

Expressing Gratitude as What's Morally Expected: A Phenomenological Approach

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This paper addresses an alleged paradox regarding gratitude—that a *duty* of gratitude is odd or puzzling if not paradoxical. The gist of our position is that in prototypical cases, gratitude expression falls under a distinctive deontic category we call *morally expected*—which has a corresponding contrary deontic category we call *morally offensive*. These categories, we maintain, need recognition in normative ethics to make proper sense of the moral status of gratitude expression and other morally charged restrictions on action, and likewise to make proper sense of the moral status of failures to abide by such restrictions. We argue for our view largely on phenomenological grounds.

Keywords

deontic categories, duty of gratitude, phenomenology, morally expected, morally offensive

The very idea of a duty to express gratitude is often described in the philosophical literature as odd or puzzling, if not paradoxical.¹ After all, a genuine act of benevolence is one in which a benefactor confers a benefit upon a recipient, with ‘no strings attached’; it effectively constitutes a gift. In this way, it creates a special relationship between benefactor and beneficiary that is unlike a lender-borrower relationship in which the borrower is duty-bound to repay her financial debt. But then to refer to a *duty* on the part of the recipient to express gratitude—a duty to do so at least verbally, and sometimes by a more substantive gratitude-demonstrating action—seems to cast the benefactor-beneficiary relationship as being analogous to (if not a kind of) lender-borrower relationship, contrary to how the former relationship is (and should be) viewed. As Claudia Card once quipped “A duty to *be grateful* sounds like a joke” (1988: 117).

On the other hand, there also seems to be something plausible and compelling, from the point of view of commonsense morality, about the idea that in prototypical situations in which a recipient is aptly grateful to a benefactor for a conferred benefit, the recipient “owes” it to the benefactor to express gratitude, at least verbally and perhaps in a more substantive manner.

Among those who address this puzzle, one finds two general types of response. One standard approach embraces the claim that in prototypical cases, there really is a moral obligation to express

¹ On this puzzle, see Lyons 1969, Berger 1975, Weiss 1985, Card 1988, Wellman 1999, Manela 2015, and Martin 2019.

gratitude; it seeks to assuage, and to explain away, the thought that there isn't—typically by alleging certain putative differences between this kind of moral obligation and others.² The second approach denies there is any such obligation; it seeks to assuage, and to explain away, the thought that one somehow “owes” it to the benefactor to express gratitude—for instance, by treating gratitude expression as virtuous despite being deontically neutral.³ Deontically, on this latter view, all there is to say is that failure to express gratitude is morally optional.

We maintain that the second of these two positions is too radical and the first is too conservative. Our view is something in between. It agrees with the second position, as against the first, that there is something puzzling, if not incoherent, about a *duty* to express gratitude. However, it agrees with the first position, as against the second, that gratitude expression has a deontic status different from being deontically purely optional. The gist of our position is that in prototypical cases, gratitude expression falls under a distinctive deontic category we call *morally expected*—which has a corresponding contrary deontic category we call *morally offensive*. These categories, we maintain, need recognition in normative ethics to make proper sense of the moral status of gratitude expression and other morally charged restrictions on action, and likewise to make proper sense of the moral status of failures to abide by such restrictions. We argue for our view largely on phenomenological grounds.

A few clarificatory points are in order before proceeding, *First*, we focus exclusively on directed, interpersonal gratitude involving a three-place relation between a benefactor, a beneficiary, and a benefit.⁴ *Second*, we focus primarily on the *act* of expressing gratitude (hence, our title) and its deontic status. However, later in the paper affective aspects of gratitude will figure in defense of our view. *Third*, we consider the commonsense concept of gratitude to have a prototype structure in the sense that it does not admit of a necessary and sufficient condition analysis that would sharply distinguish it from all other concepts. Rather, according to how gratitude is commonly conceptualized by the folk, there are central,

² See, e.g. McConnell 1993, ch. 2, Manela 2015.

³ See, e.g. Wellman 1999, who argues there is no duty of gratitude and who thereby seems committed to this view, although he is not fully overt about gratitude expression being deontically purely optional. For a reply to Wellman (besides our own featured in this paper) see Carr 2013. See also Carr 2015 on whether gratitude (as a trait) is a virtue.

⁴ Walker 1980-81 and McAleer 2012 recognize what the latter calls ‘propositional gratitude’—gratitude *that*, involving a two-place relation between a beneficiary and some welcome state of affairs. That the phenomenon in question is a genuine form of gratitude is challenged by Manela 2016a.

prototypical instances and instances that are more peripheral by e.g., lacking some of the features characteristic of prototypical instances.⁵ Our example of an experience of gratitude (Section 3) is intended to be a central, prototypical case.

We proceed as follows. Sections 1–3 set the stage for our arguments concerning expressions of gratitude and for revising the standard philosophical understanding of the range of deontic categories. In Section 1, we first elaborate our proposal for expanding the currently recognized typology of deontic categories and then set forth four related claims that we propose to argue for on phenomenological grounds. Section 2 explains the kind of abductive phenomenological argumentation we employ. In Section 3 we turn to a phenomenological characterization of what we take to be a prototypical case of experiencing gratitude, including cognitive, affective, and motivational elements. Then, with the stage set, we proceed to argue for our conception of the deontic status of expressing gratitude as well as for expanding philosophers’ conception of the deontic. Doing so will include both a *theoretical* rationale for our view (Sections 4-6) as well as a *moral-normative* rationale (Section 7). Section 8 is our conclusion.

1. Moral Constraint, Gratitude Expression, and the Typology of Deontic Categories

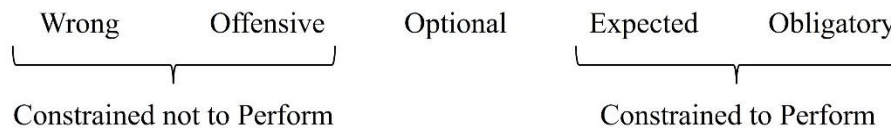
One might initially think that the very meaning of the words ‘deontic’ and ‘deontological’ precludes the possibility of *genuinely* deontic categories beyond the familiar categories of the morally obligatory, the morally optional, and the morally wrong or impermissible. But the terms ‘deontic’ and ‘deontological’ derive etymologically from the Greek ‘deon’, meaning “that which is binding.” Thus, the underlying concept of moral *constraint*—moral “bindingness”—is quasi-metaphorical, in a way that opens conceptual space for the possibility of a type of moral constraint that is weaker than outright moral obligation. Ordinary moral thought and common moral practice, we maintain, actually recognize two different kinds of prototypical moral constraint: moral obligation (with its contrary, moral wrongness or impermissibility), and moral expectation (with its contrary, moral offensiveness). Ethical theorizing has largely failed to appreciate this fact, and instead has allowed the technical philosophical terms ‘deontic’ and ‘deontological’ to ossify in such a way that the very idea of a deontic category of moral expectation is apt to be regarded as a category mistake.⁶ But we propose to resist this terminological tyranny.

⁵ For some empirical support for this claim see Lambert, et. al. 2009.

⁶ Cheshire Calhoun 2016 and Adrienne Martin 2019 defend views that recognize morally significant kinds of action (and omission) that are in some respects similar to our category of the morally expected. Calhoun argues that philosophical ethics should recognize what she calls “common decencies”—a category whose extension overlaps, if

Theoretical normative ethics should acknowledge a moral category that is genuinely deontic in a non-ossified sense, that long has been an important element of real-life ethics, but that hitherto has been largely overlooked and only dimly appreciated in philosophy: the category of the morally expected.

So our proposal, which might appear radically novel relative to received thinking in contemporary normative ethics but which we claim merely thematizes long-inherent elements of everyday moral thought, is that there are really five distinct non-overlapping deontic moral categories: the morally wrong, the morally offensive, the morally optional, the morally expected, and the morally obligatory. All these pertain to actual and potential actions, and all except moral optionality involve constraint on actions of one kind or another, as indicated in the following diagram.⁷



not coincides with, what we are calling the morally expected. Martin explores the nature of directed personal obligations, as for example between parents and their children, as a basis for understanding the relationship between a benefactor and their beneficiary. However, unlike us, Martin holds that there is an obligation of gratitude that is limited in scope in the sense that the benefactor has standing to direct the beneficiary to have the end of expressing gratitude, though no standing to direct the means of doing so. It seems to us that the direction in which Martin goes in attempting to accommodate the status of gratitude fits more comfortably with our proposal for recognizing the deontic category of the morally expected than it fits with her own proposal with her own proposal to expand the category of the obligatory. Exploring the similarities and differences between our view, Calhoun's, and Martin's is a topic for a separate paper.

⁷ The categories of supererogation and suberogation are hybrid concepts, which include a deontic aspect and an evaluative/aretaic aspect. Supererogatory actions are deontically optional and praiseworthy to perform, while those who posit the suberogatory tend to understand it to be a hybrid category—blameworthy to perform yet having the deontic status of being purely optional. We too regard it as hybrid, although we also think that its deontic aspect is moral offensiveness. We'll say more about the suberogatory in Section 6. But in any case, we have not included the categories of the supererogatory and the suberogatory in the diagram because we, like others who have deployed these categories, regard them as hybrid rather than as purely deontic. For a defense of the hybrid nature of these categories, see McNamara 2011.

Corresponding to these categories are three distinct ways that a consideration can figure as a *moral reason* for, or against, acting a certain way; we will call the respective kinds of consideration *requiring* reasons, *favoring* reasons, and *non-requiring constraining* reasons. A requiring reason for performing an action *A* is a reason to regard *A* as morally obligatory, whereas a requiring reason for not performing *A* is a reason to regard *A* as morally wrong. A favoring reason for performing *A* is a reason to regard *A* both as morally optional and yet as morally good in some non-constraining respect, whereas a favoring reason for not performing *A* is a reason to regard *A* both as morally optional and yet as morally bad (or anyway, morally “sub-par”) in some non-constraining respect. A non-requiring constraining reason for performing *A* is a reason to regard *A* as morally expected, whereas a non-requiring constraining reason for not performing *A* is a reason to regard *A* as morally offensive. (Thus, both requiring reasons and non-requiring constraining reasons are reasons to regard oneself as somehow morally *constrained* to perform *A* or not to perform *A*, whereas a favoring reason is not a reason to regard oneself as so constrained.⁸)

Various familiar words and expressions can be used—and often are used, we claim—to express the deontic categories we are calling moral expectation and moral offensiveness, and to classify certain actual or potential actions under these categories. The word ‘expected’ can be so deployed, for example, and we maintain often is so deployed—notwithstanding that fact that in some contexts it also can be deployed in a thoroughly non-normative psychological sense. Thus, our own present usage of ‘expected’ is not reformative or merely stipulative. (Sometimes the two uses will effectively coincide in applicability, in context: people will psychologically *expect* others to behave in ways that are deontically *expected*.) The word ‘offensive’ can be used, and we maintain often is used, to classify certain actual or potential actions under the deontic category to which we ourselves presently are applying this label—notwithstanding the fact that this word is flexible enough that in other contexts it can be used negatively to evaluate certain actions that one regards deontically as morally optional. The word ‘owe’ can be used, and we maintain often is used, to classify certain actual or potential actions under the deontic category of the morally expected—even though in some contexts it clearly is being used to express moral obligation. Likewise, even for the term ‘debt’, as in the expression ‘debt of gratitude’.

⁸ We are using these labels for deontic categories, and for different kinds of reasons, in a narrow and mutually-exclusionary way, rather than widely. In a wider sense of ‘favoring’, any of these kinds of reasons for performing (not performing) *A* is a favoring reason for performing (not performing) *A*. And in wider senses of ‘expected’ and ‘offensive’, actions that are required are also expected, and actions that are wrong are also offensive.

Returning now to the matter of gratitude expression, our project here is to argue for the following two claims:

Claim 1. In ordinary moral thought and everyday moral practice, gratitude expression is widely regarded, deontically, as being morally expected.

Claim 2. Such regard has a moral rationale that (i) appeals to the interpersonal moral significance of gratitude expression, and (ii) accords with moral standards regarding gratitude that would be reflectively endorsed by many individuals (thereby being internalized “deep” moral standards, for many individuals).

These are empirical psychological hypotheses about how people generally regard gratitude expression; they are not normative-ethical claims. Claim 1 concerns the *actual functional role*, in most people’s moral cognition and moral practice, typically played by their *actual* moral belief about the deontic status of gratitude expression. (Some people’s actual moral belief about this might differ from their *professed* moral belief, particularly if they are philosophers who do normative ethics!) Claim 2 concerns the relation that obtains, for most people, between (i) the person’s actual moral belief about the deontic status of gratitude expression and (ii) the moral standards that the person has internalized and hence would reflectively endorse (the person’s own *deep* moral standards, as we are putting it).

We will argue abductively for these two empirical claims—i.e., via non-demonstrative “inference to the best explanation”—with a focus on various features of moral phenomenology. The phenomenological data-points that we will contend are best explained by Claims 1 and 2 in tandem will include—but will not be limited to—the phenomenology underlying the Janus-faced-seeming nature of gratitude expression that we mentioned at the beginning of the paper.

What is the normative-ethical import, if any, of these two empirical claims? It is quite uncontroversial that considerations of wide reflective equilibrium are of central importance in epistemically rational theory-formation in normative ethics, and also in the rational formation of concrete moral judgments. So, consider the following two assertions, one a concrete normative-moral claim and the other a claim about normative-ethical theorizing:

Claim 3. In prototypical situations in which a recipient of a benevolently conferred benefit is appropriately grateful to the benefactor, (i) gratitude expression by the recipient has the deontic status of being expected, and (ii) it has this status by virtue of the moral rationale cited in Claim 2.

Claim 4. Normative ethics should incorporate an expanded deontic typology that includes the categories of the morally expected and the morally offensive.

If indeed Claims 1 and 2 are true, then their truth will in turn lend strong rational support, via wide reflective equilibrium, to Claims 3 and 4. Various kinds of moral judgment that commonly arise in connection with gratitude expression thereby will be smoothly accommodated—judgments that would be in serious *prima facie* tension with one another were it not for gratitude expression being morally expected.

2. Abductive Phenomenological Argumentation

The psychological data-points that we will invoke, in arguing abductively for Claims 1 and 2, will be various introspective judgments concerning certain experiences—viz., experiences pertaining to actual or hypothetical gratitude-involving scenarios. These experiences have intentionality—i.e., representational content. Thus, they are aptly called ‘seemings’, because their intentional contents are *ways things seem to be*, to the experiencing agent. We will focus on seemings which, for each of us two authors, are experienced vividly. As one might put it, adopting the famous expression from Descartes, these seemings are experientially *clear and distinct*.

We will be arguing that the best explanation of the various introspective judgments we cite as psychological data-points—judgements about the nature of certain vivid, gratitude-involving, experiential seemings—is an explanation that invokes Claims 1 and 2. Our abductive argumentation will rest on the following two defeasible assumptions about such judgments.

Introspective Accuracy. Introspective phenomenological judgments experienced as having the intentional contents of vivid, gratitude-scenario-involving, seemings do possess such matching intentional contents.

Trans-Personal Generalizability. Vivid, gratitude-scenario-involving, seemings that arise in oneself when one contemplates gratitude scenarios also are very likely to arise in the moral experience of most others in one’s cultural milieu when they contemplate such scenarios.

Each assumption has a strong abductive presumption in its favor, on grounds of explanatory power and simplicity. All else equal, it is simpler to treat a phenomenological judgment that is experienced as having content that matches the content of a vivid experiential seeming as really having such matching content, rather than positing some kind of error in such judgments—unless there is good reason to posit an error. And all else equal, insofar as (i) one’s own pertinent introspective phenomenological judgments arise from one’s vivid experiential seemings, and (ii) such judgments are widely shared by others in one’s cultural milieu, it is simpler to suppose that they arise in others similarly to how they arise in oneself—unless there is good reason to posit a trans-personal difference.

Going forward we will be appealing repeatedly, albeit mostly implicitly, to the abductive presumptions of introspective accuracy and trans-personal generalizability. Anyone wishing to challenge either of these presumptions bears a burden: to put forth considerations that allegedly defeat one of them or the other, and to explain why and how the considerations allegedly do so.

We next turn to our featured example—Fiona’s favor—in which we elaborate the various phenomenological aspects of our character’s experience of gratitude, as we imagine them, which serve as data points for arguing abductively in sections 4-7 for Claims 1 and 2.

3. Fiona’s Favor

Olissa and her partner Chris have just moved to St. Louis mid-summer where they will assume faculty positions at one of the universities there in September. Shortly after moving in, they attend a neighborhood block party where Olissa strikes up a conversation with Fiona, a neighbor living a few houses away. Fiona, who lives alone, mentions to Olissa that she has an important medical appointment with a specialist in Columbia, Missouri (two or so hours away by car), and because she can’t drive, she plans to take a shuttle to get to her appointment. Because the appointment is late afternoon, she will have to book a hotel room and stay over one night before returning. The next day, Olissa offers to drive Fiona to and from her appointment in a single day. Fiona gratefully accepts Olissa’s offer and the next week they go to Columbia for Fiona’s appointment.

The story continues:

Fiona is a generally grateful person, and she feels especially “beholden”⁹ to Olissa for the huge favor Olissa did for her. And, of course, she thanks Olissa, expressing her gratitude after they return from their trip. However, Fiona feels she ought to demonstrate her appreciation to Olissa; and this is something she also just wants to do. She brings Olissa and Chris some home-baked goods as a token of her appreciation. However, given the inconvenience to Olissa, how much Fiona benefitted from being driven to the appointment, and especially the concern Olissa’s responsiveness expressed, Fiona thinks that if she can, she would like to do something of some significance for Olissa to demonstrate the degree of gratitude she feels—something in addition to the baked goods. A few weeks go by, and there is a sudden death in Chris’s family; Olissa and Chris must travel to the East coast for the funeral and find someone take care

⁹ We use this term without intending any entailment of duty or obligation.

of their two dogs, water the plants, and take in the mail. Fiona hears of this from another neighbor and offers to do Olissa and Chris the “favor” of taking care of the dogs, plants, and mail while they are gone.

In this vignette, as we imagine it, Fiona does feel she ought to do something of the right magnitude for Olissa to demonstrate her gratitude, but she does not think that she must do such a favor for her in the sense of being morally *obligated* or *duty-bound*. Rather, as we imagine the complex character of Fiona’s experience in offering her help, it involves cognitive, affective, and motivational elements that we will describe in the remainder of this section. These elements, as we’ve said, constitute the data points involving Fiona’s experience of gratitude toward Olissa—how things seem to Fiona—which, in sections 4-7 will figure in our defense of Claims 1 and 2 stated above in section 1. Some of these experiential elements are from a first-person perspective representing how Fiona experiences her gratitude toward Olissa. However, the ways someone imagines the attitudes of others also count as phenomenological data-points. So, as we proceed, we also call attention to how Fiona imagines the attitudes of Olissa (taking a second-person perspective) as well as how she imagines third-party reactions toward her gratitude-relevant circumstances. These, too, will figure in arguing for Claims 1 and 2.

Cognitive elements

At a fine-grained level of phenomenological analysis, the following four interrelated cognitive elements pertain to how Fiona experiences her reasons for demonstrating gratitude toward Olissa—which we label for ease of reference as ‘reason recognition’, ‘desire-independence’, ‘external source’, and ‘grip’.

Most fundamentally, Fiona’s experience includes *reason recognition*: she takes herself to have a reason to benefit Olissa that is experienced as directly grounded in her recognition of receiving a welcome benefit from Olissa that she believes to have been motivated by genuine concern for her. Furthermore, an aspect of Fiona’s experience is that her reasons for benefitting Olissa are taken to be not merely dependent on whether she happens to want to express gratitude toward Fiona; rather, she judges that the reasons she has are *desire-independent*. And because her reasons are experienced this way, they are experienced as having an *external source* in the sense that they are responsive to what Fiona takes to be the objective facts of her circumstances, namely, that Olissa acted to benefit her out of genuine concern. The elements of desire-independence and external source give Fiona’s reason recognition experience an objective feel characteristic of experiencing reasons as grounding *moral* constraints.

As a result of experiencing reasons for gratitude in this way, Fiona experiences them as exerting a phenomenological *grip* constraining her to express, indeed, demonstrate her gratitude to Olissa. This grip

is manifested in her sense that she “owes” Olissa; that there is a normative constraint that she do something in return. However, because Fiona experiences the benefit as being conferred ‘no strings attached,’ the prospect of doing something in return is not experienced as a strict *demand* that she do so, and so the constraint she is under has a quality that differs from the experience of being under an obligation or duty.¹⁰

The elements we have so far described are from Fiona’s first-person perspective in which the focus is on how *she* experiences reasons that are normative for gratitude. However, we imagine Fiona projecting into the mind of Olissa (taking an imagined second-person perspective) and judging that Olissa would not take herself to have a right to *demand* a return favor from Fiona.

Although the above aspects of Fiona’s gratitude experience, as we describe them, are predominantly cognitive in character, they are likely to be experienced as “fused” with affective aspects of her experience so that, for example, the experience of grip is also one of *feeling* gripped by what one judges to be a reason-based constraint of the sort we have been describing. Some additional aspects of Fiona’s experience that involve both cognitive and affective aspects are “anticipatory.” That is, from a first-person perspective, contemplating the prospect of demonstrating gratitude has a positive affective valence, while contemplating the prospect of not doing so has a negative affective valence. This negative valence is morally charged, and from both second- and third-person perspectives Fiona anticipates being subject to moral disapproval expressing blameworthiness were it found out that she had a rare chance to do something significant for Olissa but passed it up. And such imagined (counterfactual) disapproval is part of what makes expressing gratitude feel somewhat like an ordinary obligation, though different and not so constraining given the ‘no strings attached’ aspect of Fiona’s circumstances as she takes them to be.

Feeling quality

In addition to Fiona’s anticipatory positive feelings in contemplating making her offer to Olissa, her overall experience includes other positive feelings. For instance, in being the beneficiary of Olissa’s kindness, Fiona feels *recognized* as a person deserving of good will that Olissa’s beneficence expressed toward her. She also feels *cared for* by Oliva, accompanied by a feeling of warmth toward Olissa. As a result of these feelings of recognition, being cared for, and the resulting feelings of warmth, she thereby feels specially “connected” to Olissa. A related aspect of Fiona’s overall experience of gratitude is a kind

¹⁰ For detailed discussions of the phenomenology of obligation (duty), see AUTHORS 2005, 2008, and 2010.

of pleasure—sometimes described as a kind of *joy*¹¹—she takes in making her offer and then following through by taking care of Olissa and Chris’s dogs, plants, and mail while they are gone.

Motivation

Finally, the involuntary phenomenological grip of the reasons for expressing gratitude is experienced by Fiona as *inherently* motivational and so she experiences herself as directly motivated to express her gratitude toward Olissa.

Note that Fiona’s phenomenology as we’ve characterized it includes aspects that overlap common experiences of duty—the experience of judging that she owes something to Olissa and the anticipation of being blameworthy for doing nothing. Nevertheless, Fiona’s experience registers that the moral constraint she is under is weaker than the moral constraint of obligation. Our contention is that the source of the difference between the case of gratitude and that of duty is that reasons normative for gratitude ground *expectations*, while reasons normative for duty ground *requirements*. Experiencing reasons of the former sort—expectation-grounding reasons—has a somewhat different “feel” than does experiencing requiring reasons characteristic of duty, as when one has made a promise that imposes a demand on one’s behavior.

We now proceed to argue abductively on phenomenological grounds, referring to various aspects of Fiona’s experience of gratitude, for Claims 1 and 2 that we set forth in Section 1. Specifically, we argue that our view which posits non-requiring constraining reasons normative for gratitude and classifies expressing gratitude (at least in prototypical cases) as morally expected (but not obligatory) fares better according to the methodological constraints set forth in Section 2 than do the two alternative competing views we explained at the outset of the paper.

4. The First-Person Perspective: Owed but Not Required

The first-person, largely cognitive, aspects of Fiona’s phenomenology are vivid, introspectively ascertainable, seemings whose contents directly underwrite the judgment tendencies we cited at the beginning of this paper.¹² On one hand, she introspects a vivid experiential seeming as-of *morally owing*

¹¹ Such positive affective experiences associated with expressing gratitude, including joy, are emphasized in Emmons 2007. However, as Manela 2016 points out, there can be cases involving negative feelings of gratitude.

¹² The experiential state-types we are here calling ‘seemings’ are distinct from the state-types we are calling experience-based *judgments*, even though such judgments often inherit their intentional content from the corresponding seemings. (This inheritance sometimes might be a causal relation between a token seeming and a token judgment; sometimes it might instead involve a single state-token that simultaneously tokens both the

an expression of gratitude to Olissa—indeed, as of owing Olissa a fairly substantial demonstration of gratitude, rather than mere verbal expression of it. On the other hand, she also introspects a vivid experiential seeming as-of *not being morally obligated* to express her gratitude.

All else equal, the best explanation of what is going on in her moral-judgment forming cognition, when these vivid seemings occur in her experience and then produce corresponding moral judgments, will be an explanation according to which these processes constitute an exercise of her *cognitive competence* in forming moral judgments—i.e., her capacity to form moral judgments that accord with her own internalized deep moral standards. Such an explanation will treat the seemings themselves as having contents that accurately capture the actual import of her internalized moral standards; and it will treat the moral judgments produced by these seemings as having contents that accurately coincide with the contents of the seemings that spawn these judgments. Thus, the best explanation of first-person phenomenological data-points of the kind cited in the previous paragraph will be an explanation that incorporates Claims 1 and 2 from Section 1 above.

By contrast, each of the two principal treatments of gratitude expression in the extant philosophical literature fares less well abductively. The approach that treats gratitude expression as morally optional is committed to claiming that Fiona would be mistaken, according to her own internalized deep moral standards, to think that she owes it to Olissa to express gratitude—Fiona’s moral phenomenology notwithstanding. And the approach that treats gratitude expression as morally obligatory is committed to claiming that Fiona would be mistaken, according to her own internalized deep moral standards, to think that she is not morally obligated to express gratitude to Olissa—Fiona’s moral phenomenology notwithstanding. So both approaches are committed to saying the following about Fiona: *either* she has mistakenly construed her own moral seemings as attributing to the act of gratitude expression the deontic status of being morally expected, when in fact the seeming actually attributes a different deontic status; *or else* her own actual moral experience simply mis-represents the deontic status which, according to her own deep moral standards, the act actually possesses. Both approaches, each of which goes contrary to the conjunction of Claims 1 and 2, are thus committed to positing some kind of performance error in Fiona’s moral cognition, relative to Fiona’s actual moral competence vis-à-vis her

seeming-type and the judgment-type.) The Mueller Lyer illusion, for example, is a visual-experiential seeming as-of two horizontal lines being equal in length; but if one is aware of the illusory nature of this experience, one will refrain from *judging* that the lines are the same length. The reason we distinguish seemings from experience-based judgments will emerge in the paragraphs immediately below.

own deep moral standards. But doing so is explanatorily gratuitous, barring some specific evidential reason for doing so.

This same kind of theoretical cost/benefit comparison, with the same abductive upshot concerning how best to explain the phenomenological data, will recur for the additional data-points that we will cite in successive sections below.

Hereafter we will no longer explicitly distinguish the two potential kinds of performance error lately mentioned. Instead, in accordance with our earlier terminology in Section 3 above, usually we will speak about “experiences as-of” (or, equivalently, “phenomenology as-of”) things being a certain way, in order to characterize judgments that arise directly from experiential seemings. Such a judgment could be mistaken either because the seeming mis-represents the actual import of one’s deep internalized moral standards, or because the judgment’s content fails to match the actual content of the seeming itself.

5. The Second-Person Perspective: No Right to Demand

When Fiona considers herself imaginatively from Olissa’s point of view, Fiona’s second-person experience is as-of Olissa not having a right to demand that Fiona express gratitude for Olissa’s beneficent action. And indeed, it is common ground among philosophers who have written about gratitude that normally a benefactor does not have the right to demand gratitude expression from the recipient of the benefactor’s beneficent action.

On the other hand, typically when one experiences oneself as having a directed moral obligation toward another person and one considers oneself from that person’s perspective, one’s experience will include a phenomenological aspect as-of that person’s having a right to demand of oneself that one comply with one’s obligation toward them. This is so for Fiona too.

What explains the fact that Fiona’s actual second-person phenomenology is as-of Olissa’s not having a right to demand that Fiona express gratitude? Given that experiences as-of one’s having a directed obligation toward another person normally include the self-directed second-person-perspectival aspect as-of the other person’s having a right to demand compliance, why does Fiona’s experience lack this aspect, even though it is an experience as-of owing it to Olissa to express gratitude?

The simplest and most natural explanation, we submit, is that Fiona’s phenomenology is not as-of being morally *obligated* to express her gratitude to Olissa, even though her phenomenology is indeed as-of *owing* Olissa a demonstration of gratitude. Her first-person phenomenology is as-of being morally expected to express gratitude, and hence also is as-of not being morally required to do so. Correlatively,

her second-person phenomenology is as-of the following state of affairs obtaining: Olissa's lacking a right to demand gratitude expression *because* Olissa is not morally obligated to express gratitude.

This proposed explanation directly invokes Claim 1 from Section 1 above, namely that in ordinary moral thought and everyday practice, gratitude expression is widely regarded, deontically, as being morally expected. Also, there is an operative abductive presumption that what's going on phenomenologically is fully in accord with Fiona's moral-judgment-forming competence, rather than involving a psychological performance-error on her part—which, in the present context, entails Claim 2. Thus, the second-person-perspectival data-point we are presently considering contributes additional abductive support to the conjunction of Claims 1 and 2.

How do each of the other two principal treatments of gratitude expression in the extant philosophical literature fare abductively, in being able to explain the second-person phenomenological data-point we are now considering? In addressing this question, it is important to bear in mind two relevant respects in which abductive reasoning is a holistic matter. *First*, the comparative abductive-evidential status of incompatible empirical hypotheses ultimately depends upon how these hypotheses stack up against one another with respect to the *full body* of pertinent data-points. Thus, even if a given hypothesis scores best comparatively for *some* data-points, it might lose out overall.

Second, because data-points can bear significant interrelations to one another, there are limits to the extent to which they can be “isolated” from another for purposes of evaluating the explanatory costs and benefits of the competing empirical hypotheses. This limitation is especially important in the present context, because of the ways that the various phenomenological data-points we are emphasizing are experienced as cohering with one another. Their experiential interconnections cannot be ignored, even when the immediate question is how well the competing hypotheses stack up explanatorily concerning one specific data-point (or several) that are the immediate focus of the discussion.

With these two methodological points in mind, particularly the second one, we return to our immediate question: how might one explain, on the basis of one of the principal treatments of gratitude in the philosophical literature, Fiona's experience as-of Olissa's lacking the right to demand that Fiona express gratitude?

Consider the view asserting (i) that there is no moral duty of gratitude expression and (ii) that gratitude expression is morally optional. *In complete isolation*, perhaps, the pertinent phenomenological data-point can be explained on this basis without invoking any psychological performance-error on Fiona's part. The key idea is that she is correctly appreciating that according to her own deep moral

standards, gratitude expression is morally optional and hence Olissa has no moral right to demand it of Fiona.

Now consider the view asserting that in prototypical cases, gratitude expression is morally obligatory. Advocates of this position typically grant that the benefactor has no right to demand compliance on the part of the recipient, and they treat this as a part of common-sense morality. Once again, in complete isolation the pertinent phenomenological data-point perhaps can be explained on this basis without invoking any psychological performance-error on Fiona's part. Now the key idea is that she is correctly appreciating that according to her own deep moral standards, the obligation to express gratitude differs from typical specific-person-directed moral obligations in there not being a correlative right, on the part of the person to whom the duty is owed, to demand compliance.

But of course, the data-point we are presently considering can't plausibly be isolated in this way, for purposes of evaluating alternative potential explanations of it. Fiona's experience as-of Olissa's having no right to demand gratitude expression is intimately intertwined with her experience as-of her not being morally obligated to express gratitude; this intertwining constitutes a performance error, if indeed gratitude expression really is morally obligatory under Fiona's own deep moral standards. And Fiona's phenomenal seeming as-of Olissa's lack of a demand-right also is intimately intertwined with her seeming as-of gratitude expression nonetheless not being morally optional; this intertwining constitutes a performance error, if indeed gratitude expression really is morally optional under Fiona's own deep moral standards.

So once it is acknowledged that the pertinent intertwining-facts also need psychological explanation, the dialectical problem noted at the end of Section 4 recurs again here, for each of the two principal treatments of gratitude expression: the sought-for explanation would need to posit some kind of performance error in Fiona's moral-judgment-forming cognitive processes. Doing so would be explanatorily gratuitous.¹³

6. The Third-Person Perspective: Blameworthiness for Omission

¹³ Advocates of the view that gratitude expression is obligatory, insofar as they grant (as they typically do) that the benefactor has no right to demand compliance by the recipient, also face the highly non-trivial task of providing a *moral-normative* rationale for this lack of a correlative right to demand compliance. No such normative-ethical burden arises if, as we contend, gratitude expression normally is morally expected and hence not morally obligatory.

Fiona's experience includes a phenomenological aspect as-of how she would feel about herself, in terms of self-directed reactive attitudes of the kind that a third party also might direct toward her, were she not to express gratitude to Olissa. (This is the third-person perspective, directed inwardly.) Regarding this hypothetical scenario, her experience (prospectively) is as-of the following: (i) omitting to express gratitude would constitute a failure of minimal decency; (ii) she would blame herself for this omission; and (iii) she would blame herself *because* the omission would be a failure of minimal decency. Moreover, these self-directed third-person experiential elements are closely intertwined phenomenologically with the first-person experiential element as-of gratitude expression being *not morally optional* for her.

If Claims 1 and 2 are true, then the compresence of these elements in Fiona's experience is smoothly explainable as comporting with her moral-judgment-forming competence. She really is morally *constrained* to express gratitude by her own deep moral standards of minimally decent behavior, and hence it really is the case that omitting to do so is not morally optional for her, which makes self-blame for such an omission entirely appropriate. Nevertheless, it also really is the case that she is not morally obligated to express gratitude, because the operative mode of moral constraint is weaker than outright moral obligation: it is moral expectation.

But once again, if one seeks to explain these data points on the basis of one of the two principal treatments of gratitude expression in the philosophical literature, one will need to posit some kind of performance error in Fiona's experience.

How might an explanation go, given the supposition that gratitude expression is really morally optional under Fiona's own deep moral standards? Probably the most promising approach would invoke the category of the suberogatory, as this category is typically construed in the philosophical literature. On the standard construal, this is a hybrid category with both deontic and non-deontic aspects: suberogatory actions supposedly are deontically morally optional, but nevertheless also supposedly qualify—evaluatively and/or aretaically—as blameworthy. (The idea is that a suberogatory action or omission has “bad-making” features which, despite not being “wrong-making” features, nonetheless suffice, in the absence of any legitimate excuses, to warrant blaming the agent for the action or omission.¹⁴) Under a proffered explanation of Fiona's third-person phenomenology which assumes that according to her own deep moral standards, failure to express gratitude is suberogatory (as this moral category is usually construed), there is no need to treat her experience as-of the blameworthiness of such a failure as a performance-error vis-à-vis her own moral-judgment-forming competence. So far, so good. Nonetheless,

¹⁴ Here we follow Driver's 1992 influential discussion of the suberogatory.

since the proffered explanation incorporates the assumption that suberogatory acts are morally optional under Fiona’s own deep moral standards, it will need to treat as performance errors both her experience as-of gratitude expression being non-optional and her closely related experience as-of failure to express gratitude being a moral-constraint violation. (One lesson of this, we take it, is that suberogatory acts are not really morally optional after all; rather, they belong to the deontic category we are calling the morally offensive.¹⁵)

Suppose, instead, that one seeks to explain Fiona’s third-person phenomenology on the assumption that gratitude expression really is morally obligatory under her own deep moral standards. On such a proffered explanation too, there is no need to treat Fiona’s experience as-of the blameworthiness of failing to express gratitude as a performance-error vis-à-vis her own moral-judgment-forming competence. But for her, this experiential aspect is intimately intertwined with the experience as-of gratitude expression also not being obligatory. So if indeed gratitude expression is morally obligatory under her own deep moral standards, then the explanation on offer will need to treat this phenomenological intertwining as a performance error.

As with the phenomenological data-points discussed in preceding sections, therefore, the third-person data-points now in focus lend yet further abductive support to Claims 1 and 2. An explanation of the phenomenology that appeals to these two claims can accommodate the data without positing any performance errors in Fiona’s moral-judgment-forming processes. All else equal, such an explanation is better than a putative explanation based on one of the two principal treatments of gratitude expression, because the latter kinds of explanation would need to posit some form of performance error in order to accommodate the pertinent phenomenological data.

7. The Interpersonal Perspective: A Moral-Normative Rationale

Claim 2 of Section 1 asserts that there is a moral rationale for regarding gratitude expectation as morally expected that accords with many people’s internalized deep moral standards. In this final main section we will defend this claim. We will argue that certain interpersonal relations are widely regarded as intrinsically valuable, and that such relations are enhanced, reinforced, and sustained by people’s regarding gratitude expression as morally expected. The “qualitative feel” phenomenological aspects

¹⁵ Even so, and as noted above in note 7, we agree with the standard claim that the suberogatory is a hybrid category, with evaluative and/or aretaic aspects in addition to its deontic aspect. In paradigmatic cases, for instance, the agent not only performs a morally offensive action, but also does so knowingly and willingly.

mentioned in our Fiona case will figure centrally, in a way that also makes direct contact with some recent work from social psychology.

The instrumental value of gratitude has received increasing attention in social psychology.¹⁶ Our focus here, however, is on the *intrinsic* value realized in experiences of episodes of gratitude.¹⁷ The recent work of psychologist Sara Algoe (sometimes in collaboration) on gratitude is relevant. Algoe's work investigates the significance of gratitude in initiating and maintaining communal bonds. She calls her view the "find-remind-bind" theory of gratitude that she puts forward in contrast to empirical approaches that employ a quasi-economic model of gratitude. This latter approach is summarized by sociobiologist Robert Trivers's understanding of gratitude as an aspect of reciprocal altruism: "I suggest that the emotion of gratitude has been selected to regulate human response to altruistic acts and that the emotion is sensitive to the cost/benefit ratio of such acts" (Trivers 1971: 49). In contrast to (though consistent with) this quasi-economic approach, Algoe's work focuses on the non-economic interpersonal significance of gratitude. Here is how she summarizes her approach:

In sum, within the context of reciprocally-altruistic relationships, gratitude signals communal relationship norms and may be an evolved mechanism to fuel upward spirals of mutually responsive behaviors between recipient and benefactor. In this way, gratitude is important for forming and maintaining the most important relationships of our lives, those with the people we interact with every day (Algoe 2012: 455).

Algoe's work helps call attention to various aspects of episodes of gratitude that are of intrinsic value realized in grateful responses to genuine beneficence. Taking Fiona's experience as an exemplar, one aspect of her phenomenology is the hedonic value included in it. Under the category of *feeling quality* when describing her experience, we noted that she feels *joy*—a kind of pleasure—in being able to reciprocate Olissa's kindness toward her. More significantly, and related to Algoe's work, are aspects of the phenomenology of care registered in Fiona's phenomenology. Under the category of *feeling quality*, we also noted that Fiona feels she is recognized as a person deserving of good will that Olissa's beneficence expressed toward her, the sense of being cared for, as well as the sense of being specially

¹⁶ For an overview of the work in question, see Davidson and Wood 2016.

¹⁷ Gulliford and colleagues 2013 note an absence of attention by psychologists and philosophers on the intrinsic value of gratitude and speculate that it is because work on gratitude tends to suffer from ambiguity between instrumental and intrinsic justifications of gratitude.

connected to Olissa. These aspects of experiences of being cared for figure in the non-hedonistic intrinsic value of some of “the most important relationships of our lives,” as Algoe observes. And from Olissa’s perspective, Fiona’s recognition of her good will and “finding” (using Algoe’s terminology) a friend in Fiona are also aspects of the overall intrinsic value realized through the interaction of both parties. Of course, there are other cases of gratitude embedded in an ongoing relationship—“reminding” the participants of their bond of friendship and perhaps their mutual love. It is this latter factor that apparently promotes interpersonal bonds of connection, friendship, and love. (Notably, there is experimental evidence that the perception on the part of the beneficiary of the recognition and care expressed by the benefactor is particularly important in positive experiences of gratitude.¹⁸)

We now submit that the overall intrinsic value—hedonic and non-hedonic—realized in cases like *Fiona’s Favor* (and gratitude generally) is best conceived against the background of non-requiring constraining reasons normative for gratitude. To see this, consider the alternatives. To insist that the reasons normative for gratitude are *requiring* reasons won’t do; it lands us back in the puzzle about duties of gratitude we began with. And notably, there is evidence from work in social psychology that individuals distinguish experiencing gratitude from experiencing duty.¹⁹ Nor will it do to understand reasons for expressing gratitude as being of the same type as reasons for acts of supererogation. In previous work (Horgan and Timmons 2010) we argue that reasons normative for supererogatory actions are moral favoring reasons (explained above in Section 1), and thus do not constrain the agent to act in the manner the reason supports. Deontically, supererogatory actions are morally optional. Reasons for expressing gratitude, by contrast, do constrain the grateful agent to act in the manner the reason supports, even though they do not require doing so. Deontically, supererogatory actions are optional and thus are not normatively expected as are expressions or demonstrations of gratitude.

Finally, in her work on gratitude, Algoe contrasts “communal norms” with “norms of exchange.”²⁰ Suppose we include in the latter not only norms of financial exchange but also norms of security and

¹⁸ See the study by Algoe, Haidt, and Gable 2008.

¹⁹ For a study dissociating indebtedness (duty) from gratitude see, for example, Watkins, et. al 2006.

²⁰ Algoe borrows the distinction from Clark and Mills 1993, 2001 whose exchange/community distinction between relationships concerns benefits conferred, where the basic contrast is exemplified by e.g. business relationships (exchange) and relationships where “benefits are given without the donor or the recipient feeling the recipient has an obligation to repay” (2001:3). As they write, the norms governing communal relationships are such that the donor

justice where one surrenders a portion of one's freedom in exchange for a like surrender by others. Then we can let communal norms refer to ones that promote positive bonds of community, friendship, and love. Communal norms, then, create *expectations* the observance of which promotes these communal goods involving mutual appreciation and care that elevate a community.

8. Conclusion

Collectively, the phenomenological data-points vis-à-vis gratitude expression that we have discussed above are best explained by the empirical psychological hypotheses we labeled Claim 1 and Claim 2. And as we observed in Section 1, in light of the key epistemological role of wide reflective equilibrium both in ordinary moral-judgment formation and in normative-ethical theorizing, Claims 1 and 2 thereby lend strong evidential support to Claims 3 and 4. In prototypical situations in which a recipient of a benevolently conferred benefit is appropriately grateful to the benefactor, gratitude expression by the recipient has the deontic status of being expected, and it has this status by virtue of the moral rationale cited in Claim 2. And for this reason, among others, normative ethics should incorporate an expanded deontic typology that includes the categories of the morally expected and the morally offensive.

Finally, the proposed categories of the morally expected and its contrary the morally offensive include far more instances than expressing/failing to express gratitude. For instance, in her 1992 paper "The Suberogatory," Julia Driver offers examples where an action or omission is "bad" (as she somewhat hesitatingly puts it) yet not wrong. Stripped of its evaluative and aretaic significance, suberogatory actions (omissions) have the status of being morally offensive without being wrong. One of Driver's examples is of someone who boards a train in front of a couple where there are only three seats left. The most convenient one is a window seat next to an unoccupied seat. The passenger is aware of the couple and although he is within his rights to take the window seat, doing so, while not wrong, is an offense; taking the lone, slightly less convenient seat is something he can be morally expected to do. This is but one case, yet there are arguably many more such cases in which a person, though not morally obligated to do or refrain from some course of action is subject to the sorts of interpersonal communal norms mentioned by Algeo that ground what we are calling moral expectations.²¹

"can't demand" the sort of responsiveness from the recipient as one can within exchange relationships (Ibid, our emphasis).

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Conflicts of interests/Competing Interests

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