

FIELD-STRUCTURES OF SOCIAL VIRTUES

Phenomenology and dynamics of gratitude and wonder

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My research over the last decade has been centred on social events of everyday life: commitment, gratitude, wonder, forgiveness, trust, sincerity. I have defined these events as ‘social virtues’ although the term ‘virtue’ is not very highly valued in our culture¹. The basic unit of my research is the person, not in an empty environment, but in continuous relation to, and interaction with another people. Consequently, I speak of ‘social virtues’ as interpersonal events, and not as attributes belonging to a person as a lone subject. In order to elaborate a phenomenological description of social virtues, I use everyday experience and different literary forms, in accordance with Fritz HEIDER, who believes that these texts “provide a fertile source of understanding interpersonal relations”.

For the dynamic interpretation of virtues I refer to the field-theory of Kurt LEWIN and to his basic concepts: life space, regions, hierarchical organisation, position, feeling of belonging. I will try to describe the field-structures of gratitude and wonder and to discover the conditions and factors which promote or inhibit each of these virtues.

The field-structure of gratitude

Gratitude for a benefit

According to HEIDER, an action or a gift can evoke gratitude only if it is perceived as a benefit by the person who receives it. We must thus adopt the point of view of this person and recognise her inner world. HEIDER says that the meaning of an action depends on several factors: local and total relevance of the benefit; levels of attribution to or interpretation of the intention of the benefactor; power and status of the persons.

I will focus on another basic condition of the psychological field, which promotes

¹Each of these virtues was investigated in the “Colloquia on interpretation”, which I have organised every year, since 1979 in the Department of Philosophy and Human Sciences of the University of Macerata. In the Colloquia scholars from many disciplines: philosophy, theology, linguistics, psychology, literature and law take part. The proceedings of the Colloquia are edited by me each year by the IEPI Press Pisa.

gratitude: the feeling of belonging to a network of interpersonal relations as ‘We-part’. I start with an example that can be considered as a ‘good structure’ in the sense of WERTHEIMER. This example is provided by a letter written to his primary school teacher by Albert CAMUS when he received the Nobel-prize:

“Dear M. Germain,

[...] When I heard the news, my first thought, after my mother, was of you. Without you, without the hand that you held out to the poor boy who I was, without your teaching and example, none of this would have taken place. I will not aggrandise this honour. But it is a chance to tell you, what you have been and still are for me and to assure you that your efforts, your work and the generous heart you put into it are still living within the small pupil, who, despite his age, has not ceased being your grateful disciple.”²

In this letter, CAMUS observes his life-cycle as a whole and recognises the role of his mother and his teacher in the building of his personality. He considers his own ego in the correct place in a network of interpersonal relations to which he feels he belongs. The Nobel Prize is not an occasion to exalt himself. Camus considers the prize as too great an honour for him; he will share this honour with the persons who have helped him to become who he is. He believes that his fate would have been different “without the care and the generosity” of his teacher. CAMUS perceives himself both as I and as We-part in the family (with his mother) and in the school (with the teacher)³. Following the concepts of Norbert ELIAS, we can say that CAMUS shows a good balance between his I-identity and his We-identity. From this global perspective of his life arises CAMUS’ deep gratitude.

This type of field-structure can be understood more clearly if we compare it with the field-structure of pride and envy, which, as we shall see, are two inhibiting factors of gratitude.

Gratitude for existence

I have illustrated gratitude for a benefit, which a person has received from another person. There are different expressions of gratitude, which concern, not a benefit, but the pure existence of a person. Romano GUARDINI⁴ says: „There are moments when a person feels he must thank another person because she is; not because she has done this or that but because she is here”.

We see this type of gratitude, for example, in the letters of Dietrich BONHOEFFER and other courageous persons who conspired against HITLER and were condemned

² [...] quand j’ai appris la nouvelle, ma première pensée, après ma mère, a été pour vous. Sans vous, sans cette main affectueuse que vous avez tendue au petit enfant pauvre que j’étais, sans votre enseignement et votre exemple, rien de tout ce la ne serait arrivé. Je ne me fais pas un monde de cette sorte d’honneur, Mais celui-là et du moins une occasion pour vous assurer que vos efforts, votre travail et le cœur généreux que vous y mettez sont toujours vivants chez l’un de vos petits écoliers qui, malgré l’âge, n’a pas cessé d’être votre reconnaissant élève. (19 nov. 1957)

³ I use the terms I and We-part in accordance with Wertheimer and Schulte. E. Levy, in his translation of Schultes essay, provides a comment in which the terms I, We and We-part are clearly analysed.

⁴ „Es gibt Augenblicke, in denen man dem Anderen gegenüber das Gefühl bekommt, ihm danken zu müssen, daß er ist - nicht dies oder jenes getan hat, sondern da ist.“

to death⁵. In a letter from his prison (28/12/44), which appears in a collection edited by E. BETHGE and R. BETHGE, BONHOEFFER wrote to his mother:

“Dear Mama, I want you to know, that I think about you and Papa innumerable times a day and I thank God because you are here for me and the whole family.”

This type of letter shows a retrospective of the writer’s life, in which the hierarchical organisation of the different regions of life-space is modified: the interpersonal region becomes the centre, and political and social commitment become peripheral. Another important event is the vanishing of the ‘obvious’ aspects of reality. Hans von DOHNANY, from the same prison, wrote to his wife (18/2/45):

“I have understood the value of many obvious things only when these have been taken away from me.”⁶

When the obvious aspects of reality disappear, the network of interpersonal relations becomes wider and the individual can see himself from the perspective of a creature who is near to others and feels gratitude for his own existence and for the existence of those who have dedicated attention to him.

Reality purified from the ‘obvious’, can now be seen from another perspective: with the eye of “wondering gratitude”.

The field-structure of pride

Pride is well illustrated in the parable of the Pharisee and the publican (Luk. 18, 9-14):

“Two men went up to the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood there and said this prayer to himself, ‘I thank you, God, that I am not grasping, unjust, adulterous like the rest of mankind, and particularly that I am not like this tax collector here. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes on all I get’.”

The prayer of gratitude of the Pharisee is not accepted by God because “he prides himself on being virtuous and despises everyone else”. The psychological field of the Pharisee is centred on his own ego, which he considers perfect, as opposed to other people, whom he considers bad. The Pharisee perceives his I in isolation and not as We-part in the whole of others.

The field-structure of envy

Another inhibitor of gratitude, envy, was investigated by the psychoanalyst Melanie KLEIN. She describes an example observed during psychotherapy:

For instance: the analyst has just given an interpretation which brought the patient relief and produced a change of mood from despair to hope and trust. With some pa-

⁵ „Liebe Mama, Du mußt wissen, daß ich jeden Tag unzählige Male an Dich und Papa denke und daß ich Gott danke, daß Ihr da seid für mich und für die ganze Familie.“

⁶ „Aber wievielerlei ‚selbstverständliche‘ Dinge gibt es doch, deren Wert mir erst durch die bittere Entbehrung bewußt geworden ist!“

tients, or with the same patient at other times, this helpful interpretation may soon become the object of destructive criticism [...]. The envious patient grudges the analyst the success of his work; it is characteristic of envy that it implies robbing the object of what it possesses, and spoiling it. Real conviction, as we often see in less envious patients, implies gratitude for a gift received.

The envious person cannot accept a gift as benefit from the other because accepting it he would acknowledge the positive qualities or the success of the other. In many cases the envious person is doubtful of his own value in comparison with other people and consequently he needs to belittle or to spoil the qualities of the other. According to SCHELER and HEIDER, if a person is secure of his own power and value, then, he will feel pleasure when another person also has value or even stands above him.

SCHELER also describes ‘existential envy’ (Existenzialneid) when the existence of another person is a continuous reproach to the envious, a constant reminder of his own inferiority.

‘Existential envy’ can be considered as the opposite of ‘gratitude for existence’, illustrated earlier.

The field-structure of wonder

Wonder is traditionally defined as arising from the perception of an unusual and unexpected object. However wonder can be defined as a virtue if we consider it as the effect of an appropriate attitude to reality, particularly to the reality of the ‘other’.

Wonder revealed to the simple

To introduce this concept, we can refer to modern poets and dramatists. In his ninth Elegy the poet RILKE⁷ says:

“[...] Praise this world to the Angel, not the untellable: you
can’t impress him with the splendour you’ve felt;
in the cosmos where he more feelingly feels
you’re only a novice.

So show him some simple thing, refashioned by age after age,
till it lives in our hands and eyes as a part of ourselves.

Tell him things. He’ll stand more astonished: [...]”

⁷ „[...] Preise dem Engel die Welt, nicht die unsägliche, ihm / kannst du nicht großtun mit herrlich Erfültem; im Weltall, / wo er fühlender fühlt, bist du ein Neuling. Drum zeig / ihm das Einfache, das, von Geschlecht zu Geschlechtern gestaltet, / als Unsriges lebt, neben der Hand und im Blick. / Sag ihm die Dinge. Er wird staunender stehn; [...]“

In these texts we can find the echo of JESUS' words when he exclaims (Luk. 10,21):

"I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and of earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to mere children."

The attitude of the simple can be defined "docta ignorantia", the concept coined by AUGUSTINE and later elaborated by NICHOLAS OF CUSA. Docta ignorantia can be defined as the attitude of the scholar who recognises what remains inaccessible in what he has found.

Wim WENDERS, in his film "Wings of Desire", extends wonder from things to people. When one of the two angels, the protagonists of the film, decides to become human, he says to his companion: "to look is not to look from up to down, but look at eye level." He means that he is giving up his superiority, his all-seeing and all-knowing. After this decision, reality changes: he begins to see with wonder the colour of things and perceive their smell and flavour and, after meeting the woman he loves, he can finally say: "Tonight I have learned wonder [...] only the wonder of us two, the wonder of a man and a woman made me become a man. Now I know what no angel knows."

Wonder and respect for the mystery of human beings

Max FRISCH in his diaries (1946 - 1949), written at the same time as he wrote the tragedy "Andorra", focuses on the conditions of love and wonder. The tragic events of this piece concern a young man who is labeled as a Jew by the people of his town and, on the basis of this stereotype, is condemned to death. As a contrast to the atmosphere of hatred in Andorra, FRISCH writes:

"Love liberates from all images [...] The biblical commandment (Dt 5,8): 'You shall not make yourself an image of God', could be said of the divine, which lives in each man, and which is full of mystery and is unknowable [...] The wonder of love is based on our willingness to become involved in the dynamics of the living and to follow a person in all his possible developments."⁸

Wonder arises from renouncing the claim to total knowledge of the 'other' and vanishes when we make an image of the other. FRISCH adds:

"When we believe we know the other, love ends. We are tired of putting up with the mystery of man, the exciting enigma that man is forever [...]"⁹

⁸ „Die Liebe befreit es aus jeglichem Bildnis [...] Du sollst dir kein Bildnis machen, heißt es, von Gott. Es dürfte auch in diesem Sinne gelten: Gott als das Lebendige in jedem Menschen, das, was nicht erfassbar ist [...] Eben darin besteht ja die Liebe, das Wunderbare an der Liebe, daß sie uns in der Schweben des Lebendigen hält, in der Bereitschaft, einem Menschen zu folgen in allen seinen möglichen Entfaltungen.“

⁹ „Unsere Meinung, daß wir das andere kennen, ist das Ende der Liebe [...] Für ein Geheimnis, das der Mensch ja immerhin ist, ein erregendes Rätsel, das auszuhalten wir müde geworden sind.“

Wonder and gratitude

Wonder and gratitude, particularly the gratitude for existence appear frequently together and influence each other; practising gratitude can evoke wonder. This relationship is expressed in its clearest form in the “Canticum Fratris Solis” by St. FRANCIS OF ASSISI. In this song St. FRANCIS praises, glorifies and thanks God because He is and thanks Him for all the wonders of creation (“laudate e benedite mi Signore e ringraziate e serviteli cun grande umilitate”).

In the psychological field of St. FRANCIS, his ego remains in obscurity and, in the centre, is God, the creator, surrounded by all his creatures.

The same field-structure can be found in interpersonal love when a person contemplates with wonder and gratitude the other without the need to possess him: parents who gaze at their new-born with amazement; lovers who admire each other.

Zusammenfassung

Mit Hilfe der Basis-Konzepte der Feldtheorie habe ich eine phänomenologische Beschreibung von Dankbarkeit und Wunder erarbeitet und einige Faktoren beleuchtet, die diese Tugenden fördern oder behindern. Ich habe zwei Arten von Dankbarkeit beschrieben: Dankbarkeit für einen Vorteil und Dankbarkeit für die Existenz. Dann habe ich mich auf das Gefühl konzentriert, einem interpersonalen Beziehungsgeflecht anzugehören, als einen förderlichen Basis-Faktor für Dankbarkeit. Hochmut und Neid sind Faktoren, die Dankbarkeit behindern. Das Wunder erfordert eine angemessene Einstellung zur Realität: die „Einstellung der Einfachheit“ und den „Respekt vor dem Mysterium“ menschlicher Wesen. Ich habe dann den Drang illustriert, den anderen in eine fixe Form oder ein fixes Bild pressen zu müssen, eine Art intellektueller Besitznahme, die Wunder behindert.

Summary

Through the basic concepts of field-theory I have elaborated a phenomenological description of gratitude and wonder and illustrated some factors which promote or inhibit each of these virtues. I have described two types of gratitude: gratitude for a benefit and gratitude for existence. I have focussed on the feeling of belonging to a network of interpersonal relations as a basic promoting factor for gratitude. Pride and envy are inhibiting factors of gratitude. Wonder requires an appropriate attitude to reality: the ‘attitude of the simple’ and ‘respect for the mystery’ of human beings. I have illustrated the need to set the other in a fixed form or image, a type of intellectual possession as an inhibiting factor of wonder.

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