

# The Overselling of Gratitude

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## The Overselling of Gratitude

By Alfie Kohn

Being told that all of us should regularly take time to list the things we're grateful for sets my teeth on edge. It took me a while to figure out why.

I realize that anyone who criticizes gratitude (really? *gratitude*??) risks being labeled not merely a contrarian but a curmudgeon, and even the fact that I wrote a book some years ago called *The Brighter Side of Human Nature* may not be enough to immunize me from that label. So I probably should start by offering reassurance that there are plenty of things for which I feel grateful. If someone does something nice for me, I appreciate it and don't hesitate to say so. What troubles me, by contrast, is the idea, propounded with evangelical fervor these days, that generic gratitude should define our way of being in the world.

No doubt such a stance makes sense for people who believe that an invisible, supernatural Being watches over them, decides what happens to them, and responds to their requests. In that case, it's probably not a bad move to keep glancing at the sky while saying, "Hey, thanks!" – and also maybe to sacrifice a goat periodically, or at least buy a dead turkey once a year and invite one's extended family over to eat it. One isn't just grateful *for* but grateful *to*, which is why the vast majority of quotes and aphorisms about gratitude that you'll find online are religious.

Conversely, if you don't believe sunsets were deliberately created for their beauty, it would make no sense to respond with gratitude. Pleasure, sure. But not gratitude. Which leaves us to ponder why so many secular folks – albeit those who like to describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious” and enthuse at length about meditation and mindfulness – have accepted a fundamentally religious idea like living a life of gratitude.

For some, the answer appears to be self-interest. Just as certain psychologists have argued that generosity confers emotional and physiological advantages on the giver – a defense of altruism for which the most polite word would be “paradoxical” – we're now hearing that gratitude will make you more content, more optimistic, less selfish, better able to defer gratification, and even a sounder sleeper.

Maybe.[1] But “count your blessings in order that you'll have more of them” is a bit instrumental as justifications go, and there's something suspect about feelings of gratitude that one has adopted with just such objectives in mind. In any case, more important than whether this posture will pay off is whether it's intrinsically justified – that is, whether it makes sense in its own right. And I'm not at all sure that it does.

Look at it this way: If there's something wrong with being perpetually sour and discontented, why wouldn't we also object to erring in the opposite direction? If we think those who are constantly carping should take stock of what they have and quit their First World whining, why not push the habitually happy (“There must be a pony in here somewhere!”) to contemplate what *isn't* satisfactory, to express displeasure when doing so is the apt response to a given turn of events? And if their own lives really are a nonstop delight, couldn't they summon some indignation on behalf of all those humans whose lives clearly suck?

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On the last Thursday of November 1931, about two hundred people gathered near Union Square in New York City for what was billed as the First Annual Blamesgiving Service. "While others are expressing their gratefulness for the good things of the past year," their leaflet said, "there can be no harm in making a similar list of things that were not so good." I say amen to that – and also to Yossarian's ready rebuttals in *Catch-22* to each of his friend's chiding reminders of the blessings he should be counting:

"Be thankful you're healthy."

"Be bitter you're not going to stay that way" [he replied].

"Be glad you're even alive."

"Be furious you're going to die."

"Things could be much worse," she cried.

"They could be one hell of a lot better," he answered heatedly.

My point, of course, is not that we should be relentlessly negative but that we should stop being relentlessly positive – and tiresomely stoic. I'm thinking here of people who never admit to being dissatisfied, who declare that the glass is one-tenth full, who insist that we keep quiet if we don't have something nice to say, who respond to a ghastly tragedy with, "Hey, it could have been worse..." It's enough to put one in mind of the unforgettable set piece at the end of *Monty Python's Life of Brian*: rows of unfortunates nailed to crucifixes who bob their heads while singing (and then whistling) a cheerful tune called "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life."

When someone loudly offers thanks to his or her preferred deity for the fact that a handful of people "miraculously"

survived a disaster, nonbelievers can't help but wonder why this god simultaneously saw fit to abandon the vastly greater number of souls whose lives were pointlessly extinguished. But isn't a secular version of unbalanced positivity also contrived? Yes, of course you're relieved beyond words if you (or your loved one) was lucky enough to recover from a horrible injury or illness. But what of the meaningless, awful, excruciating injury or illness itself? Again, I say this not to be a killjoy or a cynic but simply because I believe it's better to see things as they really are – and respond accordingly – than it is to adopt any reaction *a priori*, particularly throughout one's life. Neither an Eeyore nor a Tigger be.

My first objection to gratitude as an across-the-board stance, then, is that it's disproportionate, unearned, and therefore inauthentic. Even if training oneself to be constantly grateful really did boost what psychologists call subjective well-being, I'm not sure that's a sufficient reason. As the psychological researcher Ed Deci put it, "When people want only happiness, they can actually undermine their own development because the quest for happiness can lead them to suppress other aspects of their experience. . . .The true meaning of being alive is not just to feel happy, but to experience the full range of human emotions."

Making children express gratitude they don't feel, meanwhile, just like forcing them to apologize when they're not sorry, mostly teaches them insincerity. Subjecting them to exercises in which they must manufacture gratitude – and, yes, some schools, in the name of "positive psychology," really do make kids cough up lists of things for which they're grateful – strikes me as deeply wrongheaded.

I realize that to insist on seeing things as they are – and expressing gratitude, outrage, sadness, delight, or whatever reaction is called for – is to venture out on thin ice, epistemologically speaking, particularly when we turn our

attention to the human condition itself. Does it make sense to speak of an “accurate” assessment, a properly balanced view? Can life be objectively classified as  $x$  percent good (and worthy of gratitude) and  $100 - x$  percent horrible? Don't we *decide* what to make of life and how to feel about it? After all, making meaning is what we humans do. The trouble starts when we deny that the meanings come from us, when even adults persuade themselves that “everything happens for a reason” – just because it's too unsettling to acknowledge that things actually happen for no reason at all and nothing is actually “meant to be.”

If it makes you nervous that all possible purposes and moral guidelines for our lives are invented by humans, well, join the club. People are fallible, biased, often irrational. But it won't do to toss our meanings and principles up to the heavens and then point in that direction as if they had originated there. That doesn't bestow on those meanings and principles a status of absolute, eternal truth. It just proves we've acted in bad faith by denying our authorship. As Sartre and Camus reminded us, to see clearly and live honestly means we must begin by recognizing the fundamental futility of our condition. Camus urged us to embrace all that is precious and ennobling about life – beauty, love, humor – as a defiant “metaphysical rebellion” against the absurdity of our existential situation, one in which you and I and everyone we know will, before long, be utterly extinguished, and it will be as if we never were.

So, yes, the degree to which human existence is worthy of delight or rage is indeed a function of the meaning we construct and the reaction we choose. But the fact that this is the *only* meaning that exists provides a crucial context in which to understand the artificiality of unqualified positivity. As a default state, gratitude simply doesn't ring true – not when our individual circumstances sometimes demand a very different response, and not when the human predicament

itself has an irremediably tragic dimension.

But I think there's a second reason to push back against simple-minded gratitude, and this one is more political than philosophical. It evokes my favorite Latin question: *Cui bono?* Who benefits when we're persuaded to live life that way?

Consider an analogy. One of education's current fashions is the celebration of "grit," a notion that basically just updates the idea of stick-to-itiveness commended to us by Aesop's fables, Benjamin Franklin's aphorisms, and Christian denunciations of sloth. [Elsewhere](#) I've argued that the more we focus on getting children to persist at whatever task they've been given to do – to treat grit and self-discipline as inherently laudable – the less likely we are to *question* what they've been given to do, to ask whether it really has any value, and who gets to decide.

Impressing on people, particularly young people, that they ought to keep working (in general, not just at what seems meaningful) is a conservative precept in that it helps to perpetuate the status quo. My point now is that exactly the same is true of reminders to be grateful for whatever one has. In fact, these two positions aren't just analogous; they mesh beautifully. *Cui bono* if we're persuaded both to count our blessings and to never give up?

In the last few years, the [Templeton Foundation](#), long committed to religious and free-market causes, has given millions of dollars in grants to support the study and promotion of gratitude, including to the Greater Good Center at the University of California, Berkeley. (As Barbara Ehrenreich drily observed, "The foundation does not fund projects to directly improve the lives of poor individuals, but it has spent a great deal, through efforts like these, to improve their attitudes.") Right around the same time, the ultraconservative Walton Family Foundation – created with Walmart money – gave [millions to study and promote grit](#) and

persistence in schools. As the New Testament might have said, Ye shall know them by their funders...

The holiday devoted specifically to the cultivation and expression of gratitude didn't sit right with the puckish creators of Blamesgiving back in 1931, and it has troubled others as well. Jon Hanson, a professor at Harvard Law School, [writes](#), "The norm of Thanksgiving seems to be to encourage a particular kind of gratitude – a generic thankfulness for the status quo. Indeed," he adds, "when one looks at what many describe as the true meaning of the holiday, the message is generally one of announcing that current arrangements – good and bad – are precisely as they should be." And he proceeds to prove his point by quoting from official Thanksgiving proclamations from George Washington to George W. Bush as well as a variety of blog posts and articles.

So, too, for gratitude as a year-round stance. The implication seems to be that it's impolite for any of us, including the have-nots and victims of various forms of oppression and exclusion, to be dissatisfied, let alone to speak up against existing conditions. Social scientists [have found](#) that politically conservative people are more likely to emphasize the value of politeness.[2] As Richard Eibach, a social psychologist, and his colleagues [pointed out](#), "Critics of social justice movements...[have characterized] activists' demands for fundamental changes in the system as petulant expressions of ingratitude...Gratitude norms that discourage people from expressing dissatisfaction...may function to inhibit citizens from voicing complaints about shortcomings and injustices."

Is it possible to feel grateful while also speaking out against what's wrong? Of course. But it's worth asking about the uses to which gratitude is put, the questions it quiets, the interests it serves. We can appreciate a welcome development and thank those who make our lives more satisfying – and still offer a realistic appraisal of what *isn't* worth

celebrating. Perhaps instead of “count your blessings,” a better motto would be: A place for every feeling and every feeling (including gratitude) in its place.

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## NOTES

1. An association between gratitude and one of these states doesn't necessarily mean that the former caused the latter. And even when there is evidence for a causative role – for example, regarding generosity – the strength of the effect depends on whether we're talking about gratitude as a characteristic that people attribute to themselves on an ongoing basis or a (presumably transient) state induced by experimental manipulation. Other such doubts and caveats emerge when you look carefully at the relevant research rather than accepting at face value simplistic summaries about the benefits said to derive from being grateful.

2. Conservatives also tend to be somewhat more content than liberals – perhaps, as two New York University psychologists [argue](#), because they're more inclined to justify or dismiss potentially disturbing concerns about social and economic inequities. To that extent, it may not be surprising if chronically grateful people also turned out to be happier. As Deci pointed out, though – echoing philosophers from the ancient Greeks to John Stuart Mill – happiness shouldn't be our sole criterion for deciding what to believe and how to act.

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