Questioning Gratitude in an Unequal World with Reference to the Work of Toni Morrison

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Abstract
The last few decades have seen an increasing amount of philosophical, psychological, and educational research and theory promoting the virtue and value of gratitude. Such works elaborate various reasons for gratitude and argue for it in various cases, including unintuitive situations such as cases of harm. This essay challenges broad contemporary promotions of gratitude by considering gratitude in difficult, realistically complex moral circumstances, exploring gratitude in contemporary American author Toni Morrison’s novels, particularly *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1973). It then explores the alternative form of moral education that reading such fiction can provide in relation to relevant philosophical and educational views, reflecting particularly on Martha Nussbaum and Morrison’s own perspectives regarding the possibilities and limitations of learning from fiction.

Keywords
gratitude, moral education, Toni Morrison, American fiction, social inequality
Introduction

In recent decades, gratitude has been increasingly regarded as a virtue if not a moral requirement in philosophical, psychological, and educational research. Gratitude appears to be presumed good in many such articles and essays that deliberate rather on borderline examples, such as the appropriateness of gratitude in cases where one is merely not harmed, or in cases where one actually is harmed (Smilansky; Fitzgerald). Influenced by the popular psychology movement (1980s onward), which regards experiencing gratitude as psychologically beneficial, the normal conception of gratitude used by ordinary people and academics alike in Western societies and particularly in the United States has also broadened. The three-place relation of benefactor-benefit-beneficiary in understandings of gratitude has been deemphasized, replacing the concept of gratitude as thankfulness for any benefit, like good weather (Fitzgerald; Carr, “Varieties”; Jackson). In such works, justifications for gratitude seem to be based on its association with other qualities such as altruistic behaviors (McCullough et al.; Froh, Sefick, and Emmons).

However, gratitude’s moral value in analytic terms remains difficult to elaborate. Meanwhile, the psychological value of gratitude is seldom explored beyond the scholarly context of a presumed even playing field of resources and social power. Gratitude’s value is infrequently considered within the complex social reality found in contemporary societies, typically marked by structural inequality, racism and ethnocentrism, and other forms of discrimination and prejudice. Furthermore, while some philosophers have elaborated many unintuitive instances where gratitude can be good, their accounts presume the capacity to accurately and precisely make and use objective observations about mental states of individuals and circumstances related to receiving of benefits. In place of the fuzzy and confusing world of social perceptions, they draw clear lines to broaden justifications for gratitude.

In many of her novels, American novelist Toni Morrison does just the opposite. She challenges the moral value of gratitude through subtle storytelling, articulating non-obvious and/or underprivileged experiences and perspectives that preclude formulaic endorsements of gratitude. In particular, Morrison does this by conveying stark realistic social worlds at odds with some philosophers’ more simple cases, wherein people engage in struggles for self-respect and autonomy rather than merely facing singular episodic risks to self-esteem reflected in scholarly texts. In Morrison’s accounts, full of nuance and real-world complexity, abstract philosophical criteria for gratitude are less helpful, and presumptions of gratitude’s value are reframed in some cases as unjust impositions.
In order to substantiate and elaborate these claims, this essay begins with a brief summary and critical examination of broadening philosophical justifications for gratitude before analyzing gratitude as framed in Morrison’s works, focusing on *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1973). In these works the moral value of gratitude emerges as problematic and questionable. This essay aims to also represent a preliminary case study for understanding the moral implications of Morrison’s work in the context of her larger aims as a storyteller. The educative potential of Morrison’s stories is thus also explored here in relation to recent writings on the value of fiction with regard to education for social justice.

**Gratitude in Philosophical Literature**

In recent years, academic work on gratitude has increased significantly. Of interest for this essay however, is how gratitude has been examined and defended as good in challenging circumstances more reflective of contemporary social life. Claudia Card, Saul Smilansky, and Patrick Fitzgerald are among those philosophers who have explored moral complications for gratitude in real life cases marked by social inequality and injustice between benefactors and beneficiaries. Card for instance has grappled with the case of unwanted generosity, which complicates the simplistic notion of gratitude for a benefit. Here, Card writes of the “paradox of gratitude”: in requiring gratitude for a gift, a gift transforms into an object of exchange or repayment (see also Carr, “Paradox”). Given the paradox of gratitude, wealthy and powerful people may be insensitive “to others wishes’ [*sic*] with regard to becoming obligated,” as the more privileged “can afford not to care whether others are obligated or not” (Card 124). As “benevolence is incompatible with disregarding others’ willingness to become obligated,” signaling a lack of respect for others, one can better or only maintain self-respect in such a case by taking the benefactor out of the equation (Card 124). In such cases, Card thus argues that one could have gratitude for the benefactor’s existence and gift, but not to the benefactor as an individual, articulating the dyadic (two-place) conception of gratitude instead of the more traditional triadic (three-place) view (Jackson).

Smilansky similarly recognizes deep structural inequality in the world, but for him this implies that people ought to have more gratitude than they normally do for non-malevolence: that is, for not being harmed. Because people can benefit from harming others and at times have to make an effort not to harm others, people unreasonably downgrade non-maleficent effort according to Smilansky, for “are all dependent on the goodwill of others, and *ought not to take such goodwill for granted*”
Smilansky hopes that through this reformulation of gratitude for lack of harm, “even the most downtrodden are partners in the moral community,” as the “great over-emphasis on the contributions involved in traditionally conceived positive beneficence . . . is harmful to the widespread recognition of the moral standing of many of the poor” (Smilansky 596-97; ellipsis added). Thus, Smilansky seeks a kind of social leveling in evaluating and justifying cases of gratitude across inequality. He wants to highlight how all can be thankful for each other across class, race, and so on, in a world marked by scarcity and social tension. While Smilansky is clearly concerned with social justice here, this account risks over-recognizing the desires for racial innocence of white people within situations of structural racism and injustice, such as that in the contemporary United States. For example, many white people in the United States would say they have done nothing racist, while supporting implicitly political and cultural climates enabling police brutality toward African Americans (Applebaum).

Fitzgerald focuses most extensively on gratitude in cases of inequality and injustice, so it is worth examining his justifications for gratitude in such cases in more depth. Specifically, Fitzgerald argues that one should have gratitude in cases where he or she benefits another, and even where he or she is harmed by another. Fitzgerald’s framework follows Card’s, in detaching benefits from benefactors, while he also, like Smilansky, broadens the perspective on what counts as a benefit. Fitzgerald argues that one can benefit from giving to others and from being harmed. In discussing gratitude for giving, Fitzgerald likens his reader to Card’s wealthy and powerful benefactor: “‘If it weren’t for you,’ the benefactor might say to the beneficiary, ‘I would be miserably self-absorbed’” (133-34). As there are cases where one cannot face an obligation of gratitude, experiencing gratitude in giving is essential, Fitzgerald argues. One then has gratitude for his or her own development of sympathy and compassion. Similarly in the case of gratitude for being harmed, the benefit is indirect, and certainly not intended by the benefactor/harmer. Indeed, the recipient may not desire or accept the benefit/harm (Fitzgerald 126). However, from being harmed one can learn lessons of patience and compassion, and will grow as a person.

A major objection to gratitude-for-harm noted by Fitzgerald is the possibility that gratitude in such cases invites servility, injustice, and mistreatment, and neglects persons’ needs for self-respect. As he concedes, a “reason we might think that such gratitude is wrong is that it demonstrates a lack of self-respect or makes us servile. . . . Shouldn’t we try to dissuade victims of abuse from being grateful to their abusers?” (Fitzgerald 140; ellipsis added). In responding to this objection Fitzgerald presents
four hypothetical examples centered on women who have been abused by their fathers. Dawn and Erin have inappropriate gratitude, as they lack self-respect: Dawn “expresses gratitude by obeying his abusive demands,” while Erin “believes that she doesn’t deserve any better” (142-43). Gail tries to deny that she was abused in order to persevere. But Faye

thrived after she severed ties with her abusive father. She had no fear of other adversities in her life since they looked so small in comparison to the ones she had already survived. She became very compassionate because her own pain gave her insight into the suffering of others. She developed an unwavering passion to fight the kinds of abuse to which she had been subjected. (Fitzgerald 143)

However from a moral particularist view that entails a deeper consideration of the overall context including the outcomes of a case (Dancy), such abstract examples of appropriate versus misplaced gratitude are less persuasive. Although gratitude is seen as productive here, as Faye “sees her father’s actions as inseparable from her life story, and she values what her life has become” (Fitzgerald 144), as David Carr argues, such gratitude could arguably have immoral impacts: “just as promotion of or habituation in courage and temperance has produced brave and self-controlled villains and crooks, it could be that sincere, heartfelt and well-judged gratitude might be inculcated or promoted to ends that are quite corrupt or self-serving” (“Is Gratitude” 1483). Thus Faye could have used her strength and resilience in selfish, unvirtuous ways instead.

Following a particularist assessment of the cases, one could also further contextualize the cases of Gail and Faye to identify more morally relevant features not brought out in Fitzgerald’s argument. Is Faye still sufficiently self-respecting if she ignores or denies some harms while acknowledging others? The content of what she denies versus what she accepts may also be relevant. What if Gail has taken great strides toward emotional healing while Faye’s efforts have been much less due to incidental dispositional differences? Would this not indicate that Gail learned more (and therefore benefited more) than Faye, despite signs of continued denial? Different psychological diagnoses of sufficient self-respect and lack of denial for moral gratitude are feasible here. Fitzgerald might respond to this line of reasoning that he gives cases of women abused “in similar ways” (143). Yet when we are evaluating gratitude based on observations related to the emotional and psychological health of individual humans (not clones), the details of the abuse are not the whole story. When
real-life humans face unique and diverse situations, developing justifications for gratitude *ceteris paribus* is inadequate.

A related alternative reading may be provided from moral contextualism (Baumann). From this view, concepts such as self-respect, prerequisite for the evaluation of appropriate versus misplaced gratitude, may be understood differently by assessors. Two psychologists or two philosophers may agree on the facts of a case—observations about what happened and an individual’s state as seen empirically—but give different diagnoses due to divergent conceptualizations of key qualities. In Fitzgerald’s examples of grateful daughters, different psychologists might come to different judgments about the value and appropriateness of gratitude based on their evaluations of what counts as sufficient mental health, emotional healing, or self-respect. More broadly, what is a good and what is a beneficial learning experience may be regarded differently by diverse assessors within one concrete situation. If we find these possibilities worth exploring when it comes to gratitude, then self-respect and appropriate gratitude cannot be conclusively evaluated in abstract cases. More substantive examples with more realistically complex features are required to evaluate how and when gratitude is good, or even whether it is always morally permissible. In this context Toni Morrison’s novels provide rich counterpoints that reject blanket assertions of gratitude’s goodness within simple framings.

**Gratitude in Morrison’s The Bluest Eye and Sula**

Many plot points of Morrison’s novels *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* reveal darker tones of gratitude in line with moral particularism and moral contextualism, exposing the problematic potential in regarding gratitude as a moral requirement, virtue, or good apart from other considerations. As is generally the case in Morrison’s novels, the author’s problematizing of gratitude emerges in contexts marked by social difference and inequality, focusing on gratitude among extremely disadvantaged people, demands for gratitude for lack of harm, and gratitude’s dark side and potential relation to less virtuous traits such as self-satisfaction.

Perhaps the most well-known instance exploring gratitude, or rather suggested ingratitude, in Morrison’s canon is within the first part, or season (Autumn), of her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, a novel focusing on the lives and challenges of three poor African American girls, Claudia, her sister Frieda, and their friend Pecola. Claudia sees Frieda and Pecola gaze upon an image of Shirley Temple on a cup, “one of those little white girls whose socks never slid down their heels” (*Bluest Eye* 19). Then
Claudia recalls how her “hatred for all the Shirley Temples of the world . . . had begun with Christmas,” with the gift of a blue-eyed pink-skinned baby doll (19; ellipsis added). Claudia dissects the doll to understand its value and substance, as “all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured” (20). Expecting gratitude in the context of the family’s socioeconomic disadvantage, rather than a race-based assessment of the doll’s value, the adults around Claudia are predictably outraged: “‘. . . I never had a baby doll in my whole life and used to cry my eyes out for them. Now you got one beautiful one and you tear it up—what’s the matter with you?’” (21; ellipsis added).

Here Morrison gives a vivid example of how a benefit for one person, Claudia’s parent, can appear as a harm to another (Claudia). Within a system of internalized oppression, as Morrison notes in the prologue to recent versions of the text, people accept injustice which manifests itself culturally in big and small ways. This acceptance is a kind of continued harm, what Claudia in the narrative also reflects on as “disinterested violence,” an impersonal yet nonetheless felt harm (23). Unlike Fitzgerald’s Faye, who can feel gratitude once her abuse has ended, Claudia cannot leave the world wherein white girls are treasured over black girls. She can, and apparently does (as she expresses it), “learn to love” Shirley Temple, but this learning from and within harm also has a questionable value. Self-respect, a key component of moral gratitude for thinkers like Card and Fitzgerald, might be incompatible with any kind of gratitude for benevolence or non-malevolence in this instance.

Elsewhere in Morrison’s works this complex challenge of maintaining self-respect when one is asked or expected according to social customs to be grateful is similarly traced out in concrete circumstances and made vivid in its complexity to readers. In *Sula* ingratitude is examined particularly as expressed by the title character, another disadvantaged African American girl who grows into a willful and rebellious social outcast and deviant from the context or framing of her poor but morally righteous black community. Sula lacks appreciation for people and gratitude for anything, to the shock of others. In one of the main plot points of the story, Sula refuses her longtime childhood friend Nel’s pleas to show gratitude for her friendship over the years. Nel is hurt because Sula has an affair with her husband, asking: “I was good to you, Sula, why don’t that matter?” (*Sula* 124). Sula turns the table. “I didn’t kill him, I just [slept with] him. If we were such good friends, how come you couldn’t get over it?” (145). As Sula’s thoughts are revealed, she does not view her adultery and affair with Nel’s husband as harmful to Nel, and she does not see Nel’s assessment of it as harmful as fair or reasonable. Notably, Sula appears to be victim
to the paradox of gratitude in this case, as Nel expects Sula’s gratitude simply for being her friend, while Nel was always advantaged over Sula in socioeconomic terms.

In their final parting in life, Sula asks Nel how she can be sure that it was Nel who was good to Sula rather than the reverse—whether Nel should be the one in their relationship to have gratitude for Sula’s friendship, given the challenges Sula faced more generally. Here we see the definition and intention of benevolence or harm intertwined with the two childhood friends’ crises of identity in their relationship with each other. The reader is ill-equipped from a philosophical viewpoint to make a moral evaluation of the appropriate role of gratitude here, or of who the benefactor and beneficiary in the relationship are.

Sula’s lack of gratitude toward Eva, her grandmother and main caretaker as a child, is also critically explored in the text within a broader social context. Upon returning after ten years away Sula greets Eva with what Eva judges as inappropriate ingratitude. Within moments of their reunion Eva admonishes Sula’s lack of gratitude bluntly, recalling that Sula “was quick enough when [she] wanted something. When [she] needed a little change or . . .” (92; ellipsis in original). Sula replies, “Don’t talk to me about how much you gave me, Big Mamma, and how much I owe you or none of that.” Sula goes on to call Eva a cheat and a hypocrite. Eva remarks, “Bible say honor thy father and thy mother and thy days may be long upon the land thy God giveth thee,” to which Sula responds, “Mamma must have skipped that part. . . . Which God? The one that watched you burn Plum?” accusing Eva of murdering her drug-addicted son (92-93; ellipsis added). Sula leaves shortly thereafter and later sends Eva to a home for the elderly, confirming in the minds of the townspeople that Sula was pure evil, without a soul.

As the narrator describes, Sula is different from others in town, and her perceived ingratitude is one case in point; yet the case for her “evil” or general immorality is, at least partly, contrived. Sula had learned from experience “there was no other that you could count on” (118-19) and being free of greed, affection, or desire, or any expectation of benevolence or even non-malevolence, she had no interest in conforming to manners around her, including manners that in different contexts might appear morally irrelevant. As the narrator relates:

Among the weighty evidence piling up was the fact that Sula did not look her age. She was near thirty and, unlike them, had lost no teeth, suffered no bruises, developed no ring of fat at the waist of pocket at the

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1 This echoes a scene in The Bluest Eye, wherein Claudia and Frieda endure their mother’s continuous complaining about “some people’s” sense of entitlement and lack of gratitude.
back of her neck. . . . Some of the men, who as boys had dated her, remembered that on picnics neither gnats nor mosquitoes would settle on her. Patsy, Hannah’s one-time friend, agreed and said not only that, but she had witnessed the fact that when Sula drank beer she never belched. (115; ellipsis added)

While Sula is judged as evil, and her lack of gratitude is one symptom for the townspeople, the narrator provides a less moralistic tone in understanding Sula versus the community. The story articulates how those people accusing Sula of immorality are perhaps as harmful as Sula is, if not more so, for comparing themselves favorably and smugly with Sula, among other things. That Sula was perhaps permanently hardened over an extremely difficult childhood is overlooked in their unsympathetic evaluations, which are actually based on questionable generalities of good and evil. Their gratitude is also critically examined in the story as I discuss next.

On the other hand, the presence of gratitude is reframed as morally questionable in *Sula* and *The Bluest Eye*. As mentioned above, gratitude and lack of gratitude are treated playfully with regard to the particular (rather than universal) sentiments and habits of the people of *Sula’s the Bottom*. As the narrator relates, the townspeople were happier and more grateful for their faithful husbands and well-mannered kin after Sula returned to town, as she reminds them of risk and darkness. Yet in the same time period of Sula’s death, a harsh winter sets in, making it difficult to travel, work, grow crops or buy needed goods. Without Sula, according to the narrator, there was “nothing to rub up against” and their lack of gratitude reemerged:

Without her mockery, affection for others sank into flaccid disrepair. Daughters who had complained bitterly about the responsibilities of taking care of their aged mothers-in-law had altered when Sula locked Eva away, and they began cleaning those old women’s spittoons without a murmur. Now that Sula was dead and done with, they returned to a steeping resentment of the burdens of old people. Wives uncoddled their husbands; there seemed no further need to reinforce their vanity. . . .

Christmas came one morning and haggled everybody’s nerves like a dull ax—too shabby to cut clean but too heavy to ignore. The children lay wall-eyed on creaking beds or pallets near the stove, sucking peppermint and oranges in between coughs while their mothers stomped the floors in rage at the cakes that did not rise because the stove fire had
been so stingy. . . The white people who came with Christmas bags of rock candy and old clothes were hard put to get a *Yes ‘m, thank you*, out of those sullen mouths. (153-54; ellipses added)

Here gratitude and lack of gratitude can be seen not as direct responses to benevolence or harm, but as circumstantial and relational: as resulting from a critical evaluation of the relative possibilities and challenges of one’s life in comparison with others. The townspeople only become grateful when they can see their relative position as superior to that of others, such as that of Sula, or women whose husbands Sula is sleeping with. Lack of gratitude reigns in difficult times, regardless of general occasions for gratitude, such as Christmas treats or donations from white families. The narrator does not present this as a moral disparity within cases of lack of gratitude, but as a fact of life. In the context of structural racism in that time period and context, the reference to potential gratitude toward wealthier and more privileged white people, for benevolence or non-maleficence, also hints at the paternalism of expecting gratitude among structurally oppressed individuals and communities, though the narrator also highlights the normality, everyday expectation, of gratitude in such a case. Gratitude and lack of gratitude as authentic experiences seem akin not to virtuous or unvirtuous dispositions or habits of mind, despite the dominance of this framing in contemporary moral philosophy. Rather gratitude and lack of gratitude seem to be revealed as circumstantial dispositions and symptoms of larger understandings of one’s relations with others in their world.

In *The Bluest Eye*, displays and expressions of gratitude are also clearly related to joy over having more than others, and thus seem not virtuous but rather selfish, self-satisfied, or complacent, in line with a moral particularist view of the so-called virtue. As in *Sula*, in *The Bluest Eye* the trials and injustice faced by one social outcast—in this case, Pecola—create a new space and awareness of loss and harm. Pecola is raped by her father Cholly, becomes pregnant with and miscarries the child, and seems to go mad, asking for and imagining that she has received blue eyes from another character, Soaphead Church. In this context of horror and tragedy, the narrator relates how Pecola’s downward path actively fuels feelings of increased happiness and appreciation for one’s own circumstances among others around her. Here gratitude is observed particularly but not exclusively among the other girls Claudia and Frieda. Again, Morrison illustrates here gratitude as a positive relative comparison to another in the context of undeserved harm and privilege, in Claudia and Frieda’s gratitude in relation to the horrors of Pecola’s life. In this case, Claudia
and Frieda realize maleficence in the world and feel blessed compared with Pecola for relative lack of harm. As Morrison writes:

> all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We felt so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. . . . [H]er pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous. Even her waking dreams we used—to silence our own nightmares. (205; ellipsis added)

As the narrator continues, this gratitude is as much fantasy as truth, however. By focusing on this contrast with Pecola to feel good about their lives, Claudia and Frieda are thinking in a delusional and oblivious way, as Morrison suggests that they are in truth hardly more beautiful, healthy, or witty. As the narrator goes on, “fantasy it was, for we were not strong, only aggressive; we were not free, merely licensed. . . . We substituted good grammar for intellect; we switched habits to simulate maturity; we rearranged lies and called it truth” (205; ellipsis added). Here Morrison reveals that comparing oneself to others more disadvantaged need not help one to be a better person, or do better things, as the sense of gratitude it provides can be alternatively seen as delusional. Gratitude itself is equated with self-righteousness and self-satisfaction. Claudia and Frieda feel better because of their relationship with Pecola about non-malevolence in their worlds. Yet, these good feelings and this appreciation also reflect a lack of opposition to maleficence toward Pecola, who did nothing to deserve her fate. Though gratitude is portrayed by Fitzgerald as a way to learn from challenges and make the world a better place, efforts to help Pecola are minimal in *The Bluest Eye*, while a community gazes on in a kind of personal relief, mixed with horror.

The most obvious example of what one might regard as misplaced and inappropriate gratitude is that expressed by Pecola herself, as in the end she believes that she receives her deepest wish, to have blue eyes. One might say, in the abstract language of moral philosophers, that such gratitude may be permissible or even supererogatory, as the delusion of Pecola receiving blue eyes is not particularly harmful to Pecola in light of the situation. In Pecola’s exceedingly bad condition, why should she not take pleasure in any thing, any small blessing, that does not actively harm her? However, Pecola’s identification of blue eyes as a sign of white privilege is evidenced in her desire and pride in her eye color compared to white girls. She is then grateful to have a part of white privilege within a white supremacist
concentration: “They are bluer, aren’t they . . . Bluer than Joanna’s? . . . And bluer than Michelena’s?” (197; ellipses added). Pecola is not just happy for believing that she has received something that is good and that she wanted; she is happy to imagine she has risen above others in an unequal and oppressive racial context, where her (and others’) humanity is disrespected and devalued due to racial categorization. Contrary to philosophical claims that broaden justifications for experiencing and expressing gratitude across diverse circumstances, gratitude for gaining unjust privilege in oppressive contexts is hardly virtuous, as portrayed here. As Morrison writes, “the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of its fulfillment” (204). The gratitude appears appropriate when considering some features of the situation, and yet misplaced, lacking appropriately healthy self-respect, in other important aspects.

Learning from Morrison’s Novels

How can people learn, and what can readers take away, from Morrison’s books? To start with the question of how, many political theorists and educational researchers who have focused on learning for moral development and social justice in recent years have argued in favor of using literature in education for the development of desired virtues and values, such as compassion, empathy, and sympathy. Martha Nussbaum argues particularly that to “promote empathy across specific social barriers, we need to turn to works of art that present these barriers and their meaning,” while stories with a narrative dimension, unlike abstract philosophical works, demonstrate the breadth and depth of experience over time at the individual level, developing an alternative, more concrete form of self-understanding (431). As Eileen John has also discussed, Nussbaum argues specifically that subtlety within fiction “can help readers develop habits of perception such that they will perceive their actual moral world more finely and respond to it with a more nuanced range of feeling” (308).

While John uses Morrison’s The Bluest Eye to argue that Morrison actually leaves little room for readers to develop nuanced attention, in her highly detailed descriptions of lives and experiences which may be de facto subtle but should not be (the lives of structurally disadvantaged black girls), Morrison has expressed similarly to Nussbaum the desire to leave a space for reader evaluation, rather than to tell the reader exactly what to think (see also Als; Morrison, “Nobel Lecture”). As Morrison relates, literature “should try deliberately to make you stand up and make you feel something profoundly” (“Rootedness” 341). In order to achieve this purpose, she
contends, “I have to provide the places and spaces so that the reader can participate” (341). Morrison has similarly stated that communicating gaps or silences, where the reader must fill in the blanks as there is no master narrative or universal perspective anywhere, is one of the most powerful devices of literature, and one of her aims across all of her novels including *Sula* (“Rootedness”). As John also notes, Morrison shares detailed lives and perspectives with readers, but she does not prepare grounds for one particular lesson to be learned.

In this context, Jeff Frank argues that philosophers like Nussbaum risk contributing to “overly deterministic reading practices” by presuming we can search for and identify particular (if subtle) morals from reading fiction, rather than discovering “the multiplicity of meanings and morals that are written into works of literature” (1019). For Frank the lessons of works with multiplicities of meaning are about one’s own practices of perception. Morrison not only reveals a subtle world to readers in terms of observation and perspective, but she also creates a community or plurality of perspectives, that engages the reader to actively participate in evaluating who is right and wrong about complex moral issues, with no cheat sheet available at the back of the text (Als). Contrary to traditional notions of moral education encouraged by moral and political philosophers, there is no clear right or wrong with either Nel, Sula, Claudia or Pecola. Morrison gives the reader enough information to discover themselves as ultimate participants in meaning-making. As Morrison has written of her reader, “I want to subvert his traditional comfort so that he may experience an unorthodox one: that of being in the company of his own solitary imagination” (“Memory” 387). Traditional assumptions, such as that gratitude is always a good, are precluded here, in place of a more elaborate and creative set of circumstances.

What can be taken away, then, from Morrison’s stories, when it comes to the potential virtue and moral value of gratitude? Following moral philosophers, educators working in the area of moral development tend to assume in ever-expanding circumstances that gratitude is a good to be encouraged and inculcated. Like Smilansky and Fitzgerald, Mark Jonas argues that one must promote gratitude in place of resentment in challenging circumstances marked by inequity and structural injustice, even among people who have benefited or benefit little from society, such as homeless people. As he elaborates:

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2 Such spaces John also acknowledges in *The Bluest Eye* as a complex moral terrain: morally ambiguous if not unclear in perspective.
We have come to assume that anger and resentment are necessary for justice to be done. This is not the case, however. In the same way that Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi were able to rectify injustices without violence, so are individuals able... without anger and resentment. (46; ellipsis added)

Relatedly, Jonas argues we must not enable or support young people thinking comparatively about their lot in life in relation to that of others, lest half of them develop resentment in place of gratitude, when they witness the pleasure of easy (false?) gratitude in their peers. Bad and anti-social feelings are seen as worse in his framework, which neglects needs for self-respect, or otherwise presumes that self-respect is fully compatible with gratitude regardless of one’s circumstances.

Morrison can be seen on the contrary to enable a moral particularism and contextualism when it comes to gratitude, framing the disposition and expression of gratitude alternatively as morally questionable rather than morally essential, in contexts where we must consider not one moral principle but several at the same time, and from different people’s perspectives, short-term and long-term. From these perspectives the nature of harm and benevolence as singular or continuous and structural is not obvious even though many facts and viewpoints are given. When reading Morrison and thinking about gratitude one must ask such questions as, for example, whether encouragement of gratitude might lead to delusional oblivion to life’s challenges (thinking of Claudia and Shirley Temple), or joy in having more than others in unjust circumstances (thinking of Claudia and Pecola)? Though much of social psychology asserts today that gratitude can lead to being more beneficent in the world around you and some philosophers find potential for gratitude across a wide range of challenging circumstances, Morrison reminds that without the critical interrogation of social injustice and one’s place in society, he or she can be led away from understanding the structural nature of advantage and disadvantage, in favor of comparing oneself favorably to others for self-satisfaction. We thus see characters relying on something like gratitude in The Bluest Eye and in Sula to feel good about themselves doubly: first, for their good moral manners, and second for recognizing themselves as being in a better place than others. Yet these forms of gratitude are morally suspect in the texts, not a priori morally good.

In concrete contexts provided by Morrison—of tragedy, oppression, and deep and strongly felt harm—one can also see how the emphasis on gratitude in moral philosophy or in education can have potentially harmful paternalistic overtones, as those in authority express through gratitude moralism that they know more than
others do about what is best for them, what they deserve or can sensibly expect or hope to receive. When one sees how Eva has been part of a world that has been cruel to Sula, and the dark reality wherein poor blacks are expected to thank rich whites for the smallest of deeds, despite ongoing racist wrongdoing and evil, he or she can no longer feel as certain as moral and educational philosophers seem to be with regard to upholding a principle of gratitude against other considerations. Thinking of self-respect as a prerequisite for appropriate gratitude in real life and not only in some philosopher’s tales, one can begin to understand how misplaced gratitude can significantly harm self-respect or lead to self-delusion, such as in the case of Pecola. Such tales illuminate to readers that not all situations warrant indiscriminant gratitude.

**Conclusion**

Despite the passionate pleas of philosophers and psychologists who embrace gratitude in diverse situations, from a moral particularist view, lack of gratitude cannot be simply regarded as immoral and gratitude as necessary or normally good across diverse situations. Otherwise self-respect and respect for others and ethical duties toward them may be thwarted. As a detailed exploration of cases from Morrison’s literature demonstrate, in line with a moral particularist view, gratitude can be seen as good or bad, based on other morally relevant features of the situation. These may include when one exhibits acceptance and inaction regarding unjust privilege, versus directing that gratitude and benefit toward making life better for less advantaged people. A lack of gratitude may be warranted instead in experiences that seem to endorse an unequal status quo.

Additionally, rather than seeing gratitude or lack of gratitude as moral or immoral, Morrison’s work suggests that they are part of human nature, not necessarily bendable to good habits or virtuous intentions. In such a context, in contrast with Fitzgerald and Jonas’s claims, celebrating gratitude may be a partial and dangerous act, supportive of an unequal status quo and unearned privileges, and in this case it may become merely a means toward selfish ends as a social norm of little inherent value. In Morrison’s work, gratitude seems rather a cultural norm, externally and perhaps oppressively imposed, hardly a prized quality of moral goodness. Those concerned with enacting social justice and ethical behavior in inequitable social orders, such as those in real life today, can learn from Morrison’s stories that the line between complacency and gratitude outside the ideally abstract philosophical world can be blurry indeed.
Works Cited


About the Author

Liz Jackson is Assistant Professor of Education at the University of Hong Kong. Her monograph Muslims and Islam in US Education: Reconsidering Multiculturalism (Routledge, 2014/2016) received the Book Award of the Philosophy of Education Society of Australasia and the Research Output Prize for the Faculty of Education at the University of Hong Kong. Her areas of expertise are philosophy of education, multicultural education, and global studies in education. Her articles and essays have appeared in Educational Philosophy and Theory, Journal of Moral Education, and in collected annual volumes of the Philosophy of Education Yearbook (Philosophy of Education Society).

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