another popular treatment of the topic refers to it as “one of the most empowering, healing, dynamic instruments of consciousness vital to demonstrating the life experiences one desires” (Richelieu, 1996, p. 222). Lock and key metaphors are especially common; gratitude has been referred to as “the key that opens all doors” that which “unlocks the fullness of life,” and the “key to abundance, prosperity, and fulfillment” (Emmons & Hill, 2001, Hay, 1996).

The potential and promise revealed in these quotes is not without a downside. It runs the risk of sliding loosely into a conceptualization of gratitude which is uncritical and naively construed. Indeed, much of what passes for gratitude today appears far removed from

historical conceptions that emphasized concepts of duty, obligation, reciprocation, indebtedness, owing and being owed. Whether the giver of a benefit is human or divine, gratitude is something that due to the giver, to be returned, not kept by the self (Volf, 2006). A virtue analysis of gratitude provides a welcome corrective to the Pollyannish bias that prevails in the current gratitude revival that appears to be growing (Greater Good Science Center, 2014, Leithart, 2014).

Buoyed by research findings from the field of positive psychology, the happiness industry is alive and well in America and Europe. Pundits and pontificators routinely propose that gratitude should be part of any 12-step, 30-day, 7-secret, or 10-key program to develop happiness. Critics of this “gratitude lite” approach have lamented that what passes for gratitude today is a generic and vague feeling of well-being that often does not even acknowledge the presence of a giver toward whom one should direct their thanks (Mitchell, 2012). But how does the positive psychology of gratitude bear on the question toward which this paper is directed? Is gratitude queen of the virtues? Is it the point from which all virtues must begin? In modern times gratitude has become untethered from its moral moorings. The instrumental value of gratitude has been favored over valuing gratitude for its own sake (McConnell, 2016). When the Roman philosopher Cicero stated that gratitude was the queen of the virtues, he most assuredly did not mean that gratitude was merely a stepping-stone toward personal happiness. Gratitude is a morally complex disposition, and reducing this virtue to a technique or strategy to improve one’s mood is to do it an injustice. Furthermore, gratitude may not always feel good. Solomon (2004) wrote, “We (especially in this society [the United States]) do not like to think of ourselves as indebted.” Perhaps, on occasion, gratitude may feel good, and we do speak of heartfelt gratitude, but I think the more usual feeling is one of slight discomfort...” Gratitude may not be the inherently positive emotion it is assumed to be. Indeed, gratitude may encompass or be associated with various negative emotions: indebtedness; obligation; guilt; ingratitude; embarrassment; and awkwardness leading Roberts (2016) to declare “the perception of gratitude as inherently positive should not be accepted outright.”

A historical awareness makes it clear that equating gratitude to solely an inner feeling is insufficient. In the history of ideas, gratitude is considered an action (returning a favor) that is not only virtuous in and of itself, but valuable to society. To reciprocate is the right thing to do. “There is no duty more indispensable than that of returning a kindness” wrote Cicero in a book whose title translates “On Duties.” Cicero’s contemporary, Seneca, maintained that “He who receives a benefit with gratitude repays the first installment on his debt.” Neither believed that the emotion felt in a person returning a favor was particularly crucial. Immanuel Kant believed that gratitude was not merely a duty among others but a “sacred duty.” Kant claims that gratitude is a duty of love we have toward others in return for their kindness or charity. Conversely, across time, ingratitude has been treated as a serious vice, a greater vice than gratitude is a virtue. Ingratitude is the “essence of vileness,” wrote Kant while David Hume opined that ingratitude is “the most horrible and unnatural crime that a person is capable of committing.” As we shall see, there are different senses, types, or varieties and variations of gratitude that have their home in different psychological, social, moral, spiritual and religious contexts of discourse (Carr, 2016). How we attempt to answer the question that frames this paper may depend on the species of gratitude uncovered.

### **Gratitude Defined**

Gratitude is the basic response to the recognition that one has received gifts and benefits beyond those that may have been otherwise expected, deserved, or earned. When a person is grateful, they respond to an unmerited benefit by affirming its goodness and recognizing it as not flowing from their own agency. Gratitude involves an agency requirement, a benefactor requirement, and an intentionality requirement (McAleer, 2012). Gratitude is a feeling that occurs in interpersonal exchanges when one person acknowledges receiving a valuable benefit from another, a response to an act that is spurred by the desire to benefit the other. Much of human life is about giving, receiving, and repayment. In this sense, it, like other social emotions, functions to help regulate relationships, solidifying and strengthening them.

There is an energizing and motivating quality to gratitude. It is a positive state of mind that gives rise to the “passing on of the gift” through positive action. As such, gratitude serves as a key link in the dynamic between receiving and giving. It is not only a response to kindnesses received, but it is also a motivator of future benevolent actions on the part of the recipient directed toward the benefactor or to other parties.

Gratitude’s other nature is ethereal, spiritual, and transcendent. The terms “cosmic” or “transpersonal” gratitude are sometimes used to depict this form of gratitude. Philosophies and theologies have long viewed gratitude as central to the human-divine relationship. As long as people have believed in a Supreme Being, believers have sought ways to express gratitude and thanksgiving to this Being, whom they consider their ultimate giver. In monotheistic traditions God is conceived of as a personal being that is the source of goodness and the first giver of all gifts, from who all good flows. In these traditions gratitude a universal religious feeling, expressed in the thank offerings described in ancient scriptures to the daily ceremonies and rituals of Native Americans, to the well-rehearsed liturgies of mainline denominations to the contemporary praise and worship music of the evangelical tradition.

Gratitude is the basic response to the perception and reception of divine grace, the feeling that one has received gifts and benefits beyond those that are expected, deserved, or earned. It’s often been said that grace is the root of the gospel, and gratitude is the fruit. For example, Barth said that “grace and gratitude go together like Heaven and Earth.” As a Christianly imbued way of being, it arises when a believer reflects on God’s intervention in history or in the life of that individual, providing or doing for them for them that which they could have never done or provided for themselves. An ethic that is deeply rooted in Judeo-Christian doctrine, the word “thanks” and its various cognates (thankful, thankfulness, thanksgiving) appears over 150 times in the Hebrew scriptures and New Testament, and the practice of thanksgiving is a behavioral expression of gratitude to God. In the most general sense, grateful affect comes from the recognition that creation is a gift of God and not a right, privilege, or accident (Wilson, 2015) occurring when the mind is turned toward contemplation of God's incomprehensible goodness. Recognizing God’s provision of benefits and responding

with grateful emotion is one of the most common religious dispositions that Christian people are encouraged to develop. With gratitude there is amplification, strengthening, and deepening of the entire awareness of life.

Is gratitude to God a nearly inevitable outcome of how the human mind conceives of God's agency? Do our mental tools support the inference that benefits that cannot plausibly be attributed to human agency inevitably lead to an attribution of intentional benevolence to a divine or transcendent agent? What are the mechanisms by which people apportion credit to God for desired outcomes as opposed to human agency, or non-agency? As Schimmel (2004) points out, our natural tendency is to thank the human benefactor, be grateful to him, and perhaps act towards him in a fawning manner, and to forget God's role in the causal chain of benefaction.

Though the concept of a personally transcendent God may lack traction in nontheistic traditions, gratitude retains its spiritual nature. This fundamental spiritual quality to gratitude that transcends religious traditions is aptly conveyed by the late comparative religions scholar Frederick Streng: "In this attitude people recognize that they are connected to each other in a mysterious and miraculous way that is not fully determined by physical forces, but is part of a wider, or transcendent context (Streng, 1989, p. 5). In this sense, gratitude directs our minds to the vast oceans of realities not visible. This spiritual core of gratefulness is essential if gratitude is to be not simply a tool for narcissistic self-improvement. True gratefulness rejoices in the other. It has as its ultimate goal reflecting back the goodness that one has received by creatively seeking opportunities for giving. The motivation for doing so resides in the grateful appreciation that one has lived by the grace of others. Seen in this light, gratitude is a cosmic ordering principle that is capable of weaving a sustainable thread of meaningfulness as one contemplates how even mundane or ordinary events, personal attributes, or valued people one encounters are elements of the gift-nature of life just as it nourishes a fundamentally affirming life stance.

Both interpersonal and transpersonal or cosmic gratitude can be analyzed as traits, emotions, or mood states. The grateful disposition can be defined as a stable affective trait

that would lower the threshold of experiencing gratitude. As an emotion, gratitude can be understood as an acute, intense, and relatively brief psychophysiological reaction to being the recipient of a benefit from another. As a stable mood, gratitude has also been identified to have a subtle, broad and longer duration impact on consciousness: Gratitude is not just a transient emotion, but is also a virtue. Grateful people are more prone to the emotion, are prone to respond with gratitude to a wider range of beneficent actions, and are more likely to notice beneficence on the part of others — in particular more likely to respond to it with the emotion of gratitude rather than with alternative emotions like resentment, shame, or guilt. Grateful people are likely to agree with statements such as “It’s important to appreciate each day that you are alive, “I often reflect on how much easier my life is because of the efforts of others,” and “For me, life is much more of a gift than it is a burden.” Items such as these come from personality questionnaires designed to measure trait levels of gratitude; in other words, to identify people who are by nature grateful souls.

### **Grateful to Whom? Cosmic Gratitude**

Most accounts of gratitude suggest that the virtue is only appropriate when it is felt toward agents. Yet we sometimes have good reason to be grateful *to* (not merely *for*) non-agents, humans or supernatural, experiences and circumstances. Theists may not be the only people who are inclined to feel gratitude for things not plausibly attributable to human agency. Even atheists sometimes feel this impulse. Roberts (2014) called this sentiment “cosmic gratitude” An intriguing question for such cosmic gratitude is to whom should one direct this feeling? Philosopher Robert Solomon wrote that “being grateful to the universe is a limp way out of this quandary” (Solomon 2004, p, viii). The limpness obviously derives from the fact that the universe seems not to be an intentional agent, and in gratitude one attributes benevolent agency to the source of one’s blessings. In an interdisciplinary volume on gratitude published by Oxford University Press, Benedictine monk Brother David Steindl-Rast (2004) proposed two different kinds of gratitude: thankfulness, which is personal, and gratefulness, which is transpersonal:

When we thank, we think – namely, in terms of giver, gift, and receiver. This is necessary for personal gratitude, but transpersonal gratitude – though cognitive – lies deeper than thinking and precedes it. When it is an integral element of the experience of universal wholeness, gratitude does not yet distinguish between giver, gift, and receiver. (Steindl-Rast, 2004, p. 286).

Steindl-Rast's claim that gratitude is essentially a celebration is based on the fact that its essential characteristics are a heightened and focused intellectual and emotional appreciation. The grateful person's intellectual focus is sharpened and their emotional response intensified in the act of (spontaneous or deliberate, but in either case willing) appreciation, which he designates as gratitude. This conformity with the definition of celebration justifies his speaking of gratitude as a celebration. It differs from other celebrations by its object, which is undeserved kindness.

In his conceptual analysis of these two conceptual modes of gratitude, Steindl-Rast was the first to make a very important distinction. Since the time he penned those words, others have differentiated between directed, propositional, benefit-triggered, personal, specific and targeted gratitude on the one hand, and non-directed, prepositional, generalized, impersonal, non-specific, and appreciative gratitude on the other. This fundamental distinction becomes important when it comes to addressing the third big question we posed earlier. That is, can a non-theist, including atheists and agnostics, as well as believers in faith traditions without supernatural agents, feel existential gratitude? The question arises because gratitude is typically thought to be directed towards a person to whom one is grateful. Hence the theist may be grateful to God for their existence, experienced as a gift. But can the non-believer feel something similar without being irrational? Can there be gratitude for existence that is not directed toward any source?

This question is equally important for theists who do not hold a conception of God as a personal being, or even any kind of entity, or again those who hold that our relation to God cannot appropriately be modeled on our relation to other people. There are various



conceptions of God as Ultimate reality or “the ground of being,” which is also not an individual or personal being that one can receive benefits from.

### **The Problem of Non-Theism and Existential Gratitude**

To feel gratitude, a person must have some sense of the good being good for them, some sense of the good as originating outside themselves and their limited control, and in emblematic forms of gratitude, a sense of that the good is undeserved, and cannot be claimed by right. This reveals that gratitude is an emotion with considerable cognitive elaboration.

Existential gratitude involves being grateful for one’s existence. It reveals itself in statements such as “I am grateful to be alive,” or “I have deep thanksgiving for life itself.” As in other forms of gratitude, one is thankful for a good that originates outside of one’s own agency. In the case of existential gratitude, the good one is grateful for is existence itself. In broader forms of existential gratitude, the object one celebrates may be one’s own existence per se (Lacewing, 2016). Here, one responds to the utter contingency of existence; the quality of life is not the main focus. We delight just in being, a *joie de vivre*.

In existential gratitude, it is existence itself that is the gift. But then who provides it? To whom is owed gratitude? For theists, God, as personal creator and sustainer of all that exists, capably fills that role. It is clear that the theist may feel existential gratitude, given that it is directed towards a personal God. What of the non-theist? If there is no identifiable giver, existential gratitude fails to meet the tripartite construal (giver, gift, receiver) considered a litmus test for what constitutes the emotion of gratitude (Roberts, 2014). How can what is felt in this context even resemble gratitude? Most philosophical and psychological analyses of gratitude specify that the good is experienced as a gift and that the emotion is directed towards a person, the giver. If the only non-directed form of gratitude is existential gratitude, to call it gratitude may look like special circumstance. But if non-directed gratitude is more frequent, we can understand the non-directed, existential gratitude of the non-theist in light of this. It may be that non-directed existential gratitude figures prominently in part due to the recent rise of the religious “nones.” It is a response, at least in part, to cognitive pressure brought to bear on the experience of the undeserved goodness of one’s existence by thoughts and

experiences that support non-theism. This is not to say that the person talks themselves into a non-directed form of gratitude, but that their underlying representations of how to make sense the world change over time in line with such thoughts. The exact manner in which cognitive systems contribute to the formation of beliefs in intentional, non-random benevolence in the absence of a divine benefactor is an important topic for a science of GTG.

But atheists may not be the only ones to take issue with existential gratitude. If theists take what they perceive as the blessings in their lives to be favors expressing the benevolence of God towards them, warranting them to love God in return and to express this love in worship and thanksgiving and benevolent actions toward their fellow human beings – are they not, in logical consistency, committed to being angry to God for trials and tragedies in their lives? Is it not ingratitude if, when blessings are reversed, the response is indignation? As a believer that all things, blessings and curses, came from the hand of God, Job was faced with that terrible question: Is God the sort of person who acts without any reason? Job responded with equanimity: “The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21). In Job’s worldview, one could not receive the good without the bad. Now Job chapter 2:20 says "and he worshipped." Job's expression of grief (his coming apart at the seams) was itself an act of worship. Grief is an emotional acknowledgement that things aren't the way they should be. Grief involves at some level a distant memory of what once was and a cry for what one day will be was a universal reality once again, a world without pain and suffering. This longing, this hope that the world will be put back the way it once was, points to an eschatological dimension of gratitude.

With God, the connection between what appears to us to be a benefit or a calamity and the intention of its agent is less naturally transparent. There is even some evidence that people who are clearly resistant to the concept of God tend to presuppose the to-for structure in descriptions of their experiences of cosmic gratitude (gratitude for things that cannot be plausibly attributed to human agency, Roberts, 2014). But those who are amiable to the concept of God also sometimes feel uncomfortable thanking God for blessings, because they feel that doing so commits them to being angry with God for misfortunes. Invoking the

language of Leithart (2014), Christianity “infuses gratitude into every nook and cranny of human life” (p. 227). By virtue of its being theocentric and Christocentric, Christian gratitude is different from all other forms of gratitude. If gratitude to God is a virtue, a relational quality that transcends vicissitudes of life circumstances, the acceptance all good and bad fortune is a kind of humility in the face of God’s unchanging nature. As a synthesis of the temporal and eternal (Minear, 1962), gratitude is authentic only when it encapsulates the totality of the human-divine relationship. This is a philosophical and theological issue for sure, but ultimately we see this as an issue that empirical science could also speak to. Even if there is no transcendent, willing agent to whom we can give thanks, that does not preclude the wisdom, even the necessity, of living with an orientation of gratitude for existence itself (Solomon, 2014).

We might have another quandary as well. Theologies may teach that the more you ascribe benefactions to God the less of it you ascribe to man. Therefore, as we reflect upon the relationship between the theological idea of gratitude and thanksgiving to God on the one hand, and gratitude and thanksgiving to man on the other, we should not assume that the latter is an obvious derivation from the former. On the contrary, the opposite might be the case – the more you owe God the less you owe man. How does this tension play itself out in the actual experience of people? For example, who tends to be more grateful to human benefactors, such as foundations which support research? Is it the devout believer in God’s omnipotence and benevolence, who views granting agencies as God’s medium but not the ultimate source of funding, or the atheist, who has no one to thank for a Foundation’s beneficence other than the foundation’s founder and its staff (Schimmel, 2004)? Theists may not have the upper hand on gratitude after all.

### **Findings from the Science of Gratitude**

An examination of gratitude in the history of ideas comes from a number of perspectives—philosophy, religious studies, anthropology, theology, and political economy, to name a few. Each of these are valid, valuable and necessary in their own right. A scientific perspective can provide an evidence-based approach to understanding how and in what ways

gratitude brings benefits into the life of the practitioner. The tools and techniques of modern science have increasingly been brought to bear on understanding the nature of gratitude and why it is important for human health and happiness. A scientific perspective cannot be divorced from the big questions that I began this paper with. Responsible science returns to basic human questions about what is good and valuable and worth cultivating in life. I would maintain this is true about the science of gratitude, in which I have been a contributor for nearly two decades.

Scientific studies have revealed that gratitude is foundational to well-being and mental health throughout the life span. From childhood to old age, accumulating evidence documents the wide array of psychological, physical, and relational benefits associated with gratitude. In the past few years, there has been a tremendous increase in the accumulation of scientific evidence showing the contribution of gratitude to psychological and social well-being. Clinical trials indicate that the practice of gratitude can have dramatic and lasting positive effects in a person's life. It can lower blood pressure, improve immune function, promote happiness and well-being, and spur acts of helpfulness, generosity, and cooperation. Additionally, gratitude reduces lifetime risk for depression, anxiety, and substance abuse disorders (Emmons, 2007, 2013; Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Given the range of benefits linked with gratitude, it has fittingly been referred to as the quintessential positive trait (Wood, 2010), the amplifier of goodness in oneself, the world, and others (Watkins, 2014) and as having unique power to heal, energize, and change lives (Emmons, 2013).

The research base is now extensive. Multiple mechanisms for understanding gratitude's impact on well-being have been identified. I will briefly describe 5 of these.

*Gratitude increases spiritual awareness.* Many world religions commend gratitude as a desirable human trait, which may cause spiritual or religious people to adopt a grateful outlook. Upon recognition of God's provision of benefits, humans respond with grateful affect and gratitude is one of the most common religious feelings that believers in virtually all spiritual traditions are encouraged to develop. The joyful act of praising God is a thankfulness flowing nearly automatically from a recognition of divine gifts, and cosmic gratitude is foundational to

human flourishing. When contemplating a positive circumstance that cannot be attributed to intentional human effort, such as a miraculous healing or the gift of life, spiritually inclined people may still be able attribute these positive outcomes to a human or non-human agent (viz., God or a higher power) and thus, experience more gratitude. Spiritually inclined people also tend to attribute positive outcomes to God's intervention, but not negative ones. As a result, many positive life events that are not due to the actions of another person (e.g., pleasant weather, avoiding an automobile accident) may be perceived as occasions for gratitude to God, although negative events (e.g., a long winter, an automobile accident) would likely not be attributed to God as God is typically seen as all good. This attributional style, then is likely to magnify the positive emotional effects of pleasant life events. Being grateful to a Supreme Being is an acknowledgment that there are good and enjoyable things in the world to be enjoyed in accordance with the giver's intent. Good things happen by design. If a person believes in the spiritual concept of grace, they believe that there is a pattern of beneficence in the world that exists quite independently of their own striving and even their own existence. Gratitude thus depends upon receiving what is not expected or has not been earned, or receiving more than one's due. This gift-awareness is simultaneously humbling and elevating. Gratitude is fundamental to the spiritual life, because it is in gratitude that people become aware of their limitations and their need to rely on forces and sources outside of them.

*Gratitude reduces stress and promotes physical health.* Some of the benefits of gratitude for mental health and well-being may result from gratitude's ability to enhance physical health functioning. A number of studies have reported physical health benefits of gratitude. Gratitude interventions have been shown to reduce bodily complaints, increase sleep duration and efficiency, promote exercise, decrease functional limitations caused by pain, improve mood among individuals in treatment for alcohol use disorders and improve cardiovascular functioning (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Hill, Allemand & Roberts, 2013; Wood et al., 2009). Experimental research suggests that discrete experiences of gratitude and appreciation may cause increases in parasympathetic myocardial control lower systolic blood pressure as well as improvements in more molar aspects of physical health such as everyday symptoms and

physician visits. Therefore, there might be some direct physiological benefits to frequently experience grateful emotions. People who experience gratitude cope more effectively with everyday stress and show increased resilience in the face of trauma-induced stress (see Watkins & McCurrach, 2016). Gratitude interventions have also shown promise as a treatment for mental illnesses. The generation of gratitude has been associated with reductions of hopelessness, suicidal ideation, and suicidal attempts (Huffman et. al., 2014) independently of depression. A promising line of research is beginning to examine the relationship between gratitude and biomarkers of health and aging including oxytocin, telomerase, and endothelial progenitor cells, a precursor to atherosclerosis (Algoe & Way, 2014; Mendes, 2014).

*Gratitude maximizes pleasure.* A well-established law in the psychology of emotion is the principle of adaptation. People adapt to circumstances, both pleasant and unpleasant. With the passage of time, the ability of these events to evoke an emotional response decays. The emotion system likes newness. Unfortunately for personal happiness, adaptation to pleasant circumstances occurs more rapidly than adaptation to unpleasant life changes. This is why even a major windfall, such as a huge pay raise, tends to impact happiness for only a mere few months. Once the glow fades, preset happiness levels return. Gratitude promotes the savoring of positive life experiences and situations, so that the maximum satisfaction and enjoyment is derived from one's circumstances. In helping people not take things for granted, gratitude may recalibrate people's "set points" for happiness—baseline levels of happiness that are primarily driven by one's genes (Emmons, 2007).

*Gratitude protects against the negative.* Gratitude not only enhances positive states of being but also mitigates toxic emotions and states. Nothing can destroy happiness more quickly than envy, greed, and resentment. The German moral philosopher Balduin Schwarz identified the problem when he said "the ungrateful, envious, complaining man...cripples himself. He is focused on what he has not, particularly on that which somebody else has or seems to have, and by that he tends to poison his world" (Schwarz, 1999). Grateful people tend to be satisfied with what they have, and so are less susceptible to such emotions as disappointment, regret, and frustration. Moreover, in the context of material prosperity, by maintaining a grateful focus

a person may avoid disillusionment and emptiness. The sense of security that characterizes grateful people makes them less susceptible to needing to rely on material accomplishments for a stable sense of self. A number of studies have documented a negative correlation between gratitude and materialistic pursuits demonstrating that gratitude can reduce the psychic costs of a materialistic lifestyle fueled by insecurity and acquisitiveness (e.g. Froh, Emmons, Card, Bono & Wilson, 2010).

*Gratitude strengthens relationships.* Perhaps the central mechanism that drives gratitude's positive effects is that strengthens and expands social relationships. Gratitude is a way of seeing that reminds us that we are not alone. Gratitude helps cultivate a person's sense of interconnectedness. Gratitude is the "moral memory of mankind" wrote noted sociologist Georg Simmel. One just needs to try to imagine human relationships existing without gratitude. Research has shown that people who keep gratitude journals report feeling closer and more connected to others, are more likely to help others, and are actually seen as more helpful by significant others in their social networks (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Emotions like anger, resentment, envy, and bitterness tend to undermine happy social relations. But the virtue of gratitude is not only a firewall of protection against such corruption of relationships; it contributes positively to friendship and civility, because it is both benevolent (wishing the benefactor well) and just (giving the benefactor his due, in a certain special way). People who are high on dispositional gratitude, the chronic tendency to be aware of blessings in life, have better relationships, are more likely to protect and preserve these relationships, are more securely attached, and are less lonely and isolated (reference). People who have an easier time conjuring up reasons to be grateful are less likely to say that they lack companionship or that no one really knows them well. The innate longing for belonging is strengthened when gratitude is experienced and expressed, leading one researcher to characterize gratitude as the "find, remind, and bind emotion" (Algoe, 2012).

### **Ingratitude as King of the Vices**

“For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened” (Romans 1:21, NIV).

Given its magnetic appeal, one would wonder whether gratitude would ever be rejected. Yet it is. A growing number of social commentators contend that gratitude is a diminishing virtue in modern times and that we are less grateful than in other historical periods. Generosity should evoke thankfulness, but many of us can probably think of times when either our own benefaction was met afterwards with coldness and resentment, or perhaps when we resented, and avoided, someone who had been generous to us. Any discussion of gratitude has to reckon with the reality of ingratitude.

One of the bestselling books of recent years was Walter Isaacson’s (2011) revealing biography of the late Apple founder Steve Jobs. Delving deeply into the personality dynamics of Jobs, Isaacson provides illustration after illustration of his profound and pervasive narcissism. Some of the examples are downright laughable. One of the most amusing occurs in 2009 when Jobs is recovering from a liver transplant and pneumonia. At one point the pulmonologist tries to put a mask over his face when he is deeply sedated. Jobs rips it off and mumbles that he hates the design and refuses to wear it. Though barely able to speak, he orders them to bring five different options for the mask so that he can pick a design he likes. Throughout his life, this marketing genius acted in ways that broadcasted his lack of sensitivity to others, a hallmark of narcissism. Once he arrived at his hotel suite in New York for press interviews and decided, at 10 P.M., that the piano needs to be repositioned, that the strawberries were inadequate, and that the flowers were all wrong: he wanted calla lilies. When his public-relations assistant returns, at midnight, with the correct flowers, he tells her that her suit is “disgusting.” “Even in small everyday rebellions, such as not putting a license plate on his car and parking in handicapped spaces, he acted as if he were not subject to the strictures around him,” Isaacson writes. “I think the issue is empathy -- the capacity for empathy is lacking,” said Tina Redse, his first true love, asserting that Jobs fit the psychiatric manual's definition of Narcissistic



Personality Disorder to an uncanny degree. Another core feature of narcissism is a sense of entitlement—the expectation of special treatment or privileges without reciprocating or any sense of obligation. Isaacson provides many examples of this from Jobs' life. He was a very demanding child, demanding his parents move so he could be in a better school district. Jobs stated that if he didn't go to Reed College, one of the most pricey schools in the country, he wouldn't go at all and forced his parents to finance it, a huge burden for them. When he decided he wanted job at Atari, he went in and declared he wasn't leaving until they gave him a job. Once at a restaurant he sent his food back three times. There is a story that Jobs was caught speeding at 100 miles an hour and received a ticket. While the officer was writing the ticket he honked his horn and told the officer he was in a hurry. He was lucky the officer didn't get upset with him. Then he took off and again drove at 100 miles an hour. Isaacson's book is filled with page after page of examples like these. Not much gratitude here.

Ingratitude is the failure to remember or recognize one's position in a matrix of giving and receiving and the unwillingness or inability to feel the joy that undergirds these exchanges. Ingratitude is the failure to both acknowledge receiving a favor and refusing to return or repay the favor. There is no rejoicing in receiving the gift, and no concern for the giver's joy in giving the gift. People who are incapable of or unwilling to acknowledge benefits that others have conferred upon them are highly scorned in most traditional conceptions of human social conduct. Wrote Ignatius of Loyola, "ingratitude is the most abominable of all sins, and it is to be detested in the sight of the Creator and Lord by all of God's creatures for it is the forgetting of the graces, benefits, and blessings received" (quoted in Au, 2010, p. 65).

Simply focusing on gratitude's benefits downplays both the reality of and the perils of ingratitude and other obstacles that prevent gratitude from flourishing. A grateful approach to life is neither automatic nor inevitable. Gratitude requires thinking about the other and acknowledging one's dependence on the other. From the perspective of original sin, it is simply more natural to think about oneself and miss the mark when it comes to giving credit to others for all the good we experience. According to scriptures, ingratitude is what caused the human predicament in the first place. Schimmel (2004) pointed out that in Genesis, Adam never

thanks God for the gift of a helpmate but rather blames God for having made a woman who leads him into sin. Creation's bounties are never enough for the original couple in Eden. Yet it is that defiant stance – that Faustian urge to assert the self over and against the natural constraints of the cosmos – that may define humankind so clearly and tragically, Genesis seems to suggest. This oh-so-inevitable and supremely natural original sin comes to shape humankind's relationship with God, a relationship that will always be contentious as long as humans act like humans (and God like God).

All too often we wish to maintain an illusion of independence. We want to take sole credit for our success. We live in a nation where everyone appears to be on their own self-contained pursuit of happiness. Each individual has his or her own path this journey takes. For some, the search begins in books; for others it comes through service. And perhaps the most popular form of seeking happiness is through the accumulation of "things." Materialism, though, is bought at a cost. A society that feels entitled to what it receives does not adequately express gratitude. Comforts are easily taken for granted. Seen through the lens of buying and selling, relationships as well as things are viewed as disposable, and gratitude cannot survive this materialistic onslaught. The lack of gratitude is contagious, and is passed from one generation to the next. Ingratitude is the failure to both acknowledge receiving a favor and refusing to return or repay the favor. Ingratitude is a spiritual poverty, a bankruptcy of the soul. People who are incapable of or unwilling to acknowledge benefits that others have conferred upon them are highly scorned in most traditional conceptions of human social life.

Asked to offer an opinion about the opposite of gratitude, most people would reply "ingratitude." This is understandable. Gratitude involves recognition, the expression of thanks, and appropriate repayment. It is open-handed and open-hearted living (Thompson 2017). Conversely, ingratitude involves the failure to recognize or acknowledge a benefit, and the failure to express thanks in word, and the failure to repay the benefit in deed. Leithart (2014) presents Aquinas' account of ingratitude in terms of three degrees: "it belongs to the first degree of ingratitude to return evil for good, to the second to find fault with a favor received, and to the third to esteem kindness as though it were unkindness" (p. 93). Just as we may

morally commend people for possessing the virtue of gratitude, we may morally fault them for lacking it. Whereas gratitude is a virtue, ingratitude is an accusation. It reveals a deeply flawed character.

Political theorist Mark Mitchell identifies four contemporary forces contributing to the erosion of gratitude in modern culture: (a) increasing secularism and loss of an absolute moral order; (b) loss of contact with the natural world; (c) loss of a sense of rootedness in a place, and (d) a loss of sense of the past (Mitchell, 2012). Each of these losses contributes to an overall inability to feel grateful for life's blessings, and thanklessness is never virtuous. Forgotten is our collective debt to God, the natural world, to a place, and to the past, all of which are necessary for an adequate understanding of our debts to both the past and the future (Mitchell, 2010). Others also see ingratitude as the dominant ethos of youth culture, or a forgetfulness of the contributions of previous generations. A spirit of ingratitude corrodes human relationships and becomes epidemic within a culture when entitlements and rights are prioritized over duties and obligations, laments Senior Fellow Roger Scruton of the American Enterprise Institute (Scruton, 2010). Ingratitude is commonly recognized as one of the keys to understanding late modernity (Leithart, 2014). Leithart states the case plainly remarking that "wealth has not satisfied, but only led to the expansion of desires, which has produced a "radical ingratitude" toward the very institutions that have satisfied his desires" (p. 219).

Ingratitude is a vice that represents a profound moral failure, a defect of character. In his texts, Shakespeare uses the terms 'ingrate', 'ingrateful', and 'ingratitude' some 40 times, often modified by the adjectives 'monstrous', 'hideous', or 'grotesque.' Where gratitude is appropriate, even mandatory, being ungrateful is a sign or symptom of lack of socialization, whether the inability to appreciate what others have done for you or, worse, the grudging resentment of one's own vulnerability and the refusal to admit one's debt to others. The vexing question, posed by contemporary moralists, is whether we see the world through the lens of gratitude or the astigmatism of ingratitude (Mitchell, 2012). Descartes colorfully described three categories of people who display the vice of ingratitude: "Brutish" and "arrogant" people are ungrateful because they "think that all things are their due"; some are too "stupid" to take

time to think about the benefits they receive from others; the “weak and abject” people are those are obsequious in seeking help but then hate their benefactors. A weak man hates his benefactor because he “lacks the will to return the favor or despairs of his ability to do so” (Leithart, 2014, p. 146). Convinced that others are as greedy as he is and that no one does good without expecting benefit, he thinks he has deceived his benefactor by taking a favor without planning to reciprocate.

Yet, ingratitude as the direct opposite of gratitude is conceptually problematic. Gratitude is an emotion, or an emotional disposition. Ingratitude seems to not be an emotion. It’s a state of *not being* grateful that may be expressed either in being without emotion in response to a gift or in any of a variety of emotions that are contrary to gratitude: say, resentment or embarrassment about the gift, the giver and being a receiver. In any case, it’s not an emotion. A person does not *feel* ingratitude, a person *is* ungrateful, or *an* ingrate. I will argue below that entitlement is a much better candidate for the inverse of gratitude.

Why is ingratitude such a profound moral failure? The principle of reciprocity, upon which human societies are based, states that one has an obligation to help others who have helped us, while at the same time not harming others who have helped us. Directing ingratitude toward our benefactor is a way of inflicting harm upon that person. The moral rule underlying reciprocity is violated when one is not grateful for the benefit received. While occasionally each of us respond to a benefit in a manner which may be interpreted as an ungrateful response by our benefactor, there is clearly a psychological disturbance in the personality that habitually responds to benefits with indifference, resentment, or ingratitude. This is a flagrant violation of natural law. Gratitude, for Cicero, is a virtue rooted in nature itself. To act ungratefully to a benefactor is to act contrary to nature.

The most common type of moral reason cited in favor of gratitude is justice. In these cases we have *juridical* reasons for gratitude (Fitzgerald, 1988). The recipients of gratitude “deserve” it, “merit” it, are “entitled” to it, or ingratitude may be somehow “unfair.” Those who ought to be grateful “owe” gratitude or have a “debt of gratitude.” Ingratitude, then, would be a case of injustice.

Violations of the norm of reciprocity type elicit what social psychologist Jonathan Haidt has called moral disgust. Moral disgust is triggered by actions that reveal an absence of normal human decency, actions like ingratitude that show the lower, darker, and more “monstrous” side of human nature. Haidt argues that moral disgust makes people shun those that trigger it. It certainly tends to be the case that we are motivated to avoid people who are ungrateful, and this shunning contributes to their self-centered misery.

Who is not familiar with the most famous instance of ingratitude in spiritual writings? In the New Testament gospel of Luke, Jesus of Nazareth heals ten lepers of their physical disease and in so doing of their social stigma. Pronounced clean of their contagious condition and no longer social outcasts, they get their old lives back. They were no longer in bondage to their disease. Rescued, now free, only one returned to express thanksgiving for being healed. When only one came back thankful, Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner? Rise and go; your faith has made you well." Biblical scholars of this passage agree that by “faith” what Jesus really meant was *thankfulness*, as in “your *gratitude* has made you well.” The parable reminds us of just how common ingratitude is and how easy it is to take blessings for granted, and how gratitude is dependent upon unmerited kindness.

Were the others ungrateful? Perhaps they were just forgetful. After all, given back their dignity, they were no doubt in a hurry to return to their families and old lives. Contemporary research, though, paints a more complicated picture of ingratitude. People who are ungrateful tend to be characterized by an excessive sense of self-importance, arrogance, vanity, and an unquenchable need for admiration and approval. Narcissists reject the ties that bind people into relationships of reciprocity. They expect special favors and feel no need to pay back or pay forward. Given this constellation of characteristics, being grateful in any meaningful way is beyond the capacity of most narcissists. Without empathy, they cannot appreciate an altruistic gift because they cannot identify with the mental state of the gift-giver. Narcissism is a spiritual blindness; it is a refusal to acknowledge that one has been the recipient of benefits freely bestowed by others. A preoccupation with the self can cause us to forget our benefits and our

benefactors, or to feel that we are owed things from others and therefore have no reason to feel thankful. Ignatius Loyola wrote that ingratitude is a forgetting of the graces, benefits, and blessings received, and as such it is the cause, beginning, and origin of all evils and sins. Gratitude is grace, ingratitude is disgrace.

At the core of narcissism is entitlement. This attitude says, “life owes me something” or “people owe me something” or “I deserve this.” In all its manifestations, a preoccupation with the self can cause us to forget our benefits and our benefactors or to feel that we are owed things from others and therefore have no reason to feel thankful. Entitlement and self-absorption are massive impediments to gratitude. You will certainly not feel grateful when you do receive what you think you have coming, because after all, you have it coming. Counting blessings will be ineffective because grievances will always outnumber gifts. A spirit of *ressentiment*, or a “narrative of injury,” dominates. Jonas (2012) contends that feelings of resentment are increasingly prevalent in contemporary democracies, especially in modern institutional settings.

Were narcissistic entitlement a condition that afflicted only a small percentage of humankind, then there would be little cause for concern. Indeed, psychiatrists estimate that only one percent of the general population meets the clinical criteria for narcissistic disorders. However, narcissistic characteristics are found in all individuals in varying degrees. Early childhood is marked by egocentrism, the inability to take another’s perspective. This preoccupation with one’s own internal world is a normal stage of human development. Over time, most of us evolve out of this restricted perceptual lens. However those who continue to see the world primarily from the inside out slide down the slope from ordinary egocentrism to entitled narcissism, a condition definitely at odds with God’s plan for flourishing human beings.

Ingratitude is the failure to both acknowledge receiving a favor and refusing to return or repay the favor. Just as gratitude is the queen of the virtues, ingratitude is the king of the vices. People who are incapable of or unwilling to acknowledge benefits that others have conferred upon them are highly scorned in most traditional conceptions of human social life. The Roman

philosopher Seneca said that “no other vice is so hostile to the harmony of the human race as ingratitude.” Thanklessness is never virtuous and so qualifies it as king of the vices.

### **Amplifying Gratitude, Diminishing Ingratitude**

Is there an antidote to ingratitude? Gratitude is often prescribed as the remedy for the exaggerated deservingness that marks narcissistic entitlement. But what enables gratitude in the first place? A strong case can be made for humility as the foundation of gratitude.

Gratitude is born of humility, for it acknowledges one’s dependence on both natural and supernatural forces. This acknowledgment gives birth to acts marked by attention and responsibility. Ingratitude, on the other hand, is marked by hubris, which denies the gift, and this always leads to inattention, irresponsibility, and abuse (Mitchell, 2010, 2012). In gratitude and humility the mind is turned to realities outside of itself. Awareness of limitations and the need to rely on others become commonplace. The myth of self-sufficiency is defeated. A grateful person looks upward and outward to the sources that sustain them. Becoming aware of realities greater than oneself provides a shield from the illusion of being self-made, being here on this planet by right—expecting everything and owing nothing. The humble person says that life is a gift to be grateful for, not a right to be claimed. Humility ushers in a grateful response to life. Gratitude fits best with a humble approach to living, but humility is nowhere to be seen in Adam’s and Eve’s defiant quest to be as great and to know as much as God. One who is humble rather than arrogant tends to appreciate how much he owes to others, God or humans, for which he is grateful, and his gratitude will instill in him a desire to continue the chain of benefaction by helping others in need. To be grateful to God, for who God is, for what God does and what he asks of us, impacts on what we want, what we want to know, how we decide to behave and who we are trying to become.

Humility does not come easily or naturally, particularly in cultures that values self-promotion and self-aggrandizement. Humility requires the sustained focus on others rather than self, or as the Jewish proverb states, humility is limiting oneself to an appropriate space while leaving room for others. Thinking about oneself is natural; putting others first is

unnatural. Perhaps this is why gratitude can be counterintuitive. It goes against natural inclinations. There is a massive desire to take credit for the good things that happen. Ingratitude, on the other hand, has its roots in pride. The belief that one is self-sufficient, without need to join others in mutual obligation, supports a stance that favors taking sole credit for success in life and minimizes the contributions that others make. It can be tempting.

Reigning in entitlement and embracing gratitude and humility is spiritually and psychologically liberating. Formation in gratitude requires recognizing that life owes me nothing and all the goods I have are gifts. It is not a getting of what we are entitled to. Recognizing that everything good in life is ultimately a gift is a fundamental truth of reality and it is humility that makes that recognition possible. The humble person says, “How can I not be filled with overflowing gratitude for all the good in my life that I’ve done nothing to merit?” The realization that all is gift is freeing, and freedom is the very foundation upon which gratitude is based (see Konstan, 2016, for a further discussion on freedom and the feeling of gratitude). True gifts are freely given, and require no response. In the parable of the lepers, Jesus was free to withhold the gift of healing, and he did not demand that the other nine who were healed return to express gratitude. The one who did return exercised his freedom as well. Where there is no freedom, there is no gratitude. Gratitude cannot be forced or demanded. Gratitude and freedom are inextricably joined.

### **Gratitude as the Linchpin Between Suffering and Joy**

Before drawing to a conclusion, I want to offer some empirical (i.e. experimental) evidence on the connection between suffering, gratitude, and joy. One of the notable observations of the 2014 Yale joy consultations was that joy may be experienced in the midst of trials and tribulations as well as when life seems to be going well. Volf (2015) phrased the question this way: “Can a person who suffers rejoice?” In the laboratory, we’ve investigated the effectiveness of grateful reappraisal of unpleasant troubling memories (cited in Watkins, 2014). In one study, all participants were asked to recall an unpleasant “open memory”—a memory of an unpleasant event that is poorly understood and the participant feels that the event is not yet



behind them. After describing and reporting on the subjective qualities of this memory, participants were randomly assigned to one of three journaling conditions. Participants wrote for 20 minutes on 3 consecutive days. In the control condition students simply wrote about the upcoming day. In the emotional disclosure condition participants wrote about their unpleasant memory in a free form manner. In the grateful reappraisal condition participants wrote about positive consequences of the event that they can now feel grateful for. Participants then reported on various qualities of their open memory after the treatment phase, and one week after treatment. Compared to the control and emotional disclosure conditions, those in the grateful reappraisal treatment showed more closure of their memory, less unpleasant emotion in response to recalling the memory, and fewer intrusive thoughts concerning the memory. In this study participants also reported on their emotional state immediately after each journaling session, and we were fortunate to have included a joy item. In a recent reanalysis of our data, we found that there was significant main effect for treatment on joy, in that those in the grateful reappraisal treatment reported significantly more joy than those in the emotional disclosure treatment. Indeed, we found that the joy reported for those in the grateful reappraisal treatment was slightly higher than the joy reported by those subjects who were not even writing about their painful memory. Moreover, it appeared that the joy reported by those following their journaling was important to the healing of their unpleasant open memory.

That study showed that joy can be experienced even when thinking about troubling events from our past; also that thinking about those events in a grateful manner may be critical to that experience of joy, and to the healing of troubling memories. Volf (2015) argues that there are two ways that one may rejoice through suffering, both of which may be seen as forms of grateful reappraisal. First, we may rejoice because even in the midst of painful circumstances we can still celebrate “some good that is ours despite the suffering.” For example, even though one may experience loss through a disease such as cancer, often these individuals display an increased appreciation for life itself. Second, Volf proposes that we can rejoice for the “good that the suffering will produce.” “Joy despite” is possible on account of “Joy because.” We are engaged in further experimental work to specifically investigate this conception.

### **Conclusion: Gratitude as the Truest Approach to Life**

Despite the flurry of empirical science on gratitude and happiness, in contemporary society there is a "crisis in gratitude", meaning that, as a culture, we have lost a deep sense of gratefulness about the freedoms we enjoy, a lack of gratitude towards those who lost their lives in the fight for freedom, a lack of gratitude for all the material advantages we have. The untethering of gratitude and obligation, gratitude and responsibility, and gratitude and indebtedness, has led to a "gratitude light" approach. In short, if we are cynical about gratitude it is because we reduce gratitude to a feeling.

From ancient religious scriptures through modern social science research, the virtue of gratitude is upheld as a desirable human characteristic with a capacity for making life better for oneself and for others. Aside from a few harsh words from a small handful of cynics, nearly every thinker has viewed gratitude as a sentiment with virtually no downside. As Comte-Sponville (2001) pointed out, gratitude is "the most pleasant of the virtues, and the most virtuous of the pleasures" It is virtuously pleasant because experiencing it not only uplifts the person who experiences it, but it edifies the person to whom it is directed as well. But the fact that people typically consider gratitude a virtue and not simply a pleasure also points to the fact that it does not always come naturally or easily. Gratitude must, and can, be cultivated. And by cultivating the virtue, it appears that people may get the pleasure of gratitude, and all of its other concomitant benefits, free of charge.

It is fitting to end this paper by restating the big question posed at its outset: Is gratitude queen of the virtues, and ingratitude king of the vices? We can answer this question with three domains of evidence: (a) gratitude leads to happiness, better health, overall well-being, and other indicators of flourishing in life in a manner that is causal and not merely correlative; (b) as a moral motive, gratitude leads people to act out of concern for others, primarily by increase generosity and altruism, and (c) gratitude mitigates toxic emotions and curbs antisocial impulses. Conversely, ingratitude is an acid that corrodes relationships, poisonous to both its possessor and to society. In empirical research on human strengths, gratitude consistently emerges as one of the strongest predictors of various indicators of human flourishing. Gratitude

has been linked to positive social outcomes, including empathy, generosity, voluntarism, compassion, forgivingness and the provision of social support. Gratitude does appear to play a unique role in the human moral apparatus in that it is both a response to the benevolence of others but also generates benevolent actions on the part of the receiver. As an integral element of moral character, gratitude is an open and receptive stance toward the world that energizes a person to return the goodness they have received. Gratitude's intrinsic function is to affirm the good in life, embrace that good, and then transform the good in purposeful actions to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self. The late moral philosopher Charles Shelton beautifully captured the essence of gratitude as a way of life:

Gratitude is an interior depth we experience which orients us to an acknowledged dependence out of which flows a profound sense of being gifted. This way of being, in turn, elicits a humility just as it nourishes our goodness. As a consequence, when truly grateful, we are led to experience and interpret life situations in ways that call forth from us an openness to and engagement with the world through purposeful actions in order to share and increase the very good we have received (2004, p. 273).

From a psychological perspective, this fullest sense of gratitude represents a substantial altering in a person's outlook. To elaborate, to experience this degree of gratitude brings about an expansive enlargement of a perceptual hermeneutic. In short, this degree of gratitude nourishes a more or less all-encompassing hermeneutics of appreciation. This appreciative lens fosters within individuals a radical openness to and receptivity of the world. This openness and receptivity allows for an altruistic acuity that enhances the giving away of goodness. Stated succinctly, as one experiences life, gratitude's intrinsic function allows one to approach the world by embracing it, nourishing it, and transforming it. A corollary to this definition involves the language of gratitude. If this portrayal of gratitude is accurate a range stretching from the commonplace thanks to a profound way of being it might prove more precise when discussing gratitude to incorporate periodically specific phrases such as true gratitude, authentic gratitude, or genuine gratitude in order to convey that inherent in the experience of gratitude

exists the capacity for it to root more deeply within a person and with an endpoint (gratitude as defined above) that one can strive for but never totally attain. This spiritual or cosmic gratitude contains both a vertical and horizontal dimension, orienting a person toward God and toward others. Gratitude is both an intrinsic good orienting one's vertical relationship to the divine and a motivator for horizontal acts of justice and generosity directed toward people. Authentic gratitude leads people to experience life situations in ways that call forth from them an openness to engage with the world to share and increase the very goodness they have received. It is the feeling of connection with humanity emerging from a sense of wonder and joy that participating in an intricate network of existence brings.

There is a very basic reality about gratitude. We all begin life dependent on others, and most of us end life dependent on others. The human condition is such that throughout life, not just at the beginning and end, we are profoundly dependent on other people. And we are aware of this dependence. Moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (1999) has referred to humans as "dependent rational animals." To be alive is to be in relationships with others, relationships that are vital to our well-being. Gratitude takes us outside ourselves where we see ourselves as part of a larger, intricate network of sustaining relationships, relationships that are mutually reciprocal.

We are receptive beings, dependent on the help of others, on their gifts and their kindness. As such, we are called to gratitude. If we choose to ignore this basic truth, we steer ourselves off course. So gratitude is essential if we are to truly understand ourselves. In some respects this is a profoundly counter-cultural idea. Our psychological society has placed great emphasis upon individual autonomy and self-sufficiency, and with respect to gratitude, overemphasized its benefits and ignored the vices that make it so challenging to sustainably maintain. Until this dependence is acknowledged, gratitude remains a potentiality at best. When embraced, gratitude's essence can be construed not only from behaviors which are measurable, but from ways of living that are both pathways for aspiring to the good life and passages for attaining it.

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