Paying It Forward

(12,108 Words)

Abstract

My teachers gave me more than I was owed; I cannot pay them back, but I can and should *pay it forward* to my students. This paper asks why: why would receiving an undeserved benefit from one party generate normative pressure to do likewise for a third party? This question can't be answered by appeal to beneficence, gratitude, or fairness, and so we must look elsewhere. In bipolar relationships, like friendships, we are subject to a norm of *balance*; when another is especially generous towards me, I should relate in kind. Balance is essentially diachronic: healthy bipolar relationships sustain and thrive on local imbalances—but persistently one-sided relationships are thereby flawed. I argue that so, too, are we subject to a norm of balance across generations. When we cannot repay a gift back to achieve balance within a bipolar relationship, we can instead pay that gift forward to achieve balance across *multi-generational relationships*—like that connecting my teachers, me, and my students. And one can, it turns out, achieve inter-generational balance with recipients quite different from one's initial giver. The upshot: among the tasks of responding to deep asymmetries in our lives is achieving balance in multi-generational relationships.

"To do philosophy," declares Iris Murdoch, "is to explore one's own temperament, and yet at the same time to attempt to discover the truth" (1970, p. 45). And in the name of both honesty and clarity, it's worth starting this paper with a bit of autobiography. When I finished my philosophy degree, I sat down to compose a thank you note for my advisor. Gratitude is a tricky business—both in day-to-day life and as a philosophical matter. We feel *indebted* to those who've benefited us, but unlike ordinary debts, it's often unclear how to repay them; the very language of "payment" seems to do violence to what gratitude is about. I was fortunate enough to have an outstanding advisor, and not for the first (or last) time was I struck by how impossible it seemed to express gratitude to a teacher who gave me so much. Nor did this seem like some practical challenge or a product of my inability to express myself; in an obvious sense, I could never *pay him back*. What I could do—or at least what I could try to do—was pay it forward.

As I wrote something to that effect in my inadequate thank you card, I felt both liberation and puzzlement. On the one hand, it was clear that this card didn't need to bear the normative weight of responding to the gift—much of that work would be done elsewhere.

Yet paying it forward seemed philosophically bizarre. Why would doing something for my students be an adequate response to *him*? Why would a gift from my teacher bear on how I should treat my students? Nonetheless it seems to. I *could* do the baseline required for my students (already a lot). But imagine a student sends me a third (sixth? tenth?) draft of a paper on a tight schedule. Should I make time for another round of comments? It is exactly the kind of thing that we normally think I don't owe my student, but it is exactly the kind of thing my advisor would do—or rather, that he *did for me*—and that seems to matter. I feel a substantial (normative) pressure to pay it forward. If I don't—indeed when I don't—I feel that I have *let down* or *disappointed* both my supervisor and my students.[1] And even if my not paying it forward were ultimately justified, I'd still feel the residual regret that attends an overridden consideration.

Am I just confused to feel that a gift from *one* person changes my normative situation with respect to *another*? Maybe—but if so, the confusion is widely shared. Speaking in particular about forgiveness, perhaps with an eye towards a broader range of conduct, Jesus characterizes paying it forward as a requirement whose failure warrants severe punishment (Matthew 18:21–35).[2] Having given a man money, the quintessential American moralist Benjamin Franklin insists he treat it as a loan to be paid to "another honest Man in similar Distress" (1791/1901, p.214). Explicitly citing Franklin in a speech to Parliament, John Stuart Mill likewise urged that "it is our duty to pass it on…to those who are in the same relation to us as we are to those who preceded us" (1866/1866). Emerson, in his strange and far ranging essay "Compensation,"

[1] Cf. Martin (2013) and Telech and Katz (2022).
[2] For discussion see McDougal (2024) and XXXX.

claims

> In the order of nature we cannot render benefits to those from whom we receive them, or only seldom. But the benefit we receive must be rendered again, line for line, deed for deed, cent for cent, to somebody. (1903, p. 27)

Representatives of twentieth-century Western moral sensibilities—from revered American football coach Woody Hayes[3] to the much feted charitable organization Heifer International,[4] from Alcoholics Anonymous[5] to schmaltzy Hollywood blockbusters,[6] and from Paul Erdös[7] to the US Postal Service[8]—present an injunction to pay it forward as of central importance. The phenomenon is familiar enough that a critically beloved,[9] surrealist comedy features a sketch whose punchline turns on feeling that paying it forward is required.[10,11]

Supposing that there is *something* we are all tracking, what could explain it? This is our central question: why does receiving a gift from one person generate pressure to do for another?

It is not, I argue, a special case of beneficence, gratitude, or fairness (§1.2–1.4). Rather, paying it forward is a response to an *inter-generational imbalance* or *disharmony*. When one receives a gift one should not pay *back*, paying it *forward* achieves balance in one's interpersonal relationships across generations. (Talk of "balance" can connote moral bean-counting; I don't intend that. A theory of paying it forward should explain what's defective about an accounting-like approach to paying it forward, see §2.1–2.2.)

[3] Who regularly (mis)quoted Emerson (Greene, 1995).
[4] Which has trademarked the phrase "passing on the gift" (Heifer International, 2024).
[5] Addictionhelp.com (2014).
[6] Leder (2000) based on Hyde (1999).
[7] Of Erdös number fame (Hoffman, 1998).
[8] "Stamp it Forward," urges a poster at my local branch, by purchasing charitable stamps.
[9] Syme (2021); Zinoman (2019); Anderson (2023).
[10] Robinson (2019), available at https://youtu.be/52LJaWDdG9c?feature=shared.
[11] For lack of space, I won't discuss Mauss's (1925/2016) influential "The Gift', which concerns "the obligation to return presents" (55). I am instead interested in gifts that are not straightforwardly obligatory (see §1.1). Mauss, unlike me, casts the practice of giving in a foundational social role. He theorizes a non-market-based *social contract*, where the normative pressure to return and pay forward gifts does the Hobbesian work of securing a social order against the threat of violence (Graeber 2001, cf. Sahlins 1972).

The balance account rests on two key claims. First, interpersonal relationships are subject to a diachronic norm of balance or harmony (§2). Roughly, there can be something defective about a relationship in which one person puts far more than the other. Crucially, however, such a norm is concerned with how individuals relate to one another over long time horizons. Many relationships thrive in spite of, or rather because of, local imbalances; you might be asymmetrically supportive of me while I'm going through a rough patch—that (temporary) imbalance is part of what might make our relationship good. But our relationship is flawed if it's *always* this way. We are subject—I argue—to a diachronic norm of balance, which applies not only within bipolar relationships but *across generations*.

But how can my relationship with my student balance that with my teacher when they are two *different* relationships? My second claim is that many relationships that seem bipolar (e.g., between me and my teacher or between me and my student) are in fact parts of a single *multi-generational* relationship (§3). Part of what it is to be a student looks forward to the possibility of one day sharing one's knowledge with another. This *proleptic* dimension of the student role finds fulfillment in my eventually becoming a teacher in much the same way that an acorn becomes an oak. We shouldn't see my relationship with my teacher as *separable* from that with my students. They are rather two parts of a single multi-generational whole. It is this larger intergenerational relationship that is balanced by paying it forward.

On the picture I offer, living well involves recognizing our place in a broader, multi-generational, socio-temporal order. Many of our relationships "rely on an implicit understanding of… occupying a place in an ongoing human history, in a temporally extended chain of lives and generations," and are what they are in virtue of the part they play in something larger (Scheffler, 2016).

Having defended an account of inter-generational balance, I argue that one can successfully

achieve inter-generational balance with recipients quite different from one's initial giver (§3.4). One might, for instance, pay forward exceptional teaching not with students but by volunteering at a soup kitchen, working as a political activist, or lovingly attending to an ailing neighbor. Paying it forward can forge a new relationship, putting those who gave to us in moral communion with those to whom we give. If I'm right, paying it forward may play a larger part in a life well lived than it first seems.

1 Getting the Phenomenon More Clearly in View

This section has two goals: to get a better pre-theoretical grip on the phenomenon of paying it forward, and to show we can't explain it as a special case of beneficence or gratitude.

First things first, we need a richer set of examples. Here are two new ones and an old one in new clothes.

> ADVISING Giver was Beneficiary's advisor; university norms required that Giver do some Baseline for Beneficiary: hold office hours, respond to emails, read seminar paper drafts at least once, etc. But Giver did Extra: reading more, being even more available, etc. Beneficiary is now an instructor himself, and has a student, (potential) Recipient, who would benefit from receiving Extra.

> FREE BIKE When Beneficiary first joined the bike club, he didn't have a bike. A senior club member, Giver, had an old bicycle she no longer used. Some Baseline level of support is required of senior members: advice, encouragement, maybe briefly loaning one's bike, etc. But Giver does Extra, gifting Beneficiary her spare bike. Beneficiary is now a senior member. A new club member, (potential) Recipient, lacks a bike. Beneficiary still has, but no longer uses, the bike Giver gave. She knows it would be perfect for Recipient.

Hospitality Beneficiary is visiting town and needs a place to stay. Giver is a friend of a friend who doesn't know Beneficiary, but seeing his need, does Extra, hosts Giver for a few days. Beneficiary knows that Giver will never visit his hometown, and so knows he can never repay the favor to her. Later, Beneficiary is back home and hears of (potential) Recipient, a friend of a friend he doesn't know, who needs a place to stay. Beneficiary can host her, but it would be inconvenient.[12]

In each case, Beneficiary faces pressure to pay it forward. If she doesn't, her behavior is in some way wanting. Put schematically:

Paying it Forward Giver goes beyond Baseline in giving Extra to Beneficiary, and now Beneficiary faces normative pressure to go above a prior Baseline and do Extra for a third party (potential) Recipient.

A cautious reader might already be a bit suspicious on two grounds. First, one might not feel the force of the intuition in all three cases. That is fine for now; my view predicts cultural variation, especially in cases like Hospitality. Second, one might worry I am prejudicing the analysis by ignoring the possibility of paying it forward outside of pre-existing social patterns, e.g., paying forward good advising at the local soup kitchen. I'll turn to such possibilities in §3.4.

1.1 Some kind of *pressure*

I say Beneficiary faces "normative pressure" to pay it forward—of what kind? I want to consider answers to this question and ultimately remain ecumenical about its answer.

These cases bear some, but not all, of the hallmarks of directed obligation. Even if Beneficiary selfishly wants to keep the bike, the fact that it was a(n undeserved) gift seems to *settle*

[12] Another important case is between children and *good* parents/guardians/caretakers. I don't discuss this because children raise unique ethical difficulties (Schapiro, 1999).

the question that he should pay it forward in the way that obligations do (Wallace, 2019). In my own case, paying it forward to my students doesn't feel *optional*. Likewise, Franklin, Emerson, Erdös, and Jesus all see paying it forward as required. The non-optionality feels, to foreshadow a theory I'll consider below, a lot *like* the non-optionality of gratitude. So something requirement-*like* seems afoot.

At the same time, paying it forward is not an ordinary directed duty owed to (potential) Recipient. Directed duties are paradigmatically demandable, and while Recipient can demand Baseline of Beneficiary, she *cannot* demand Extra. My students have many claims against me, but they have no claim to my being like my teacher. And even if Franklin is right that his beneficiary must aid a "similar[ly] Distress[ed]" man, no such man can *demand* that gift of him. Darwall, Gilbert, and others have influentially argued that directed duties are constitutively bound up with demand (2006; 2018, respectively). If they're right, then paying it forward cannot be a directed duty. But even if they're wrong, the undemandability of paying it forward distinguishes it from paradigmatic directed duties.

That puts paying it forward in somewhat familiar, but still much contested moral terrain: that of interpersonal normativity wherein an agent is under significant normative pressure that falls short of a claim right. Various notions might be deployed to capture the pressure to pay it forward. Maybe we have a relational pro tanto reason to pay it forward—perhaps one we might label requiring or insistent. Maybe paying it forward a special kind of duty that serves as a counter-example to a constitutive link between duties and demand or duties and rights;[13] maybe it's a different species of normative expectation, like a personal bond.[14] Maybe it's an imperfect duty, and so not demandable but nevertheless issuing in a kind of discretionary requirement or

[13] As in Martin (2019) or Fricker (2022).
[14] (Martin, 2021).

a mandatory *end*.[15] Maybe not paying it forward is suberogatory, a failure of common decency, or a morally permissible moral mistake.[16] Maybe my reasons to do it are a non-deontic matter of the heart or a product of ideals of a relationship.[17]

The precise meta-normative flavor of pressure needn't concern us, so I invite the reader to deploy whatever notion seems best. Our key question is why such pressure, whatever exactly it is, arises when one person gives another an undeserved gift? And, crucially, why the pressure arises not just to pay the gift back but to pay it forward to a third party?

1.2 Relationality: Against Beneficence

The simplest account of the pressure to pay it forward appeals to beneficence. Whatever their exact shape, norms of beneficence are sensitive to *how much* one has to give. And the recipient of a gift has, in virtue of that gift, more to give. Thus:

> The Beneficence Account Paying it forward is a special case of beneficence. We always have pressure to be beneficent; giver's gift furnishes Beneficiary with *more to give*, generating further pressure to do so.

I agree that all else equal, those who have more to give should give more. This account nonetheless fails because it cannot capture the *relational* character of paying it forward. This relationality presents itself in two ways.

The first is in an asymmetry between Beneficiary and similarly situated individuals. Imagine that Beneficiary has a friend who never received Extra: she bought her own bike, stayed at a hostel, or had merely adequate advising. Nevertheless, she is now in the same position as Beneficiary—it's just as easy for her to give Extra. Let's just focus on the bike case. Like anyone

[15] O'Neill (1996); Herman (2022).
[16] SeeDriver (1992); Calhoun (2016); Harman (2016) respectively. See also Liberto (2012).
[17] Darwall (2024) and Martin (2013); Lewis (2022, 2018).

with an extra bike, both Beneficiary and the friend have strong reason to give it to another in need. That said, Beneficiary faces *extra pressure*. It is in some respect *worse* for Beneficiary not to do Extra than for the similarly situated friend. The fact that Beneficiary's bike was *given to him* has its own special significance beyond merely furnishing him with more to give.

To defend the Beneficence Account, one might appeal to the gift's epistemic significance. The possibility of altruism is especially salient for Beneficiary, who unlike the similarly situated friend was once helped in just this way. But an appeal to salience wrongly presupposes that there's always a difference in salience between Beneficiary and a similarly situated individual. Just imagine that Beneficiary and the friend are close: the friend *knows* all about the gift. Beneficiary tells her everything, she sees the significance of the gift in Beneficiary's life, and she sees the opportunity and significance of giving Extra herself. In such a case she does indeed have strong reason to give; but Beneficiary has yet still greater pressure to do so.

The second relational dimension of the phenomenon concerns the reactive attitudes warranted by failure to pay it forward. Imagine Beneficiary never pay forward what her advisor gave him. One paradigmatic expression of the feeling would be an address *to* Giver that "I can't help but feel I'm letting you down. You did so much for me, but I didn't pay that forward." That an address *to* the Giver is appropriate is evidence the reactive attitude in question is interpersonal—he lets *Giver* down, where his attitude is directed *to her*.[18] The Beneficence Account can't capture the *directedness* of this reactive attitude. If my boss gives me a raise, and so more means to be beneficent, but I don't increase my charitable giving, I have not let *her* down; but when Beneficiary does not pay forward his advisor's gift, he does let *her* down.

We also find this relationality in the perspective of Giver. She has, I submit, special standing to feel disappointed if Beneficiary doesn't pay it forward in a way an onlooker cannot. While

[18] Darwall (2006); Wallace (1994, 2019).

she cannot demand Beneficiary pay it forward, she could feel *personally* let down by his failure; she could intelligibly express that with "I feel you let me down." Contrast her with an onlooker. An onlooker could feel some third-personal disappointment that Beneficiary doesn't pay it forward; but it would be wildly presumptuous for him to take it personally or say "you let me down." Who is he to get involved?[19] .

General ethical pressure to promote the good according to our ability cannot explain the special normative relation between Beneficiaries and Givers. Any other non-relational explanation—e.g., seeing Giver's role in paying it forward as that of a (mere) moral exemplar—will likewise fall short.[20]

1.3 Pressure Towards Whom?: Against Gratitude

Perhaps Beneficiary's duty (or other kind of pressure) to pay it forward is owed *to* the Giver. A duty can be owed to one person while having its content concern another; if I promise you I'll call my mother, my duty is about her, but owed to you (Hart, 1955). Similarly, maybe the normative pressure at issue is *about* Recipient but directed *to* Giver. A natural way of developing this thought is suggested in passing by Adrienne Martin's and Barbara Herman's work on gratitude (2019; 2022):

> The Gratitude Account Paying it forward is a special instance of gratitude. Giver's gift generates a debt of gratitude *to Giver* whose content is giving, in turn, to Recipient.

This account also correctly situates paying it forward firmly in the realm of relational normativity. One of its chief advantages is that like paying it forward, gratitude has some but not all the hallmarks of directed obligation: gratitude feels non-optional but is not demandable. Like

[19] Cf. Martin's diagnostic test for directedness (2019).
[20] XXXX

paying it forward, gratitude is at once like and unlike an ordinary debt. So this account gives paying it forward the right kind of normative flavor, whatever exactly that is.

But the Gratitude Account understands the relationality at play too narrowly. Recipient is not merely the raw material for Beneficiary's ethical success or failure.[21] The pressure to pay it forward is also directed *towards* her. We can see this from the perspectives of Giver, Beneficiary, and Recipient.

First consider Giver. If the pressure to pay it forward were directed solely to Giver, she should be able to release Beneficiary from that normative expectation. If you owe something *to me*, then I typically have the power to release you. Some rights are inalienable, but most are not and those that are are typically quite special (e.g., rights to one's body or against servitude).[22] Giver does not, however, have the power of release. Consider how inappropriate it would sound for Giver to say "look, I know you appreciate my advising, but I don't want you to ever feel the need to go above and beyond for your students," or "…to give away your unused bikes" or "…to host others." Giver would be *overstepping*—it's not Giver's place to alleviate the normative pressure. Herman argues that in general, duties of gratitude are not waivable by their claimant. (2022). I disagree, but even if she's right, the contrast with paying it forward remains. Imagine Giver says "please don't feel you need to thank me! you don't owe me a thing, it was my pleasure." If Herman is right, Giver is making a normative error, but she isn't mistaking her *place* in the normative situation. Imagine by contrast Giver says, "please don't feel you need to go beyond with *your students*! You don't owe them a thing, it was my pleasure." That would be outrageous. Giver wouldn't merely make a normative error; she would overstep. Who is *she* to release Beneficiary in that way?

Now consider Beneficiary. What does the pressure to pay it forward call for him to do? Not

[21] Cf. Thompson (2006).
[22] See, e.g., Pallikkathayil (2017).

solely to look *back* (to Giver), but also to *forward* (to Recipient). The pressure is doubly directed. How should he conceive of what he is doing when paying it forward? To be sure, he might see himself as living up to Giver or her gift. But according to The Gratitude Account, that is *all* the directionality involved. Recipient turns out to be merely the site where Beneficiary's gratitude to Giver is appropriately discharged—Recipient is the raw materials for Beneficiary's gratitude to Giver.[23] But for Beneficiary to see his normative situation like that is contrary to the very spirit of paying it forward. Giver did things for Beneficiary's sake, and so paying it forward should involve Beneficiary paying *that* student-/new-member-/guest-directed regard forward.[24]

That same idea can be captured from an ex-post perspective. What kind of self-blame should Beneficiary feel if he ought to pay it forward but doesn't? Not only that he's has let down Giver, but (would-be) Recipient as well. When I imagine (or remember) not living up to my teacher's example with my students, I feel I've let *them* down, not just him. Not to feel something towards *them* feels like a case of misapprehending my normative situation yet again. Just as in acting I should see my students as more the mere site of a debt owed to my teacher, I should do so in my ex-post reactive attitudes.

And lastly, consider Recipient. A (potential) Recipient, we've seen, cannot demand Beneficiary pay it forward. But when Beneficiary should do so and doesn't, a (potential) Recipient

[23] Cf. Thompson (2006).

[24] One could develop The Gratitude Account by pairing the claim that Beneficiary owes it to Giver to pay forward Extra to Recipient with Nico Cornell's influential defense of third-party wrongs (Cornell, 2015, 2025). Cornell argues (contra the orthodoxy since Hart) that if I promise you I'll take care of my mother and I break that promise, I wrong my mother even though it is you, not she, who has a right against me. But Cornell should resist extending his account to paying it forward. For Cornell, rights and their correlative directed duties "capture[] the sense that we owe our attention to a particular person." When a non-rights-holder is wronged, her complaint is: "you shouldn't have done that, and now I've suffered as a result. I am not saying that you shouldn't have done it *for my sake*…, but the effect on me now makes me one the people you are accountable to for having acted as you did" (2015, 133, 140). But that is exactly what is *not* true of paying it forward, where in the good case, Beneficiary *does* act for Recipient's sake. Recipient herself should be in Benficiary's "deliberative field of vision" alongside Giver, which Cornell convincingly argues entails that the duty at play is directed, at least in part, to Recipient (133). XXXX

can feel personally hurt.[25] To see this, first consider the contrast between Recipient and the onlooker. The onlooker cannot take the failure to pay it forward personally; but Recipient can. Of course its personal—she is the person to whom Beneficiary should pay it forward!

As further defense of this, suppose *arguendo* that no personal reactive attitude is apt. If Recipient still takes it personally, the following rebuke of would then be accurate (albeit forward): "You can, of course, feel some *impersonal* attitude like indignation that another person has failed to meet normative standards (of gratitude) that govern him. But you mustn't take this *personally*; Beneficiary may have failed, but he didn't disappoint *you*, he only let down Giver. You may have been the appropriate site of his gratitude, but don't think you were any more than that." That all seems quite off. It often (though not always) hurts or feels disappointing to be given exactly what one is owed and no more—and it very often makes sense to take such merely adequate treatment personally.

The normative pressure at issue, then, is doubly directed. Or to put the point another way, the underlying normative relation in virtue of which Beneficiary should do something for recipient is not only a relation linking Giver and Beneficiary. It is instead a relation (or pair of relations) that link Beneficiary both backwards and forwards—to Giver and to Recipient.

1.4 Against Fairness and Free-riding

The Gratitude Account is relational in only one direction. More promising is an account that appeals not to norms governing two-person relationships but rather norms governing relationships or practices that involve Giver, Recipient, and Beneficiary simultaneously. My own account appeals to such a norm, but before turning to it, we can consider the most famous such norm—*fairness*—and see whether it can do the work we need.

We could follow Rawls in accepting something like H.L.A. Hart's principle of fair play (1964

[25] Hurt of the kind Darwall (now) argues is second-personal (2024).

and 1955, respectively):

> The Fairness Account Paying it forward is a special instance of acting fairly. If one voluntarily accepts entrance into a mutually beneficial cooperative scheme, one is obliged as a matter of fairness to follow its norms. By accepting Giver's gift, Beneficiary voluntarily enters a gift-giving (i.e., Extra-involving) scheme and so is obliged as a matter of fairness to give Extra in turn.

This all makes good sense. Before Giver's gift, Beneficiary was a member of the cooperative scheme of ordinary student–teacher/member–member/guest–host relationships; the ordinary schemes don't involve doing Extra. In accepting Giver's gift, Beneficiary voluntarily enters a more demanding, gift-giving variant of the original scheme. Having benefited from this variant scheme, Beneficiary mustn't free ride on its norms—she should give Extra to Recipient.

In a sense this picture is deeply right: it pulls (as my account will) on the norms of a larger relationship or practice to explain how Giver's gift could change what Beneficiary should do for Recipient. Failing to pay it forward does feel akin to free-riding—who is Beneficiary to have reaped such rewards without paying back into the broader practice of academia, his club, or hospitality?

But The Fairness Account has three key flaws. The first is Scanlon's old objection to any attempt to ground bipolar normative relations via fair play (1990). If the normative pressure to pay it forward were *just* the same as the pressure not to free ride in cooperative practice, then *any* member of the practice would have a complaint against a Beneficiary who doesn't pay it forward. If I cheat on my taxes, each of my fellow taxpayers has the same complaint—so long as we live in the same state, it's *their* business.[26]

[26] Although see (Thompson, 2006, 339n.14).

Second, the view depends on an implausible metaphysics of cooperative schemes. It is a bit mysterious how Giver's gift could change the norms of the practice all on its own. Would that one good advisor could change the norms of the profession! But she can't. We could instead say that the advisor started a *new* student–teacher-*plus* practice wherein senior members give Extra. But then why would the relationship between Beneficiary and *Recipient* be a part of that *new* Extra-involving practice? Presumably my students and I share a pedagogical practice in virtue of their being enrolled in my classes, my being listed as their teacher or supervisor on various forms, etc. If my having an outstanding advisor and accepting his gift admitted me into a new student-teacher-plus practice, in virtue of what did my *students* get into that new practice instead of the old one?

Third, the view has incorrect normative predictions. It treats Beneficiary's obligation to pay it forward as just an ordinary obligation. But while others can *demand* I not free ride, no one can demand that I, as a Beneficiary, pay it forward. Worse, the account threatens to make it obligatory for Giver to do Extra going forward. The account says that Beneficiary ought to do Extra going forward because of the practice she's a part of. But Giver is also a part of that practice, and Rawlsian/Hartian mechanics bind all occupants of a practice together, equally. Clearly, though, Giver is under no obligation to continue to do Extra.[27]

2 An Ideal of Balance

We need some other story that can make sense of how Giver's gift changes Beneficiary's normative situation—with respect to both Giver and Recipient. My key maneuver will be to appeal to a norm of *balance* or *harmony* within a relationship.[28] Giver's gift creates an imbalance in the relationship, one that can't be appropriately re-balanced by anything Beneficiary can do

[27] Nor is it plausible that Giver must pay her fair share but already did with her initial payment. Giver's gift cannot be seen, even retroactively, as normatively *like* her fair share.

[28] I am drawing here on Björnnson's (2022).

for Giver. Beneficiary can, and should, re-balance by paying it forward. I'll first motivate and unpacking the idea of balance norms in simple, two-person cases; I'll then extend the idea to paying it forward.

Let me flag at the outset that "balance" may misleadingly connote a balance-book mentality in which acting well is a matter of moral book-keeping. But I'll argue paying it forward to clear out one's moral debts or set the ledger clean is defective.

2.1 Balance in a two-person relationship

One way that a friendship can be flawed is by being *imbalanced*. Suppose that you and I are close friends, but while you are always there for me, I am never available when you need me most. I thereby let you down. Crucially, though, not all imbalances are bad. If I'm going through a rough patch, that might call for a *temporary* imbalance in which you are there for me in a way I am not for you. But in the best of friendships, that one-sidedness is temporary—the relationship is balanced over the long haul. In other words, the ideal of balance is diachronic; it is satisfied over time, often in spite of—or rather by way of—a series of temporary imbalances. Indeed, one of the best things about strong relationships is that they can *sustain* local imbalances: if our relationship is a good one, we can both trust that the time will come that I can be there for you as you were for me without threat of permanent one-sidedness.[29]

Balance is not always achieved in kind; often relationships exhibit healthy asymmetries. If you often help me fix my bike, I might achieve balance by lending emotional support. What matters, of course, is *not* that we achieve equal quanta of benefit. Balance in our relationship consists in an equilibrium, harmony, or fit[30] in how each of us *relates to* the other. I should relate—both practically and affectively—*to* you as you did me.[31] Practically, we each take no-

[29] The balance norm is defeasible—balance is not the end-all-be-all of a good relationship.
[30] On this notion of fit, see Clarke (1706/1991.
[31] Perhaps it involves epistemic ways of relating too (Keller 2004; Stroud 2006).

tice interests, needs, and projects of the other and weight them in our practical deliberation. Affectively, it involves emotional openness or vulnerability, empathy, and the emotional work of friendship.[32] The character of our attention to, reasoning about and feeling with is balanced over time.

One key upshot of this is that when a virtuous agent brings a relationship into balance, she does not do so with an eye towards balancing her relationship or some interpersonal scorecard. Rather, the virtuous agent does Extra for the same kind of reason that Extra was done for her. If my partner generously surprises me *for my sake*, I bring the relationship into balance by doing something in turn *for her sake*. The case where I do it *to balance the scorecard* is a case of continence that falls short of virtue.[33] If "balance" connotes this kind of accounting-like, non-virtuous motivational profile, substitute "harmony" or "fit." What matters is that our *ways of relating to one another* fit one another across time. Suppose she acts for my sake and I act for the sake of clearing my moral ledger. The problem isn't an imbalance in material benefits—they might be balanced; it's rather that our qualities of will are out of balance(/harmony/equilibrium).

The normative pressure generated by the ideal of balance has a certain flavor—it's the same flavor we find with paying it forward. Suppose that we are co-teaching a class. We agree on a certain Baseline level of work that we owe one another. Then you start to do Extra—you go above and beyond in your preparation, you generously field more students emails, grade a few extra midterms, etc. What kind of normative situation does that leave me in? I should thank you, but that's not all. I am under some pressure to re-balance. That pressure has some but not all of the hallmarks of direct obligation. On the one hand, it is strong and when violated licenses

[32] Cf. Velleman (1999); White (2025).

[33] Compare: the virtuously generous agent does not help others on the basis that doing so is generous—that's continence. Virtuous generosity is done on the basis of others' needs.

feelings of disappointment—both your disappointment in me and my disappointment in myself for letting you down. On the other, you cannot *demand* of me that I do Extra; we already agreed to Baseline. We might understand the normative flavor at hand in various ways—as a special kind of duty, a special kind of reason, a personal bond, a matter of suberogation, etc.—but however we understand it, the *should* in "I should step up in our class" matches the *should* in "Beneficiary should pay it forward."

2.2 When You Shouldn't Pay it Back, Pay it Forward

When we are friends or co-teachers, it's often obvious how to re-balance your generosity: I could be there for you when you need me or grade a few more of the finals. By contrast, the gifts in our examples of paying it forward seem impossible to repay. Recalling Emerson, "in the order of nature we cannot render benefits to those from whom we receive them, or only seldom" (1903, 27). His claim of impossibility rings true—my advisor's gift feels un-repayable. I could never provide *him* with exceptional advising to launch his career! More generally, it would be hard for me to help him to the extent he did me—my needs were far greater than his are now, and I was *dependent* on him in a way he is not on me. Moreover, he was exactly positioned to address my needs in a way I am not his.

That said, perhaps Emerson's thought is not best understood literally, i.e., by insisting on the *impossibility* of paying things back. I've written about the cases in ways that either make explicit or suggest Beneficiary's reciprocating back to Giver is impossible. But the deeper issue isn't impossibility, but inappropriateness. Even if Beneficiary (or I) could pay back our advisor, we shouldn't. Responding to Giver's gift reciprocally seems to misunderstand the normative situation. Payback is an inappropriate response to *that kind of gift*.

Why? Because a student-teacher relationship is essentially asymmetrical—in ability, need, and power, and so accordingly in the way that each ought to relate to the other. A teacher is

supposed to do more for a student than she does in return. The attention, work, sacrifice, and care should be asymmetric. Within that essentially asymmetrical context, Extra is a gift of essentially asymmetrical attention, effort, care, and regard. The value of the gift and the beauty of the relationship in part *consist* in their asymmetry.[34] Contrast giving withing a friendship or co-teaching relationship. There, the value of the gift is not essentially asymmetrical—it is no part of what you give to me in a friendship that your gift is *not to be reciprocated*. To reciprocate fully is in keeping with the symmetrical nature of a friendship.

But for Beneficiary (or me) try to pay Extra back *to our advisor* would be a mistake. Reciprocating would do violence to the very character of the relationship and the gift given within it. To re-balance within an essentially asymmetrical relationship—to seek to force into symmetry that which is essentially, beautifully, and forever imbalanced—is a mistake.

How, then, should one respond to the imbalance? By paying it forward. Balance is thereby realized not within the bipolar relation between Giver and Beneficiary, but across the three-person chain of giving involving Giver, Beneficiary, and Recipient. Recall that balance in a bipolar relationship is an essentially diachronic ideal—it is realized *over the long haul* by way of local imbalances. To pay it forward, I propose, is to re-balance across a still broader socio-temporal scale. As the Giver related to me, so I can relate to others *as a giver* in turn—one local imbalance is re-balanced by another. When I pay it forward, I re-balance *across the generations*, where by "generation," I just mean each link in the chain of giving.[35] If I don't, I fail to live up to a inter-generational ideal of balance, thereby disappointing those to whom I am related: my teacher, and my students. Inter-generational balance is often the *only* way to balance when the imbalance is created by a gift that presupposes some kind of asymmetry in position.

Here's another way to bring out the idea: an imbalanced friendship is *one-sided*; not paying

[34] Cf. Callard (2019).

[35] Generations, in my sense, aren't *demographic*: e.g., my teacher could be younger than I and my students older.

things forward is similarly *one-sided*, just on a broader socio-temporal scale. The gift-giving appears on only one side of me vis-à-vis those to whom I am related. The imbalance appears not between two people but among three. Just as a balanced friendship often involves taking turns carrying the extra load, balance across generations is a matter of taking one's turn.

This may all seem surprising—or, rather, objectionable! I argued just paragraphs ago that within essentially asymmetrical relationships, it is a mistake to seek balance via reciprocation and so one must pay forward, not back. One might object I have drawn exactly the wrong conclusion from the argument about asymmetry. Given the essential asymmetry of some relationships and the gifts within them, one might conclude they should not be subject to a norm of balance at all! Balance, one might object, should only be a norm for symmetrical relationships.

Here are three reasons to think balance is an ideal even for the asymmetrical relationships. First is phenomenological: the *feeling* of imbalance in a bipolar relationship is similar to that of one-sidedness in one who has not paid it forward. That is, one's sense of what goes awry in failing to reciprocate in a friendship *feels* similar to that made in failing to pay it forward. Second, the species of normative pressure that bipolar imbalances generate is like that in response to what I describe as inter-generational imbalance: we are under strong, directed normative pressure that is not demandable both to re-balance within a friendship and pay it forward. Third is a bigger picture commitment I'll gesture at without defense: that interpersonal relationships in general are subject to ideals like balance because that is the kind of relation that does justice to the equality of human beings. Our equality is realized in our relationships—interpersonal and political—and to see even asymmetrical relationships as beholden to a balance norm is to see them as governed by a normative standard that reflects our fundamentally equal moral status even amidst asymmetry.[36]

[36] Countenancing the possibility that balance can be achieved *across* generations can resolve what seems like a tension between egalitarianism, on the one hand, and the centrality of asymmetrical relationships. Consider, for

While details remain, we can now state the core of the view:

> The Balance Account Paying it forward is a special instance of re-balancing relationships. One should re-balance one's relationships when they are imbalanced. When Beneficiary is given an undeserved gift he should not pay back, he (defeasibly) should achieve balance by paying it forward across generations (where this "should" involves directed normativity, relating the Beneficiary to Giver and to Recipient).

I'll quickly recap how the view fairs better than its rivals. Unlike The Beneficence Account it's clearly relational; failure to re-balance manifests a defect *between us*. Unlike The Gratitude Account, the relationality at issue is doubly directed towards both Giver and Recipient. The inter-generational balance norm links Beneficiary to both Giver and Recipient—it is his relationships with both that must be brought into balance. Recipient is not merely raw materials for living up to Giver's gift; the norm directly involves Recipient as one of those *towards whom* it is directed.

The Balance Account captures what was compelling about the Fairness Account: in both free-riding and refusing to pay it forward one makes an exception of oneself, violating the terms of a broader interpersonal practice. But the Balance Account draws the boundaries of the relevant relationality more narrowly. The Fairness Account granted *everyone* in the practice a complaint when Beneficiary fails to pay it forward in the same way that everyone has a complaint against me when I don't pay my taxes; but The Balance Account does not. It describes how Beneficiary should relate to Giver and Beneficiary—those immediately above and below him in the chain of generations. No one else is directly involved in the normative

example, a critique of Rawlsian liberalism issued by ethicists of care: a politics of free and equal individuals does violence to socially essential, asymmetrical dependency relationships, e.g., parent-child, and more generally that between the one-caring and the cared-for (Noddings, 2013, 2002; Gilligan, 1982; Held, 2006; Ruddick, 1995). But ideals of reciprocity and equality can have their place amidst asymmetry when they are achieved not *within* bipolar, asymmetrical relations but across generations.

relation of balance.

On this picture, virtuously paying it forward is not best done with an eye towards balancing one's moral ledger or giving one's relationships the property of being balanced. To do so manifests the same error as re-balance my spouse's kindness by attending acting so as to clear my debt or imbue our relationship with balance.

As we saw earlier (§1.1), there are various ways to understand the normative pressure to pay it forward. My picture can combine with any such understanding that countenances the essentially *relational* nature of the phenomenon. Imbalance within a relationship generates a second personal reason, special kind of (undemandable) duty, normative hope, personal bond, etc.

So, too, is this picture compatible with different understandings of the stringency of the requirement to pay it forward. The ideal of balance is defeasible in both bipolar and multigenerational relationships; the view is just that there is some serious, defeasible, directed pressure towards Recipient to pay it forward.

2.3 A further question?

Why is balance an ideal that can be fulfilled across generations and not just reciprocally? The rival accounts I considered and rejected above all provided some kind of normative glue connecting the relationship between Giver and Beneficiary on the one hand and Beneficiary and Recipient on the other. According to THE BENEFICENCE ACCOUNT, behavior in one relationship triggers a change in material conditions that matters (by way of a general norm of beneficence) to behavior in another. THE GRATITUDE ACCOUNT offered a different link, with the later relationship figuring in the content of what one should do as a matter of gratitude within the earlier relationship. THE FAIRNESS ACCOUNT offered a final link: there is one large practice, behavior within which is all normatively connected by a norm of fairness.

But on a balance-based account, why can Beneficiary balance his relationship with Giver by relating not to *her* but instead to *Recipient*? Why does the relationship with Giver bear on the relationship with Recipient? We need some kind of normative glue that links the two relationships together and explains why balance can be achieved inter-generationally.

One response to this explanatory challenge is fist-pounding: the balance norm just is something that can be satisfied both reciprocally and inter-generationally. Explanations stop somewhere—maybe they stop here. But that leaves the important thing unexplained—why paying it *forward* works at all!

Another approach is to think that what one balances is not something interpersonal, i.e., the relationships, but rather the agent's *life*. Balance might be a fundamentally ego-centric norm; what matters is that *my* life is balanced, be that with respect to my friend alone or with respect to my teacher and my students at once. The problem with this approach is that it gives up on the *relational* character of paying it forward. On this picture, what goes wrong when one does not pay it forward is that one fails to give one's own life the right kind of feature.[37]

I prefer a different route. When Beneficiary doesn't pay it forward, he—in some sense—fails to live up to the standards of his role *as a student* and at the same time *as a teacher*. In §3 I make this sense precise, with an account on which the particular bipolar relationships being balanced are connected in virtue of *what they are*.

3 Multi-generational Relationships

I'll argue the needed connection between the two relationships—Giver–Beneficiary and Beneficiary–Recipient—is *internal* to what those relationships, and their constitutive roles, are. In brief, the

[37] Moreover, this view threatens to allow two wrongs (or defects) to make a right (or merit): imagine I enjoy a profound imbalance in one friendship and sacrifice everything within a different, equally profoundly imbalanced, relationship with someone else. Two imbalanced friendships don't render a life balanced on the whole; but such a view would predict they do.

various roles in the chain linking Giver, Beneficiary, and Recipient are essentially connected; to occupy any one of these roles is to be located in a multi-generational, socio-temporal order that looks both backwards and forwards in time. The two relationships can be balanced against one another because they are part of a single whole—a larger relationship (connecting all three individuals) that *itself* can, and should, be brought into balance.

All this will reveal something surprising about what it is to be a student, teacher, club member, and to occupy many other social roles besides: some roles and relationships that seem essentially bipolar are in fact essentially part of something larger. Some roles are *proleptic* in anticipating a future in which their occupants relate to another as they were related to.

3.1 Proleptic Roles

Let's set aside the phenomenon of paying it forward and just consider the relationships at play in our central cases. I'll develop the theory with the cases of the bike club and teaching; we'll consider hospitality in 3.3.

Many clubs have institutions of seniority, and involve (often explicitly) a process of "aging" within the club. Senior members were once junior members, and junior members become senior. My claim is that this temporal order—of aging—is part of what makes the social roles what they are. Part of what it is to be a junior member is to be something that "anticipates" becoming a senior member (an idea I'll develop throughout this section). Put another way, a generic like "junior members become senior members" captures something about the *social form* of club membership, and what it is *to be* a member. Accordingly, the behavior that is appropriate to the role—what it is to act well *as* a senior member—is connected to how one *was* treated. To be a senior member just is (in part) to relate to others as you were once related to.

That junior members become senior members is not a matter of statistical regularity, but rather a feature—of future possibility—*built into the roles* themselves. When a junior member

ages into a role that relates towards new junior members in turn, that is no accident. It is the manifestation of a cultural form that was latent in the role in the first place. So relating to junior members as a senior member is living out a potential that was already present in being a junior member.

That fact that this is not merely a matter of statistical regularity is vivid in cases where "aging" is rare. Consider the German academy in which the career progression from lecturer to full professor involves sharp reductions in numbers at each stage of advancement. Relatively few lecturers become professors. Yet still, the role of lecturer is proleptic: it anticipates the (unjustly rare) possibility of becoming a professor. When a lecturer does so, it is not an accident but the manifestation of underlying potential in the junior role; after all, *lecturers become professors*.

We see much the same in the case of supervisor–advisee relationships. Too many Ph.D. students in philosophy are unable to become teachers. But when one does so, it is no accident: students become teachers—that potentiality is part of what it is to be a graduate student in philosophy.

One might worry that club members, German lecturers, and Ph.D. students are special cases. Consider, for example, undergraduates: most don't become teachers, and—more to the point—most, unlike PhD students, aren't training for roles in which they teach. Is it really true that the role of student *in general* looks forward to the possibility of teaching? No—that is too narrow. But something slightly more expansive seems right: part of what it is to be a student is to occupy a role that looks forward to the possibility of, in some sense, *sharing the fruits of one's knowledge* with another. Sometimes that's by way of formal teaching; sometimes informally, when explaining something a classmate or friend. But pedagogical modes of sharing one's knowledge are just one way of sharing the fruits of one's knowledge. The more typical might be *using* it in service of another. Part of what it is to be an engineering student looks

forward to the possibility of using their knowledge in service of another—in serving a client (in addition to the possibility of informally teaching classmates or colleagues). Students become those who share the fruits of their knowledge in turn—a proleptic dimension reflected in the locution, used in some commencement ceremonies, that graduates are bestowed with the "rights and *responsibilities*" of their degree.

Consider by way of analogy Michael Thompson's idea of natural–historical judgments like "bobcats breed in spring," or "the acorn becomes an oak" (2008, ch. 4).[38] He argues such judgments characterize the "life-form" of a thing; like ordinary generics, they admit of exceptions—though it is true that *dogs have four legs*, some dogs have only three.[39] Phillipa Foot argues that in light of such "Aristotelian categoricals," we can evaluate an instance of a species as excellent or defective: a three-legged dog manifests a natural defect (2001). There is, of course, great skepticism about the neo-Aristotelian project. But whatever its vices with respect to the natural world, the thought that our *social roles* have such a similar structure involves no contested Aristotelian metaphysics. Proleptic, social-historical judgments, like "lecturers become professors," are true because we have constructed the roles thus. Sometimes we do so via explicit or implicit institutional arrangements, e.g., with the club bylaws or university regulations…; sometimes via broad cultural norms, e.g., hereabouts, guests and hosts act thusly…; sometimes via subcultures, e.g., academic philosophy is built on a model in which graduate students become professors.[40]

Not all social roles are like this. No part of what it is to be a prisoner looks forward to the possibility of being a guard, and neither does being a movie-goer anticipate a future in which

[38] Drawing on Anscombe 1981.

[39] They can even be statistically exceptional, as in "infant octopuses grow into adults," even though only about two in a den of 56,000 reach maturity (Cosgrove and McDaniel, 2009).

[40] That this is so despite a job market in which many do not makes our situation perverse—a bit like that of dogs in a world where disease makes three-leggedness commonplace.

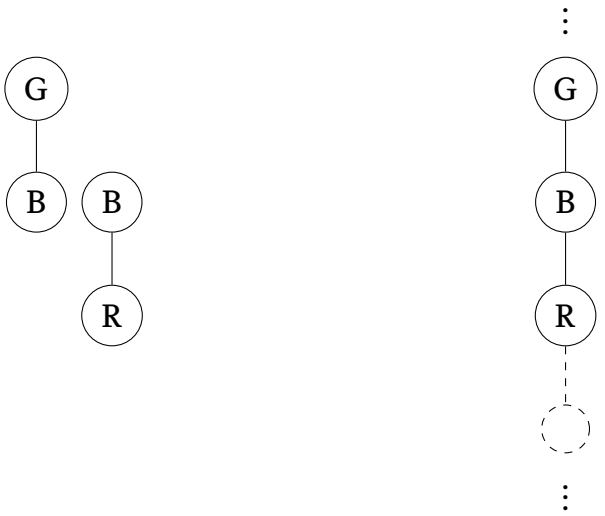
one will be a director. But being a student or junior club member is unlike being imprisoned or entertained by a movie—the former roles, but not the latter, look forward to the possibility of occupying the complementary position in the relationship. There could be other forms of learning relationships that are unlike that of a student and teacher. Imagine I join a cult, am taught its ways, but am sworn never to share or use my occult learnings with others—not only with outsiders, but even with other members of the cult! I am strictly to learn, keeping my knowledge to myself forever. Such a role would be quite *unlike* that of an ordinary student. My thesis—that roles like that of a(n ordinary) student are proleptic—explains this. Or imagine a club with permanent hierarchy (akin to caste), in which the junior members forever remain so. Like the cult, that would be different from a club in which aging is natural, and my view explains why.

3.2 From Bipolar to Multi-generational Relationships

Student-teacher and club relationships paradigmatically exhibit directed (or relational) normativity. This is often referred to as "bipolar normativity," which is often taken as synonymous with "directional normativity" and "relational normativity." But what we have learned is that these are not in fact synonyms, and that at least some seemingly bipolar relationships aren't merely bipolar. Part of what it is to relate to a senior club member as a junior member anticipates the possibility relating in turn to future junior member as a senior memeber. So it is a mistake to think that the relationship has just two poles—the junior and senior member. Junior club members become senior ones, who in turn relate to *new* junior members. This next generation may not be involved in the relationship yet, but the relationship always already anticipates their possible future involvement. And that later relationship, e.g., that between Beneficiary and Recipient, involves the earlier senior member, e.g., Giver: Beneficiary's relationship Recipient just is the manifestation of the proleptic dimension of Beneficiary's relationship with

Giver. The same holds for the relationship of teacher and student.

The two seemingly bipolar relationships are better understood as two nodes of a larger chain of relationships stretching back to actual teachers/club-members of the past and forwards to possible students/club-members of the future. With "G," "B," and "R" naming Giver, Beneficiary, and Recipient, we should replace the picture on the left with the one the right.



It does not follow from such relationships' being multi-generational that, e.g., junior members who quit the club—and so never become senior members who relate to later junior members—weren't members in the first place. They are exceptions to the rule; three legged dogs aren't any less dogs than their four-legged relatives. The picture represents the social form of the roles: it is essential to the role *student* that it is a part of this broader chain—the multi-generational relationship. At first, further links in the chain are merely *proleptic* elements of the role. But in the *normal* course of events—the course of events characteristic of the social form—the student matures into one who shares her knowledge with others in turn.[41] When she becomes a teacher, she does not come to occupy *new* role; she simply matures in her role as a student. And being a teacher/student is essentially being a part of multi-generational whole.

[41] Cf. Thompson (2008).

3.3 The Normative Upshot of Multi-generational Relationships

We have been looking for a glue that links Giver and Recipient in a way Beneficiary can, in paying it forward to Recipient, balance what came before with Giver. We have now found that glue. Giver and Recipient are linked because they are both part of a multi-generational relationship. And this multi-generational relationship can be balanced by Beneificary paying it forward.

To unpack this, first consider re-balancing within a bi-polar relationship. Recall the case in which you and I are co-teaching a class and you do Extra. I am under pressure to re-balance. But imagine that instead reciprocating Extra in our class, I instead take on more tedious work in a committee that we are both on. Intuitively, my gift can re-balance the gift you gave in our class. But how can giving within the *committee* relationship balance out giving within the *co-teaching* relationship? The answer is obvious: there is one underlying relationship between us; it is *our* relationship that can be re-balanced by way of local imbalances.

How, then, can Beneficiary's behavior with his students re-balance Giver's gift? Because there is *one underlying relationship* being re-balanced: the multi-generational one. What is balanced is the Giver-Beneficiary-Recipient multi-generational chain; balance is achieved over the long haul. The two relationships can be normatively linked by the balance norm because they are metaphysically linked as parts of single whole.

Above, I said that when Beneficiary fails to pay it forward, he at once fails to live up to the standards of his role *as a student* and his role *as a teacher*. My picture explains this: Beneficiary's role as a student and as a teacher is the same role—it is a single node in the multi-generational relationship. To fail to re-balance is to fail meet a norm that applies to him as the student-and-teacher that he is.[42]

[42] This puts us in a position to redescribe *balance* in terms more analogous to an Aristotelian account of natural normativity. For the later way of relating to balance the earlier, it must *reproduce* the form of relationality that characterizes its social form. On this way of talking, to say that the younger role looks forward to the possibility of its occupant so relating to another, really means that part of what the role does is perpetuate itself. Hosts, students,

This view also explains why paying forward *some* gifts is unintelligible. Imagine Beneficiary is in a committed, monogamous, Western romantic relationship; the relationship is imbalanced, with Beneficiary's partner giving more than he does. Years later, Beneficiary is in a new relationship, and does more for his new partner. Is Beneficiary paying forward the gift previous partner treated him? No; this doesn't seem like a case of paying it forward at all. (Nor would it be right to think that he was under pressure to *pay forward* his treatment in his earlier relationship.) Why not? Because typical, contemporary, Western romantic relationships are essentially bipolar and reciprocal; they aren't part of a multi-generational whole. Thus, there is no proleptic element: it is not part of what it is to be a romantic partner that the role occupant looks forward to the possibility of so relating to another in turn. Other romantic practices are otherwise; a hippie, free-love commune might have a romantic practice in which partners are transient—where to be a romantic partner anticipates so relating to another in turn. There, paying it forward would be possible.

Whether romantic love can be paid forward depends on the social relations of romance. That same cultural variability can be found with respect to the last of our three core cases: Hospitality. When I introduced the case, I said intuitions about whether Beneficiary should pay hospitality forward to a third party are culturally variable. Why? Because hospitality itself is culturally variable. In some cultures, hospitality is like monogamous, romantic love—essentially reciprocal and bipolar. Paying that forward is unintelligible; and so, one isn't under pressure to do *for another* what was done for one. Rather, one is under pressure only to reciprocate. But in other cultures, hospitality takes on a multi-generational form. Consider, for example, the Torah's injunction of hospitality: "When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you

and junior club members are defective when they do not reproduce their form of relationality.

shall love the alien as yourself, *for you were aliens* in the land of Egypt…" (Leviticus 19:33-34 NSRV, my emphasis). Hospitality is presented in *non-reciprocal* terms; one does not host one's former hosts. Instead, the role of host/citizen is understood in *inter-generational terms*: to be host/citizen is to be one who was once a foreigner in need of a host. (Or, stated with a generic: hosts/citizens were once foreigners in need of a host.) In turn, how one should relate to another in the role of host is intimately connected to how one *was* related to, earlier in the chain. To clarify, I am not claiming *Leviticus* presents hospitality as a matter of paying it forward; the Israelites are not meant to pay forward the treatment they received in Egypt.[43] I'm rather reading in *Leviticus* a conception of the social *role* of citizen/host as essentially involving a reference to an earlier relation to others. To become a host is to take on a role complementary to that once occupied. One has pressure to pay forward hospitality exactly when what it is to be a guest has this multi-generational form.[44]

3.4 Paying it Forward Outside a Pre-Existing Relationship?

In Advising, Free Bike, and Hospitality, there is a pre-existing multigenerational relationship which obtains independently of anyone paying Extra forward. Are all cases of paying it forward like this? Suppose I were not a teacher; could I pay forward my advisor's gift by, e.g., volunteering at the YMCA or being especially solicitous of my elderly neighbor? My advisor, my neighbor, and I are *not* in a pre-existing multi-generational relationship. So could doing Extra for my neighbor *balance* anything having to do with my teacher? I'll argue yes (with some complications); paying it forward is a surprisingly general phenomenon.

[43] On some readings, paying it forward might actually be the right way to think about it. Shortly after the quoted passage, the addressee is reminded that "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt" (19:36). Maybe that's a reminder of the divine authority by which God commands; but perhaps it at also invokes a pay-it-forward logic: because God gave to you, you must give to others.

[44] In cultures where hospitality is multi-generational, it could *loop* in a way (most) clubs and teaching relationships do not. A single individual can stand in multiple nodes of the multi-generational relationship.

3.4.1 When Paying It Forward Forges the Next Link in the Chain

To see why Beneficiary could pay forward the gift of an advisor to an elderly neighbor, let's consider an intermediary case: suppose Beneficiary is a structural engineer whose Ph.D. supervisor was an exceptional teacher. Though she has left academia, she feels pressure to pay it forward; and so declines a high-paying job to work for a housing non-profit. She partners with clients and design innovative, low-cost homes for their needs. Beneficiary is, I submit, right to see her work as an instance of paying it forward even though she is not *advising*. The proleptic dimension of the student role isn't confined to paying things forward to future students. Students use their knowledge for others in turn. So when Beneficiary, as a working engineer, uses her knowledge in service to her clients, she realizes the proleptic element of the relationship she bore with her advisor. And in doing Extra, she can achieve balance in the multi-generational relationship involving her advisor, her, and her clients.

But note that here, there was no pre-existing multi-generational relationship linking Beneficiary, her advisor, and her clients. Beneficiary's relationship with her clients was established exactly by her paying it forward—by taking them on as clients in the first place. This is a little different from the case in which Giver, Beneficiary, and Recipient are in a pre-existing multi-generational pedagogical relationship whether or not Beneficiary does extra. In Advising, Recipient is Beneficiary's student not *because* Beneficiary does Extra but because Recipient's is enrolled in her class. The fact of their relating as teacher and student is grounded by facts independent of the *gift itself*; by contrast, the relationship between our engineer and client is forged by Beneficiary's gift.

The upshot: paying it forward can take place outside of pre-existing multi-generational relationships because it can be what establishes the next link in the multi-generational chain.

What if, though, what Beneficiary pays forward has no relation whatsoever to what she was

taught? Imagine Giver supervised Beneficiary's thesis in mathematical logic, but Beneficiary now runs a community center. (And suppose, perhaps artificially, she uses no skills or knowledge from learned from her supervisor.) Can she pay forward her supervisor's gift with those who use her center? Yes, and to understand why, we need one final bit of theoretical machinery.

3.4.2 The Species-Genus Structure of Relationships

The advisor-advisee relationship is a species of a more general student-teacher genus, which in turn is a species of a more general mentor-mentee genus. Consider that in Advising, Beneficary could pay forward Giver's exceptional graduate advising with undergraduates. Why would that be? After all, the graduate advisor-advisee relationship is meaningfully different from that between undergraduates and their teachers. How, then, can Beneficiary achieve balance by doing Extra for undergraduates? Because the graduate advisor-advisee relationship *is* a student-teacher relationship.[45] Beneficiary and Giver stand in an advisor-advisee relationship and thereby stand in a student-teacher relationship. And so when Beneficiary pays it forward to her students, she achieves balance in *the very multi-generational relationship* (student-teacher) that includes her advisor.

Now imagine Beneficiary leaves the profession, and volunteers to mentor kids at the community center. Could that voluntary mentoring be a way of paying forward Giver's gift? Yes! Because the student-teacher relationship just is a mentor-mentee relationship, and the Gift of advising was, at the same time, a gift of mentorship. It was a specific *kind* of mentorship, namely advising, but it was mentorship all the same. And she pays forward the mentorship; her relationship with her mentees is a continuation of the multi-generational mentor-mentee relationship

[45] To be a member of a species just is to be a member of a genus and have the species-specific differentia (Rosen, 2010); an advisor-advisee relationship just is a student-teacher relationship which is oriented around pursuing graduate work, regulated by formal advising norms, etc.

she stood in with her advisor. By paying it forward, doing *Extra* in her own way, she achieves balance in the multi-generational mentor-mentee relationship that includes her advisor.

Still, you might insist, mentoring is still awfully close to teaching. Can she pay forward Giver's extraordinary advising with special kindness to her elderly neighbor? Yes. The mentor-mentee relationship is itself an instance of an even more general relationship, something like that of *service* or, most broadly, of *giving* or *benefaction*. Put from most to least specific (with many intervening levels omitted): the student-teacher relationship is a kind of mentor-mentee relationship, which is a kind of benefactor-beneficiary relationship. Since Giver's extraordinary advising was an instance of benefaction, Beneficiary can pay that benefaction forward with kindness to her neighbor. That's because her student-teacher with Giver relationship is *at once* a benefactor-beneficiary relationship that she can re-balance with a gift to her neighbor. Where Franklin tells us that one must pay it forward to "another honest Man in similar Distress," I am here suggesting students, neighbors, any many else besides are similar *just in virtue of being in need*, so similar that one can see paying it forward to the neighbor as a completion of the role Beneficiary simply qua beneficiary of a gift.

This is surprising. I have claimed that quite apart from anything about paying it forward, it is plausible that relational roles like student, guest, and junior-club-member are proleptic, anticipating the future in which their occupant takes on a complementary role with someone else. It is not independently obvious that being a *beneficiary* is likewise proleptic. But that is what the argument up to this point has lead us to understand about paying it forward: to receive a gift is to occupy a role—in this case constituted by nothing other than the gift itself—that looks forward to a possibility in which one gives to another.[46]

That isn't to say gifts should only be paid forward and never be reciprocated. The proleptic

[46] Cf. Engster (2007); Løgstrup (1956).

nature of the role makes it *possible* to balance across generations but does not require it. The Balance Account makes the question of whether to pay a gift forward or backward a first-order ethical question. It turns on whether one *should* reciprocate the gift, which is settled by the considerations outlined in §2.2: whether the gift took place in an essentially asymmetrical relationship, the opportunity or lack thereof of reciprocation, the giver's preferences, etc. And there is often space for *both* some degree of reciprocation and paying forward.

3.5 Students before Neighbors?

Things get more complicated, however, if Beneficiary is, say, a teacher who pays forward the gift to the elderly *instead of* to her students. Imagine that Beneficiary has a number of students under her tutelage, and she does exactly what she owes and nothing more. But she seeks constant opportunities to pay it forward with the elderly in her neighborhood. *One* multi-generational relationship that she stands in with her advisor is balanced: that of benefactor-beneficiary. But another, more specific multi-generational relationship she stands in with her advisor remains imbalanced: that of student-teacher.

Given that Beneficiary has not re-balanced the student-teacher relationship, does she face any pressure to redirect her extra efforts towards her students? Or, having re-balanced the benefactor-beneficiary relationship, has she satisfied whatever pressure there is to pay it forward?

I submit she does face pressure to pay it forward to her students in particular. To see why, consider a situation in which Beneficiary has no students. Here, there is *no person* she in any way lets down. Moreover, the student-teacher relationship she stands in perfectly overlaps with the benefactor-beneficiary relationship she stands in with her teacher; there is no person in one but not the other. But when she does have students and nevertheless pays it forward to her neighbors, this is not so. She stands in two *distinct* multi-generational relationships with her teacher.

One involves her students (to whom she does not pay anything forward). The other involves her neighbors (to whom she does). And in this case, she really does let down her students; there is a distinct relationship, involving them, that remains imbalanced.

More generally, there is pressure to pay it forward to a particular recipient when there someone occupying the anticipated role of recipient. But when no one yet occupies that role, the agent has greater discretion to forge whatever relation she'd like to re-balance vis-à-vis her giver.

That said, these norms are defeasible. Beneficiary might be all things considered justified in focusing her efforts on the elderly in her neighborhood; imagine her students are well supported and her elderly neighbors suffer chronic neglect—the defeasible pressure to pay it forward to her students might be overridden.

4 Details: Bad Behavior, Upper Limits, and Which Recipients

In what follows I'll consider whether one should pay forward misbehavior (obviously not, §4.1), whether a balance norm sets an upper ceiling on permissible giving (it doesn't, §4.2), and to *how many* Recipients one faces pressure to pay it forward (however many would balance Giver's giving, §4.3).

4.1 Paying Bad Behavior Forward?

Does the Balance Account imply that if one has been treated poorly, one should achieve balance by paying forward the bad treatment? A balance-based account looks like it will predict that having been neglected, one has reason to do *less* than one would otherwise owe, as that would thereby achieve balance. That's an unacceptable result; our account should predict paying it forward is asymmetric: one should pay forward only the good, not the bad.

It can do just that. It is true that by paying bad treatment forward, one will have achieved

balance in a *bad* relationship. But one should not accord with the standards of bad relationships! Compare: suppose you and I are friends and I mistreat you; you shouldn't re-balance our relationship by mistreating me. You should hold me to account or distance yourself from me.[47]

This all suggests a deeper understanding of when and why balance matters: we should re-balance a relationship when and because the relationship is a good one. Because the relationship is good, *its being re-balanced* matters. Put another way, because the balance norm is a norm *of a relationship*, its normative authority rests on that of the relationship. Only good relationships are the kinds of things whose norms (including balance) are genuinely authoritative.[48] Thus, you shouldn't pay forward the bad.

4.2 A Limit to Giving?

One might worry the balance view sets a kind of ceiling on how well one can treat those who come later in a multi-generational relationship. Suppose my advisor was just *fine*; am I betraying the standards of the relationship if I go above and beyond that treatment for my students? I would, after all, thereby create an imbalance. And on similar grounds and even more importantly, should I be wary of being an exceptional teacher on the grounds that I will thereby generate pressure on my students to pay it forward? No to both. The Balance Account says that I have reason to *rectify* imbalances; it does not say that I have reason to *avoid generating* them.

[47] XXXX.

[48] This kind of asymmetry between good and bad relationships follows from an account of, more generally, how relationships' norms generate reasons to act. The norms of a patriarchal marriage or toxic friendship do not provide agents' reasons, but the norms of a healthy partnership or friendship do. One such picture is defended by White (2022), whose general principle is:

> Transmission If an agent is actually in a relationship, then her reasons to follow the…standards of that relationship are as strong as her reasons to be in that relationship. (That is, if an agent has decisive reason to be in the relationship, she has decisive reason to follow its standards, if only weak reason to be in the relationship, then only weak reason to follow its standards, etc.)

The best way to see this is to consider a case of (im)balance in a two person relationship. Suppose that we are close friends and you are going through an especially difficult time. If I go out of my way for your sake, that would generate normative pressure on you both to feel and express gratitude and to re-balance over the long haul. Is either a consideration that tells against helping you? No. This isn't a metanormative claim about right kinds of reasons; rather, it's a first-order normative claim about what kinds of consideration bear on my coming to your aid. Imagine I reason "I know they are having a terrible time of things. I could pop by, drop off some dinner, and see if they need some help around their place; I know this would help. That said, doing so will generate pressure on them to thank me and, *worse still*, to care for me, later, in turn. Maybe I shouldn't." That is just confused. Maybe such reasoning would be appropriate if there is something *wrong* with you, e.g., if you are pathologically averse to thanking or later helping me. But absent a special consideration, it is not my *place* to shield you from the responsibilities of responding to my gift in this way. Thus, the mere fact that I will generate pressure to re-balance is not a reason against helping.[49]

This is not just a technicality. It speaks to the normative significance of (im)balance. Imbalance is not a *bad state* to be avoided. The *reason* to re-balance is not to make things better. Compare gratitude: the fact you'd owe me gratitude is not a reason to refrain from helping you. Gratitude calls for response, not avoidance; it isn't bad to owe[50] gratitude. (If anything, it's a

[49] Arguing otherwise, Herman offers the example of her paying for one of her undergraduates to attend medical school as paradigm of a gift that oversteps; it would so imbalance their relationship that this kind of gift is inappropriate in the first place (2022). I agree such a gift oversteps, but I don't think that's because it generates undue *imbalance*. For one thing, a teacher's generous support—years of mentorship, generous advising, hiring the student in her lab, etc.—could be even more materially impactful on the student's career than the tuition. But the former does not overstep. Why? Because it is appropriate for the role of teacher even if *just as imbalancing*. Paying tuition goes awry because it oversteps the boundaries of a (typical) teacher-undergraduate relationship, in which direct funding is a breach of what is normal. It invites a change in understanding of who the student and teacher are—now sponsor and sponsored—a role with (contingently established) expectations and norms that can stand in tension with the student-teacher role. (We don't run financial aid decisions by students' teachers for good reason.)

[50] *Owing* may not be the right notion, see §1.1.

wonderful thing to owe gratitude and, further, to express it.) So, too, for imbalance: to be in a state of imbalance is often in itself a *good thing*—it is the manifestation of another's kindness; re-balancing is the fitting response to imbalance, *not* a way of fixing a bad state of affairs.

4.3 How Many Recipients?

Should the lucky advisee go above and beyond with one future student? Every student she has? Should she rather match the number of hours her advisor spent on her? In short, to how *many* people does one face pressure to pay it forward?

The balance norm, as we've seen, is fundamentally about ways of relating, not costs borne or benefits rendered. To answer "how many?", we should therefore look to how Giver related to Beneficiary. In my own case, if I sought just one student to pay it forward, I would not thereby relate to my students the way my own supervisor did to me. He was pointedly *not* selective—he didn't single *me* out for special treatment. He relates to his students *in general* by manifesting a disposition to do Extra. To relate to those following me in the multi-generational relationship in the manner he related to me requires a similarly non-selective regard for my students.

By contrast, imagine Giver only does Extra for exactly one person. In the educational context this is often objectionable. Issues of fairness and equity loom large—selective favoritism is often unfair; and by the arguments of §4.1, we don't have reason to pay forward bad, e.g., inequitable, behavior. But in some contexts, Giver's benefiting one person selectively might be unobjectionable. The bike-club case is be one in which Giver's finding *one* junior member to relate to with particular generosity—giving the bike, etc.—can be appropriate. Here, Beneficiary can pay it forward in turn by finding one junior member for whom he can do Extra.

5 Conclusion

How prominent is the phenomenon of paying it forward in a life well lived? Is it an idiosyncratic moral phenomenon that matters for advisors, club members, and other occasional recipients of acts of kindness? Or is re-balancing multi-generational relationships a central part of living well?

At least one philosopher, Knud Løgstrup, defends a maximalist answer. For Løgstrup, the "demand" to pay it forward is something like the foundation of all of ethics. Our lives are essentially characterized by profound *dependency* on others; and in light of that, the very conditions of our life are undeserved gifts that we receive within asymmetrical relations of dependence (1956).[51] To have a life at all, Løgstrup thinks, is to stand as Beneficiary to many Givers, and so we owe *everything* to others in turn.[52]

Even if Løgstrup overstates things, he may not be so far off the mark. Not everyone's life is a gift, and maybe paying it forward isn't quite so foundational as he thinks. Nonetheless, we profoundly depend on others, and much of what *is* best in our stems from the gifts others have given us and which we cannot or should not pay *back* in any way (an insight well developed in feminist philosophy, e.g., Noddings 2013, 2002; Tronto 1993; Ruddick 1995; Held 2006; Engster 2007; Collins 2015).

As President Obama once pithily put the point in the context of taxation for the infrastructure used by businesses, "you didn't build that!" And what is true of roads and bridges is true of so much of what matters most in our lives. Because our lives are so thoroughly characterized by asymmetrical relations of dependence, imbalances we shouldn't pay back abound. And inasmuch as that is right—inasmuch as such imbalances are central to our lives—paying it forward

[51] Cf. Stern (2019).

[52] Lest one accuse him of some saccarhine, Pollyannaish understanding of life as a gift, it's worth noting that Løgstrup was a member of the Danish resistance during Nazi occupation—he knew first-hand that life could be awful.

is central, as well.

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