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No Thanks to Gratitude

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Struggling to keep national memory and appreciation alive

TWENTY YEARS AGO the noted political commentator William F. Buckley, Jr. published a short book, *Gratitude*, to promote his version of a plan for national public service. His proposal proved highly controversial, especially among conservatives, with some assailing it as a dangerous expansion of state power and others praising it as a way to rebuild patriotism. Views on the idea of national service at the time were already so firmly fixed, however, that few commentators bothered to consider Buckley's novel justification for the program, which was encapsulated in the work's title.

Buckley introduced his essay by recounting a touching short story by Anatole France, which drew on an old medieval legend. It describes a humble young monk who arrives as a postulant at a monastery possessing the one talent of juggling. Ashamed how this skill compared to the refined proficiencies of the other brothers, who excelled in singing, musical instrumentality, and poetic expression, the young monk slipped furtively into the sanctuary in the dead of night to perform his juggling act before the statue of Our Lady. This gift was all he could offer; but in its very simplicity and sincerity it represented "gratitude reified."

Buckley then posed the question of how young Americans might display devotion to their heritage — not just to the country, but to its laws and practices that have given them their liberty. His answer? A term of public service that would include such nonheroic jobs as helping to care for the old and the sick: "By asking them to make sacrifices we are reminding them that they owe a debt, even as the juggler felt a debt to Our Lady." And if these young citizens do not feel a need to repay this debt, or perhaps even acknowledge that they owe one, still, Buckley insisted, performing service is important, for "the failure to express gratitude . . . brings on the coarsening of the sensibilities, a drying out of the wellsprings of civic and personal virtue." In the end, Buckley's primary goal was less to provide the concrete benefits from service activities than to "shape the national ethos" of the citizenry by developing a capacity for gratitude.

Today, two decades removed from this proposal, little enthusiasm and no funds are available for a program of this kind. The whole idea has vanished from public discussion. What remains of interest, however, are the questions that Buckley introduced about gratitude and its role in political life. In what measure do public actors (or the state) have a stake in expressing or promoting gratitude? Is the virtue of gratitude diminishing in modern America, and if so, what are the sources or causes of its decline?

WHAT IS GRATITUDE?

GRATITUDE IS ONE of the most fundamental and complex of the virtues, overlapping with and undergirding many of the others. Cicero once characterized it as "the mother of all the virtues." Although precision of definition in such matters is neither possible nor desirable — some things being better investigated by what Pascal called an *esprit de finesse* rather than an *esprit de géométrie* — there is need for at least a rough idea of gratitude's meaning.

And where better to begin, at least in an American context, than by consulting our greatest lexicographer, Noah Webster? Webster commences his 1828 dictionary entry on gratitude as follows: "An emotion of the heart, excited by a favor or benefit received; a sentiment of kindness or good will towards a benefactor; thankfulness. Gratitude is an agreeable emotion, consisting in or accompanied with good will to a benefactor, and a disposition to make a suitable return of benefits or services, or when no return can be made, with a desire to see the benefactor prosperous and happy."

The characterization of gratitude as an "emotion" or "sentiment" seems to identify it as a feeling that wells up spontaneously. Even so, it has been subjected to the strongest kind of moral judgment. An incapacity to experience gratitude is commonly regarded not just as unfortunate, but as evidence of a defective soul (or, in the case of a collectivity, of a defective community). At the same time, a capacity for gratitude can be developed, shaped, and trained. How often, for example, do we see earnest parents reminding their children to "say thank you" when receiving a gift? In so doing they are hoping not just to teach good manners — the outward performance of good behavior — but also to form a disposition of character.

Identifying gratitude as an emotion places it within the subject matter of the modern science of psychology.

To identify gratitude as an emotion places it squarely within the subject matter of the modern science of psychology, which until recently paid it surprisingly scant attention. Freudians ignored it, with the notable exception of Melanie Klein. In her *Envy and Gratitude* (1957), Klein got right down to basics, locating the source of gratitude in infancy: "A full gratification at the breast means that the infant feels he has received from his object a unique gift which he wants to keep. This is the basis of gratitude." She goes on to observe that "the more often gratification at the breast is experienced and fully accepted, the more often enjoyment and gratitude, and accordingly the wish to return pleasure, are felt."

Little else was written about gratitude for the next 40 years, until a new school, known as "positive psychology," made it a subject of sustained inquiry. Relying on empirical methods, scholars in this field developed quantitative scales for measuring subjects' experience of gratitude and then proceeded

to correlate that gratitude with other feelings and behaviors. Studies showed that people who experienced greater levels of gratitude also experienced more happiness, less stress, and more satisfaction in personal relationships. High gratitude scores even correlated with sleeping better. Gratitude, in short, can be an important factor in contributing to good mental health.

There are some obvious questions about this research. On one level, we may wonder whether the personality type that enables a subject to experience high levels of gratitude also accounts for the other positive results found to be associated with it. Gratitude, in the parlance of social science, would then be less an independent than an intervening variable. On another level, humanist-oriented thinkers might object to having a virtue so rudely measured and clinically dissected. Would the great Thomas Aquinas, who gave us one of the classic treatments of gratitude, ever have dreamed of employing a psychometric “GRAT scale”? Humanists might also take exception to the idea that gratitude “pays.” They would argue that a virtue is a virtue because of its intrinsic beauty or nobility, not because of its utility. In fairness to the new science, however, only the most severe of moralists deny that virtue sometimes brings its own psychic rewards. Recall Webster’s description of gratitude as an “agreeable emotion,” probably meaning agreeable to the one who experiences it as well as to those who observe it.

Psychological investigation certainly provides insights, but gratitude is surely something more than just an emotion or feeling. It is an objective standard of behavior. Gratitude is generally made known through conduct — hence such well-known phrases as “displaying gratitude,” “showing gratitude,” “expressing gratitude,” or more strongly, “paying a debt (or the dues) of gratitude.” The dimension of “performance” is necessary if only for the practical reason that no one can see into the heart of another: “For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him?” (1 Corinthians 2:11). Gratitude has a social aspect and is incomplete if it does not include the act of acknowledgment. The requirement of performance transforms gratitude from a mere feeling to a virtue, in the ordinary understanding of doing or practicing what is a good.

Gratitude has the special characteristic that its outer form should also be thought to express an inner disposition.

The performance dimension of gratitude looms larger in public than in private life. Within the narrower circle of family or friends, the minutest of gestures, like a smile or a warm look, may be sufficient to reveal an inner emotion. For a broader public, however, such reserve will not do. Gratitude must be expressed in a record or public event. Following the battle of Chattanooga, for example, President Abraham Lincoln wrote a letter — already a quasi-official act — to General Ulysses S. Grant expressing his “profoundest gratitude” for the “skill, courage, and perseverance” displayed in achieving victory, and the Congress followed up shortly thereafter with a joint resolution to the same effect. When it comes to the political realm, the use of such terms as the “duty” or “obligation” to express gratitude is no mere figure of speech. Webster, in the next sentence of his entry, concurs: “Gratitude is a virtue of the highest excellence, as it implies a feeling and generous heart, and a proper *sense of duty*.”

The need to display gratitude in public life leads to the development of “rules” respecting the time, place, and manner for the performance of the rites. Yet gratitude has the special characteristic that its outer form should also be thought to express an inner disposition; it includes sincerity, which means that people are always looking for evidence of good intention. Gratitude in this respect differs from many other virtues, like practicing justice or even honoring one’s father and mother, where the state of mind is, by comparison, a lesser consideration in judging the virtue and where doing one’s duty counts most. The importance of “interiority” for gratitude has the consequence that deviations from the ordinary forms are sometimes permitted, and perhaps even encouraged, on the grounds that mechanically following convention can betray a lack of genuine feeling.

Still, rules are important. Matters cannot be left up to each individual, as if what he or she does is all that counts. Gratitude involves considering the times and occasions when it ought to be felt. It must accord with a standard, even if there is no simple formula for governing conduct for all occasions. Many factors, including the intention of the benefactor, the degree of sacrifice incurred, and the size of the gift, must be taken into account.

In cases where gratitude is expected, the failure to make a respectful and proper acknowledgement, or, worse, the display of a willful disregard toward the benefactor, opens one to the charge of ingratitude. Even the proud must learn to submit to the yoke of gratitude. Ingratitude is more than just the obverse of gratitude; it is a greater vice than gratitude is a virtue.

GRATITUDE AND CULTURE

THE IMPORTANCE OF gratitude is seen in its relationship to three great constituents of American and Western culture: religion, understandings of human nature, and doctrines of social change.

The connection of gratitude to religion is one of the major themes of religious thought. Martin Luther, for instance, called gratitude “the basic Christian attitude,” and it has been at the heart of the liturgies of both Christianity and Judaism. Its centrality turns most on the biblical view that there is no necessity for God to have created the heavens and earth, made man in his likeness, or shown his grace. God is accordingly the ultimate benefactor, having given freely these greatest of gifts. For this reason, to cite Webster again, “The love of God” is considered the “sublimest gratitude.”

The relationship between gratitude to God and gratitude for persons and the things of this world has been a matter of much debate. Some argue that religious gratitude is destructive of important aspects of secular gratitude. Either religious gratitude encourages people to focus all attention on the divine, leaving no place for feelings about matters of this world, or it extends the feeling of gratitude indiscriminately to the humblest parts of creation, diminishing the special status that should be accorded to noble acts in the political realm. Others contend that religious gratitude has the effect of deepening and cultivating people’s general disposition for the virtue without causing any distortion in perspective. If religious faith is diminishing, as many worry is now the case, our society will experience a loss of capacity to feel gratitude across the board.

Gratitude, though not itself a theoretical concept, is of such importance as a virtue that it has played a central role in many of the great philosophical debates about the character of human nature. It has served in particular as a stumbling block to the full acceptance of the general Enlightenment

understanding of anthropology, the premise of which is that people act only in calculation of their self-interest. Gratitude presupposes that people can sincerely wish for the well-being of others and give freely in acknowledgement of benefits received. If this is the case, then humans cannot be said to be driven exclusively by the search for their own advantage; they are capable, in some measure, of engaging in disinterested behavior.

The difference between these two understandings of human nature is paradoxically highlighted by the extensive reliance on economic terms to explain gratitude. Common expressions include “paying a debt of” or being “owed” gratitude. The terms are metaphorical in that they refer to activity in one realm to help illustrate meaning in another. But the language serves in a special way to call attention to the qualitative differences between the two realms. A “debt” of gratitude is of a different kind than a debt on a home mortgage, and what is “owed” to a benefactor — say, the fireman who has saved one’s family — is hardly comparable to an obligation to the credit card company. We are reminded here of another world of exchange than the market and another kind of currency than dollars and cents. This other world is the realm of the gift, where those who feel gratitude give freely, not only to their benefactors, but also, in a new spirit, to others. A widening circle of solicitude for others is the anticipated result of this alternative economy.

Gratitude presupposes that people can sincerely wish for the well-being of others and acknowledge benefits received.

The challenge that gratitude poses to the calculative model leaves that model’s proponents with little choice but to try to undermine the genuineness of gratitude. Their preferred approach has been to describe gratitude as an elaborately concealed form of self-interest, as in La Rochefoucauld’s observation that “gratitude, in the majority of men, is merely the secret hope of further favors.” Thomas Hobbes, the great master of artful redescription, proceeded more indirectly, initially defining gratitude in a traditional manner, as a response to a gift freely given and naming it one of his “laws of nature.” He then went on, however, to observe that a gift is never bestowed for the primary benefit of another, as “no man giveth, but with intention of good to himself.” What holds for the donor must hold for the beneficiary. Gratitude is what the recipient displays so that a donor “will have no reasonable cause to repent of his free will.” It would nevertheless be an error to view Hobbes’s account as an exercise in cynicism. His praise of the forms of gratitude should be taken for what it was: a recognition of gratitude’s supreme importance in facilitating social intercourse inside the kind of decent, middlebrow society he was seeking to promote.

The claim that humans are capable of genuine gratitude must be distinguished from the much broader claim that gratitude is so widespread and potent that it can supply the adhesive force to hold a society together. Proponents of the calculative model deliberately conflate these two claims, hoping that by showing the naïveté of the second claim they can call into question the existence of gratitude in any form. The rhetorical trick here is to try to bury the real man by attacking the straw man. But no one should be fooled. The truth is that most who cherish gratitude are well aware of its limitations; they know, no less than do those who embrace the calculative model, that gratitude is too weak to supply the bonds of political obligation and too fragile to create the attachments required to form large societies.

It is not just the limitations of human nature, however, that recommend caution in applying gratitude to political affairs. We must also consider the purpose of political collectivities in their relation with each other, which is for each nation to promote its legitimate interests. From this fact it follows that the virtues must be ranked differently for nations than for individuals. George Washington famously developed this theme in his Farewell Address. He began his argument by reminding Americans, in a realist vein, of the error of counting too heavily on the gratitude of other nations: “It is folly in one nation to look for disinterested favors from another.” But it soon becomes apparent that his purpose at the time was less to offer instruction on what to expect from others than to educate his fellow citizens in their own conduct. It would be a grave mistake, he argued, for us to allow gratitude to dictate our foreign policy, which is exactly what many were then urging by calling for America to side with France, our ally in the Revolution, in its war with Britain.

It is not just the limitations of human nature that recommend caution in applying gratitude to politics.

Washington’s counsel rested on a deeper realism than that found in the calculative model, in which all action is held to be self-interested. This model, he knew, was based on a misleading simplification. Feelings of gratitude in fact can have a powerful influence on political affairs and lead a nation to act against its best interests. A wise nation, guided by a genuine realism, must control even its generous feelings. In the dealings among nations, the regulating virtue should be justice, not gratitude.

Finally, gratitude is centrally implicated in ideologies of social change, such as communism or socialism. Far from being exalted as a virtue, in these ideologies it is viewed as a conservative instrument that protects the status quo and prevents progressive social and political transformation. Differences between the left and right in modern democracies are often best seen in each group’s posture toward gratitude.

We might like to think that gratitude should be possible as a simple human reaction in almost any political or social situation. The Roman philosopher Seneca, for example, spoke of instances in which a master owes gratitude to his slave when the slave provides a benefaction beyond his expected duty. This said, it is also true that gifts are proffered in a given social context, with an existing distribution of power and set of laws defining property. Once the spotlight is turned on the character of this social context — and this is what doctrines of social change do — there is no avoiding the question of the justice of these arrangements. If the benefactor derives power from an illegitimate source or holds property that is ill-gotten, then how can his gift be entitled to receive gratitude?

This line of reasoning obviously cannot be dismissed out of hand. Americans, for example, recoil today at the gratitude that minions sometimes show to their lords in feudal societies, equating it with servility. Ideologues of social change deliberately totalize this kind of argument and eliminate any place for normal human interactions. If, as they insist, everything important is tied to the social structure, and if the existing social structure is deemed exploitative at the core, then all acts of gratitude become suspect. Gratitude is seen as a tool of social control designed to keep people happily, even

gratefully, in their places.

Herein is the source of the anti-gratitudinarianism that is rife not only among communists and socialists, but among most who oppose capitalism and demand reparations for past injustices. For people of this persuasion, the disposition to gratitude must be undermined and destroyed if social justice is to be realized. Thus, in the end, gratitude is the most partisan of the virtues.

PUBLIC GRATITUDE

PUBLIC GRATITUDE REFERS to the gratitude that the nation owes to individuals, groups, and, by extension, institutions, for gifts that have redounded to the public benefit. Obvious examples of people deserving of public gratitude would be military or political heroes and members of the armed forces — especially those who have served in war. Institutions or objects deserving of public gratitude include the Constitution.

Maintaining the public's gratitude for people and objects such as these is a special concern of public policy. The challenge sometimes takes care of itself, in instances in which gratitude is spontaneously forthcoming. Such was the case during World War II, when public gratitude flowed freely for the military heroes and for the many who served in the war effort. Likewise, Americans today feel gratitude for the September 11th passengers on Flight 93 who acted to save the Capitol or White House from destruction, and for the many firemen and first responders in New York City who risked or sacrificed their lives at Ground Zero. The matter is inevitably different, however, where the gift or sacrifice has not been immediately experienced, but involves something done in the past. Already, there has been a waning of the spontaneous feeling of gratitude toward those who served in World War II.

Gratitude that continues beyond the period of direct experience is not the same emotion as the contemporaneous variant. It must be cultivated by different means, and it requires greater reflection on the enduring significance of the gift. Abraham Lincoln focused on this theme in his first public address, "The Perpetuation of our Political Institutions," given in 1838, when he was only 28 years old. One of the great challenges for his generation of Americans, he stated, was to keep alive and intact the principles and institutions of the generation of the Founders: "This task of gratitude to our fathers, justice to ourselves, duty to posterity, and love for our species in general, all imperatively require us faithfully to perform." But Lincoln went on to observe that appreciation for the Founders will "grow more and more dim by the lapse of time" because events of the founding will no longer be part of a living history, a "history bearing the indubitable testimonies of its own authenticity, in the limbs mangled, in the scars of wounds received, in the midst of the very scenes related — a history, too, that could be read and understood alike by all, the wise and the ignorant, the learned and the unlearned." If there is to be gratitude for a past gift, for something that is no longer part of living history, it must come from the determined efforts of every generation. Each must devise means to ensure that memories are preserved and that an understanding of what those in the past gave to posterity remains palpable to those who follow.

Civic education should have as one of its principal aims the maintenance of the memory of the nation's benefactors.

Lincoln was proposing a policy for fostering public memory to sustain gratitude for past gifts. Today, that policy relies chiefly on three instruments: speeches, civic education, and monuments.

Public speeches of leading officials, especially presidential inaugural addresses, function in part to remind Americans of their link to the past. A few of these speeches have a special status, stretching beyond the moment to cultivate a general disposition for gratitude. The most outstanding example is Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. Ronald Reagan's 1984 speech at Normandy, commemorating the fortieth anniversary of D-Day, is one of the best modern examples. Unfortunately, an important 19th-century tradition of pronouncing July 4th Orations, in which politicians and leading citizens at all levels would remember the founding, has long since fallen by the wayside.

Civic education broadly conceived — which includes instruction in schools and universities, displays in museums, and the content of some film and television programming — should have as one of its principal aims the maintenance of the memory of the nation's benefactors. For younger students, civic education should seek to create an affective attachment between the citizen and the nation's past, helping to promote what Lincoln referred to as "the political religion of the nation." As students move further along, education should include in-depth and critical inquiry into the American experience, on the premise, best stated by the 19th-century historian Richard Hildreth, that what "is due to our fathers and ourselves, [and] due to truth and philosophy," is to present the past "unbedaubed by patriotic rouge." This approach works to maintain gratitude, Hildreth believed, because, in the case of American history, "the best apology is to tell the story exactly as it was."

Finally, there are monuments, such as the Flight 93 national memorial at Shanksville, Pennsylvania, the Iwo Jima memorial, and the Freedmen's Monument to Abraham Lincoln in Washington, D.C.'s Lincoln Park, which commemorates his emancipation of slaves. Not all or even most public monuments, of course, have the aim of instilling gratitude. Some are reminders of an important tragic event, such as the monument at Ground Zero or the monument at Pearl Harbor; others have the special purpose of helping to teach principles, such as the Jefferson Memorial in Washington. The monuments having a special relation to gratitude are those that, in what they depict or symbolize, are meant to remind the viewer of a benefaction that had great significance for the nation and that may have been paid for with enormous sacrifice.

Not all or even most public monuments aim to instill gratitude. But erecting a monument is often an act of gratitude itself.

The experience of viewing such monuments is a subject worthy of analysis. While visitors reflect on the physical display, they may also wonder who

built it and why. Erecting a monument — conceiving of the project, sustaining the effort to execute it, securing financing, and designing it — is often an act of gratitude itself. This aspect of the experience takes place not just in the viewer's mind, but is ordinarily explained in the plaque of dedication, which is like a play within a play, in which the history of the project is revealed. Visitors are thus simultaneously seeing two things: a display of gratitude, and a display of an act of displaying gratitude.

This second dimension of a monument sometimes proves as instructive as the first. Take the case of the Freedmen's Monument, where the inscription on the pedestal offers a remarkable instance of "gratitude reified":

In grateful memory of Abraham Lincoln. This monument was erected . . . with funds contributed solely by emancipated Citizens of the United States declared free by his Proclamation, January 1st A.D. 1863. The first contribution of five dollars was made by Charlotte Scott, a freed woman of Virginia, being her first earnings in freedom and consecrated by her suggestion and request, on the day she heard of President Lincoln's death, to build a monument to his memory.

The Freedmen's Monument adds yet another level to the experience of understanding gratitude. In a wonderful essay by political scientist Diana Schaub, entitled "Learning to Love Lincoln: Frederick Douglass's Journey from Grievance to Gratitude," we discover that Frederick Douglass, the greatest orator of his day, was the keynote speaker at the monument's dedication in 1876, telling his audience:

The sentiment that brings us here today is one of the noblest that can stir and thrill the human heart. It has crowned and made glorious the high places of all civilized nations with the grandest and most enduring works of art, designed to illustrate the characters and perpetuate the memories of great public men. It is the sentiment which from year to year adorns with fragrant and beautiful flowers the graves of our loyal, brave, and patriotic soldiers who fell in defense of the Union and liberty. It is the sentiment of gratitude and appreciation . . . a sentiment which can never die while the Republic lives.

Douglass was deeply involved in the whole project and took care to make sure that the monument was separated from a parallel plan to memorialize Lincoln by raising funds to build a college for black Americans. Although Douglass believed the college to be a worthy cause, combining it with the monument would, he thought, tarnish the act of gratitude by mixing it with an effort to secure a benefit. Gratitude, which Douglass called "one of the holiest sentiments of the human heart," is expressed in the purity of its intention. The form — in this instance, the building of the monument — had to appear true to the intent.

This last part of the story teaches something further about gratitude. While there is great beauty in the reaction of the heart — as illustrated by Charlotte Scott's donation — there is also something noble in the reflection on, and understanding of, the essence of what a monument is — as found in the thoughts of Frederick Douglass.

RELIGIOUS GRATITUDE IN PUBLIC LIFE

THE VIRTUE OF gratitude enjoys a special status in American public life. The obligation to display gratitude is recognized by a statute, enacted in 1941, that establishes an official national holiday of Thanksgiving. The statute codified a long practice, unbroken from Abraham Lincoln's proclamation in 1863, of a presidential declaration fixing each year a day of thanksgiving. Before Lincoln, Presidents Washington, Adams, and Madison proclaimed thanksgiving days, in some instances at the urging of Congress, but the practice ended with Madison.

Under the terms of the statute, the holiday has no direct religious connection. History makes clear, however, that the expression of gratitude to God for our national blessings was originally at the core of the whole exercise. The opening phrase of Washington's first proclamation in 1789 reads: "Whereas it is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly to implore his protection and favor . . ." Every proclamation since has continued the practice of acknowledging God, although President Obama caused a small stir in 2009, when he did not directly thank God, but quoted from Washington's proclamation. If this was a subtle attempt to introduce a change in the character of the holiday, it seems to have been foiled by the discovery. Chastened by the criticism, President Obama returned to traditional piety in 2010, uttering the magic words "we lift up our hearts in gratitude to God for our many blessings, for one another, and for our Nation."

A sense of the religious character of these proclamations can be gleaned from a passage, not at all untypical, from John Kennedy's declaration in 1963:

Let us therefore proclaim our gratitude to Providence for manifold blessings — let us be humbly thankful for inherited ideals — and let us resolve to share those blessings and those ideals with our fellow human beings throughout the world . . . On that day let us gather in sanctuaries dedicated to worship and in homes blessed by family affection to express our gratitude for the glorious gifts of God; and let us earnestly and humbly pray that He will continue to guide and sustain us in the great unfinished tasks of achieving peace, justice, and understanding among all men and nations and of ending misery and suffering wherever they exist.

The religious dimension of this day of gratitude has for quite some time now been supplemented (or tamed) by tying the holiday into a day of memory of the Pilgrims and their encounter with the Indians. In this vein, it is more often celebrated as "Thanksgiving Day" than, in JFK's words, "a day of national thanksgiving." Indeed, the earliest holidays proclaimed by Washington, Adams, and Madison made no mention of the Pilgrims, and the dates they selected bore no special connection to the harvest (some were in the winter and the spring). The link to the Pilgrims, once resisted by many Southerners, has added to the quaintness of the holiday and made it acceptable to many public educators as a day that the schools can celebrate. More recently, it has provided an occasion for some nice lessons on cultural sensitivity. President Obama's 2009 proclamation began with a homily reminding Americans of the spirit that "brought together the newly arrived Pilgrims and the Wampanoag tribe — who had been living and thriving around Plymouth, Massachusetts, for thousands of years — in an autumn harvest feast centuries ago. This Thanksgiving Day, we reflect on the compassion and contributions of Native Americans, whose skill in agriculture helped the early colonists survive, and whose rich culture continues to

add to our Nation's heritage."

It is doubtful that presidents today attach anything like the significance that Washington did to their Thanksgiving proclamations, if indeed they ever get around to reading their own words. Some proclamations bear the stamp of having been crafted by the B-team in the speechwriters' office. Still, the tradition continues, and the connection of Thanksgiving to public expressions of gratitude to God requires us to ask in what measure government has an interest in cultivating the religious aspect of gratitude, and in what measure a religious people, through their public officials, may give thanks to God. Different answers have been given to these questions. George Washington believed that governmental encouragement of religion, where there was no violation of constitutional principle, was both permissible and, in light of the public benefits of religion, good policy. Many have taken the opposite view, some out of animosity for religion, others from an understanding of what they think the Constitution, or a liberal political system, allows. James Madison, who twice agreed to declare a day of thanksgiving, evidently had doubts about his action and probably let the practice lapse because of them. In a later reflection he commented: "Altho' recommendations only, they [official expressions of religious gratitude] imply a religious agency, making no part of the trust delegated to political rulers."

The legal standing of the holiday of Thanksgiving (and for that matter Christmas) is not an issue today, as neither holiday is officially designated as religious. (It is another matter for the National Day of Prayer, established by statute in 1952, where the religious aspect is integral to the statute.) Still, some dispute about Thanksgiving continues, for it is clear that custom connects it to religion. For most people of faith, this practice is generally seen as a natural and fitting expression of the spirit of the people. For those who are unfriendly to religion, however, any mention of religious gratitude under the cover of public authority should be discouraged or banned. The wall of separation of religion and politics can never be high enough.

PUBLIC POLICY AND PRIVATE GRATITUDE

THE FINAL ASPECT of the intersection of government and gratitude relates to the possible effects of government action on the status of gratitude within the private sphere, among individuals and groups in society. As a general formula, many would probably agree that government should seek to encourage the stock of virtues within the populace, provided that it acts within its rightful and prescribed boundaries; and further, that government should try to avoid enacting measures that might jeopardize or diminish virtue, unless there are compensating benefits to be had. Beginning from this logic, the philosopher Roger Scruton recently warned that many governmental policies expanding the scope of the state have interfered with opportunities for the practice of philanthropy and thus for responses of gratitude.

Scruton's approach rests on an analysis of the effect of state actions on what Tocqueville called citizen "mores" (moeurs). Citizens whose habits and attitudes are shaped by an expanding welfare state are more likely to conceive the social world in terms of rights:

When you receive what is yours by right you don't feel grateful. Hence people who receive their education and health-care from the state are less inclined to give to schools and hospitals in their turn — something that is borne out vividly by the figures concerning charitable giving . . . The spirit of gratitude retreats from the social experience, and in countries like France and Germany, where civil society is penetrated at every level by the state, people give little or nothing to charity, and regard gifts with suspicion, as attempts to privatize what should be a matter of public and impartial concern.

Scruton allows that considerations other than promoting virtue, in particular questions of distributive justice, come into play in deciding public policy. Still, the point of his essay, entitled "Gratitude and Grace," is that a concern for virtue should weigh much more heavily in judging measures than it now does. Public policy tends to be formulated on the basis of concrete demands and benefits, and ignores or minimizes considerations of longer-term moral effects. Scruton also identifies a powerful animus against gratitude operating just beneath the surface in contemporary political debates. Proponents of an expanded welfare state often view the capitalist element of the current system as fundamentally unjust. In line with doctrines of social transformation, many regard a disposition in favor of gratitude as an insidious mechanism of social control that keeps people feeling grateful for the crumbs they receive.

Scruton combines his treatment of gratitude with a discussion of the related themes of gift, love, charity, and philanthropy. As gratitude is so comprehensive a virtue, there is a danger of mingling these qualities under one term, losing track of what is specific to each. It is well to remember, however, that philanthropy is less an expression of gratitude than it is the source of its obligation; gratitude is mostly the affair of the recipient. As for philanthropists, a number of motives actuate their giving, including self-interest (a search for social standing or for contacts that can pay off down the line), devotion to a cause, acceptance of a duty or command to give charity, and a love of humanity. Yet it is also true that gratitude is itself sometimes a motive of philanthropy, as in gifts given to hospitals and schools in gratitude for what these institutions may have done for the benefactor or his or her family. Donations for cultivating public memory, including civic education, also figure prominently among those in which gratitude serves as an important motive. Many philanthropists in America feel strongly that they have received a great benefit, in the form of the blessings of a free country, that has afforded them an opportunity to make or keep their fortune. They wish to give something back to their country, and in what better way than promoting public gratitude.

IS GRATITUDE TODAY a diminishing virtue, less evident than it was in the past? And if so, how much of this decline is due to government or political action and how much to general trends that are operating in the culture at large?

These are difficult questions, and it is hard to prove any answer beyond a reasonable doubt. Many thinkers today contend that there has been a steep decline in the ethos of gratitude in modern America, citing as causes failures in civic education and a diminishing influence of religion. In addition, our wealth and technology appear to have increased expectations and allowed many people to take much for granted. The relative security of our time, in which there have been no wars on a major scale, may also contribute to this decline. Still, the disposition for gratitude can never be eliminated. It resides in the human heart. There will always be occasions, whether born of concerns for our own well-being and that of our loved ones, or of the safety of the nation, where the power of a gift breaks through the veneer of a sense of control and security and makes us feel grateful.

It may be, however, that we are too prone today to search for trends, as if the only reason to validate a concern about a virtue is if conditions are deteriorating. For most enduring human problems, trends occur at the margins, and slight changes, which are usually beyond our powers to detect, do not really touch the essence of the matter. When it comes to public gratitude, whatever trend may be afoot, we can be certain that sustaining a living history will always prove to be a difficult challenge. If we are to be true to the spirit of the gifts of those who created this nation, keeping alive its great memories is something we owe not just to ourselves, but to all mankind.

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