

WHAT KIND OF A DEBT IS A DEBT OF GRATITUDE?

Abstract

A survey of recent philosophical examinations of gratitude reveals a shared puzzlement about debts of gratitude. These debts are, philosophers generally agree, owed by beneficiaries *to* their benefactors (this essay focuses on gratitude in beneficiary-benefactor relationships). That is, beneficiary debts of gratitude are *directed to* the benefactor. The puzzlement is that philosophers also generally agree that benefactors have no *right* to gratitude, cannot *demand* or *insist* on gratitude—in sort, have no *claim* against the benefactor that they show gratitude. What, then, directs the debt of gratitude to the benefactor? If there is no correlative claim on the part of the benefactor, how is that the beneficiary owes gratitude *to the benefactor*, specifically? In this essay, I address this puzzlement in three stages.

First, I provide a taxonomy of the conceptual space available for addressing this puzzling aspect of debts of gratitude, and locate several core analyses of gratitude—contemporary and historical—within this taxonomy. Second, I redirect the inquiry to the question of what speech acts the benefactor has standing to perform in relation to the ungrateful, or potentially ungrateful, beneficiary. Finally, I argue that investing in a person yields, at least under standard conditions, the standing to *urge*, but not demand, gratitude, as well as the standing to feel *let down by*, though not resentful of, ingratitude. This standing is not readily accounted for in a strictly deontic framework, so I conclude that debts of gratitude bear interesting structural parallels to deontic “bipolar” duties, but are a distinctive mode of normative relationship.

Adrienne M. Martin
amartin@cmc.edu