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Meaning and Moral Dimensions of Gratitude

Masoud Sadeghi*

Abstract

Gratitude is defined as a moral emotion since it primarily motivates and stems from behavior that demonstrates concern for the well-being of others. As such, it is classified among other-praising moral emotions. Although defining and analyzing gratitude may seem straightforward at first glance, this theoretical study — drawing on the latest ethical research — identifies and examines four fundamental challenges to its conventional definition. These challenges revolve around the concepts of the other, will, benevolence, and benefit-giving. The article also discusses whether the feeling of gratitude must necessarily be a response to supererogatory actions beyond duty. The literature on gratitude is structured around two approaches: two-component gratitude and three-component gratitude. In the three-component approach, gratitude arises from the relationship between three elements: the benefactor, the benefit, and the beneficiary. In contrast, the two-component approach omits the benefactor and posits gratitude as a product of the relationship between the benefit and the beneficiary. The former is termed the propositional approach, while the latter is referred to as the prepositional approach. Sometimes individuals feel compelled to express gratitude toward God, existence, nature, or an abstract idea or concept—even in the absence of a tangible benefactor. This phenomenon is often termed existential gratitude, i.e., gratitude for life or existence as a whole, rather than for a specific benefit or person.

Keywords

Gratitude, Moral Emotion, Propositional Approach, Prepositional Approach, Existential Gratitude.

* ssociate Professor of Medical Ethics, Faculty of Medicine, Kermanshah University of Medical Sciences, Kermanshah, Iran. | masoud.sadeghi@kums.ac.ir



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