

## Can non-theists appropriately feel existential gratitude?

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**Abstract:** Does it make sense for non-theists to feel gratitude for their existence? 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 but not to anyone? After analysing gratitude and how we can best understand the idea of non-directed gratitude, I discuss the conditions that need to apply for non-directed gratitude to be appropriate. I end by discussing whether theism provides a psychologically richer and more satisfying framework for understanding existential gratitude.

Can a non-theist appropriately feel existential gratitude? That is the question I hope to have answered by the end of this article. By ‘non-theist’, I mean agnostics, atheists, and members of religions without a deity, such as Buddhism. What ‘existential gratitude’ is will require a little unpacking. It involves gratitude for one’s existence, but this thought can be focused in various ways. 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-theist feel something similar without being irrational? Can there be gratitude for existence but not to anyone?

This question is equally important for theists who do not hold a conception of God as a person, or even any kind of entity, or again those who hold that our relation to God cannot appropriately be modelled on our relation to other people. Thus, there are various conceptions of God as the ground of being, which is not also a kind of (individual) being. Or again, Simone Weil (1956/2003, 358) suggests that ‘God must not be put in the dative’ – in which case, we cannot give thanks to God.<sup>1</sup>

The discussion that follows falls into three parts. In the first part, I analyse gratitude and examine how we can best understand the idea of non-directed gratitude.

In the second, I discuss the conditions that need to apply for gratitude, including non-directed gratitude, to be appropriate. In the third, I briefly examine a potential implication of the account defended here, viz. whether theism provides a better – a psychologically richer and more satisfying – framework for understanding existential gratitude.

### **On gratitude**

If we acquire a good through exchange, effort or achievement, or by right, then we don't typically feel gratitude. Gratitude is an emotion we feel in response to receiving something good which is undeserved. Of course, sometimes we can feel gratitude on occasions when we receive a good that we deserve or have paid for. But careful reflection shows that even here, the gratitude picks up our sense of something undeserved. For instance, if I thank someone who has sold me something, I do not thank them (except in a perfunctory way) for giving me the item when I hand over the money. If I feel genuine gratitude, then I am thankful that they sell the item at all, which is something I have no right to, or perhaps I thank them for good service, which is something one does not 'buy' in the same way as the item. If I feel grateful for receiving a well-deserved award, I am sensitive to the fact that such recognition, even if merited, is neither mine by right nor always forthcoming (e.g. there are others whose work may also deserve such recognition). To someone who feels gratitude, that it is oneself or one's work that is singled out for this honour involves a sense of receiving a good that goes beyond what can be demanded by right or rests solely on one's own efforts. If my sense is, instead, that I am owed this recognition, then my emotion is more likely to be satisfaction and happiness than gratitude.

But perhaps it is too strong to say that the good being undeserved is a *necessary* condition of feeling gratitude. We can say, more precisely, that to feel gratitude, a creature must have some sense of the good being good *for it*, some sense of the good as originating outside itself and its control, and in *typical* forms of gratitude, a sense of that the good is undeserved, and especially when one cannot claim the good by right. All this indicates that gratitude is an emotion with considerable cognitive sophistication.

In existential gratitude, the good is existence. The precise object can vary. In narrower forms of existential gratitude, the object is one's life in light of specific features, such as its meaningfulness or richness, features it is possible that some people's lives lack. These forms of gratitude embody the thought that how well one's life goes is not (purely) a matter of desert or achievement. In broader forms of existential gratitude, the object may be one's own existence per se or as part of the existence of anything at all. Here, one responds to the utter contingency of existence (one's own or that of the universe); the quality of life is not the main focus. We delight just in being.<sup>2</sup>

There are a variety of emotions we may feel towards an undeserved good, not only gratitude, but joy, delight, a sense of well-being or simply happiness. 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.<sup>3</sup> I shall call this the 'personal' analysis of gratitude. It is important to the occurrence of gratitude that we experience the giver as good, as having good intentions in conferring the good. If we think the giver seeks simply to put us in their debt, or is otherwise malicious, then we do not typically experience gratitude. Furthermore, we feel that gratitude binds us to others – we wish to respond, to acknowledge their gift, to express our indebtedness and goodwill towards them for the gift; and the expression of gratitude itself is the first token benefit we return to them, our immediate 'gift' in return.

This personal analysis is intended to be purely descriptive: for an emotion to constitute gratitude, it must be directed towards the bestower of a gift. This is distinct from the normative claim that gratitude cannot be appropriate if it is not so directed. That discussion will follow later.

In existential gratitude, it is existence itself that is the gift. But then who bestows it? To whom do we owe gratitude? For many theists, God, as personal creator and sustainer of all that exists, fills the role perfectly. Thus it is clear that the theist may feel existential gratitude, given that it is directed towards a personal God. What of the non-theist? How can what they feel in this regard even count as gratitude? While many people feel gratitude towards their parents, biologically the causal origin of one's existence, no one defends the view that one's parents are a typical or appropriate object of existential gratitude as characterized above. The reason is obvious – one's parents are not the cause of existence itself nor of many of the conditions of one's existence that make it something for which one can be grateful. Existential gratitude, particularly of the broader form, is often bound up with feelings of awe and wonder; gratitude towards one's parents is not.<sup>4</sup> But without a person towards whom gratitude is directed, on the personal analysis of gratitude, whatever the non-theist feels in this vein can't qualify as gratitude.

There is, undoubtedly, a phenomenon to be explained here; non-theists have these feelings, and not uncommonly. Richard Dawkins (2010) speaks for many when he says that we have cause to give thanks for our highly improbable existence, and the lawlike evolutionary processes that gave rise to it. But he goes on to make clear that such gratitude is not owed to, or to be directed towards, anyone or anything. The question is how best to understand this combination of attitudes.

A first line of thought, preserving the thought that gratitude is always directed towards something, is to find an impersonal substitute for God. Suggestions in the literature include luck, chance or 'the universe'. But it is difficult to think of these playing the right role in the analysis. Undoubtedly, in existential gratitude, one is impressed by the contingency of one's existence or life path. But luck or

chance is part of what one reacts to – it characterizes the nature of the ‘gift’ – rather than being the ‘giver’. Unless we personify (or, with the ancient Greeks, deify) luck, chance, or the universe, the structure of the gratitude remains obscure.

Roberts (2004) argues that such irrational personification is just what occurs, albeit implicitly, when people express gratitude towards such impersonal causes of benefits. They take ‘luck’ or ‘the universe’ as being well-disposed towards them. This is exemplified in Solomon’s (2002) analysis. He talks of existential gratitude, directed towards ‘life itself’ or ‘the universe’, as a response appropriate to being ‘beneficiaries of a (more or less) benign universe, or even the lucky beneficiaries of good fortune in a cruel universe’ (*ibid.*, 100). But the universe is neither benign nor cruel.

However, Solomon (2007) came to reject his earlier understanding of existential gratitude, agreeing with Roberts that such personification of something impersonal simply displaces the problem for the non-theist. The more promising line of thought he develops, but leaves very incomplete, is that gratitude does not always need to be directed towards a giver, even if it typically does. I term this the ‘non-directed’ analysis of gratitude. While one is always grateful *for* something – gratitude always takes an intentional object – one is not always grateful *to* something, the origin (agent or cause) of the good.<sup>5</sup>

But can we make good on such a proposal? Without being able to specify the undeserved good as a gift from a giver, non-directed accounts have struggled to capture what is distinct about gratitude. Thus, Solomon argues that (non-directed) existential gratitude is a form of gratitude because *all* gratitude is about ‘being properly humble about one’s own modest place in the world’ (Solomon (2007), 270). Gratitude – and he doesn’t specify existential gratitude here – is supposedly ‘a philosophical emotion, appreciating the bigger picture and having a chance to play a role in it’ (*ibid.*). But this is to confuse gratitude with a constellation of mutually reinforcing mental states. The only part of the ‘bigger picture’ one need appreciate in gratitude is that there is goodness that originates outside oneself. If one can sit comfortably with this thought, which requires one to overcome envy and narcissism, then it is liable to inspire humility and modesty, but such emotional nuances need not always strongly characterize one’s gratitude. They are more likely to do so in existential gratitude than, say, expressing thanks when opening birthday presents, but still are not a necessary condition. Solomon’s specification misses the mark. He fails to identify accurately why non-directed gratitude can qualify as a bona fide form of gratitude.<sup>6</sup>

Let’s start again from another direction. If the *only* non-directed form of gratitude is existential gratitude, to call it gratitude may look like special pleading by the non-theist. But if non-directed gratitude is more commonplace, we can understand the non-directed existential gratitude of the non-theist in light of this. And there are more such mundane cases.

We gain some clue to whether gratitude must always be *to* something by considering its origins and closely related words. Thus ‘gratitude’ connects to ‘grateful’,

'gratuitous', 'gratuity', 'gratify', 'gracious', and 'grace'. Some of these have roots that clearly indicate an interpersonal relation – 'gratuitous' comes from the Latin *gratuitus*, meaning 'given freely'; 'gratuity' from *gratuitas*, meaning 'gift'; and 'gratify' from *gratificari*, meaning 'to give or do as a favour'. But the root of all of them is *gratus*, which means *both* 'pleasing' and 'thankful'. This twin meaning is still apparent in the two senses of 'grace' (and in the obsolete 'grate', which also retained this double meaning). There is the theological sense of undeserved favour of God (later extended in various ways); and there is the sense relating to that which is pleasing or elegant, giving us the adjective 'gracious'.<sup>7</sup> Hence the root of 'gratitude' lies in a Latin term that does not specify the response as necessarily to a giver, rather than just to an undeserved good.<sup>8</sup>

This broader meaning of *gratus* is retained in the less common uses of 'grateful' and 'thankful' as indicative of a response to something that is welcome, perhaps especially (but not only) for things that bring relief – she was grateful for a moment's quiet after looking after the kids all morning, he was thankful to find a stream on a hot day. These are constructions that do not normally raise the question of to whom one is grateful. Instead, they emphasize the welcoming receipt of that which is good from a source outside oneself. We find the etymology reflected in psychology.<sup>9</sup>

This supplies a response to Roberts (2004), who objects that when atheists use 'grateful' in this sense, such uses are 'loose' or even 'misleading': the person is not feeling gratitude but is simply glad. But this can't be a correct linguistic analysis (though it may well be true sometimes, even often – people misuse words and misidentify emotions). First, such phrases do not change their meaning depending on whether they are uttered by theists or atheists (as Roberts supposes)! The busy mother, even if a theist, needn't be grateful to God for the moment's quiet. Second, the origins of the term 'gratitude' allow such a use – it is not loose or misleading, but rooted in etymology. Third, Roberts's alternative suggestion, that the emotion is simply 'being glad', fails to specify the response precisely enough – it misses out how the response picks out the undeserved and uncontrolled nature of the good (as noted at the very start of this section). It is *gratuitous* goods that generate gratitude. This idea of 'gratuitousness', which in this sense is detached from its more personal origins, is also present in notions of grace and graciousness, goods that we appreciate not for their utility, but as pleasing flourishes.

Without a person to be grateful to, how does non-directed gratitude differ from other emotional responses to undeserved goods? The answer lies in the focus of the emotion. In joy, happiness, and so on, the *goodness* of the good is salient; and it is notable that one can feel such emotions about deserved goods, such as achievements, as much as undeserved goods. In gratitude, it is the *undeserved* nature of the good that is particularly salient, that it originates outside oneself, not flowing from one's efforts, achievements, or value. In personal gratitude, this origin is *further specified* in the idea of the good as a gift, bestowed with good intentions. But not all undeserved goods are, literally, gifts, originating in

the intention of another. What unites personal and non-directed gratitude, and distinguishes gratitude from other emotions, is the focus on the undeserved, gratuitous, contingent nature of the good.

Another lesson we may draw from mundane examples of non-directed gratitude is that giving a more precise specification of the intentional or phenomenal content involved is to say too much. For example, non-directed gratitude needn't involve a sense of one's modest place in the world or an implicit personification of the origin of the good.

Having defended the possibility of non-directed gratitude, we may allow the possibility that when non-theists claim to feel existential gratitude, what they feel is indeed a form of gratitude. At present, this is a rather thin conclusion – such a claim makes sense. But this is not yet to say that it provides a fully satisfactory account of existential gratitude as non-theists experience it. For that, we need to consider first, whether such an attitude is appropriate and then, whether the resulting account captures the psychology involved.

### **Appropriate gratitude**

Before we can make headway with these questions, something needs to be said about the appropriateness of emotions and how we may assess such appropriateness in general. I shall be brief, laying out, but not seeking to defend, my assumptions in this regard.

I follow recent developments in emotion theory in holding that emotions are evaluations of their intentional object in terms of the concerns, interests, or well-being of the subject. The intentional object – the person, event, or state of affairs that the emotion is about – is represented as being a certain way, and as a result, having a certain relevance to the concerns of the subject. Thus, in fearing the snarling dog, I experience it as dangerous, where this idea of danger relates to threats to my well-being. Or again, in feeling joy at an article publication, I feel that event as an achievement, where this idea relates to my goals and what I take to be worthwhile in life. Emotions present certain features of an object or situation – the dangerousness of the dog, the achievement of article publication – as 'salient'. Emotions can be characterized in terms of the nature of this salience – fear: danger; joy: the arrival of a notable good in one's life; and so on. Features of the situation are presented, in the emotion, as providing a reason for some response. So in fear, the snarling dog is experienced as dangerous, a reason to be afraid and cautious; in joy, the acceptance of an article is experienced as a reason for elation and celebration. In these terms, gratitude presents the undeserved nature of a good as a reason for experiencing gratitude.<sup>10</sup>

This structure allows us to ask whether an emotion misrepresents its object. Is the feared spider dangerous? Is an infuriating remark genuinely offensive? Such questions may sometimes be answered by empirical enquiry, concerning facts either about the object of the emotion or its relation to one's concerns or

well-being. Some species of spider are dangerous because poisonous, others are not; what you think he meant by the remark was not what he meant at all; and so on. An initial way we understand emotions to be appropriate or not is, therefore, cognitive. Emotions can be inappropriate if they factually misrepresent their object or its relation to one's concerns and well-being.

On other occasions, questions about the appropriateness of an emotion must be answered by normative enquiry – once you've correctly understood the remark, the question still remains whether it is offensive. Emotions can also be inappropriate if they misrepresent values, e.g. my sadness is inappropriate if what I have lost is without value. If one thinks there are facts about values, then this inappropriateness is also a cognitive affair.<sup>11</sup>

We may discuss the inappropriateness of particular instances or whole types of emotion. In the former case, we usually appeal to some assumed standard, arguing that this instance does or doesn't meet the criteria. Thus, over a case of anger, we might disagree over whether the cause – his knocking over the vase – was accidental or deliberate. But we may also disagree over the standard, appealing to some higher notion of value. Thus, the Stoics advise that no material loss is worth becoming sad over, as the only thing that truly has value is virtue.

In these discussions of appropriateness, while we can reflect upon, refine, and even transform our emotions, we have no way, independent of our emotional life as a whole, to establish whether they are appropriate or not. When enquiring into whether an instance or type of emotion is appropriate – whether its object has the value the emotion takes it to have – we engage further emotional responses, which may range widely both in type and in imagination. Our emotional sensibilities provide our access to values; we cannot stand back from them entirely – to achieve some vaunted perspective of 'objective' reason – to compare our responses with what is 'really' valuable.<sup>12</sup> Rather, in discussing appropriateness, we draw on a diverse range of considerations and explanations to gain a deeper grasp of our emotions and the values of things. Our ethical enquiry is therefore simultaneously a process of self-understanding,<sup>13</sup> and our reflections are guided by, and in turn inform and refine, our conception of virtue and a human life worth living. We find a place – or not – for both the emotional response and the value to which it responds in our account of such a life. Thus, in defending the appropriateness of some instance of sadness, we account for why its object qualifies as a genuine good and why its loss impacts on the well-being of the subject, and so is appropriately registered.

But we may also go beyond this focus on the cognitive dimension of the emotion to give an account of the role of sadness in human life, and why we would be impoverished without it. Such considerations move us towards appropriateness understood practically – giving an account of an emotion in terms of its effects. This has typically been the primary interest of psychological accounts of emotions; when a psychologist asks 'why do we have emotion x?', they aren't asking for an account in terms of the value to which it responds, but one which explains the functional role

of the emotion, which can be specified in individual-psychological, social or evolutionary terms. Such an explanation may render the judgement that the emotion is inappropriate. Thus, Goldie (2008) provides an evolutionary account of xenophobia in terms of the usefulness of 'in-group cohesion' – but xenophobia is neither cognitively appropriate nor part of the best life for us, given our current socio-economic-political situation. We may, however, usefully reflect on what we take the right place of group loyalty to be, and be suspicious of accounts that argue for its complete eradication, given our human nature.

We naturally seek to bring together the cognitive and practical dimensions of appropriateness; we want the best way to live to be a response to how things really are (Bishop (2010)). To show merely how an emotion may help us instrumentally attain certain ends without also showing that it appropriately represents reality is dissatisfying. Thus, we take anger – or we might say, the use of anger – that bullies another to achieve some end as subject to censure. Someone who manipulates others through emotion lacks integrity, and a life without integrity is not yet the best life for human beings. Likewise, we take attunement to reality – cognitive appropriateness – to have positive effects not only in the life of the subject but also in the lives of others with whom they interact. Hence we expect any account of a cognitively appropriate emotion also to receive a justification in terms of its practical effects.<sup>14</sup>

Having laid out the conditions for appropriateness in general, we may now consider whether and when gratitude is appropriate. That personal gratitude is appropriate as a type of emotion is not in doubt. From the practical standpoint, psychologists have defended its important contribution to successful social relationships (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi (2000), Frederickson (2004), Komter (2004)), as well to the grateful individual's happiness (Watkins (2004)). Klein (1957) argues that gratitude in child development is closely bound up with trust and generosity. Gratitude requires one to recognize and accept goodness in others that is beyond one's control. Receiving such goods as freely given creates a sense of oneself as good and a reciprocal ability to share one's goodness with others. If someone does not feel gratitude on any particular occasion when it is appropriate, this may simply be that they have not recognized the situation or good for what it is. However, the absence of gratitude from someone's life or character more generally, the absence of a disposition to feel gratitude, is typically the result of envy, in which a subject seeks to possess goodness for themselves and to deprive others of it, if necessary by destroying the goodness they have.

From the cognitive standpoint, personal gratitude is a recognition of the goodness of the gift, and the goodness of others in freely giving it. In accepting the good as undeserved, gratitude is also a recognition of the 'otherness' of others, i.e. their psychological separateness, their decisions and existence beyond one's control. A failure of gratitude marks a lack of recognition of the nature of a gift, and may mark a reluctance to acknowledge one's lack of self-sufficiency.



For the theist, existential gratitude is simply an instance of personal gratitude, and so we can understand its appropriateness in the same terms: existence per se, one's life, or the circumstances of human life are understood as gifts of God, and existential gratitude is an appropriate recognition of this fact. It also facilitates an appropriate interpersonal relationship with God and with other people, as the sense of gift inspires a generosity in using one's life for the good of others. Much more can be said on the place and contribution of gratitude within a theistic psychological framework, but these brief remarks indicate that its appropriateness is hard to doubt.

What account can the non-theist give of existential gratitude that renders it appropriate? We have already seen that impersonal existential gratitude is open to objection on cognitive grounds; can non-directed existential gratitude do better? Two challenges arise, one in relation to its non-directedness and the other in relation to its being a form of gratitude for existence. I start with its non-directedness.

Dawkins's (2010) account illustrates the difficulty here. He suggests that (personal) gratitude developed in response to the need to keep track of debts and fairness. This capacity 'free-wheels' when we reflect on having 'received' existence; existential gratitude is a 'vacuum phenomenon' – a phenomenon derived from a fitness-enhancing capacity but in itself not contributing to evolutionary success, and in that sense pointless. As Bishop (2010) and Colledge (2013) note, this explanation undermines Dawkins's claim that we *ought* to feel gratitude for our existence: 'If thanks-giving for our personal existence is ultimately meaningless, at best an empty gesture stemming from psychological structures evolutionarily ingrained by past survival strategies, then on what ground is it to be advocated?' (Colledge (2013), 30). Dawkins's account of the phenomenon renders it cognitively inappropriate, rather than appropriate. (The same difficulty bedevils Komter's (2004) explanation.)

But a different account, deriving from developmental – specifically psychoanalytic – theories, does better by identifying the psychological origins of existential gratitude and personal gratitude, rather than deriving the former from the latter. It turns out that the capacity for personal gratitude, given its origin, entails the capacity for existential gratitude. Personal gratitude originates in experiences of receiving gifts from others. This goes back to being fed as an infant, the very first gift being the mother's milk. The experience of being fed is not simply that of receiving the milk that ends the unpleasantness of hunger; it is multi-sensory and emotional, involving pleasures of smell, touch, gaze and being gazed at, of being held and feeling secure. In these ordinary, blissful experiences, we may speculate that the experience exhausts – fills – the infant's sense of existence at that time. It is not simply this or that *in* experience that is received as good, but one's total existence-as-experienced. This provides the ground for that which becomes, with cognitive development, the intentional object of gratitude.

We may further speculate that in such blissful experiences, the mother is not experienced as a distinct ‘something’ within the world, one object among many, but the totality of one’s world in that experience. There are two possible accounts of this phenomenology. On the first, the experience is one of ‘unity’, a marked absence of a sense of self in relation to the world/mother. The world is not experienced as something to which one can be in relation. However, by positing no distinction between self and non-self, there can be no sense of receiving goodness from beyond oneself. More structure is needed before we can connect the experience to gratitude.

On the second analysis of the phenomenology, the experience is one of intense relatedness, rather than strict unity. It may be that this structure evolves, in response to experience, out of earlier experiences of unity; or again, it may be that blissful experiences can take either form; or again, that the self–other relation dissolves into unity in certain experiences, e.g. as the infant’s attentiveness to the mother and feeding alters during or after the feed. This second account, of relatedness, doesn’t require that there is a consistent, unchanging boundary delineating the infant’s self and its world, only that some differentiation occurs. On this view, given that the mother exhausts the infant’s world at that moment, and given that the experience of being fed exhausts the infant’s existence in experience, then from the infant’s perspective within the experience, the gift of one’s total existence is received from the whole world. This provides the ground for that which one feels gratitude towards.<sup>15</sup>

However, what has just been described has the structure of impersonal gratitude, and thus the account appears to suffer from the objection raised against impersonal accounts earlier. Impersonal gratitude relates to the world – on the model of the original experience of the mother – as beneficent, ‘as if’ we received existence from the world as we do from our mothers. Thus, in an adult, the objection now runs, this state may be a psychological throwback to an infantile state, the recurrence, or recapitulation, of a state that only makes sense before persons are discriminated as distinct objects in the world. Once they are, then surely it is only persons who are the appropriate targets of gratitude.

This objection, while it must and will be answered below, identifies a strength of the psychoanalytic account: it explains the attraction of the impersonal account and the difficulty of clarifying and defending a non-directed account. Even as he defends his (early) impersonal account, Solomon notes that ‘most of us realize that personifying the world is an intellectually suspicious, even if poetic, endeavour. Nevertheless, the urge is there, so most people prefer gestures that are properly wrapped in a complex submission to a personal God’ (Solomon (2002), 57). Something of this urge may be explained by the origin of the phenomenology, and finds expression in the implicit personifications that characterize many people’s experience of existential gratitude. It may well be that in many actual instances, non-theists’ existential gratitude *is* irrational in ‘a mild and harmless sort of way’, as Roberts (2004, 63) argues. Or at least, that when attempting to

make explicit the intentional content of their gratitude, non-theists frequently say something that fails to cohere with their other beliefs. This is unsurprising, as we saw in the first section how difficult it is to specify this content accurately and adequately.

As we are noting this strength of the psychoanalytic account of existential gratitude, here are four more.

1. Unlike Dawkins's account, it does not specify the origins of existential gratitude in irrational terms. We have, instead, characterized it using the only psychological resources available to the infant at the time. There is a sense in which the infant's response is neither rational nor irrational, since we cannot appraise it in these terms.
2. The account argues that the origins of personal gratitude, with its greater cognitive demands to identify the origin of the good as an agent who bestows it as a gift with good intentions, lie in a less precisely structured phenomenological state. This sits well with developmental accounts of emotion generally; we may talk of infants feeling 'proto-emotions' (Lear (1990)), earlier versions of types of emotion that later become more reality-oriented and precise in their content and focus.
3. In existential gratitude, whether one is grateful for existence itself, one's own existence, or the conditions of human life, what one is grateful for must be experienced as good in some fundamental way. The account provides the original phenomenology for such an existential experience. When repeated, positive experiences of being fed – a very fundamental kind of experience – are the basis of not only gratitude, but also a sense of one's goodness, as the good thing becomes part of oneself. The literal incorporation of milk is accompanied by a metaphorical psychological incorporation of the goodness of the experience into the structure of the self (what psychoanalysts call 'introjection').
4. The account explains the psychological origins of the connections between gratitude and other mental states, such as trust, generosity, and love (Roth & Lemma (2008), 15). There are psychological parallels between the account and common lore remarks on romantic love, in which the intense relationship between lovers caught up in each other completely captures attention or even leads to a weakening or dissolution of the boundaries of the self, as well as accounts of mystical experience of the love of God. These mental states directed onto persons all have parallels in the case of existential gratitude, e.g. the love of life mentioned by Dawkins and Solomon's sense of 'cosmic trust'.

But these strengths relate to explaining the psychology of gratitude, not to its appropriateness. So back to the objection that impersonal existential gratitude is

an inappropriate recapitulation of an infantile state. The objection can be defeated by developing the psychoanalytic account, which is necessary in any case to avoid committing the genetic fallacy, i.e. seeking to explain something purely in terms of its origins. While what the infant experiences has the same *form* as impersonal existential gratitude, the claim is not that what it feels is *identical* to adult existential gratitude any more than it is identical to adult personal gratitude. The infantile state precedes both, and is the ground out of which both develop. An adult experiencing existential gratitude is not, therefore, to be understood as entering the same, infantile, psychological state. The echoes remain, especially in the phenomenology, but the content differs as the cognitive resources of the subject develop. Hence, just as personal gratitude requires proto-gratitude to be sharpened in terms of a sensitivity to persons and their intentions, so existential gratitude may result from a distinct developmental sharpening.

Should existential gratitude retain its impersonal form, then we may object that it is cognitively inappropriate. But in non-directed existential gratitude, the original experience has undergone a further developmental transformation, such that the subject no longer feels in relation to something apart from and beyond the good itself. As argued, the focus of the emotion is on the relation between the self and the good, viz. its undeserved, contingent nature.<sup>16</sup> Precisely what would trigger or support just such a developmental pathway is unclear, though it will be culturally and perhaps individually specific, such that development towards non-directed existential gratitude is, I suspect, only available in particular cultural contexts. Different cultures support different cognitive sharpenings of the fundamental experience of the goodness of existence.

To make the case adequately would take greater expertise than I have in this matter. But it is interesting to note that Buddhism – at least in those expressions that precede Buddhism in the West – appears not to recognize or encourage existential gratitude. For a religion that places great emphasis on the importance of gratitude as a virtue, this is very noticeable. Instead, directed gratitude, towards all who benefit one, takes on both depth and a very wide scope. In Theravada Buddhism, the traditional objects of gratitude are one's parents, friends, and spiritual teachers, including the Buddha, the Dhamma (teaching), and the Sangha (religious community). The Mahayana text 'Contemplation on the Mind-Ground Sutra' broadens this, adding gratitude to all living things (without which one could not practice virtues and accrue karma) and to one's king/country. It is related emotions, such as joy and happiness, that characterize the response to life. In theistic societies, existential gratitude is more common, but takes a personal form. Thus, it may be that non-directed existential gratitude is only commonly cognitively available in post-theistic societies. If I am right, then this development – from personal and impersonal to non-directed existential gratitude – is probably 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 *argues*

herself into a non-directed form of gratitude, but that her underlying representations of how to make sense the world change over time in line with such thoughts.

We are now in a position to state when non-directed existential gratitude is appropriate. It will only be appropriate if the cognitive sharpening involved in the development of the emotion can survive critical scrutiny. As noted above, we have no way of settling this question without appeal to our emotions in general.

So, then, starting with cognitive appropriateness: first, existential gratitude represents existence as a good for the individual. This could only be inappropriate if existence is not a good. If so, then all forms of existential gratitude are inappropriate. Theists are, therefore, unlikely to press this objection, which in any case is highly contentious. So I shall not pause to answer it. Second, existential gratitude represents existence as undeserved. This could only be inappropriate, for each person who feels existential gratitude, if they deserve to exist – not just in the sense that they should not be killed, but in the sense that their coming into existence is also something they deserved. Again, if this is so, the objection will apply equally to all forms of existential gratitude, and again, is highly contentious. One could argue that, by the good I create through my life, I deserve to have lived. But this is an ugly thought, wrong-headed in multiple ways. To note just one: it demonstrates an insensitivity to what existential gratitude, in its narrower forms, responds to, viz. an appreciation of how much of the good one creates is dependent on forces, circumstances, and opportunities that are outside one's control. Instead, because our existence is, as existential gratitude represents it to be, radically contingent, and not dependent on our activities, the thought that existence is undeserved is appropriate.

So much is in common between personal and non-directed existential gratitude. However, only non-directed existential gratitude fails to represent the good of existence as a gift. Of course, if God exists and bestows existence as a good, then there is a sense in which this is inappropriate. It fails to acknowledge the origin of the good. But our task is not to make non-directed existential gratitude appropriate *tout court*, but appropriate for the non-theist. To show this, we may take non-theism for granted. And given non-theism, it is perfectly appropriate not to represent existence as a gift.

But why respond to the undeserved good of one's existence with gratitude, rather than another emotional response to undeserved goods, such as joy, wonder or love? In normative moral theory, we may say that actions are permissible, impermissible, or obligatory. In an action *x* is obligatory, then its omission is impermissible. However, if an action is merely permissible, then its omission is permissible as well. We cannot say that emotions, or even character traits, are obligatory, since it is commonly held that what is obligatory falls under the scope of the will, and one cannot have either an emotion or a character trait by an act of will. Of course, one can will that one develops the character trait, and this will contribute to the trait's development and to the occurrence of the emotions towards which it

is a disposition. But this is not enough to talk of the emotion or trait as obligatory. However, we can apply an analogous structure: we can say that an emotion is not merely appropriate, but its absence is inappropriate and subject to moral censure. To mark this, we might say that the emotion is ‘mandated’, required in some sense.

Theists can argue that existential gratitude is mandated in this sense – it is the proper recognition of God’s gift of life. Non-theists cannot say this, although they can argue that the absence in someone’s life of *any* of the emotions that recognize and respond to the fact that one’s existence is both good and undeserved is inappropriate – the undeserved good of existence mandates some positive response. But there is no requirement to focus specifically on the undeserved nature of the good in the way that gratitude does, and the remarks on cultural differences support this. But appropriateness is not the same thing as being mandated, just as permissibility is distinct from obligation. A focus on the undeserved nature of existence is not inappropriate – it does not misrepresent anything, but marks something of genuine value, in a culturally specific way. Thus, we can claim that non-directed existential gratitude is cognitively appropriate.

Taking the perspective of practical appropriateness yields the same result. Existential gratitude does not clearly serve a specific end, such as successful social relationships, as personal gratitude does. As Bishop (2010, 532–533) notes, attitudes with the kind of wide content that characterizes existential gratitude are likely to be valuable primarily in relation to our ‘ultimate fulfilment’ as human beings. To argue that existential gratitude is mandated would require one to show that we cannot be completely fulfilled without it. Again, this may be defended within a theistic framework, since the theist’s understanding of human nature places an appropriate relationship to God at its heart. Quite independently, there are also results from positive psychology that indicate the benefits of religious faith. But there is little empirical or theoretical argument that points in the same direction for non-directed existential gratitude in non-theists. Perhaps such a case may be made for the wider class of emotions that respond to existence as an undeserved good. This is not something I can rehearse here, but I take Solomon’s (2002, 2007) book-length discussions to provide statements of the kind of case that could be made. There is no reason to suppose that non-directed existential gratitude detracts from flourishing, and if Solomon’s argument is right, it contributes to it.

Thus, I have argued that while non-directed existential gratitude is not mandated, it is not inappropriate. Cultures may differ in the way in which responses to the undeserved goodness of existence are shaped. It is perhaps primarily in post-theistic cultures, cultures whose history provides the space for existential gratitude, that non-directed existential gratitude develops as members relinquish theism and some, at least, reform the inclination towards existential gratitude in genuinely non-directed, rather than impersonal, terms. Such a shaping is among the appropriate responses to existence.

### Accounting for existential gratitude

Despite reaching this conclusion, has the account really captured the spirit of existential gratitude? In asking this question, I have in mind a challenge from Cottingham (2006). His argument focuses on the difficulties faced by secular accounts of such religious virtues as humility, faith, hope, and trust. For example, he objects to the psychological ‘thinness’ of accounts that understand humility in terms of the extent to which one’s accomplishments are the result of luck and contingency, or analyse hope in terms of a confidence in science to ameliorate the human condition. In such accounts, ‘what is left out . . . is almost every motivational and psychological aspect of the spiritual life that has made the traditional religious virtues intelligible and attractive’ (Cottingham (2006), 410). That he thinks the objection applies to gratitude as well is illustrated by his remarks on the secular analogue of morning prayer or saying grace:

the most likely result of such endeavours, I predict, will be something flat and indigestible – a formula that merely asserts ‘Well, it’s nice that I am still alive for another day of potential activities that may be worthwhile for myself and others’; or ‘It’s good that we are about to sit down to a nice meal, and it’s ethically useful to remember that much work was necessary to enable this nutrition to be made available to us.’ It is not that such views are devoid of value, or that it would be pointless to utter them, but that their thinness, their lack of the power and resonance given by a rich interpretative context, means they cannot capture a great deal of what is valuable in their theistic analogues. (*ibid.*, 416)

As the quotation indicates, Cottingham’s objection is not that such sentiments are inappropriate. Hence, in applying his objection to our discussion, the ‘mere’ appropriateness of non-directed existential gratitude is not what is at issue. Rather, the resulting account of what such gratitude amounts to will be, at least by comparison with its theistic counterpart, psychologically unsatisfactory.

If Cottingham were right about the resources available to non-theism, then the charge would be justified. Given that he draws upon extant accounts in the literature, I must agree that the accounts he discusses are lacking in psychological depth. But neither they, nor Cottingham’s parody of secular grace and prayer, do justice to what the non-theist can say and feel (at least about gratitude). From his choice of words, it appears that Cottingham’s non-theist is a version of Bentham, whom Mill (1838) criticized as having a highly limited conception of human motivation and feeling. Thus Cottingham’s non-theist’s appreciation of ethical value is limited to ideas of instrumental usefulness, his emotions to vague feelings of ‘nice’ and ‘good’. But we mustn’t confuse such crass, emotionally shallow utilitarianism with the psychology of non-theism!

Here we must add to the original discussion of non-directed gratitude in general (from the first section). I noted that in everyday uses, such as being grateful for a moment of rest in a busy day, non-directed gratitude was a response to goods that are pleasing, welcome, and bring relief. To analyse non-directed existential gratitude as the psychological equivalent to being thankful in this way, just with a

different object, would be grist to Cottingham's mill. In existential gratitude, I feel far more than 'nice' that I am alive, nor does my existence come as a 'welcome relief' (from what: not existing?). Instead, I am deeply struck by the undeserved, contingent nature of my existence, and its dependency on the wondrous fact of the existence of anything, the contingency of evolution, and the many activities of other living things and people. To try to capture this as 'brute luck' vastly oversimplifies and abstracts from many detailed and diverse contributions, fusing them together into an amorphous whole. This is itself an act of intellectual ingratitude, a failure to acknowledge the complexity and individuality of origins and each of the sustaining sources of one's existence.

Furthermore, Cottingham is right that it is a fundamental betrayal of the nature of an emotion such as existential gratitude to think that it should be encouraged or justified solely on the basis of its 'ethical usefulness'. First, this fails to recognize that the emotion is an appropriate *response*, called for by our experience of existence. As indicated above, if not gratitude, then some cognate appreciation of existence is mandated and forms a necessary part of the fulfilled human life. Second, it narrows the scope of the value of the emotion, limiting it from its relation to our nature and fulfilment as human beings to something instrumental. Such a standard is inappropriate, just as it is wrong to think of anger as a means to get what you want. This is not to say that ethical behaviour has no place in thinking about existential gratitude – we would, I think, be surprised if it had no motivational effects on efforts to preserve and improve the conditions of a good existence for others as well as oneself.

These are very programmatic remarks indeed. Cottingham's complaint of a lack of a 'rich interpretative context' has not been quelled. But the complaint may be unfair. What is needed is a sense that the non-theist can provide a psychologically satisfying account of existential gratitude, and such an account needn't carry the weight of two millennia of hermeneutic endeavour within a tradition like Christianity. I hope to have pointed us in the right direction: in seeking a satisfactory account, we need to elaborate upon the psychological implications and effects of meditating upon the undeserved, contingent nature of existence, being mindful (I choose the Buddhist term deliberately) of its goodness and complexity without oversimplification; and we need to elaborate upon the nature of the fulfilled human life within which such an emotion has a meaningful place. In these endeavours, it may help to recognize the origins of gratitude in experiences that set up the deepest psychological structures of the individual, including the sense that one is good and the sense that others are good. In this way, we no longer leave out the deeper motivational and psychological aspects of life that make religious virtues attractive.

Some may object that the ineradicable place of cultural development and the fact that non-directed existential gratitude within non-theism is only appropriate, not mandated, mean that the account fails to ground existential gratitude as deeply



in the human condition as theistic accounts, and this leaves a lingering sense of superficiality or 'thinness'. But this objection suffers from two confusions.

First, it mistakes the depths to which culture and its historical development permeate the self. That we are formed within a *particular* culture is one of the deepest facts about the human condition. That certain forms of emotion are culturally specific simply falls out from this. It does not follow that such emotions are in any way psychologically impoverished or superficial compared to emotions that are universal or more directly grounded in our evolutionary past. The theist may press the point, arguing that, nevertheless, our God-given human nature runs deeper than culture, and so the non-theist's account of gratitude will be superficial by comparison. But to defend the objection, the theist must show that this 'God-given' human nature is somehow prior to or independent of culture, something over and above its manifestations and development in and through human culture. But if we become ourselves and are brought into relationship with God through human culture and history, this is difficult to sustain.

Second, the objection that the non-theist's account is superficial mistakes depth for mandate. It is true that the account defended here does not (cannot) make existential gratitude mandated, while the theist's account does. But this does not show that the psychological account given is any less rich or deep. An equally rich account of why it is appropriate, but not mandated (but also why some positive emotional response to life is mandated) can be given.

Another possible objection to the account is that I have granted that many, perhaps most, instances of non-theistic existential gratitude are not fully coherent, but contain the seeds – or remnants – of a theistic understanding of the world. But, in response, this is no reason to think that the account is either implausible or psychologically unsatisfactory. That we live in a post-theistic culture in which such effects occur are simply facts to be faced, on the non-theist's account, not objections to the account itself. An account of what makes an emotion appropriate need not claim that most people feel that emotion appropriately.

Others may object that making good on the elaborations indicated above will lead us back to theism (Cottingham 2003). Bishop argues that the type of approach taken here involves 'an amplification of the view of the world achieved by established natural science' that takes us beyond 'the confines of scientific naturalism, even if . . . not . . . all the way to God' (Bishop (2010), 530, 532). Whether this is so rather depends on just what one takes 'scientific naturalism' to commit one to. On a narrow reading of the term, Bishop's point may already have been granted in the claim that establishing the appropriateness of emotions requires normative discussion which cannot become independent of our emotional sensibilities themselves; for this is not a discussion to which natural science will have much to contribute. Any satisfactory psychological account of existential gratitude – along with most other human emotions – will need to be a normative account. But such accounts are common in the literature without commitment to theism.

We may be optimistic, then, that a psychologically rich and satisfying account of appropriate non-directed existential gratitude is available to the non-theist.<sup>17</sup>

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## Notes

- The remark, however, appears in the following context, which does not support a complete rejection of a personal idea of God:  
 The thought of God must not interpose itself between us and other creatures. It must not make the contact between us and them less direct. On the contrary, through it the contact must be made more direct.  
 The real aim is not to see God in all things; it is that God through us should see the things that we see. God has got to be on the side of the subject and not on that of the object during all those intervals of time when . . . [we] turn ourselves toward the world.  
 We must not go to the help of our neighbour for Christ, but through Christ. Let the 'I' disappear in such a way that Christ . . . himself goes to the help of our neighbour.  
 Generally speaking, 'for God' is an unsuitable expression. God must not be put in the dative. These comments are compatible with maintaining a *direct* personal relationship with God (in the context of which gratitude is appropriate), but not maintaining an indirect relationship with God through activity in the world.
- More accurately, in being grateful for one's own existence, one is grateful for it as existence which one experiences. It is a condition of this gratitude that what exists is something that we experience. It is difficult to know what to make of gratitude for that which exists but which we cannot experience. It is part of the nature of gratitude as a *response* that we can only be grateful for that which we experience. This is not to say that my experience of existence, rather than existence itself, is *what* I am grateful for. Rather, we delight in existence *as* something experienced.
- See Klein (1957), Heider (1958), Streng (1989), McConnell (1993), Fitzgerald (1998), Emmons (2004), Harpham (2004), Roberts (2004), Watkins (2004), Von Tevenar (2006). Many add further specifications, but these need not concern us here, as the argument that follows does not depend on them.
- Narrower forms of existential gratitude do not support such a clear contrast between theistic and non-theistic positions as broader forms do. Not all theists want to say that God bestows on them the specific

goods of their lives, rather than saying that God makes possible rich forms of life. For if I thank God that I was born when I was, into the culture that I was, with the wealth and opportunities that I have – and I treat these as direct gifts of God to me – what does that say of how I should think of God’s failure to bestow such gifts on others? Or again, should I think that God supports the forms of economic and cultural development that enable such wealth and opportunities, which may rest on ineradicable injustice – is God a capitalist, for instance? Maurice Wiles (1986) famously rejected the idea of miracles on similar grounds – to think that God would directly intervene to bless me in some way but not prevent great evils falling upon others is not good theology. It is at least arguable that theistic existential gratitude should focus, not on the specific goods of one’s life, but on life being such that richness and meaning are possible. Hence, both theist and non-theist face the difficulty of just whom to direct gratitude towards for how *well* their lives go. Thus, the contrast between how to understand existential gratitude in theists and non-theists is clearest when we talk of its broad forms, and I shall focus on these forms only from now on.

5. It is notable that many of the authors providing a ‘personal’ analysis do not consider existential gratitude (or apparently impersonal forms of gratitude). Their analyses are concerned with typical gratitude; while correct as far as they go, they may nevertheless be incomplete. Three accounts of existential gratitude fall somewhat between the impersonal and non-directed analyses: Nakhnikian (1961), Solomon (2004), and Steindl-Rast (2004).
6. By contrast, Dreyfus & Kelly (2011) don’t even address the question. They note the central importance of gratitude in the Homeric world, but in their reclamation of the structures of meaningfulness at play in that world, they simply state that it is unnecessary actually to believe that the Greek gods exist. They take the possibility and cogency of non-directed gratitude for granted.
7. Interestingly, Harpham (2004) notes that while Seneca makes intention crucial to his analysis of gratitude, the term is little used in this way until Aquinas. Augustine never discussed gratitude in response to the grace of God; it is Aquinas who introduces the importance of recognizing intentions in gratitude, and the modern term has scholastic origins. A theology of existential gratitude may well argue that gratitude is the appropriate response to existence as an expression of God’s grace, i.e. it is grace that is the ultimate object of such gratitude.
8. As I shall mention Buddhism below, it is worth noting that the Pali word for ‘gratitude’ is *kataññuta*. *ñuta* means to know in the sense of experience or apprehend; the *kata-* prefix in the Buddhist texts gives it a reflexive intensification, hence ‘making known’. Thus *kataññuta* involves mindful attention not just to things one experiences but also to their origins – a conscious acknowledging of benefit.
9. Bertocci & Millard (1963) define the virtue (as opposed to the emotion) of gratitude as ‘the willingness to recognize unearned increments of value in one’s experience’. In fact, this is imprecise, as it fails to distinguish gratitude (as a virtue) from dispositions for joy and happiness. However, their discussion makes it clear that gratitude involves *acknowledging* the good *as undeserved* and responding appropriately.
10. It may be that not all emotions present their object as ‘meriting’ the emotional response, e.g. in disgust, we often put little weight on the idea that we have *reason* to be disgusted.
11. A number of developed non-cognitive views, such as Blackburn’s (1998) quasi-realism, can capture this thought equally well, in terms of the emotions I would hold as part of a maximally developed moral sensibility. They would simply reject the idea that this is a genuinely cognitive matter.
12. There are a variety of reasons for thinking this. We may give an empirical defence of the claims that we do not (successfully) evaluate our emotions without engaging further emotions in some form and that, in fact, given the way emotions may operate upon our thought without our knowledge, it is doubtful that there is an ‘emotionally-neutral’ space within which we *can* deliberate about such matters (Goldie (2008), Lacewing (2014)). Another set of considerations stems from an account of what values are. According to response-dependent accounts, a value is something that is conceptually dependent upon evaluative responses; and many such accounts understand the evaluative responses involved to be emotions (and desires).
13. See Wiggins (1987), Scanlon (1998: ch. 1, §12), Lenman (2008), and Lacewing (2014).
14. There is some reason to think that we are unduly optimistic in these expectations. A number of psychologists argue that the purpose of thinking is ‘doing’, and more particularly, the purpose of moral thinking is to manage our social relations and environment (Haidt and Kesebir (2010)). Because we are ‘ultrasocial’ creatures (Lerner & Tetlock (2003)), these relations contributed crucially to our survival,

and reasoning developed to serve this end (Mercier & Sperber (2011)). This goal may conflict with accurate representation, such that inaccuracy may be more functional than accuracy.

However, it is possible to interpret such evidence as there is for this view in accordance with the claim that, on the whole, an accurate appreciation of social situations will at least not hinder, and will generally contribute positively to, success in one's relations with others. For example, Taylor and Brown (1988; 1994) famously argue that people who harbour positive illusions about themselves and others do better than those who do not. Even if this is correct, it is very important that the illusion is mild, as people whose estimations either of themselves or others are more seriously inaccurate do less well. It is also not established whether those holding positive illusions do so from ignorance, a cultivated mild self-deception, or choice. Only the former would even be in tension with, let alone undermine, holding accuracy as an appropriate goal for emotion (see Badhwar (2008)).

Further evidence that accuracy (within limits) contributes to, rather than detracts from, social success comes from studies of psychological defence. Defences render inaccurate depictions of reality, and there is a good correlation between defences and poor psychosocial adjustment (e.g. Vaillant (1993), 132, table 4; Cramer (2006), 235–236, 253–254). In defending the place of accuracy as an appropriate goal for emotions, we can nevertheless agree that 'thinking is for doing', having established that thinking accurately generally contributes to doing well.

15. Theorists of the 'oceanic feeling' speak of experiences of unity between child and mother. There are two reasons to resist the account given here of the idea of 'oceanic feeling'. First, as Saarinen (2012) has shown, there are considerable mistakes and unclarity in Freud's original account of the feeling, a phenomenological description of which was supplied to Freud by Rolland. Hence, the phenomenon requires a fresh, and more precise, characterization. Rather than talk of experience of unity, I prefer to talk of experience as 'without limit', i.e. limits are not part of the experience. Second, and I think supportive of Saarinen's thesis, traditional psychoanalytic theories (though *not* Klein's) wrongly assume that the infant has no self-conception, and hence all psychological experience in early infancy is such that self–other–world are not distinguished – hence the feeling of unity. Damasio (2000) presents a theory in which a preconscious, biologically based 'proto-self' is present at birth, from which a 'core self' – a fundamental sense of oneself as a bounded biological unity – develops together with consciousness in response to experience. In Damasio (2010), he updates his theory to argue that the proto-self involves bodily feelings, though these are not unified. Given that the core self co-evolves with an awareness of one's body as such, it must emerge in the first few months after birth.
16. That this form of depersonalization is a real psychological possibility is indicated by the occurrence of similar processes elsewhere, e.g. in the development of autonomy and moral sensitivity. In the final stages of psychological maturity – which perhaps not everyone achieves – the *origin* of one's values and freedom in relation to parental figures drops out of the story in the analysis of the relevant emotions and intentions. It is, we say, to the values that one responds, not to one's parents, even as the range of values to which one is sensitive is shaped by childhood experience.
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