Thanking the bus driver

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Should we in the Halifax Regional Municipality abandon our custom of thanking the driver as we exit the bus?

I know of three arguments that we should.

The first is that pausing to thank the driver eats up time and, thereby, slows down service. The second is that it compromises safety. The third is that we shouldn't thank people for simply doing their job.

Now it's true that when just about everyone in a crunch of people trying to get off the bus turns to thank the driver, time gets wasted and service slows down. The solution to the problem, though, isn't to abandon our custom, but rather to modify it slightly. We just have to delegate the saying of thank-you to the last person leaving.

Here's the new rule: Thank the driver, if you care to, if you are the only person getting off. But don't pause to say "thank you" if someone is getting off behind you. If you are the last person getting off at the stop, though, thank the driver on behalf of the entire group of people exiting.

Of course, one problem with this solution is that those who don't mean to thank the driver will be wrongly counted among the thankers. Another problem is that if the final person exiting the bus doesn't thank the driver, either because she doesn't think the driver deserves thanks or because it's not her habit, the people who exited earlier won't have thanked the driver, despite their wish.

The second argument, that thanking the driver puts safety at risk, has two parts. First, acknowledging thank-yous all day long wearies a driver. Second, in order to acknowledge the thank-you, a driver has to turn his or her attention away from the front of the bus. A weary or distracted driver is an accident waiting to happen.

Does receiving thank-yous weary or distract drivers? We would need to hear from the drivers themselves before crediting the second argument. In any case, the solution to the first problem would work here just as well. If safety is indeed compromised when a driver acknowledges a large number of thank-yous, then, since following the new rule stated above will reduce that number, following it will improve safety.

The third argument begins with the observation that in driving the bus, or in serving customers or clients, bus drivers, clerks, tellers, and the rest are simply doing their job. They get paid for what they do. Serving us well, then, is not a favour bus drivers do us. Drivers bring us benefits, absolutely; but they do so in exchange for money, and not as gifts they freely give.

We are not indebted to someone whose service comes with a price, no matter how much benefit we derive from their service.

Yet only when a person does one a favour does he or she deserve one's thanks. By thanking drivers when they do not, in fact, deserve thanks, we reduce the value of gratitude. "Thank you" loses its significance.

We can make a related point from the driver's side. To thank a bus driver is implicitly to deny to him or her that what he or she is doing is honest work within an impersonal economy. Thus, thanking the driver devalues not only our gratitude, but his or her labour, as well.

These points apply even when the driver performs exceptionally well. He or she is still simply doing his or her job. That a person is good at his or her job might call forth our admiration, but it cannot properly call forth gratitude.

I think this argument is unassailable. Thanking people for doing their jobs spreads gratitude too thin and expresses disdain for the meaning and value of work. Since we want to appreciate both favours and labour for what they in fact are, we ought to abandon the practice of thanking people for simply doing their jobs.

And, yet, we like to end our transactions with a "thank you." Not leaving off with this pleasantry would feel harsh and impolite.

It seems to me that the only sound response to the argument that we should not thank drivers is to deny that in saying "thank you," we are actually thanking them. Paradoxical as it might sound, we aren't in fact expressing gratitude when to the driver we say or nod "thanks."

What we are doing, rather, is acknowledging the personhood of the person with whom we are transacting business. We are letting it register with the driver that we see him or her as a creature of intelligence and emotion who is engaged in his or her present task for his or her own good reasons. Not to say "thank you"—which would be to ignore the clerk—is to treat him or her as merely a machine, without consciousness or will.

It is unfortunate that we have no resources to use to acknowledge the personhood of the driver other than the language and manners of gratitude. We would be clearer in our intentions and less often confused if we had an acknowledgement ritual that didn't involve saying "thank you."

But we don't, and so the language and manners of gratitude will have to do.

Now, acknowledging the personhood of drivers by speaking the words of gratitude is not a unique phenomenon. There are all sorts of occasions on which we use language that is at home in one domain to perform a task in a different domain.

Sometimes, though, we get confused as to what domain our task is in, and our confusion can have unfortunate repercussions.

Take "I'm sorry," for instance. "I'm sorry" is most at home in the domain of apologies, when a bad outcome is our moral fault. But we also use the phrase to express regret that an event for which we are not morally culpable occurred. We even sometimes use it to express our sadness at something that lies entirely beyond both our causal and moral responsibility.

"I'm sorry I didn't call," said when you hadn't promised to call, or couldn't call because you had to deal with an emergency, doesn't express an apology, for you weren't at fault in not calling. "I regret I didn't call" would express your intention more clearly.

Oftentimes, "I'm sorry you feel that way" is a way of saying simply that you're sad he or she feels that way.

"I'm sorry you failed," the teacher says. The student might think the teacher is apologizing and, thereby, admitting she wronged him by neglecting to teach him adequately. But the teacher, having done her best, is instead expressing only regret or sadness.

I think we should cherish our practice of saying “thank you” to bus drivers, store clerks, bank tellers, and so on. It’s civil and pleasant to acknowledge others as people, and pleasant and heartening to be so acknowledged. But let us be clear that our practice is one of civility and fellow feeling, and not one of expressing gratitude. Though we pause to say “thank you” to the bus driver, we do well to understand that we aren’t actually thanking her.

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