

A note on the definition of gratitude

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Abstract. In this paper, I object to Michael Rush's definitions of targeted and propositional gratitude.

When we think about what gratitude involves, it is natural to begin with a situation in which one person is grateful to another. In the recent philosophical literature, this is referred to as targeted gratitude. The purpose of this paper is to contest some definitions of types of gratitude offered by Michael Rush, starting with his definition of targeted gratitude.

Rush offers a definition that looks good at first sight (2019: 16). According to his definition, a person is grateful to another for something, call it X, if and only if the following conditions are met:

- (1) The person believes that X is a benefit to them.
- (2) The person is glad that X is the case.
- (3) The person believes that this other person brought about X, or played a relevant role in bringing about X.
- (4) The person does not believe that this other person has any disqualifying negative intentions or attitudes.

I do not think that this attempt at definition succeeds. Consider the following situation. Heathy is rescued from a fire by Charle. Heathy believes that escaping the fire was a benefit to her. She is glad that she escaped. She believes that Charle brought about her escape, or had a major role in bringing this about. She also believes that Charle did not have any disqualifying negative intentions. He did not, for example, rescue her in order to enter into an

abusive relationship with her. If we apply the definition above, Heathy counts as grateful to Charle. But Heathy is part of a clique and Charle is not part of that clique. Heathy would have preferred someone from her clique to rescue her. (Indeed, if Charle had not rescued her, someone from her clique would have.) Heathy says, “Get away from me, Charle, or whatever your name is!” Heathy is not grateful to Charle, so there is a problem with the definition above. It counts as grateful people we would ordinarily describe as ungrateful.

In the recent philosophical literature, the term “propositional gratitude” is used for a kind of gratitude in which there is no one who is the recipient of gratitude – nobody to whom one is grateful. Rush gives the example of being grateful that it did not rain when gathering the harvest. This is called propositional gratitude because the person is grateful that X, where X is filled in by a proposition, such as the proposition “It did not rain when gathering the harvest.”

From this example, it is plausible that propositional gratitude is something for atheists – a replacement for thanking God. A good question is whether it even exists in predominantly religious cultures, but I shall focus on definitional points below.

I think that Rush’s definition of propositional gratitude is also flawed. He defines it as occurring when the following conditions are met:

(1) and (2) above, plus

(5) had the person taken some other person to have brought about X, or played a relevant role in bringing about X, and not taken the other to have any disqualifying negative intentions or attitudes, the person would have been grateful to this other.

Rush gives another example of propositional gratitude, one which is helpful for understanding this definition (2019: 3). Someone pushes him out of the way a falling piano as part of a failed plan to shove him down a well. In light of the evil intention, Rush is not

inclined to send the person a thank you note.¹ If he did not believe that there was an evil intention, he would have been grateful to the person; but instead he is merely grateful that he avoided the piano. This is an instance of propositional gratitude by his definition. However, assuming that there is such a thing as propositional gratitude, Rush can be grateful that he was pushed out of the way of the piano and, even if he does not believe that there was a disqualifying intention, still not be grateful towards the person who pushed him. That is what the discussion earlier reveals. So the final condition of this definition does work.

Leaving aside the acceptability of this condition, note that there is a worry that “propositional gratitude” is just a fancy term for gladness. Rush aims to dispel this worry. He points out that someone can be glad about something when they do not believe that they benefitted from it, such as when someone is glad about an event that benefitted others (2019: 15). This is a good point. But I am not sure that what Rush is trying to define is genuinely a type of gratitude or is just gladness plus some other conditions – gladness about a benefit to oneself, gladness that would have been gratitude. As a term for it, I prefer “hypothetical gratitude,” after the much disputed hypothetical consent.

Reference

Rush, M. 2019. Motivating Propositional Gratitude. Forthcoming in *Philosophical Studies*. Accessed on 29th June 2019 from: <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007%2Fs11098-019-01241-z.pdf>

¹ A question I have about Rush’s example is, how did the villain of the piece not get killed by the piano?