

White, Patricia

## **Gratitude, citizenship, and education**

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# Bildung, Öffentlichkeit und Demokratie

Herausgegeben von

Jürgen Oelkers, Fritz Osterwalder und Heinz Rhyner

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*Öffentliche Bildung und Demokratie*

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# Gratitude, Citizenship, and Education

## *Abstract*

Citizenship education is a complex matter, not least when the place of civic virtues in it is considered. This is illustrated by a consideration of the civic virtue of gratitude. Two conceptions of gratitude are explored. Gratitude seen as a debt is examined and Kant's exposition of it, including his objections to a person's getting himself into the position where he has to show gratitude as a beneficiary, is explored. An alternative conception of gratitude as recognition is developed. This, it is claimed, has more relevance to the kind of gratitude it would be appropriate for citizens of a democratic state to feel and show. The educational implications of these views are briefly indicated.

Gratitude does not have much place in contemporary discussions of the moral life or moral education.<sup>1</sup> Yet we think it right that people should feel gratitude in all kinds of situations and parents try to encourage such feelings in their children. Is it absent from contemporary ethical and educational discussion because it is an easily understood notion, easily acted upon? But that seems not to be so. It often seems to have an uneasy place in everyday life, creating disturbing situations. People sometimes do not *feel* gratitude when others – or even they themselves – think they should, or, even if they feel grateful, they may find it hard to express their feelings appropriately. Those to whom gratitude is expressed may often be embarrassed and try in some way to make light of their role in the benefit offered. These difficulties may be linked with the fact that gratitude seems in many cases to be something the relatively powerless are expected to offer to the relatively powerful – children to parents, elderly and infirm parents to adult children, the poor to the well-off, traditional wives to husbands. It may be that the reason lies in the ethos of a kind of Gradgrind culture.

“It was a fundamental principle of the Gradgrind philosophy that everything was to be paid for. Nobody was ever on any account to give anybody anything, or render anybody help without purchase. Gratitude was to be abolished, and the virtues springing from it were not to be. Every inch of the existence of mankind, from birth to death, was to be a bargain across a counter. And if we didn't get to Heaven that way, it was not a politico-economical place, and we had no business there” (DICKENS, 1961: 283)

In the public arena the idea of gratitude is commonly regarded as even more awkwardly out of place. The idea that citizens should be grateful to the state is

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1 I would like to thank JOHN WHITE and RAY ELLIOT for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper. A shortened version of this paper is forthcoming in *Studies in Philosophy and Education*.

seen as totally inappropriate. SOCRATES's linking of gratitude and political obligation is perhaps seen as fit material for undergraduates to cut their philosophical teeth on but of little importance for understanding the obligations of citizenship today. When gratitude and political obligation are linked in our contemporary political context, we are likely to hear strident fascist voices urging citizens to be thankful for what the state has done for them and urging them to greater sacrifices, often of their lives. This seems to accord ill with any conception of self-respecting citizens taking a responsible role in shaping the political arrangements of their society. Thus gratitude finds no place in discussions of citizenship education.

I want to explore the place of gratitude in the moral life and to argue that feelings of gratitude of a certain kind are centrally important to being a citizen in a democratic society.

### *Gratitude as a Debt*

It seems to me possible to discern two conceptions of gratitude at work in the way we live our lives. On the one hand, and commonly, gratitude is seen as a debt, as recent philosophical treatments emphasise (see BERGER 1975, SIMMONS 1979, McCONNELL 1993). On this view, a recipient of a benefit from a benefactor should acknowledge the benefit in a fitting way. Given, that is, that certain conditions obtain. The benefit has to be given voluntarily; if it was given under duress, gratitude is not appropriate. Again if the benefit is a happy by-product of something done without the thought of benefiting someone in mind, gratitude is not due. Neither is it due if the benefactor knew that he was benefiting the recipient but undertook the act only because it brought him benefits. In showing gratitude, then, the recipient is acknowledging not the benefit in itself but the benevolence shown by the benefactor. Thus if the benefit was provided under duress, unwittingly or as a by-product of a self-interested project, gratitude is not due because the benefit was not provided *in order to help* the recipient.

As BERGER (1975, p. 302) puts it, expressions of gratitude are a complex of beliefs, feelings and attitudes. By showing gratitude we demonstrate our belief that the donor acted with our interests in mind and that we are appreciative of the benefit and the other's concern. We also indicate that we have an attitude of regard for the benefactor, and importantly, that we do not see him simply as an instrument of our welfare. We see him rather as a fellow member of our moral community. Our benefactor has acted out of concern for us and our expression of gratitude is an acknowledgement of this. As BERGER sums it up:

"The donor has shown his valuing of the recipient; the donee shows the relationship is mutual by some form of reciprocation, and each has demonstrated attitudes appropriate to members of a moral community." (BERGER 1975, p. 302).

More sharply to illuminate the character of gratitude on the debt account, let me draw attention to several occasions on which people may experience feelings of gratitude which it cannot accommodate. First, it does not allow for feelings of gratitude for things which benefit us but where there is no benefactor with our good in mind. In a mundane case this might be when, for instance, we arrive late



at the station and find that the last train has been delayed and is still in the station. Or it might be, for those without any belief in a divine benefactor, feelings of delight at scenes of great natural beauty. Second, it does not allow for gratitude to people whose motives in benefiting us are not entirely pure where, for instance, the benefit was the knowing by-product of a self-interested venture. I may offer a student a lift in my car to a conference, for instance, with the thought of the welcome company on the long journey. Finally, it does not accommodate the feelings of gratitude which CHRISTABEL BIELENBERG felt to a benefactor who, it seems right to assume, had no thought of benefiting anyone. In her book *The Past is Myself*, CHRISTABEL BIELENBERG, whose husband was in a concentration camp after the 20 July 1944 plot against HITLER, describes a visit to the headquarters of the Sicherheitsdienst in Berlin where she has come to plead for his life. There she sees a prisoner being ill-treated who himself remains calm and even courteous in the face of this treatment.

“I looked up into his face as he passed my chair and tried to show him how I felt. I tried to show him actually how proud, how humbly grateful I was that a human being could behave with such dignity in such circumstances” (BIELENBERG, 1994, p. 231)

After witnessing the horrific treatment of this prisoner CHRISTABEL BIELENBERG’s fear, her dominant emotion to this point, is replaced by fury.

“I dimly realised the depth of gratitude that I owed to the unknown prisoner and even to his tormentor, for had it not been for them I might have been in very poor shape. Now I knew that I was no longer afraid... No one knows how they are going to behave in real danger until they are faced with it. Not to be afraid is just something to be grateful for and, in this case, because of the things I had seen, another, equally primitive emotion had taken the place of fear.” BIELENBERG 1994, p. 232).

These cases are of course very different. That the debt account of gratitude cannot account for the feelings felt in the cases of the delayed train or the natural beauty may not be thought to show that it is unacceptably narrow or in some other way inadequate. Perhaps the feelings here have something in common with gratitude but, in the absence of a benefactor, they are more appropriately seen in the first case as a mixture of relief and gladness at unexpected good fortune and in the second as awe and delight in the face of natural beauty. And the second case of mixed motives may also not be too much of a problem. Perhaps, as BERGER allows, in such cases “we owe one another the benefit of the doubt” (BERGER 1975, p. 299). That the case of CHRISTABEL BIELENBERG cannot be covered may, however, be rather more significant, as I hope to show.

### KANT and Gratitude

I want to continue to round out the picture of the debt account of gratitude and a further way of doing that is by considering an illuminating objection to gratitude. That is KANT’s objection in the *Lectures on Ethics* (1780). In one way it seems odd to cite KANT as an objector to gratitude, since in *Die Metaphysik der Sitten* he refers to it as a “heilige Pflicht” (KANT 1797/1956, p 592) and ingrati-

tude as a “verabscheutes” and “empörendes” vice (KANT 1797/1956, p. 597). In the earlier *Lectures on Ethics* (of which I have not been able to locate an original copy, only a translation) however, KANT casts doubt on whether it is ever wise to put oneself in the position of a beneficiary, if one can possibly avoid it.

“To accept favours and benefits is also a breach of one’s duty to oneself. If I accept favours, I contract debts which I can never repay, for I can never get on equal terms with him who has conferred favours upon me; he has stolen a march upon me, and if I do him a favour I am only returning a quid pro quo; I shall always owe him a debt of gratitude, and who will accept such a debt? For to be indebted is to be subject to an unending constraint. I must forever be courteous and flattering towards my benefactor, and if I fail to be so he will very soon make me conscious of my failure; I may even be forced to using subterfuge so as to avoid meeting him” (KANT, 1780/1979, p. 118–119).

So, out of duty to oneself, one should not put oneself in a position where one is obliged to show gratitude. Why should that be?

An initial answer, from within the Kantian framework as it were, must be the wish to avoid the situation of eternal indebtedness stressed by KANT in the passage above and elsewhere in the *Lectures on Ethics* (e.g. KANT 1780/1979, p. 222). It seems that even though the beneficiary may repay his benefactor he can never be “even with him” because the benefactor did a kindness he did not owe.

“For even if I repay my benefactor tenfold, I am still not even with him, because he did me a kindness which he did not owe. He was the first in the field, and even if I return his gift tenfold I do so only as repayment. He will always be the one who was the first to show kindness and I can never be beforehand with him” (KANT 1979, p. 222).

Many commentators find the idea of an eternal undischageable debt odd but since Kant mentions it in several places in the *Lectures on Ethics* and *Die Metaphysik der Sitten* it cannot be dismissed as some kind of anomaly, or a view rejected in the later critical work.

Let us leave aside for the moment the problem of the eternal undischageable debt. One reason for avoiding being a beneficiary with a debt of any kind is that one should avoid the situation of being in debt. The problem seems to come from the debt framework. It is not good, generally speaking, to be in debt and particularly not for an ethical viewpoint in which the value of autonomy is stressed. The autonomous person needs ideally to be free of pressures which might interfere with her ability to make clear-sighted, reasoned, independent judgements in the light of the evidence and ethically significant considerations. Perhaps one’s first reaction is to say that being a beneficiary need not interfere with such judgements in that the beneficiary can resolutely strive to discount any pressures deriving from her relationship with her benefactor in her ethical deliberations. There are however, many well documented historical as well as fictional accounts of beneficiaries with powerful and influential patrons coming under intolerable pressures to act in certain ways at the risk of losing their livelihood (like, for instance, those enjoying LADY CATHERINE DE BURGH’S patronage in AUSTEN’S *Pride and Prejudice*). KANT’S mention of the need to be forever “courteous and flattering” towards a benefactor suggests that his views are to be taken against the background of a cultural context of widespread formal and informal patronage in which there is a settled and, for the most part, socially approved pattern of behaviour between patrons and beneficiaries. Viewed

against this background KANT's warnings of the dangers of becoming indebted are more understandable. There are particular situations, like that of receiving benefits from a powerful patron, which can pose threats to other ethical values.

Clearly if indebtedness is to be avoided, there is every reason to avoid putting oneself in a situation where one has an eternal and undischageable debt. But why does one have such a debt? McCONNELL offers a possible interpretation of this curious situation where I can never "get even" with my benefactor, which Kant continues to stress in *Die Metaphysik der Sitten* (KANT 1956, p. 592). McCONNELL suggests that since KANT makes clear in that later work that gratitude is a matter of honouring a person for a kindness he has done us (KANT 1956, p. 591), what is owed to a benefactor, is not ceaseless attempts to benefit him (which can never even the score!), but continuous moral recognition because he was first in benevolence. This moral recognition need not be ostentatious but it will last throughout one's life (McCONNELL 1993, p. 169).

This account of the repaying of the debt as a matter of continuing honour and recognition rather than a ceaseless offering of benefits to one's benefactor seems to capture the spirit of the Kantian view, particularly if we assume that we are here talking about substantial benefits and not small everyday courtesies, like giving a neighbour a lift to the railway station. Also, even if at first the idea of moral recognition of one's benefactor throughout one's life seems an extreme response, it makes more sense than setting a time limit to such regard and mirrors common responses to benefits, like "I shall never forget this," "I shall always be grateful for this." But then it makes KANT's suggestion in the *Lectures on Ethics* that one should, if possible, avoid this situation rather odd. Why should one avoid an occasion for showing respect to another person?

And indeed in *Die Metaphysik der Sitten* KANT no longer thinks that a person should be deterred from becoming a beneficiary by the debt he will incur and argues:

„Eine empfangene Wohltat nicht wie eine Last, deren man gern überhoben sein möchte (weil der so Begünstigte gegen seinen Gönner eine Stufe niedriger steht und dies dessen Stolz kränkt), anzusehen: sondern selbst die Veranlassung dazu als moralische Wohltat aufzunehmen, d. i. als gegebene Gelegenheit, diese Tugend der Menschenliebe ... zu verbinden.“ (Kant 1956, p. 593).

Thus, if one is a beneficiary, one can positively welcome this chance to show respect to others for their kindness.

This shift in KANT's views offers a hint that there may be another way of looking at gratitude outside the debt framework altogether.

### *An Alternative View of Gratitude*

What form might an alternative view of gratitude take? Is it possible perhaps to take a view of gratitude which might more easily accommodate, for instance, help and support between friends.

What is needed is an alternative to the standard debt account in which the beneficiary is in some sense an inferior partner. CLAUDIA CARD (1988) has offered an account in which the beneficiary is seen as a trustee or guardian. This at

least offers the possibility of seeing the relationship between benefactor and beneficiary outside of a debt framework but in the end it raises, I think, more problems than it solves.<sup>2</sup> Such an account needs to retain the elements of a benefactor and beneficiary and the idea that appropriate feelings should obtain between them. But then it needs to be appropriately loosened up so that it is possible to take a more generous attitude towards the motives of the benefactor and what might count as an appropriate response from the beneficiary.

Let me sketch such an account. First, reciprocity is taken out of the framework in which it is seen as a repayment or a *quid pro quo*. It is seen more broadly as a response. It is a response in which the beneficiary honours and celebrates the benefactor's goodwill. This in turn makes possible a continuing and even strengthened relationship with the benefactor. In this way this account highlights BERGER's emphasis on gratitude as a mutual relationship between members of a moral community but relaxes the strict idea of something to be repaid so that the slate is wiped clean. It is also relaxed in such a way that it is appropriate to reciprocate not only when the benefactor has explicitly acted with the beneficiary's good in mind. This account also allows for situations, as in friendships, in which people like to offer gifts or help and in accepting such help and recognising the goodwill of the giver the beneficiary is benefiting the giver. And for this the benefactor too can be grateful, thus creating a beneficent circle of gratitude.

It might be argued that this alternative account, which in light of its emphasis on mutual recognition might be termed the recognition account, is really not very different from the debt account. The elements are basically the same but just in a somewhat less strict relation to one another. But perhaps that underestimates the importance of the shift which has taken place. The beneficiary is not now conceived as in debt, with a need to repay that debt if possible, but as the repository of someone's goodwill and the good things which have flowed to him or her as a result of another's efforts. This can call forth an appreciative, celebratory attitude towards a benefactor which sets up a beneficent circle of concern.

This is not, I think, a utopian flight of fancy. Our everyday thinking about benefactors and beneficiaries offers the possibility of such an alternative ac-

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2 CLAUDIA CARD (1988: 210–124) suggests the trustee or guardian metaphor for the benefactor/beneficiary relationship. Here the benefactor's act can be seen as a matter of entrusting the beneficiary with a deposit, an act which shows confidence in the beneficiary. If, for instance, I let you use some valued possession of mine, you can feel that I trust you and value your projects. This way of looking at the relationship emphasises the valuing of the trustee or guardian of the deposit by the benefactor. If I am the guardian of a deposit I am not in the inferior position highlighted in KANT's account and, in less extreme forms, in other versions of the debt account. On the debt account, the main aim of the beneficiary is to discharge the debt and be free of the obligation. On the trustee account, on the other hand, there is no question of seeing the debt as a burden to be paid off.

The trustee or guardian does, however, as CARD (1988: 123–4) acknowledges, have awkwardnesses. First, a minor point of terminology, it sets gratitude within a legal or banking framework and is thus unfortunately reminiscent of the debt view. There are, however, more troublesome substantive problems with it. One benefits others by accepting deposits or trusts whereas by accepting help or a favour one is benefited. Similarly, a trustee or guardian is someone to whom others are grateful, whereas a beneficiary is grateful to others. And yet, perhaps for this reason, the trustee account does bring out the possibility of mutuality in the benefactor/beneficiary relationship which I have wanted to emphasise.

count. Given the ultimately educational focus of this paper, it is interesting to note, for instance, that as children we first learn gratitude as mutual recognition. "Say ta to grandpa and give him a kiss" is hardly an initiation into moral bookkeeping. It is coming to understand gratitude as a form of love.

Making more space for the recognition view of gratitude could make for more flourishing personal lives as well as a more flourishing polity, as I shall try to show. The shift is away from moral bookkeeping and an attempt to keep in the black and survive by our own efforts towards a happy appreciation of interdependence.

I do not want to argue, however, that we should try to rid ourselves of the debt view of gratitude and simply substitute something like the recognition view. Matters are rather more complicated than that. There is a place for each in the moral life but those places need to be appreciated. The more relaxed recognition view strengthens mutual bonds in families, between friends and between members of the wider community. It encourages people to see themselves as cared for and others as the source of that concern and creates what I have several times referred to as the beneficent circle of gratitude.

By contrast, the place of the debt view is perhaps captured in an important objection to this treatment of gratitude thus far. It could be argued that it has centred on what might be termed everyday gratitude and totally left out of the picture those acts which call forth a massively grateful response from the beneficiary. I have concentrated on lifts in cars, gifts and so on and have not taken account of the gratitude felt and shown in cases where people are saved from drowning or financial ruin. In those latter instances especially where strangers are involved (as, let us say, in the drowning case) gratitude will appropriately be felt as a debt. Someone saved from drowning by a stranger will feel a massive, not to say Kantian undischageable, debt of gratitude to their rescuer. The bond between rescuer and rescued cannot be of the mutual sort because the rescued person was saved under the aspect of a human being in distress not for herself. After the rescue the pair have no reason to see one another again. The gratitude does not reinforce a mutual bond. In a more extended treatment I would like to consider such cases in depth. I have not done so here because (particularly if there is anything in my remarks about their lack of mutuality in many instances) I think the everyday cases of gratitude are more generally significant for the political and educational claims which are my focus here.

### *Gratitude and the State*

Should citizens be grateful? And if so, to whom and for what? Discussions of gratitude and citizenship attempt to use gratitude as a ground of political obligation and most such attempts rely on the debt account (see McCONNELL 1993, chapter VI). The general form of the argument is that the state provides many kinds of benefits for citizens and citizens are thus obligated to show their gratitude by supporting the state, specifically obeying its laws, paying taxes and so on.

In the *Crito* the argument is that the state is responsible for the birth, nurture and education of SOCRATES and thus SOCRATES should not destroy it by flouting its laws when he thinks they are wrong. The relationship between state and citi-

zen is in this way like that between parent and child. It has been argued (KRAUT 1984, discussed in McCONNELL, 1993, p. 183–5) that, although this argument cannot show that citizens are obligated to obey the law, it at least suggests that citizens should have a special respect for the state and concern for its well-being, very much as children should for their parents.

Properly to consider this broad line of argument would involve taking up the many issues raised in this debate. For instance: does the state benefit citizens? Are not the goods the state provides actually provided by the citizens themselves collectively through taxation? Is it appropriate to be grateful for what is due to one as a right? Can gratitude be owed to institutions rather than people? And does gratitude to the state oblige one to obey unjust laws? I shall not enter this debate because it seems to me to rest on the debt account of gratitude which has only slight relevance to a democratic community. It is set in a framework of assumptions, more appropriate to a benevolent dictatorship than a democracy, about a state ruling over citizens to which they are grateful for benefits and to which they make recompense through their obedience. Contemporary commentators on this view (e.g. GOLDMAN, WALKER, SIMMONS) are not unaware of this problem but they tend to react by trying with great sophistication to tweak the conditions here and there to make them fit the democratic situation.

I would like to suggest a more radical solution, namely a move to the recognition account of gratitude. In the context of democratic citizenship the recognition account fits very well the kind of relationship that should ideally obtain between citizens. For in democratic societies, as important as the formal machinery of voting, multi-party systems and so on are the attitudes which citizens have towards one another and in the light of which they live their civic lives. I am thinking of attitudes like trust, honesty, decency, self-respect and so on in the particular forms they must take in democratic societies. For, as I have argued elsewhere (see WHITE, 1996), democratic self-respect is different from the kind of self-respect which might obtain in an hierarchical society and, similarly, trust between citizens and citizens and their government takes a particular form in democratic societies. In the same way, the recognition account of gratitude seems particularly suited to support the flourishing of a democratic polity. As a citizen, rather than looking to see whether people are particularly concerned to benefit me, I appreciate the fact that much that people do does in fact help to make communal civic life less brutish, pleasanter and more flourishing. My appreciation does not lead me to make any kind of precisely calculated repayment but it does affect the way I feel about my fellow citizens and in a broad sense it influences my relations with them.

To take this kind of attitude to fellow citizens might not involve a huge shift in attitudes and values. As the story of CHRISTABEL BIELENBERG and the prisoner illustrates, this way of thinking can come naturally in certain situations. It is a way of looking at the world which is sometimes expressed by immigrants who are appreciative of the manners and social atmosphere found in their newly adopted community. It may even be quite a widespread view amongst long-standing inhabitants of democratic societies but one which, understandably, they do not feel called upon to *express* verbally. It may be expressed rather in the many, varied ways in which they contribute to the shaping of the democratic polity.

One might object to this view by pointing to the existence in allegedly democratic societies of people who feel themselves to be outside the polity, ethnic groups who experience prejudice and hostility, homeless people. They have little or nothing for which to be grateful to their fellow citizens and thus are outside the beneficent circle. I have no wish to refute that. That seems to me an accurate description of the way things actually are for some people in democratic societies but that only underlines the plight of such people in a society which fails to make good its democratic credentials. Perhaps one criterion of an adequately democratic society might be the extent of the beneficent circle of gratitude as recognition. In the old South Africa it was clearly unthinkable. Can it perhaps now slowly develop there? Can it develop in Bosnia? Can it become more all encompassing in the UK?

### *Educational Conclusion*

Let me now suggest some pointers for education in the light of these two conceptions of gratitude. If indeed there are something like these two different ways of looking at gratitude, the debt view and what I have termed the recognition view, parents and teachers will need to introduce children to these views in practice at the appropriate time and place. Later, as part of their development of a nuanced understanding of ethical matters, children will need to be helped to reflect on these different notions and their place in our lives. With young children, parents will be laying foundations of the recognition view in the family and with their children's friends. They will be keen to direct their children's attention to the concern lying behind the benefit rather than the actual gift offered or help rendered. They will also help their children to find ways of expressing gratitude beyond the conventional thank yous so that the child is imaginatively involved in the relationship with the benefactor.

Expressing gratitude as recognition in school will be very much a matter, as with other social virtues (see WHITE 1996), of teachers doing this through the way they and the organisation of the school treat school students. To whom, and how does the school ask students to be grateful? Who shows gratitude to school students?

The school should also be concerned to open children's eyes to the possibility of a grateful response of a wider kind to other citizens in the community, and even beyond it. This is always important but especially so in democratic pluralist societies. Gratitude as mutual recognition can be restricted in its fullhearted sense to one's own group and even if gratitude is felt and expressed towards other groups it may be in some corrupt form, as when people express excessive gratitude to those whom they regard as inferiors. A major aim of the school's education for citizenship should be the widening of the beneficent circle of gratitude as mutual recognition.

It might be thought that these remarks should go further and even perhaps that I should offer something like useful guidelines for schools to follow. Such a suggestion, however, seriously underestimates the role of the professional understanding, skill and imagination which teachers need to bring to the task of

citizenship education, if gratitude, or indeed any other civic virtues, are to be realised in practice.

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