

Gratitude Without Debts in Confucian Thought

Tsai George, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

I explore the role and significance of *gratitude* in early Confucian thought. In particular, I examine the implications of the fact that, although gratitude has an important place in the philosophical thought and writings of the Early Confucian ethical tradition (e.g., in discussions of how one should relate to one's parents), the notion of *debt of gratitude* (or a *duty* or *obligation* of gratitude) is virtually absent in these discussions. This absence presents an interesting contrast with the Western ethical tradition. The notion of "owing someone a debt of gratitude"—which is commonplace in our ordinary moral thought—can probably be traced to the old Christian idea that we owe God obedience as gratitude. In the history of philosophy, we find versions of the notion of duty of gratitude in Seneca and Kant.¹ Contemporary analytic philosophers such as Barbara Herman have also developed accounts of the idea.²

The general notion of *obligation* figures prominently in the Western ethical tradition (at least certain parts of it), given its roots in Judeo-Christianity, and the tremendous influence of thinkers such as Kant. (Indeed, the idea of obligation/duty is important for Utilitarians as well.) But while the notion of duty and obligation may not figure as prominently in the Confucian ethical tradition (as, say the Kantian ethical tradition), the notion of duty and obligation is not absent in Confucian thought. For instance, some scholars argue that the early Confucians took there to be duties and obligations in the context of the family (e.g., filial duties).³ Indeed, such family bonds (in particular, filial duties) are often appealed to as a model for understanding our other duties and responsibilities in the larger-scale social context (duties to the community, to the ruler, to Tian, and so on). Confucians believed in the importance of duties in the observance of certain rites. For instance, in Analects 2.5, Confucius says, "When your parents are alive, comply with the rites in serving them; when they die, comply with the rites in burying them; comply with the rites in sacrificing to them."

So given that (1) the Confucians take gratitude to be quite ethically important, and (2) the Confucians think we have duties to certain others (e.g., to our parents), it's all the more puzzling that (3) the Confucians did not think we have *duties of gratitude* to anyone (say, to our parents).

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*; Seneca, *On Benefits*.

² See Barbara Herman, "Being Helped and Being Grateful: Imperfect Duties, the Ethics of Possession, and the Unity of Morality"; Tony Manela, "Obligations of Gratitude and Correlative Rights." To be sure, there are also obligation-skeptics about gratitude among contemporary Western philosophers: See for example: Joel Feinberg, "Duties, Rights, and Claims"; Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, p. 179; Claudia Card, "Obligation and Gratitude"; Christopher H. Wellman, "Gratitude as a Virtue"

³ See P.J. Ivanhoe, "Filial Piety as a Virtue"; Celilia Wee, "Filial Obligations: A Comparative Study"

What is *gratitude*? Gratitude is a certain kind of response, or set of responses, to the intentional provision of benefit to one by another. It is usually viewed as an appropriate or fitting response by the beneficiary to the benefactor. Gratitude has affective, practical, and communicative dimensions. That is, it may comprise certain emotions (e.g., feeling thankful in one's heart, wishing a benefactor well); certain actions (e.g., performing acts of gratitude, such as returning a favor to the benefactor); and certain communicative expressions (e.g., communicating gratitude by sending a "thank you" note). Gratitude may also cover acts that are directed at someone other than the benefactor (e.g., "paying it forward").

What are *debts of gratitude*? Is it merely a figurative expression? I do not believe talk of "debt of gratitude" is mere metaphor in our ordinary moral thought. As Barbara Herman puts it, "In the central, ordinary case of gratitude, you do something for me—provide a benefit—and in response I owe you gratitude."⁴ Many believe that gratitude is at least sometimes *owed*, and *owed to the benefactor*. Gratitude involves things the beneficiary *must* do, and often must do *for* the benefactor. The early Confucians, however, did not conceive of gratitude in these deontic terms. To be sure, they did take gratitude and ingratitude to be morally significant. The failure to perform at least certain acts of gratitude is often seen as constituting a defect or shortcoming in one's moral character. It is also seen as warranting negative criticism or disapproval. (These are constant themes in the *Analects*). But, for the early Confucians, these negative moral appraisals fall short of the judgment that there's been a failure to discharge one's duty of gratitude. Gratitude (grateful thoughts and actions) is not seen as morally obligatory in the way that, say, keeping a promise and refraining from lying is seen as morally obligatory in common sense moral thought.

So what explains why the early Confucian did not subscribe to the notion of debt of gratitude? I believe that thinking through this question from a comparative perspective can reveal interesting implications regarding conceptions of interpersonal relations with and without debts of gratitude. More specifically, what I argue is that the notion of obligations of gratitude is connected to a broadly modern Western social world that sees human beings in *atomic* terms—as highly *individualistic*, *autonomous* beings. Moreover, human interactions and relations are seen in more *transactional* terms between *moral equals*. Thus, acts of beneficence are often viewed as the first move in a reciprocal relation: it is a kind of action that is only completed, as it were, when it receives the appropriate (re)action. And this is why, I argue, we find, in Western thought, the notion that something is owed in return when a benefit or gift is received.

The Confucian tradition, by contrast, tends to see people as engaged in a larger cooperative activity or venture (consider the importance of the image of the *family* in Confucian ethical thought). So human beings are viewed as enmeshed in an ongoing collective or shared project spanning across generations, within which different needs among its members with different roles may arise at different times. Since the early

⁴ Barbara Herman, "Being Helped and Being Grateful: Imperfect Duties, the Ethics of Possession, and the Unity of Morality," p. 393

Confucians regarded themselves as engaged in a collective project with others in this way, they are, I argue, inclined to view of gratitude in non-deontic terms.