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Gratitude and Forgiveness

Gratitude

Gratitude has been variously described as an attitude but also as a mood, habit, motive and moral virtue. It is derived from the Latin *gratia* meaning 'favoured' and *gratus* meaning 'pleasing'. Gratitude is the acknowledgement of goodness. The Heideggerian formulation is: *Denken ist Danken* – 'thinking is thanking'. *Je suis reconnaissant*.

1. 'I recognise' (intellectually).
2. 'I acknowledge' (willingly).
3. 'I appreciate' (emotionally).

Only when these *three* come together is gratitude complete. Gratitude maximises the enjoyment of the good. It enriches and elevates human life. Happiness, one might say, makes good things happen in the sense that happiness is the fulfilment of desire. In this vein, we may cite G.K. Chesterton: 'I would maintain that thanks are the highest form of thought, and that gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder'[1]. In *Orthodoxy*, the great Catholic convert pens this line: 'the test of all happiness is gratitude'[2].

1. Robert A. Emmons, *Thanks!: How Practicing Gratitude Can Make You Happier*. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston and New York, 2008, p. 19.
2. Ibid, p. 21.

St Ignatius is *the* saint of gratitude. The first step in the Examen, according to Ignatius, as we saw, was 'to give thanks to God our Lord for the benefits received'. Gratitude is foundational – it shifts the mind and heart into a positive perspective and helps us build hope. Expressing gratitude is the heart of Ignatius' Examen. All is grace. For Ignatius, gratitude is *the* prayer of thanksgiving. In 'The Contemplation to Attain Love', it broadens out to an awareness of the gifts of our entire lives as God's desire dwells within us. Gratitude always points back to God who blesses us with benefits: God as giver. If gratitude is the response to God's love, ingratitude is 'the most abominable of sins', because it proceeds by way of forgetfulness of God's gifts, that the world is charged with God's grandeur and grace. Here St Ignatius is on the same page as Seneca who called ingratitude an 'abomination' and David Hume who labelled ingratitude the most horrible and unnatural crime, while Kant dismissed it as the essence of vileness. For Melanie Klein (and her psychoanalytic research) envy and entitlement block gratitude. Children under the age of 7 seem not to understand the dynamics of gratitude. Ingratitude is an anhedonic act – a denial of pleasure.

Gratitude, for St Ignatius, is not a transient feeling but an abiding vision. The attitude of gratitude moves us to see God in all things, that life and our very being is *given*.

During the last few months of his life, the author of *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*, wrote a series of essays on the subject of gratitude in which he explores, much like the Examen commends, his feelings about completing his life and coming to terms with his impending death. *Gratitude* is the simple title of British neurologist Oliver Sacks' 2015 quartet of short essays.

Sacks says his memories were in a mode of gratitude and that at 80 years of age he feels glad to be alive, that he is not yet finished with living. He recalls a story: his friend was walking with Samuel Beckett in Paris on a perfect spring morning. His friend said to Beckett: 'Doesn't a day like this make you glad to be alive?', to which Beckett replied: 'I wouldn't go that far'. By contrast, Sacks states that he is grateful 'that I have experienced many things', in his intercourse with life, and has only some few gentle regrets. He writes: 'Over the last few days I have been able to see my life as from a great altitude, as a sort of landscape, and with a deepening sense of the connection of all its parts'. Later on, Sacks continues: 'I cannot pretend I am without fear. But my predominant feeling is one of gratitude. I have loved

and been loved; I have been given much and I have given something in return; I have read and travelled and thought and written. I have had an intercourse with the world.'[1]. Sacks realises that he has been on an enormous adventure in his journey through life. Both science and nature enchant him. 'A few weeks ago, in the country, far from the lights of the city, I saw the entire sky powdered with stars.'[2] This everyday epiphany is an experience of what the Canadian Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor labels 'fullness'. 'My sense of heaven's beauty, of eternity, was inseparably mixed for me with a sense of transience – and death'.[3] As a boy, he loved the periodic table with all the elements of metals and minerals, little 'emblems of eternity', as he calls them.

Later he would be drawn into near suicidal addiction to amphetamines, from which he slowly recovered. This poet laureate of medicine saw humanity at its most hurt and frail. In the book he tells us that he will not live to see his eighty-third birthday; he did die, at the age of 82, believing up until the last that the human brain was the most incredible thing in the entire universe. This 'old Jewish atheist', whose book *Awakenings* was adapted into a film, maintained a love of life, a desire to understand and achieve new levels of insight into the human condition, with a curiosity that was not idle.

Exercise

Positive psychologists suggest we keep an account of our blessings daily, rather than fixate on our burdens (or count sheep) and note them in a Gratitude Journal (*experiences* of gratitude) or go on a Gratitude Visit to someone you love, admire or respect (*expressions* of gratitude). Marcus Aurelius, in what amounts to a Stoic spiritual exercise, begins his classic *Meditations* with a long list of people to whom he expresses gratitude: to his grandfather for his character and self-control; to his mother for his reverence for the divine; to his friend for introducing him to the teachings of Epictetus, etc.; finally, he engages with a paeon of praise to the gods. What emerges in contemporary psychology, one that confirms the insights of the ancients, is that gratitude is the forgotten factor in the science of happiness.

1. Oliver Sacks, *Gratitude* (London: Picador, 2015), p. 20.
2. Sacks, *Gratitude*, p. 25.
3. Sacks, *Gratitude*, p. 25.

However, it was St Ignatius who was the first to note the psychological, not to mention spiritual, benefits of the practise of gratitude.

'All goods look better when they look like gifts' (G.K. Chesterton): so, think of a moment of a benefit or blessing you have received; take time to relish and savour these gratuitous gifts; think about their value. The depressed person, by contrast, believes that the world is devoid of goodness, and in clinical studies such individuals show significantly lower gratitude than non-depressed controls. Gratitude, through its capacity for dereflection, mitigates depression, as hyperreflection (excessive self-scrutiny and rumination) intensifies gloominess. By practising gratitude, attention is directed away from the errant ego and its concerns onto others. Don't we all want to be around grateful rather than grating persons? Gratitude also has a significant effect on optimism. Gratitude drives out anger. The essence of gratitude is remembering goodness. Gratitude is the way the heart remembers.

> If the only prayer you say in your life is 'thank you', it would be enough, (Meister Eckhart)
>
> Grace and gratitude go together like Heaven and Hell. (Karl Barth)

In the Doxology, gratitude is the hymn of praise to the Creator. Luther called gratitude the basic Christian attitude. St Paul always begins his letters with expressions of thanks, which amounts to a theology of grace. Gratitude and humility are linked. Gratitude is the humble acceptance of that which is – a recognition of reality. Gratitude is really a way of seeing the world spiritually.

In *The Gratitude Factor*, Jesuit Charles Shelton lists *seven* benefits of gratitude: from enriching love to relieving stress. He argues that gratitude has a fourfold structure. When we feel grateful, we are talking about:

1. a positive experience, in which
2. we have benefited because
3. something has happened, or someone has done something for us that

4. leads us, more often than not, to do something positive in kind.[1]

The dynamic of gratitude involves receiving, accepting and responding. He offers a Daily Gratitude Inventory consisting of resting/relaxing, reviewing/recalling, relishing and responding. He lists *ten* obstacles to gratitude, including individualism, materialism, amnesia, suffering – which are all possibilities for derailment. By contrast, when we feel grateful, we experience a surplus, a surfeit of meaning. He offers *nine* exercises for developing gratitude which include recognising blessings, attending to surprises, recalling significant people, relishing roles. For gratitude to develop, deepen and deploy we need to make a conscious and conscientious choice that underpins our daily decisions. True (as distinct from distorted) gratitude always bonds with goodness, is gratitude's moral anchor. Types of quasi-gratitude include reluctance, defensiveness, mixed or misplaced gratitude, which all bespeak of an absence of goodness. There is also harmful gratitude which hurts, such as giving a gift to flaunt wealth. He provides us with a systematic taxonomy of gratitude. Gratitude is defined as a deep-felt thankfulness. Because gratitude relates to integrity, it involves some interior transformation. The book concludes by viewing gratitude as incorporating *three* layers of meaning: emotion, gift and goodness. Genuine gratitude is sacramental; its paradox is that it gives back. Gratitude, as all the above realised, and none more so than St Ignatius, is ultimately a form of love – the giving away of goodness itself.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness was the fourth step of the Examen. The practice of forgiveness, like the practice of gratitude, can help us find meaning in life's worst events. It is a spiritual practice. There is a Buddhist story which tells of two monks in prison. One asks the other: 'have you forgiven them?', to which he replies 'No'. The other monk responds: 'Then I guess you really are in prison'. When Nelson Mandela was finally freed and experienced fleeting anger, he very quickly afterwards

1. Charles Shelton, *The Gratitude Factor* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2010).

knew only forgiveness. So, we need to plumb the dynamics and vicissitudes of forgiveness.

The first thing to say is that the discussion must take place against the backdrop of wanting fairness rather than revenge, retribution or retaliation, so easily fuelled by feelings and fantasies of 'getting back' at someone or 'getting even'. These must be relinquished for real forgiveness to occur; resentment must be surrendered. Outrage is not the same as rabid rage. Of course, in the Christian tradition, Jesus forgives the woman caught in adultery, informs us that if we forgive others, our own trespasses shall be forgiven, and at the end of His life (even if it is symbolic) cries out: 'Father forgive them; they know not what they do', in one of the famous of the so-called seven last words from the Cross, pleading to do in His divinity what he couldn't do in His humanity. Forgiveness is (humanly) impossible but ethics encourages us to try to make the impossible possible. The fear around forgiveness is that one ends up excusing certain evil behaviour but to explain or to seek to understand is not to excuse, just as forgiving is not forgetting. The wound must be honoured even as we try to find the words for it.

In his 2001 book, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, Jacques Derrida, the father of deconstruction, makes the point that in principle there is no measure or moderation to forgiveness. Forgiveness belongs to the Abrahamic heritage, as well as to philosophical humanism and a cosmopolitanism born from a grafting of Stoicism with Pauline Christianity. This is the cultural context; and the Christianisation of the notions of conversion-confession. For Derrida, the moment forgiveness is for a purpose – be it in the service of a finality, spiritual atonement, therapeutic reconciliation, the re-establishment of national normality – then forgiveness is not pure. Forgiveness, he argues, should not be normal, or normative, or normalising. 'It *should* remain exceptional and extraordinary, in the face of the impossible.'[1] The only thing to forgive is the unforgiveable; it is the only thing that calls for forgiveness. Derrida writes: 'forgiveness forgives only the unforgivable.… Forgiveness must announce itself as impossibility itself.'[2] Forgiveness introduces eternity, transcendence. Derrida contests the conditional (as he sees it) logic of exchange, which is

1. Jacques Derrida, 'On Forgiveness', in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 32.
2. Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, pp. 32-3.

so widespread – the thought that forgiveness is only possible after repentance. This is an economic transaction, which contradicts the Abrahamic tradition. Forgiveness, to be forgiveness, must be infinite, gracious and granted to the guilty precisely as guilty.

Real/true/impossibly pure forgiveness is uneconomic; it breaks us out of the cycle of economy. It is unconditional, unaccountable, unimaginable (like loving your enemies), something mad. Accountants aren't mad but those who forgive obey an otherworldly logic. A gift – the gift of forgiveness – is precisely that, a gift not a deal or an exchange. Genuine forgiveness is offered not asked. Many people picture God like the keeper of a record, like an accountant totting up His books. God forgives the prodigal son, the woman caught in adultery: this love is profligate, agapeic surplus. In the Gospel stories, Christ sets aside calculation for the excess of love. Ethics is excessive, hyperbolic, beyond laws and norms and mores: ethics beyond ethics – 'there perhaps is the undiscoverable place of forgiveness'[1] Derrida resists the notion that forgiveness must have a meaning – be it sacrifice or salvation. If I forgive you on the basis or condition that, asking forgiveness you change, what type of forgiveness is that? Derrida enquires: 'Imagine, then, that I forgive on the condition that the guilty one repents, mends his way, asks forgiveness, and thus would be changed by a new obligation, and from then on, he would no longer be the exactly the same as the one who was found culpable. In this case, can one still speak of forgiveness?'[2] For forgiveness to be worthy of its name, it must forgive the unforgivable without condition, even if, as he acknowledges, this radical purity seems mad. But forgiveness is mad. It is honourable only when it takes place outside of symmetry, negotiation and calculated transaction. It should never amount to a therapy of reconciliation as in South Africa. We shall shortly see how Desmond Tutu argues from a completely different perspective. But Tutu's language, Derrida says, is one of amnesty and amnesia certainly, but not forgiveness. Forgiveness must remain irreducible. In order to have meaning, forgiveness must have no meaning, no finality, even no intelligibility. Such is the *aporia* of forgiveness. Every time forgiveness happens, it is an absolute exception. Forgiveness remains irreducibly incomprehensible. What happens in the heart of one who forgives is secret, a zone of experience about which we

1. Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, p. 36.
2. Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, pp. 38-39.

can say nothing. 'It is infinitely distressing. It is night.'[1] Derrida is adamant: forgiveness can't become caught up in processes or procedures. Perhaps his and deconstruction's madness is not so mad?

The Gospel narratives, to take *the* example, seem to contradict any theology of atonement. The God of Jesus Christ is marked first and foremost by forgiveness. The American philosopher and disciple of Jacques Derrida, John Caputo, asks: 'Are the dealings of the Father with the world governed by the principles of economics, of exchanging this for that, or by the nonprincipled, the uneconomics of love?'[2] Derrida's approach (and this goes for Caputo too) is aporetic: the only thing that can be truly forgiven is the unforgiveable; the only condition under which forgiveness is possible is when forgiveness is impossible. By contrast, the theological tradition requires *four* conditions for forgiveness to happen (Derrida and Caputo would say that here theologians are behaving like bankers):

1. An expression of sorrow must be given.
2. The intention to make amends must be given.
3. A promise not to repeat the offence must be given.
4. A willingness to do penance must be demonstrated.

If someone meets all four criteria, they have 'earned' forgiveness. Now, for deconstructionists like Derrida and Caputo, this is a deal not a gift, though they recognise that the gift can't be given. If you (only) love those who love you …

Let us ask: what is forgiveness? It is sometimes more useful to begin the discussion before defining the term. Forgiveness is an intentional (a voluntary) process by which a victim undergoes a change (a conversion, if you like), in attitude or feelings regarding an offence, whereby negative emotions are let go of and they begin to wish the offender well. It's important, however, to also state what forgiveness is not: it is not excusing or excoriating; it is not pardoning which is carried out by a priest or judge; it is not forgetting (removing awareness of the offence from consciousness); it is not reconciliation (restoration of a relationship). Forgiveness can be a legal term, a psychological concept, or a moral virtue. There is a beautiful

1. Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, p. 56.
2. John Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct*?, (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 75.