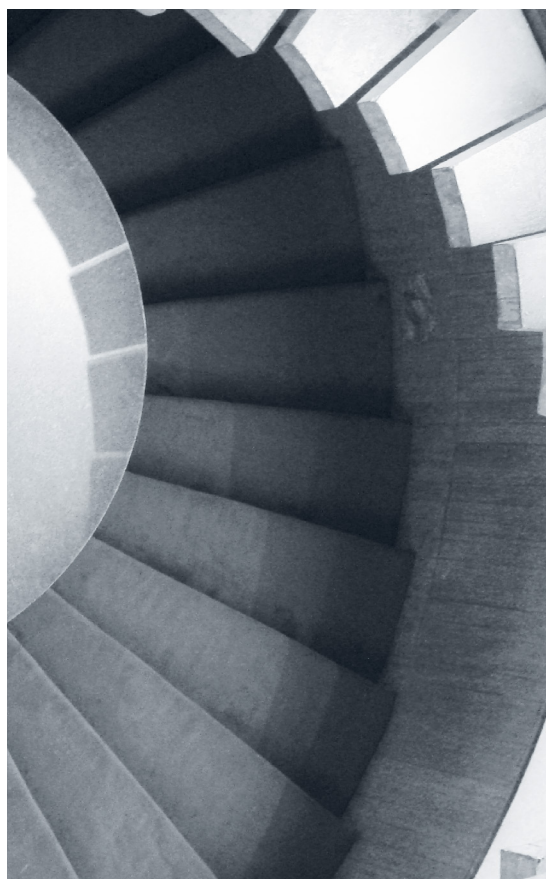


# Gratitude and individuation: review and reflections

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## Abstract

The current article intends to describe several approaches regarding gratitude, an emotional trait that has been studied by psychoanalysts, positive psychology and human personality researchers. The author reviews this diversity of approaches and proposes an analytical discussion on gratitude as an aspect of emotional health, observing that it can also adopt shadowy characteristics that deserve discrimination. It emphasizes the importance of conscious work on gratitude in the path of individuation. ■



**Keywords**  
gratitude,  
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## Gratitude and individuation: review and reflections

### Introduction

The phenomenon of gratitude has been approached through various lenses and perspectives. The current article proposes to reflect on this emotional trait and its role as a protection factor in the individual's psychic health. This article presents a bibliographic review on the study of human emotions, making a distinction between emotion and affective traits, in an attempt to classify gratitude within this complex field. The author walks through Melanie Klein's classic text "Envy and gratitude", through Carlos Byington and through positive psychology – an analytical field since the year 2000 –, and through the view on gratitude by some religious traditions. The discussion continues through the Greeks of antiquity and focuses on whether gratitude is worthy of exaltation or reservation.

### Background

To begin this reflection, it is important to place gratitude within emotions, a broad field of study.

Paul Ekman, a North American psychologist and pioneer in the study of human emotions, proposes to divide emotions in two groups: basic and complex. Basic emotions relates to an instinctive behavior present in animals, and to certain typical facial expressions, independent of the individual culture, and in fact it has a parallel to facial expressions in primates (EKMAN, 1992). Examples of basic emotions are anger, fear, sadness, disgust, surprise, curiosity, acceptance, joy. Complex emotions is made up of a combination of these basic emotions, in the same way as primary colors blend resulting in countless hues that make up the color palette. One example is the combination of basic emotions such

as anger and disgust resulting in contempt, a complex emotion.

Robert Plutchik, another North American psychologist, proposes that these basic emotions are biologically primitive and have evolved in the human being resulting in complex and sophisticated behaviors. Such behaviors represent an increase in the capacity to reproduce themselves or to survive. For instance, we could mention fear, a behavior that would stimulate the reaction of fight or flight through an adrenergic activation, an evolutive advantage in a threatening situation. (PLUTCHIK, 2000).

In that regard, Plutchik proposes a model which he calls Wheel of Emotions, displaying the intensity of the emotion on an axis, placing it in a gradation of activation, such as: serenity – joy – ecstasy. Here, it is a pleasing affection in a low activation level that brings serenity, whereas, when associated with excitement, results in ecstasy. The same may occur with a negative emotion, for instance, a state of mild apprehension, when activated more results in the state of fear, which at its emotional peak becomes terror. Plutchik builds a three-dimension polygon; in its apex there is a little differentiated emotion of low intensity, like a state of emotional rest. On the side of the polygon that is opposite the vertex, a diamond-like three-dimensional figure, in which the emotions stand out and differentiate themselves one from the others, so that we can see the expression of each of them with clarity and specificity: admiration, ecstasy, anguish, wrath and so forth.

It is interesting to observe that all this scientific interest to classify the emotional reactions in humans is recent, having started at the beginning of the 1960s. Such research is part of the field that studies personality. Thus, in general terms emotions emerge in a context

that elicits and provokes them, when looking closely, it becomes clear that there are certain specific temperament patterns that make the appearance of certain emotions easy or difficult. For example, people with a temperament prone to hostility have a lower threshold to experience anger.

In this way, there is a distinction between emotion and affective trait (WATSON, 2000). While emotion is a more crude and independent response, the affective trait maintains a longitudinal relationship with the individual's temperament, which is the genetically inherited portion of the personality that tends to have longitudinal stability. Thus, although everyone can experience all the emotions during their life, depending on the context, there are those who are more predisposed by temperament to experience fear, sadness, acceptance etc., more frequently, for a longer time and with more intensity.

We could ask ourselves: where can we find gratitude within this mix of emotions? This is a difficult classification. It has already been characterized as a complex emotion, a moral virtue, a habit, a personality trait, a behavior or even a coping behavior.

We can relate it closer to appreciation, acceptance, serenity, contentment. Furthermore, we can assume that gratitude may be related to the ability to feel empathy and solidarity towards the other, as a receiver engaging in a cooperative and altruistic relationship. Lazarus and Lazarus (1994) propose that gratitude is one of the "empathetic emotions," which roots lie in the ability to establish empathy towards others. At the opposite end of the spectrum, we know that highly competitive people often find it difficult to feel gratitude, engaging more often in relationships where rivalry, envy, resentment, and comparison become prominent features.

### **Studies on gratitude**

The word gratitude comes from Latin *gratia*, grace. This vernacular is close to the word gra-

teousness and gratuity. Gratitude has a relationship with what is *gracious*, *witty* and what comes *gratis*, free, and is received as a gift. We feel gratitude when we recognize that we have received something of value. The benefit received may be material or immaterial, and the source may be attributed to human resources (people) or non-human resources (god, life, cosmos, chance, luck).

Some researchers have dedicated themselves specifically to the study of gratitude. McCullough et al. (2001) describe an affective trait, which they call "disposition towards gratitude" – a generalized tendency to recognize and respond with gratitude to the attitudes of other people, in the experiences and outcomes obtained. These researchers note that some people feel grateful even for negative experiences, such as a serious illness, believing that such adverse event project them towards transformations that, later, they consider it as positive. On the opposite extreme, there are those who, however graced (*agraciados*), always consider themselves as being harmed, and complain almost regardless of the context.

These authors describe the disposition towards gratitude as having other characteristics, such as: intensity, frequency, spam, density. This means that individuals who are typically grateful tend to feel gratitude much more intensely and frequently than the population in general. In addition, they tend to extend gratitude to many events for which they feel grateful – family, health, job, life as a whole – which they call spam. Density refers to a large number of people for whom the individual is "grateful to."

An interesting aspect observed by these researchers is the fact that people who are grateful and attribute their success to others, do not underestimate their own effort. Rather, it is as if they expand the credit to a larger number of people who contribute to their wellbeing, including themselves.

The starting questions for the researchers were: can gratitude be studied as an independent variable? Or is it a conglomerate of mixed emotions, attitudes and behaviors? To answer these questions, they tried to validate a questionnaire prepared specifically for their research, isolating gratitude as a variable, and then comparing the data obtained from this questionnaire to other data from other questionnaires that separated other variables such as certain personality characteristics, tendency to hope, happiness, optimism, vitality or satisfaction with life. The personality characteristics studied were greater and lesser tendency to positive and negative affectivity, in addition to cordiality, affability, opening, neuroticism and extraversion (that is different from what we call extroversion in analytical psychology). Researchers also tested the population who were more prone to gratitude, using questionnaires that researched feelings of envy and leaning towards materialism. They also submitted the same questionnaire on gratitude to four people who were familiar with each subject in the research, to verify if people who felt grateful were also considered by their peers to be grateful.

The result showed that gratitude can be studied as a variable independent from other personality and behavior traits, and that there is a good correlation between people who consider themselves grateful and the opinion of their peers in this regard. Furthermore, through this research it was possible to observe that people inclined towards gratitude are less predisposed towards envy and materialistic values. These people are less inclined to consider their happiness to be related to material goods and tend to share their resources with others. The research also showed that this population is less frustrated and resentful when people around them obtain something that they do not have.

In fact, when we think about gratitude in psychology, there is a fundamental paper by Melanie Klein (1882-1960), in which she oppos-

es envy to gratitude. An eminent psychoanalyst and pioneer in the study based on empirical observation of children and babies, Melanie Klein published in 1957 her seminal work entitled "Envy and gratitude" (KLEIN, 1991). Already in a very mature period of her trajectory, the author postulates that envy and gratitude are opposite feelings that interact with each other. She also states that the first object to which they refer is the nurturing breast. The psychoanalyst observes that the nurturing breast is perceived by the baby as a source of creativity and strength, and when the emotion of envy is excessive, it harms this individual's creative ability. Melanie Klein further points out that envy has a negative influence not only in situations of emotional deprivation, but also it has a negative influence in situations that are apparently normal, in which there is a reduction in the ability to feel gratitude. Klein makes a connection between narcissism psychopathology and individuals who feel the emotion of envy very strongly. She describes what she calls abnormal formation of the schizoid-paranoid position, where there is an accentuated split between the good breast (through which the baby feels satisfied, cared for and nurtured) and the bad breast (by which the baby feels persecuted, frustrated, abandoned and rejected). Another interesting aspect of the text is that Klein also makes considerations about the normal structure of the baby's psyche, what makes us ponder not only on the meaning of pathology, but also on the meaning of physiology and psychic health.

Melanie Klein also extends her thoughts to the field of transference, applying her observations on envy and gratitude to the therapeutic relationship. In this regard, the author puts a limit to the possibility of analyzing envy. She points out that sometimes it is not possible to make too much progress, as we are dealing with a very old and deep-rooted pathology, capable of creating psychic scars that are difficult to overcome and be treated. The author further states that envy

creates an “undermining of the roots of feelings of love and gratitude, as it affects the oldest relationship of all, the relationship with the mother” (KLEIN, 1991, p. 207).

Klein’s work points to the question that envy is related to the idealization of the other. Thus, we derive that the feeling of gratitude towards the other is also to be able to see the other as vulnerable, with complexities and difficulties typical of any human being. The author postulates that the idealization of the mother by the baby is probably related to a persecutory anxiety prompted by birth itself, attributing to the mother the ability to completely satisfy the baby. The unborn baby begins to separate the feelings of satisfaction while in the uterine environment from the feelings of oppression and insecurity caused by labor (thus, even before breastfeeding, the paranoid-schizoid position begins splitting between “good breast” and “bad breast”). This work influenced a whole generation of psychoanalysts.

Going back to papers on positive psychology – a recent area in psychology that studies healthy emotional states such as happiness, optimism, contentment, resilience, quality of life –, there is an interesting article by Emmons and McCullough (2003). These researchers have made a case-control study with a group of 65 neuromuscular disease patients. With similar disease symptoms, the subjects were randomly separated in two groups. In one group, the subjects had to list every day, for 21 days, five things which they felt grateful for on that day and fill a daily questionnaire evaluating their physical and emotional health conditions. The second group filled the daily questionnaire only about their health.

The results showed that the simple intervention of making a list about what you were grateful for, each day, resulted in a statistically significant reduction in negative affections and an increase in positive affections. Furthermore, the subjects

who were encouraged to make a “gratitude list” had a better sleeping quality and quantity, were more prone to optimism and a sense of connection with others.

In addition to psychological readings on gratitude, it is important to observe that many traditional religious currents value this emotional trait. Judaism, Christianity, Islamism and Buddhism consider gratitude positively, shown in socio-demographic research as a positive association between religious populations and the inclination towards gratitude (McCULLOUGH et al., 2001). This point needs to be carefully interpreted, as, through association studies, it is not possible to say what is cause and what is consequence. Do people who lean towards gratitude get close to religious environments because they find a resonance in a group that encourages this characteristic that is already present? Or do religious people start to practice gratitude because they are encouraged to do so? What has been observed, without causal interpretations, is that religiosity and/or spirituality variables tend to go hand in hand with the variable inclination towards gratitude (BAETZ, TOEWS, 2009).

In fact, various religions have commemorative days to celebrate gratitude collectively. Sukkot, the Jewish festival in the Fall, Christian Thanksgiving harvest and the practice of Ramadan in Islam are all related to the cultivation of gratitude.

## Discussion

We may start the discussion asking ourselves: in the end, does gratitude deserve admiration or contempt? Some well-known authors such as Seneca (4 BC – 65 AD) praised the value of gratitude not only for the wellbeing of individuals but also for social wellbeing. On the other hand, Aristotle (384 BC – 322 BC) and Epicurus (341 BC – 271 BC) believed that manifestations of gratitude are nothing more than veils to cover the initial interest of individuals or are emotional ties

that make people feel unnecessarily indebted to their supposed beneficiaries.

Clinically, we observe that the two hypotheses may be true. There are individuals in whom gratitude emerge as a beneficial ability to recognize the value of people and situations they encountered in life. In other cases, we see that gratitude may be expressed through an affectation, a mask behind which we may recognize the feeling of guilt, the desire to manipulate others, and many other dark aspects such as hypocrisy, falsehood, regressive religious morality etc.

Similarly to what Carlos Byington proposes in his book “Creative envy” (BYINGTON, 2002), we can think of gratitude as a structuring function, which structures consciousness by modulating symbolic integration. It can be experienced as creative or defensive.

In defensive gratitude, we see destructive and poorly worked traits on a collision path. I remember a story told by a patient who mentioned that she knew a 10-year-old girl who was born with a physical deformity, without one of her arms. This child used to say about herself: “when I was about to be born, next to me there was a little angel without an arm, so I gave him mine, and I was grateful for the opportunity to do so.” This child lived in a highly religious family environment, and surely had learned this statement from an adult, that inspired admiration and appreciation by the religious group. She repeated this statement as a parrot, not at all integrating its content. In this supposedly cooperative and generous attitude there is a declaration of an artificial gratitude, which does not contribute to a genuine elaboration of this child’s physical disability.

In creative gratitude, on the other hand, it is easy to identify behaviors that contribute to the emotional health of the individual. Many times, in my office I was able to observe patients, who had suffered a lot, either from a depressive episode or even from neoplasia, and who later

– to their own surprise – feel grateful for this bitter experience, which woke them up to a process of self-knowledge, deepening awareness and resilience.

## Conclusions

It is easy to feel grateful for a fleeting and hedonic event and it has no long-term relevance, it is ephemeral. I propose that we deepen our reflection and consider the cultivation of gratitude as the possibility of feeling satisfied in a world full of limitations, disagreements and complex interactions. Gratitude as the development of a serenity that strengthens us in adverse contexts, in impermanence and in the face of the unknown. As a flexibility to welcome whatever comes, a readiness in recognizing grace in what we receive, whatever it may be. And to circumvent the inescapable obstacles and vicissitudes inherent in human existence.

Our society tends to put an emphasis on what we lack. We incorporate the habit of shining a spotlight on what we do not have, on what we are not. I call the attention for us to count our blessings, and to also put a beam of light on what we have, on what we are.

It is possible that the development of creative gratitude may take some time. It is a known fact that different emotions may happen in different lengths of times. While surprise happens in a split second, love can take years to be established and take root. To develop gratitude as a way to overcome competitiveness and envy, the path proposed by Melanie Klein is to de-idealize the other, to see the other as a human being susceptible to mistakes, subject to vulnerabilities and blind spots. To develop empathy towards the other and oneself.

Much research have pointed out that gratitude can be an affective trait that is pro-social and that it facilitates subjective happiness and wellbeing (EMMONS, McCULLOUGH, 2003; LARSEN, McKIBBAN, 2008; SANSONE, SANSONE, 2010).

To develop an inclination towards gratitude with depth and wisdom may help us on a journey of individuation and realization. A relevant question would be: “how much is

*sufficient* for someone to feel grateful and satisfied with life?” ■

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## Resumo

### *Gratidão e individuação: revisão e reflexões*

*O presente artigo tem como objetivo abordar diferentes leituras a respeito da gratidão, traço emocional que já foi estudado por psicanalistas, pesquisadores da psicologia positiva e da personalidade humana. A autora articula essa diversidade de abordagens e propõe uma leitura analítica a respeito da gratidão como fator de saúde emocional, observando também que este mesmo traço pode adotar características sombrias que merecem discriminação. Ressalta a importância do trabalho consciente acerca da gratidão no caminho de individuação. ■*

Palavras-chave: gratidão, emoções positivas, individuação.

## Resumen

### *Gratitud e individualización: revisión y reflexiones*

*Este artículo pretende abordar diferentes lecturas sobre la gratitud, un rasgo emocional que ya ha sido estudiado por psicoanalistas, investigadores de la psicología positiva y de la personalidad humana. La autora articula esta diversidad de enfoques y propone una lectura analítica sobre la gratitud como factor de salud emocional, advirtiéndole también que este mismo rasgo puede adoptar características oscuras que merecen discriminación. Destaca la importancia del trabajo consciente sobre la gratitud en el camino de la individuación. ■*

Palabras clave: gratitud, emociones positivas, individuación.



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