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# GRATITUDE AND HUMAN FLOURISHING

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JONATHAN LEAR

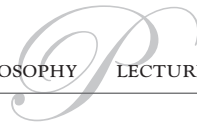
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*Gratitude and Human Flourishing*

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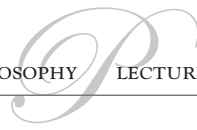
ABSTRACT

What is the role of gratitude in a flourishing, meaningful, happy life? This paper argues that gratitude is crucial. Although Aristotelian in spirit, this paper tries to correct for Aristotle's aristocratic outlook. It offers an Aristotelian ethics more suitable to democratic culture. The paper also draws on contemporary psychoanalytic thinking about the central place of gratitude in infantile development and adult human flourishing.

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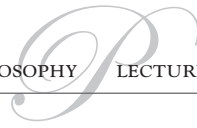
# Gratitude and Human Flourishing

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## 1. A Significant Moment

When I was an undergraduate, with only a vague thought that it might be a good idea, I took a course on Chinese history. The Professor was young. He spoke with a English accent, and that impressed us all. Looking back, I realize I was taken less with the content of the course than with the joy he took in teaching it: his absorption in the material, the vigor and imagination with which he told his stories. At midterm, he made an announcement: If anyone received an A for the course he – it was an all-men’s college at the time – would have the opportunity to write *another paper* and *for no credit whatsoever*. Call this his English eccentricity. There is something comic about an award whose prize is more work and no credit. I was hooked. I mention this moment because it happened to me at about your stage of life, but it ended up having lifelong significance. I could not have known that at the time. In effect, the teacher taught me the joy of learning for its own sake. He taught me how to be a student and, later in life I realized he was also teaching me how to be a teacher. I assume I thanked him at the time, but how could any “thank you” back then be adequate to a lifetime gift? I could not have understood what I was thanking him for. But there is something about the nature of the gift that makes this mismatch all right. What is that?



## 2. Gratitude and Happiness

The question I want to explore in this lecture is: What role does gratitude play in a flourishing human life? I am concerned with what Aristotle called a happy life. Happiness, *eudaimonia*, qualifies not this or that moment, but a life (in the sense of *bios*). In contemporary English, we use phrases like a full, rich, meaningful life, a life well lived. What is the place of gratitude in life “taken as a whole”? I am asking about the goodness of gratitude for the value of one’s life, not about the rightness of a grateful response in appropriate circumstances.

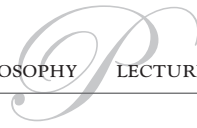
There are two reasons this question has been overlooked. First, from the religious outlooks of the Abrahamic religions, gratitude to God is overwhelmingly called for. God created the world, made it good, and entered into personal relations with human beings. The question I am asking, focusing on the relations of human beings with each other, is certainly intelligible in this context, but it tends to linger in the shadow of the brilliant, commanding question of our proper relation with God. Second, from a secular point of view, the place of gratitude in a flourishing life is Aristotelian in spirit, but Aristotle himself did not hold gratitude in high esteem. It is good in appropriate circumstances to thank people, but life would be so much better if one could be a benefactor rather than a recipient.<sup>1</sup> This outlook seems to me a relic of an aristocratic outlook that we would be better off without.

So, I would like to follow a broadly Aristotelian approach to ethics, but correct for his more aristocratic values. Gratitude, I want to argue, is a mode of our flourishing that calls into question Aristotle’s conceptualization and valorization of self-sufficiency. Gratitude is a celebration of our dependency. In favorable conditions, there are certain modes of acknowl-

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1 In discussing the ultimate self-love of the virtuous person, Aristotle says:

It is true of an excellent person too that he does many actions for the sake of his friend and his fatherland, even dying for them if need be. For he will give up wealth, honors, and fought-about goods generally *in keeping for himself what is noble*. . . . This is presumably what happens with those who die for others. They are choosing, then, something of great nobility for themselves. And they will give up wealth on the condition that their friends get more. *For while the friend gets wealth, the excellent person himself gets what is noble. The greater good, then, he allocates to himself.*” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1x.8, 1169a18–29, emphasis added)



edging and welcoming our dependence, that constitute our flourishing. The case I want to make is compatible with either a secular or a religious outlook. The overall thesis is this:

- ♦ Gratitude is fundamental to the human condition in that it is a condition of our flourishing or happiness (*eudaimonia*).
- ♦ In those conditions of happiness, gratitude will manifest itself as constitutive of our rational lives.
- ♦ Therefore, gratitude will constitute the very being of our human being (namely, as an animal having *logos*).

### 3. A Contingent Trigger

My interest in gratitude was triggered accidentally. I happened on an article entitled “Envy and Gratitude.” It was by a distinguished psychoanalyst, Melanie Klein, and it aimed to sum up a lifetime of thinking about the human condition. She placed *gratitude* at the apex of human flourishing. Why not happiness or life-satisfaction or self-acceptance? How could gratitude be so important? And why is envy its evil twin? What is the meaning of this pairing?<sup>2</sup>

### 4. The Social Meaning of the Emotions: A Puzzle about Gratitude

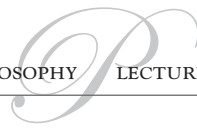
For Aristotle, gratitude is an emotion, a *pathos*. In paradigm cases, emotions make a claim to their own rational legitimacy, and they play an intermediate function in restoring order and well being.<sup>3</sup> For example, Aristotle defines anger thus:

Anger may be defined as a desire accompanied by pain, for a conspicuous revenge for a conspicuous slight at the hands of men *who have no call to slight oneself* or one’s friends. . . . It must always be attended by a certain pleasure – that which arises from *expectation of revenge*.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Klein, “Envy and Gratitude”; O’Shaughnessy, “On Gratitude”; Lear, “Gratitude, Freedom and Refusal.”

<sup>3</sup> Konstan, *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks*; Müller, “Virtuous Feelings?”

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 11.2, 1378a31–b2, emphasis added.



So, anger plays an intermediate role between (what the agent takes to be) a prior injustice and an appropriate social response.

Table 1. Anger

Prior Event	Emotion	Response	(Hoped) Outcome
Insult or Injury	Anger	Revenge/Punishment	Justice (Restored)

In a similar way, fear aims at restoring safety.<sup>5</sup>

Table 2. Fear

Prior Event	Emotion	Response	(Hoped) Outcome
Threat	Fear	Flight/Avoidance	Safety (Restored)

Of course, with emotions there is plenty of room for misfires. People can imagine insults or threats that do not exist; they exaggerate some things and ignore others. Emotional irrationality is common. But that fact should not obscure the central point: for a person well-attuned to the world and whose character is well formed, a virtuous person, their emotional life will be *constitutive* of their flourishing. When things are going well, emotions contribute to our happiness as they partially constitute our rational living. In the cases we have been considering, anger and fear, they are part of our efforts to restore justice or safety. (I shall return to the issue of rationality at the end of this lecture.)

But where does gratitude lead us? This is not an easy question to answer. Aristotle defines gratitude indirectly, as an appropriate emotional response to what he calls a favor.

Let a favor [*kháris*], then, in the sense in which the person who has received it is said to be grateful [*khárin ekhein*], be a service provided to one in need, not in return for anything, nor in order that the provider get something, but in order that the recipient get something.<sup>6</sup>

5 “Fear may be defined as a pain or disturbance due to imagining some destructive or painful evil in the future.... fear is caused by whatever we feel has great power of destroying us or harming us in ways that tend to cause us great pain. Hence the very indications of such things are terrible, making us feel that the terrible thing is itself close at hand . . .” (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* II.5, 1382a22–31).

6 Aristotle, *Rhetoric* II.7, 1385a17–19 (C. D. C. Reeve trans., with emendation). As David Konstan points out, it is a mistake to use “kindness” as a translation (as do the Oxford and Revised Oxford translations), for kindness is not a *pathê* (*The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks*, 156).

The words “favor” and “gratitude” can be used in a variety of related ways, but Aristotle is focusing in on a special use for each. Gratitude, in Aristotle’s sense, is the appropriate response to a favor, and a favor has these hallmarks:

- ♦ It is given in response to a perceived need.
- ♦ It is given for the sake of the recipient.
- ♦ It is given with no expectation of return.

Gratitude is an expression of thanks that comes along with an understanding of what it is thankful for. If I responded to a favor with thanks but also an intense sense of obligation to repay an incurred debt, I would have misunderstood what I had just been given. With a favor, there is no debt to be repaid.<sup>7</sup> So, gratitude, like the other emotions, fits into a social network, but it is not clear how. If there is no debt, what does one do next?

It is important to recognize that the favor-gratitude dynamic does not fit what one might call the *ordinary economy* of favors, gifts, and reciprocation.

Table 3. Ordinary economy of gift or favor and reciprocation

Prior need	Response	Emotion	Response	(Hoped) outcome
Birthday recognition	“Favor” or gift: party, present, card, etc.	Gratitude	Reciprocation: remember birthday of benefactor	Social harmony, equality of relationship
Hunger, sociality	“Favor”: dinner	Gratitude	Bring wine, invite back to dinner	Social harmony

It is constitutive of the ordinary economy that “favors” and gifts are given in the expectation, explicit or implicit, of some kind of reciprocation.<sup>8</sup> Think of the Godfather. If he does you a favor everyone knows that at some point he will expect you to express your ‘gratitude’ by doing something for him in return. This is a caricature, and the ordinary economy does not

7 As David Konstan tells us in *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks*, “the terms for asking or paying back are never found in connection with *kharin ekhein*” (167). He continues: “The sentiment of course sustains the social system of reciprocity, but has its own grammar and role. Gratitude is never owed. Gratitude was a response to the receipt of a benefit that had been bestowed precisely with no ulterior intention of gain on the benefactor’s part, as Aristotle insists in his definition of *kharis*” (167–168).

8 See Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*.

have to be so cynical. The favor may be experienced as generous; the ‘gratitude’ may be sincere and heartfelt; but nevertheless, it is understood that, in the fullness of time, some kind of reciprocation is due.

There is much that can be said in favor of this form of sociality. There are people, for instance colleagues or neighbors, with whom you would like to maintain genuinely cordial relations, but you do not want to get close to, nor do you feel like being on the receiving end of a genuine favor. You go out for dinner occasionally and sometimes you pay the bill, other times they do. The person who is taken out says “thank you” to the one who pays and means it.

But this is not the favor-gratitude dynamic that concerns Aristotle. The Aristotelian dynamic *transcends* the ordinary economy and yet it remains *immanent* to sociality as such. It is a different manner of relating to each other. It is a difference that makes a difference in opening up possibilities for us living together. It is this different manner of being with each other that makes gratitude so important.

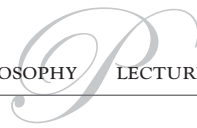
In a similar way, this gratitude dynamic transcends the ordinary service economy of payment in return for professional services.

Table 4. Ordinary service economy

Prior need	Response 1	Response 2	Outcome
Cavity	Dental repair	Payment	Restoration of dental health
Car repair	Mechanical service	Payment	Well-running car
Plumbing repair	Plumber service	Payment	Running water, no leaks

One might form a personal and friendly relationship with a person who is providing a service – I am friendly with my dentist – but in an ordinary service economy that is not necessary. On occasion there is a team of doctors or a team of mechanics and one never gets to know the person(s) providing the service. Payment is supposed to be payment in full. A range of emotions may arise in the circumstances, or none at all. The ordinary service economy is excellent when *all* you want is expert service, and would prefer to abstain from personal relations of any complexity. There are occasions when I do not want to know this person better, though I want them to be well paid for their service. The service economy is a structure in which, occasions for gratitude as Aristotle understood them, do not arise.





Gratitude takes itself to be an appropriate response to a favor. It recognizes the favor for what it is and accepts it *gratefully*. When circumstances permit, a “thank you” to the benefactor is a manifestation of the gratitude itself. But how could merely putting the gratitude into words be enough? By contrast, with anger it is usually not enough merely to say “I am angry at you.” Angry people typically want revenge or at least restitution. Indeed, often when we put our anger into words it is in an attempt to *diminish* it. That is one reason why ‘talking cures’ are meant to be therapeutic. With fear, the verbalization may even waste time in getting away. But then, what is the larger social context for gratitude? We have already seen that the favor-gratitude dynamic floats free of ordinary exchanges of reciprocation. The verbal expression of gratitude has *some* form of completeness to it in that it recognizes no further reciprocation is called for. But this cannot be the end of the story. But then, what forms of sociality does it facilitate?

Table 5. Initial Aristotelian structure of gratitude

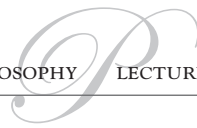
Prior need	Response	Emotion	Response	(Hoped) outcome
Hunger, shelter, care meaning, understanding, etc.	Favor/ <i>kháris</i> : fulfillment of need with no strings attached	Gratitude/ <i>kháris ekhein</i> <i>kháris eidenai</i> (contains expression of gratitude)	?	?

From an Aristotelian perspective, if gratitude is constitutive of a flourishing life it ought to be clear how it promotes well-being – both individually and in a larger social context. This is our problem. On the one hand, there seems to be a certain completeness in the expression of gratitude in response to a favor. On the other, there is an incompleteness that still needs to be accounted for.

### 5. The “Debt” of Gratitude

This phrase is ironic and earnest at the same time. It would be a misfire if the gratitude did not acknowledge the favor as for the recipient’s own sake and with no expectation of return. Yet it is incredible that this should be the end of the story. We find the idea of a debt of gratitude compelling, however little we may understand it.

We can, I think, take a hint from Aristotle’s Greek. The work he uses for *favor* is *kháris* and the expression for *gratitude* is literally *having favor* (*kháriv ekhein*). There is a repetition



of the word “*kháris*.” The favor is taken over, appropriated; it is now something the recipient has. There is a fruitful ambiguity here. *Having favor* means gratitude, but on the other hand, a favor is precisely what *the benefactor* has – a favor is that which the benefactor bestows. If we take a step back and look at benefactors and ask, why did they give their benefactions?, it is not unusual to discover that it was because they themselves were *filled with gratitude*. (That is, they were filled with “*having favors*.”)<sup>9</sup>

The Greek word for *favor* (*kháris*) and the expression for *gratitude* (*kárin ekhein*) derive from a common verb *khaírô* which means *to be glad, rejoice; to take delight; take pleasure*.<sup>10</sup> The giving of the favor delights the benefactor; the receiving of the favor delights the recipient. In an Aristotelian spirit, one may think of there being one unified activity – which viewed from one aspect is giving, and viewed from the other is receiving. The giving succeeds as giving only if in the act there is someone receiving, and vice versa. The activity may stretch out over space and time, but it breaks down if it loses these two complementary aspects (fig. 1).

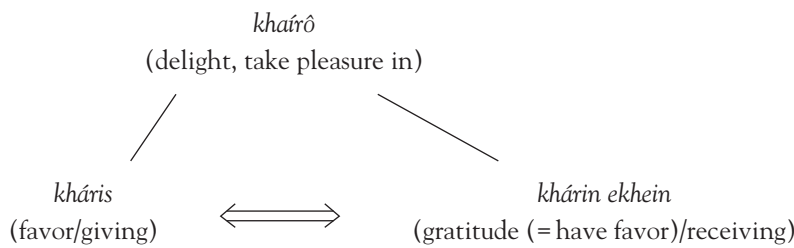
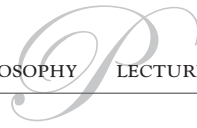


Figure 1. Favor and gratitude

Now the delights of generosity – the sense of having enough to share, of doing a good deed, of satisfaction in giving, etc. – differ from the delights of receiving a favor that fit one’s needs, for one’s own sake. But there is a common delight in which both can participate: delight in participating in an activity that transcends the ordinary economies of sociality. Donor and recipient experience firsthand – and delight in – a special human way of being-together, something freed of (what are now experienced as) the confines of *mere* sociality. We experi-

9 It is fascinating that the other expression for gratitude is *khárin eidenai*, literally, *knowing* or *understanding* favor (Konstan, *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks*, 167–68). Gratitude understands its own conditions.

10 Diggle, *Cambridge Greek Lexicon*, 2:1489. I am grateful to Glenn Most.



ence something for which we might not have perfect vocabulary, but which we want to say is “higher” or “finer.”

Let me give an example with which some of us have experience: donors and recipients of scholarships and fellowships at colleges and universities. Of course, there are many kinds of donors, but I want to focus on a paradigm. These are the students who have such an extraordinary experience as undergraduates, who do well enough financially, and later in life are filled with gratitude. They express their gratitude by funding scholarships for future generations of students. Now, it is possible to be on the receiving end of such a fellowship and not give a second thought about how it came to be. But what would it be to receive it gratefully? Obviously, if explicit thanks were possible that might be appropriate. Some donors appreciate being recognized and appreciated for what they have done. But not all. Some want to remain anonymous. Others give in the expectation that their gifts will go to people they will never meet, perhaps long after they are dead. The true expression of gratitude is, I think, marked by a double-understanding; first, that there is no obligation to reciprocate, but, second, that in being given a benefit for one’s own sake, one takes responsibility for making good use of it as such. This is the so-called “debt” of gratitude. It is taken to be “repayment” to make good use of the benefit – but recipients of the benefit have the freedom to determine as best they can what *good use* consists in. They do so *gratefully*. In effect, the favor-gratitude dynamic opens the possibility for a new kind of responsibility. In the ordinary economy of gift and reciprocation, in accepting the gift I take on the responsibility of return. But in gratitude I acknowledge a different kind of responsibility: to make the best use of it by my own lights as the manner in which to demonstrate my thanks.

What is given to the students is an opportunity for *creative repetition*: not to follow this or that particular path, but to *repeat* by making *good use* of one’s benefits, by one’s own light of what that means.<sup>11</sup> And to do so gratefully, that is *filled with favor*. That is “*having favor*” (gratitude) inclines toward generosity (being filled with favor). So, it looks like we might fill out the Aristotelian structure of gratitude this way:

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11 I discuss repetition in *Imagining the End*.

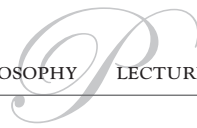


Table 6. Complete Aristotelian structure of gratitude

Prior need	Response	Emotion	Response	(Hoped) outcome
Hunger, shelter, care meaning, understanding, etc.	Favor/ <i>kháris</i> : fulfillment of need with no strings attached	Gratitude/ <i>kháris ekhein kháris eidenai</i> (contains expression of gratitude)	Creative repetition: becoming one's best self thankfully (expression of gratitude)	<i>Eudaimonia</i> / happiness (shared)

And having set out the situation with a benefactor we might see this as one molecule in a larger structure that opens out indefinitely:

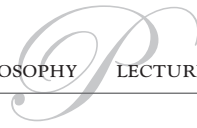
Table 7. Ongoing Aristotelian structure of gratitude

Prior need	Response	Emotion	Response	Prior need	Response	Emotion	Response	Become benefactor
	Favor	Gratitude	Repetition		Favor	Gratitude	Repetition	

In each case, in experiencing gratitude one feels the call to express thanks by being (or becoming) someone who can make something good out of the favor. In psychoanalysis there is a helpful distinction between the *superego* and the *ego ideal*. The voice of the superego is a demand of obligation, and it can be quite punishing, making one feel guilty or ashamed for not living up to a demand. The call of the ego ideal, by contrast, is more gentle and enticing: to live up to one's own ideals of who one would like to be. Gratitude fortifies the ego ideal. It is a thankfulness to others for support in living up to one's own ideals.

## 6. Gratitude and Nutrition

It seems that, when things are going well, gratitude is an activity of metabolizing goodness. It bears an analogy with what Aristotle called the nutritive soul. In our hunger, we take in some part of the external world – food – and through digestion turn it into ourselves. With gratitude there is a level of conscious understanding and acceptance, but it retains the basic structure of the nutritive soul. We have an antecedent need ('hunger') that the benefactor satisfies with a favor ("food") and *in gratitude* recipients metabolize that favor into themselves. This cycle is a form of nourishment.



This is more than an analogy. The link between nutrition and gratitude is embedded deep in the human psyche. Humans are born helpless. So the first feedings are an *intergenerational transmission and transformation* of food. In an idealized scene, a loving and intuitive mother takes her baby in her arms, the baby is just at the edge of hunger, feeling the need arise, and the mother lovingly and calmly takes the infant to her breast and gives the baby a good feed.<sup>12</sup> The milk is coming *from inside* the mother, and it is coming lovingly, for the baby's sake. From a psychoanalytic view this is a fertile occasion for imaginative activity. For the baby, the mother's goodness is embodied in her milk. The baby now *feels* that it has her mother's goodness *inside itself*. It is a bodily sensation embellished by fantasy – a fantasy of feeding on the good, *taking it inside* and transforming it *into* oneself. The *taking it in* is called internalization, the *transforming it into oneself* is identification.

When things are going well, the infant experiences an infantile form gratitude. There is an inchoate sense that the mothering-world is full of goodness, and beneficence. There is enough loving goodness to give to the infant without threat of the mother losing her own goodness. She remains a constant loving mother, even after the feed. The infant takes the goodness in willingly and in fantasy makes it part of herself. This is a primordial creative repetition – that upon which future creative repetitions are based.

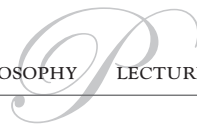
This is when things are going well. Infantile gratitude is a psychic achievement. There are challenges to be overcome. First, there is a lure of omnipotence. Discriminating fantasy from reality is a developmental task. If we are hungry and food arrives at the time of wishfully imagining it, it can seem as though we have done this on our own. There is a tendency in the human soul to take ourselves to be the source of our well-being. Gratitude, by contrast, thankfully acknowledges dependence. It welcomes a source of goodness coming from outside.

Second, there is in the human soul a tendency towards envy. Envy is a nauseated outrage at any source of goodness. I cannot go into its complexities now. In brief, envy stimulates rage-filled attacks on any source of goodness and tries to do away with it. Envy is at once a negative omnipotence and an insistence on despair – “motiveless malignity,” in the words of Samuel Taylor Coleridge.<sup>13</sup> The envious person is not pursuing some evil end because he

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<sup>12</sup> Klein, “Envy and Gratitude.”

<sup>13</sup> In the margins of his copy of *Othello*.



mistakenly thinks it is good (for him). He is against goodness. That is what makes envy so difficult to understand: the standard form of belief-desire psychological explanation does not seem to apply. In this sense, envy *resists* understanding. It is a will to non-being.

One can now see why Melanie Klein singled out envy and gratitude as two poles on the axis of human existence. They are each fundamental ways of metabolizing the world's goodness. Envy's route is to attack it, destroy it, reduce it to nothingness. Gratitude's route is to accept it thankfully and make it into oneself – acknowledging a special blend of dependence and independence. On the one hand, it is mother's milk I have taken in, but in *identifying* with it, I transform it into a sense of my own goodness. This is a nutritive process of gratitude. In gratitude, I develop confidence that I have enough goodness so that I too can give it away without losing it. When things are going well, this is all constitutive of my flourishing.

## 7. Intergenerational Transmission and Transformation

Moving to the adult world, a significant amount of philanthropy is intergenerational – an older generation bequeathing goods to future generations. There is some similarity to the structure of the original feeding situation, but is recreated at an adult level. Let us consider one salient difference. Taking mortality into account – our own and those around us – is something we humans do. I mean this in the sense of a natural-historical generalization – in the sense that Michael Thompson has made clear.<sup>14</sup> Not that all of us do it, but that taking death into account characterizes us as human. Now, if there is such a thing as a distinctively human mode of flourishing – *eudaimonia* – there must be ways to take death into account in the living of a happy life. It is also characteristic of us that the issue of death is more on our minds in middle-age and advancing age. This is part of our human-developmental trajectory. But how does one live *well* with the prospect of one's own death? It seems to depend on finding a good balance between preserving, nurturing and letting go. On the one hand, we find comfort in thinking that the projects and ideals that have mattered to us will continue on – in what Samuel Scheffler has called “the afterlife.”<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, if one ties

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<sup>14</sup> See Thompson, “The Representation of Life.”

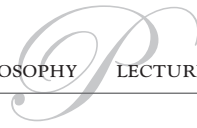
<sup>15</sup> Scheffler, *Death and the Afterlife*.

one's wishes too closely to being remembered personally or for a very specific project being carried out successfully one may succeed in the short run, but it is likely this persisting good will have its own finite limit. (I am struck by how many buildings on college campuses are named after people who are barely remembered.) So, my hunch is that one route to leading a happy human life, taking one's mortality into account, is to turn oneself into a benefactor, that is, one who is capable of bestowing a favor. The favor need not be material goods, there are all sorts of ways to support others' needs. The important point is this: turning oneself into a benefactor requires both trust and hope. A favor is for the sake of the recipient with no expectation of return. It is up to recipients to make their own best use of the good they have received. This is inevitably a process of transformation, one which is not up to the benefactor and which may lie beyond what the benefactor can imagine. When the benefaction succeeds over a long duration of time it is ever more likely that this will be so.

On the side of the recipient, gratitude builds confidence by metabolizing confidence. It is internal to the act of bestowing a favor that the benefactor has confidence in the recipient, that the recipient can make good use of receiving a benefit with no strings attached. In gratitude, the recipient acknowledges that there is a special trust immanent in the very activity of this kind of giving, and accepts it with a developing sense of confidence.

## 8. Gratitude and Integration

So, summing up, we can see that gratitude promotes integration at three levels. First, there is psychic integration in the individual between the rational and non-rational parts of the soul. The early infantile fantasies of gratitude persist and link to the more well-defined activities of generosity and gratitude in adulthood. An elemental pattern is set for accepting, acknowledging and transforming the good. At the same time, a basic confidence in one's own goodness is established that lends vitality to life in adulthood. Second, there is an integration in one's sense of a life well-lived over time. Memories of the gifts and beneficent influences of others recur through life. One comes to see those moments as shaping one's life – and in that very process one integrates one's life. The sense of inheriting these gifts, of making good use of them, lends a sense of meaningfulness to one's own life. Third, there is an integration of the generations. The goods of the one generation passed on to the next – for them to make



good use of by their own lights – ties together human history in the attempts to metabolize goodness over time. And, looking back, gratitude acknowledge the gift coming from the past.

## 9. Rationality and Irrationality of Gratitude.

Aristotle investigated the emotions in the *Rhetoric*, not a text on psychology. This was because he was concerned with the power of public speech to stir up our emotions which in turn can distort our reasoning. As he says,

Things do not appear the same to those who love and those who hate, nor to those who are angry and those who are mild mannered. . . . To the one who loves, the person about whom he makes his judgment seems not to do injustice or to do little injustice, but to one who hates it is the contrary.”<sup>16</sup>

That is why it is important not to stir up our emotions, especially when we are trying to come to some kind of judgment. “This would be as if someone who is going to use a straightedge made it crooked.”<sup>17</sup>

How might this happen with gratitude? I have been sketching out the goodness of gratitude in life taken as a whole, when things are is going well. This does not mean that gratitude is always and everywhere good. Gratitude, like any other emotion can be elicited in false and distorting ways. So imagine we are citizens who watch certain news-channels, read certain newspapers, participate in certain social media. Imagine we read an op-ed piece that basically has this structure.

### *A Gratitude Syllogism*

He is making our country great again.

(He reinvigorates our best ideals.)

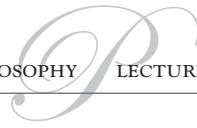
He understands and supports us.

He gives us power to alter the events of our time.

<sup>16</sup> *Rhetoric* II.I, 1377b30–1378a4.

<sup>17</sup> *Rhetoric* I.I, 1354a23–26 (“straightedge” = *kanôn*, sometimes translated as “ruler”). Aristotle was talking about jurors, but we can expand his point to include citizens in the midst of exercising their civic responsibilities, for instance, voting.





It is done for our sake. (This isn't just about paying him back)

Therefore:

We should join in to make the country great again. We'll thereby live up to our ideals.

I call this a "syllogism" in Aristotle's broad sense of something that is put forward (in public space) by people who claim it ought to command our rational assent. It is meant to persuade us through its reasoning which we ought to be able to recognize as such. It need not be formally valid, like Aristotle's formal syllogisms, it only claims to command rational assent via our understanding and assenting to the content of what is being asserted. The premisses are meant to be plainly true; and the conclusion is meant to follow clearly from the premisses. Of course, the premisses may not be true true, the argument may not be valid or sound. But this is the type of argument that is put forward in public space with the claim that it is true and ought to command assent. I am not here concerned with the inner psychological states of those who put it forward. Perhaps they are cynical or motivated by resentment, etc. Rather, I am concerned with the emotion that structures people's outlook in such a way that, should they go through the argument, they would find it persuasive. The relevant emotion here, as I shall try to explain, is gratitude.

Suppose over at another news-channel or newspaper, there is an op-ed responding to the same public events that has this form:

*An Angry Syllogism*

That bum is a charlatan.

He makes everything that happens about himself.

He understands people only in order to take advantage of them.

He misleads people into thinking they are doing something good.

He is doing everything for his sake.

His power is dangerous: He will destroy the country.

Therefore:

Let's get rid of him

Let us consider the place of emotions in these reasonings. I shall concentrate on gratitude, but similar remarks apply to anger.

Our gratitude toward some leader might be well-placed or misplaced. Suppose it is misplaced. Aristotle's point about the crooked straightedge is that it will be applied *right there*

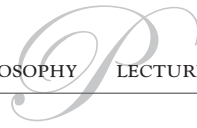
*in our reasoning*, distorting our thinking without our realizing it. We will think we are getting *straight* to the point. We will be minded to see unfolding events under the aura of making our country great again. Anyone who disagrees, we will think, is missing the point: it is *their* judgment that is distorted. But if, unbeknownst to us, we are suffering an excess of gratitude, it is *our* judgment that is bent out of shape. In this way, excessive gratitude distorts the *content* of our premisses without our recognizing it. We tend to experience events under the aura of being granted a favor, when in fact that is not so.

Gratitude also influences the *form* of the argument. It affects my sense of salience, my sense of how things hang together and of what follows from what. Suppose all the premises are true, and I correctly recognize them as true. But, suppose, as it happens I am not grateful. I do not feel the call of gratitude in this case. I may think that “He” is doing all sorts of good things, and I may think well of his efforts; I may admire him. But, for me, nothing particular follows from all that.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps I have other good things to do. It is gratitude that licenses the sense of *legitimacy* of the argument. It is when I am *thinking gratefully* that the conclusion seems to follow in a compelling way from the premises. Gratitude need not be a particular subjective “feel,” it shows up in the sense of legitimacy in an inference. There is no need for an additional premise, “I am grateful.” Gratitude is already present in my activity of living a rational life – trying to think things through.

There is no Archimedean point from which one can tell *just by looking at the gratitude syllogism* whether it is properly persuasive or not. For that, one needs the judgment of the virtuous person. The virtuous person will be properly attuned to genuine occasions to which gratitude would be an appropriate response. It is possible there are worldly occasions that would provoke a virtuous person to formulate the above gratitude syllogism in their reason-

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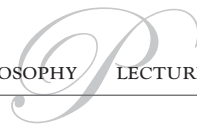
18 In my case, Jimmy Carter is an example. After stepping down from the Presidency of the United States, he devoted his life to providing homes for the homeless with Habit for Humanity. I admire him greatly. I do think he is providing a model for a way of living that, if followed by others, would make the country great. In his case, I think I agree to some version of all the premises in the Gratitude Syllogism above. However, I do not experience this as a favor. And thus I do not draw the conclusion from the premises. Perhaps I am wrong about that. Perhaps I should be grateful. Perhaps I am living with a crooked straight-edge I do not recognize as such. I do not want to argue about my possible failings here. This is just meant to illustrate how one might accept the premises of this Gratitude Syllogism but not the conclusion.



ing. The important point is that even here, in the virtuous case, gratitude will be at work influencing the virtuous person's sense of the propriety and salience in our reasoning. Gratitude will be *in the reasoning*. Only the virtuous person will be operating with a true straightedge, not a bent one.

(Note that although the syllogism may have some contemporary resonances, it is not intrinsically associated with any political outlook (other than the broad idea that the nation-state is the historically relevant entity in which to realize political ideals). It could equally be a reaction to Donald Trump as it could be to John F. Kennedy's call to ask not what your country can do for you, but ask what you can do for your country. Also notice that it is possible for both syllogisms to be misguided; but they cannot both be sound at the same time, about the same person, the same events, etc.)

So, in conclusion, the point of this paper is not that gratitude is in itself good for us. Alas, in a world that is filled with deceit, selfishness, thoughtlessness, cruelty, and motiveless catastrophe, there are plenty of occasions in which gratitude would be silly, self-deceived or even disastrous. The proper place of gratitude is in the midst of a truthful understanding of the world. Aristotle is also right that our happiness – our flourishing – depends on good fortune. However, when we are fortunate enough to have that good fortune, it is characteristic of our kind that, in our dependence, a significant portion of our good fortune will consist of favors in the Aristotelian sense, given appropriately in response to our needs, for our own sakes and with no expectation of return. I have tried to show how *living gratefully* as a manner of taking up and responding to such generosity can plausibly be seen as constitutive of our flourishing. Under these fortunate circumstances, gratitude can also be understood as *constitutive* of our rational activity. This gives us reason for thinking that gratitude is more than one emotion among others. It earns a special place in understanding what is special about our peculiarly human form of flourishing.

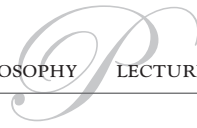


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