

The Nature of Ingratitude

by Christopher DeGroot (March 2018)



The Muse Inspiring the Poet, Henri Rousseau, 1909

What I do is me: for that I came.

—Gerard Manley Hopkins

Our needs, philosophers have long said, are essentially

negative in character, deriving from our natural state of lack. Now our desire is for food, now it is for sleep, now it is for sex. When does it ever end? Ah, only in death, our greatest fear.

A cheerful condition! And yes, it is no wonder that, like someone who remains vaguely agitated and weary after getting over an illness, we do not naturally incline to feel gratitude in any lasting or deeply meaningful sense. Rather, this virtue must be taught from without; more precisely, *impressed upon us* in youth; and, like all virtues, willed again and again, until it becomes a habit, a reliable aspect of our character.

Because it is painful to be hungry, it feels good to eat, but it is not in our nature to feel so fortunate for *having* eaten, for from beginning to end, the need has been a burden, like an itch to be scratched. We naturally feel *relief*, like a man who is glad to have finished a race, but gratitude is something different from relief. It is positive, and arises most readily, and most often, where there is affection and sympathy, as in a family, or among friends, for example.

Accordingly, unless it is a result of moral education, we are generally not grateful beings although, of course, many would like to believe otherwise, just as we all say we believe in equality, fairness, justice, and so on, even as our behavior demonstrates that the converse is true much of the time.

In a clear sense, then, ingratitude is an unsurprising phenomenon. Human psychology being what it is, it would be rather strange if gratitude, like the rest of morality, was not frequently a sham, as though a person should say thank you for having to climb a mountain for no evident reason (after all, we all, with our endlessly wanting bodies and minds,

simply *find* ourselves in this world), and over and over again at that. Indeed, like hypocrisy, ingratitude is a pernicious yet common effect of unavoidable human self-interest. Notice that certain holidays—Veteran’s Day, Memorial Day, Thanksgiving—commonly have something hollow about them, just as the words please and thank you often do. Indeed, what are these holidays, for many of us, besides occasions to indulge in pleasure, that seeming justification, here in America, for existence itself?

Here is another telling example. Although no nation can afford to dispense with its military—indeed, the state itself is essentially a form of defense—still, many seem not to even consider how much we all owe to the armed forces. The great exceptions are, of course, persons whose intimates have served in them, so that experience has given them a sense of how very necessary the military is, just as I have some idea of the misery of rheumatoid arthritis, since my own mother has that disease.

Other public servants—firemen, the police—are also taken for granted. The police, thanks to our uniquely dishonest and inept media, are often made to appear as mere villains. And yet, unless you have lived a sheltered life (as indeed many have in this country), you cannot possibly be unaware of how much more brutal and unjust life would be without those who enforce the law. In fact, the law itself would not even exist, just as taxation is only feasible at the threat of imprisonment and fines.

Still, I do not wish to overstate or to be unduly harsh. There are surely many good people, people who do appreciate our public servants, but who simply don’t do so often enough, or perhaps not sufficiently, because they hardly reflect on just how much they need those persons. After all, these days we are

all caught up in our own affairs, and where the moralist would have one be grateful, it is common for people to rather turn to their next interest or task, as though there were nothing else in the world. "Happiness is leisure," said Aristotle. "Time is money," say contemporary fools.

Again, where there is deep gratitude, it is generally bound up with a significant personal relationship, so that it derives some of its force from affection. Now it is for this reason that gratitude is often a source of loyalty. Indeed, where there is a grateful person, there is likely to be a loyal one. But there are many instances in which although gratitude would seem to be in order, there is no loyalty, given the lack of a personal bond. Such relations inspire no affection, and therefore, nothing properly positive in regard to either virtue. Notwithstanding the requirements of morality, human psychology, if the relation is superficial, may lack a certain affective impetus. Then, human failings—ingratitude, disloyalty—are only to be expected.

Alas, this is perhaps more common in our time than in any other. For we live in the age of mass man; our relations, in many instances, are as tedious and shallow as spam e-mail. Nor has there even been anything like this in human history. I look at my city block and think: "After having lived here for almost three years, I still know only a few of my neighbors, and it would be foolish to expect any of them to assist me in a jam." My ancestors, by contrast, lived their days among an extended family, surrounded by other families, who had known one another for generations. Today we are constantly dealing with strangers, and more and more, not even in the flesh but digitally. Given the facelessness (in many cases, literally) of so many of our interactions, it is inevitable that they should be so devoid of those moral virtues which philosophers and moralists have always valued.

Then there is the liberalization of our era, the increase in autonomy that has become more powerful in proportion as traditional religious mores have declined. In his acute *The Tragedy of Liberalism*, Patrick Deenen [writes](#):

Training at dorm parties and the fraternities at one's college were the ideal preparation for a career in the mortgage bond market, and the financial frat party of Wall Street more generally. The mortgage industry rested upon the financial equivalent of college "hookups," random encounters with strangers in which appetites (for outsized debt or interest) were sated without any care for the consequences for the wider community . . . responsibility—and cost-free loans were mutually satisfactory and wholly liberating from the constraints of an older financial order. But much as on college campuses, these arrangements led to gross irresponsibility and abuse, damaging communities and demolishing lives.

There is not only tragedy here, but profound irony, too. Liberalism, the story goes, was supposed to free us from ignorance and superstition. Mankind, guided by science, would be wiser than men such as Socrates and Plato. Democracy for all, and enlightenment now! as the Panglossian Steven Pinker says, offering readers the facile good news that, like other lies, never goes out of fashion. In fact, however, if we look closely at human life, we can see that, in all areas, it is increasingly characterized by an utterly Satanic instrumentalism. In practice, autonomy, now the last universal good, means that common concerns are determined by persons who acknowledge no authority save their own. Therefore, that is good which suits my own interests, and to this everyone had

better yield. Thus, the hookups and general indulgence of frat parties, as Deenan rightly observes, is not so different from what happens on Wall Street. Each contains a disregard for the well-being and long-term interests of others. Absolute individual freedom, this might be called, though one may want to ask: Was it for *this*, all our ancestors' labor and sacrifice?

For the meaning of life now consists of pleasures, the more intense and exciting the better, and to this end our fellows may be manipulated. As I argued in "[Sleeping on a Volcano](#)," the great evil of modernity—which you need not be a believer to perceive—is that, without the *intrinsic* fear of punishment—without, that is to say, the fear of God—there are sure to be many more people who, when it comes to others, will try to get away with whatever they can. Accordingly, many are quite willing to treat other people as mere means to their own ends, and to skillfully deceive them in order to do so.

Indeed, manipulation and deceit now define many a career, which others—the less “successful”—behold with envy and admiration. Through Tinder and other dating applications (such unintended comedy in that phrase), the young learn to use each other for desire's sake. Such is the [essence](#) of “love” in 2018. In a notorious example, about which none of us should know, the matter being private, the actor Aziz Ansari met a young woman at a party while she was on a date with *another man*. Of course, that did not prevent them from exchanging phone numbers. She seems to have wanted to gain in some fashion through his status, while he seemed to want her for sex. Later, she sought revenge for her own bad decisions by trying to ruin his career. It was a humiliating act which many young women, themselves unhappy and clueless concerning love, could not but support. It was mankind preying upon one another like monsters of the deep, as my wise friend Tony Esolen said

of the fiasco to me.

It is a simple insight, and yet endlessly profound in its implications and effects, that once relations which were formerly determined by need (and longstanding customs born of it) become determined by choice, things just don't work out, in too many instances. On the whole, a people's freedom amounts to a vast confusion and battle of conflicting interests, an incoherent struggle of sovereign wills with no compromise in sight. Since only autonomy matters, or anyway, since nothing matters more than it, the only thing to be regretted is not succeeding at your selfish endeavors, or being punished for your failed actions. Finally, given the failure of our corrupt universities, accurate knowledge of former and better ways of living is not even imparted. The past, after all, is supposed to have been nothing but so many terrible isms: sexism, racism, imperialism, and on and on. Amid all this moral squalor, which seems normal to many, it being all they have ever known, gratitude, like other virtues, is sure to be lacking.

Yet, however that may be, since gratitude, though a virtue, is difficult and indeed contrary to our nature, we should make a serious effort to practice it, to make it a consistent aspect of our conduct. For gratitude has the wonderful effect of ennobling our attitude, so that our very perception of things changes for the better. It also makes our relations with each other more pleasant. I think of those lofty lines of Baudelaire's: "*Cette gratitude infinie et sublime,/ Qui sort de la paupière ainsi qu'un long soupir.*" ("*That sublime and infinite gratitude,/ Which glistens under the eyelids like a sigh.*")

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