Paying it Forward

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"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" (Murdoch, 1970, p. 45). And in the name of both honesty and clarity, I think its 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 matter of philosophical interest. We feel *indebted* to those who have benefietd us, but unlike ordinary debts, it isn't always clear how to pay them off; and the very language of *payment* seems to do violence to what gratitude is about. I was fortunate enough to have an outstanding supervisor, 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 there was nothing I could ever do to *pay him back*. What I could do, however, or at least what I could try to do, was pay it forward.

Nothing, I felt, could ever live up to the gift I was given except my paying it forward—to manifest the kind of care and attention towards my own students that my teacher did. And as I wrote something to that effect in my inadequate thank you card, there was a sense of 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, viz., with my own students.

At the same time, paying it forward seemed philosophically bizarre. Why would doing something for my students be an adequate response to *him*? Or put the other way around, why would a gift from my teacher have any bearing on how I should treat my students? But it really seems to. I could do the baseline required for my students (which is, as anyone fortunate enough to be a teacher knows, already a lot). But imagine a student has sent me a third (sixth? tenth?) draft of a paper on a tight schedule. Should I make time to send another round of comments? It is exactly the kind of thing that we think I don't (normally) 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 negatively valenced reactive attitudes, viz., a sense of *letting down* or *disappointing* my students.[1] And even if I have good reason not to, i.e., if my not paying it forward is justified, I still feel a kind of residual regret that attends an overridden consideration.

I was the beneficiary of an undeserved gift; and as a result of that gift I should pay it forward. The oddity is understanding why a gift from *one* person should change my normative situation with respect to *another* person. Maybe my feeling that it does is a confusion, but if it is one, it 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] The quintessential American moralist Benjamin Franklin charges a man to whom he has given money to see it instead as a loan that must instead be repaid to "another honest Man in similar Distress" (1791/1901, p.214). In his strange and far ranging essay "Compensation," Emerson claims that:

> 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)

Paradigmatic representatives of twentieth century Western moral sensibilities—from revered American football coach Woody Hayes,[3] to the much feted charitable organization Heifer International,[4] and from Alcoholics Anonymous[5] to schmultzy Hollywood blockbusters[6]—present an injunction to pay it forward as of central importance. A hagiographic biography of Paul Erdös's highlights his commitment to an injunction of paying it forward[7]. The phenomenon is familiar enough that it even forms the basis of a USPS advertising campaign[8] and a surrealist (and very funny) comedic sketch whose punchline

[1] Cf. Martin (2013) and especially Telech and Katz (2022).

[2] For an interesting discussion of this, see Abe Mathew MS.

[3] Who regularly (mis)quoted Emerson (track down this citation)

[4] Which has trademarked the phrase "passing on the gift" as an expression of their central mission (Heifer International, 2024).

[5] Addictionhelp.com (2014)

[6] Webber (2013) based on Hyde (1999)

[7] Hoffman (1998), published as an excerpt in NYTimes (figure out how to cite if needed).

[8] "Stamp it Forward" urges the poster at my local branch, offering charitable stamps whose purchase contributes to some cause.

turns on the felt force of requirement to pay it forward,[9,10]

Supposing that there is *something* we are all tracking, what could explain it? What is it that all of us in the grip of some pay-it-forward-intuition *could* be tracking? This is our central question: why would the receipt of a gift from one person generate any pressure to do for another? Is it just a special case of our general reasons to be beneficent? a matter of gratitude? of fairness? or something else entirely?

An appeal to beneficence, gratitude, or fairness are all promising starting points to explain why we should pay it forward, but I'll argue that they all fail (§1.2–1.4). The pressure to pay it forward is a matter of locating oneself in a web of interpersonal relationships that span across generations. Paying it forward is a response to a kind of inter-generational imbalance or harmony; when one is the beneficiary of a gift one cannot or should not pay *back*, one should instead pay that forward as a way of achieving a kind of balance in one's interpersonal relationships.

Unpacking and defending that account will turn on two key claims. First, that interpersonal relationships are subject to a diachronic norm of balance or harmony (§2). To put it roughly, there is something defective about a relationship in which one person puts far more into it 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 really step up in our relationship as colleagues during my tough year—that imbalance is part of what might make our relationship good. But if that is how things *always* are, our relationship will manifest a flaw. Diachronically, the relationship is subject to a norm of balance. I'll argue that this notion of balance applies not only within bipolar relationships but *across generations* (§2.2). There is an imbalance in, for instance, my teacher giving so much to me without my ever balancing that out—and since I cannot and should not try to do so with *him*, I can do so with my students instead (§2.2). As I'll argue, the balance norm is fundamentally not about costs born or benefits rendered, but about *how one relates* to the other, i.e., one's patterns of attention and reasoning with respect to the other (NOTE: use Strawsonian phrase "quality of will"?). As my teacher related to me, so I need to relate to my students

[9] Robinson (2019), available at https://youtu.be/52LJaWDdG9c?feature=shared. It's well worth watching. In brief, Robinson pays for the order of the customer behind him in a drive through, expecting (and soon demanding!) that that customer pay it forward to his successor. Robinson, however, has sped around the drive through so that he himself will be the recipient of paying it forward. The joke turns on the notion that one really *must* pay it forward.

[10] Question for me and readers: Should I have something about gift economies?

in order to achieve balance.

Balance is the *what* of paying it forward. But we still need a *why*. Why is it that my relationship to my students and my teacher—or Franklin's relationship with the beneficiary of his loan and that beneficiary's relationship with the next person in the chain—are normatively linked by a balance norm? Why can one relationship balance the other when they are just two different relationships? Or the other way around, why does the earlier relationship in some way call out to be balanced by *another* relationship? My second major claim is that many relationships which seem on their face to be bipolar (e.g., that between me and my teacher and that between me and my student) are in fact essentially two 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 or using one's knowledge with another another in turn. This *proleptic* dimension of the student role finds fulfillment in my eventually becoming a teacher in much the way that an acorn's becomes an oak. Because of this, I'll argue, we shouldn't really see my relationship with my teacher as *separate* from my relationship with my students. They are rather two parts of a single multi-generational relationship, and it is this larger intergenerational relationship that is balanced by paying it forward.

Stepping back from the details of the view, the basic idea is that part of our living ethically 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).[11] That *larger* socio-temporal order brings with it its own normative upshots, including an ideal of intergenerational balance.

And though it may seem surprising at the outset, I'll argue that same structure underlies *all* cases of paying it forward, even ones in which there isn't an immediately obvious multi-generational relationship at play (§3.4). I might, for instance, pay forward my exceptional teaching not with students but with by volunteering at a soup kitchen, working as a political activist, or lovingly attending to my ailing neighbor. The fact of our paying it forward can forge a new relationship, putting those who gave to us in a kind of moral communion with those to whom we give. Only in such a way, I argue, can we do

[11] What Scheffler claims about life in general I argue (§3) is true more locally of particular forms of relationality.

justice to what I'll argue is the distinctively relational character of the phenomenon. If I'm right, it suggests that the basic machinery at play—the ideals of multi-generational relationships—may play a larger part in shaping our duties to others than it might at first seem.

1 Getting the Phenomenon More Clearly in View

This section has two main goals: to get a better pre-theoretical grip on the phenomenon of paying it forward, and to see that we cannot explain the phenomenon as a special case of either beneficence or gratitude.

First things first, then, we need a richer set of examples. Here are two new ones and an old one in new clothes. In each, I imagine that the protagonist does *not* pay it forward to elicit the negative reactive attitudes that will drive much of the further argument.

> ADVISING Giver is Beneficiary's graduate advisor; the norms of the university require that Giver at least do some Baseline for Beneficiary: make herself available in office hours, respond to emails in a timely way, read seminar paper drafts at least once or so, etc. But Giver does *much more* than that for Beneficiary. Where many do Baseline, Giver does 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. Beneficiary sees this, but he *only does the Baseline*.

> FREE BIKE When Beneficiary first joined the local bike club, he didn't have a bike of his own. An older club member, Giver, had an old bicycle she no longer used. Club members are not obliged to give each other bikes; some Baseline level of support is required (advice, encouragement, maybe loaning the bike a bit, etc.); but Giver does Extra and gives the bike. Many years later, Beneficiary is an experienced cyclist. A new club member, (potential) Recipient, lacks a bike. Beneficiary still has the old bike, knows it would be perfect for Recipient, but keeps it, doing only Baseline.

> 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, offering him a place to stay for a few days. Giver never intends to visit Beneficiary's

hometown, so he knows he can never repay the favor to her. Some time later, Beneficiary is back home and hears of (potential) Recipient, a friend of a friend he doesn't know in need of a place to stay. Beneficiary can host her, but it would be quite a bother. He just wants to enjoy some quite nights watching Netflix and so doesn't offer to help.[12]

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 will actually predict 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, where I will argue that while the cases above represent the core of paying it forward, that core phenomenon generalizes.

1.1 Some kind of *pressure*

The first thing to note about such cases is that they bear some but not all, of the hallmarks of directed obligation. Even if Beneficiary selfishly wants the bike, the fact that it was a(n undeserved) gift at least seems to *settle* the question that he should pay it forward in the way that obligations do. In the autobiographical example with which I opened, I certainly feel that paying it forward to my students is not *optional*. It feels, to foreshadow one of the theories I'll consider below, a lot *like* the pressure one faces to be grateful towards a benefactor. And while I don't want to lean on this, people like Franklin, Emerson, Erdös, and Jesus all seem to see paying it forward as required; as the comedian yells in the punchline of his skit "you have to!!!" Something of requirement seems afoot, although (and here intuitions seem to differ) whether it is actually a requirement tout court or just something requirement-*like* isn't totally clear.

[12] Another salient case is that of *good* parents/guardians/caretakers and children; while important, I don't discuss it because children raise unique ethical difficulties (Schapiro, 1999). But if helpful, the reader might keep that case in mind. Thanks to Berislav Marušić for raising this.

At the same time, however, even if we do think that paying it forward is straightforwardly required in these cases, it is not an ordinary directed duty owed to Recipient. Directed duties are paradigmatically demandable, and while Recipient can demand much of Beneficiary, she *cannot* demand Extra. My students have many rights against me, but they have no right to my being like my teacher. And even if Franklin is right that his beneficiary must offer a loan to a "similar[ly] Distress[ed]" man, no such man can *demand* that loan of him. Darwall, Gilbert, and others have influentially argued that a directed duty just is that which is constitutively bound up in the right way with demand (2006; 2018, respectively); if they're right, then paying it forward cannot be a directed duty. But even if they are wrong about demand in general, the undemandability of paying it forward clearly sets it apart from paradigm directed duties.

And that puts *paying it forward* in somewhat familiar, but still much contested moral terrain: the domain of interpersonal normativity wherein an agent is under significant normative pressure which falls short of a claim right. A variety of notions might be deployed to capture the kind of pressure we are under to pay it forward. Maybe we have a relational pro tanto reason to pay it forward—perhaps one we might label requiring or insistent.[13] 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;[14] maybe it's a different species of normative expectation, like a personal bond (Martin, 2021). Maybe it's an imperfect duty, and so not demandable but nevertheless issuing in a kind of discretionary requirement or a mandatory *end*.[15] Maybe my not doing so would be 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 an ideal of a relationship that doesn't entail something essentially deontic.[17]

What exactly the right meta-normative flavor of pressure there is 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

[13] cites.

[14] as in Martin (2019).

[15] Herman (2022), CITE O'NEIL justice and virtue, and the normativity of obligatory gift giving in Fricker (2022).

[16] For each of these suggestions, see (respectively), Driver (1992); Calhoun (2015); Harman (2016). See also Liberto (2012). mention Hart here?

[17] Darwall (2024) and Martin (2013).

to *another*?

1.2 Relationality: Against Beneficence

The most simple account of the source of this pressure might be something like beneficence.[18] Whatever the exact shape of our reasons (or duties of other normative expectation) of benefence, it is surely sensitive to considerations about *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 application of a standing pressure to be beneficent. Giver's gift equips Beneficiary with *more to give*, and so generates new pressure to do so.

I agree that we do have normative pressure to be beneficent and that, all else equal, those who have been benefited have to give more. The problem is not that this account appeals to an irrelevant source of normative pressure, but that beneficence plus the fact of having more to give cannot capture the particularly *relational* phenomenon of paying it froward. This relationality presents itself in two ways: first an asymmetry between Beneficiary and similarly situated individuals; and second in the character of the reactive attitudes warranted by a failure to pay it forward.

On the first, imagine that Beneficiary has a friend who was never given any such gift. She bought her extra bike herself, had to stay in a hostel, or had a mediocre advisor. Despite those disadvantages, imagine she is now in much the same position as Beneficiary—it is just as easy for her to give Extra to another as it is for Beneficiary to give to Recipient. Let's just focus on the bike case. Anyone who has an extra bike has strong reason to give it to one in need. That said, there is *extra pressure* for Beneficiary. It is in some respect *worse* for Beneficiary not to do Extra than for a similarly situated friend. Whatever beneficence might recommend (or even require), the fact that his bike was *given to him* has its own special significance apart from its merely furnishing him with more to give. Or put the other way around: if both Beneficiary and her friend give Extra, the latter's gift feels especially generous.

In response, the defender of the Beneficence Account might appeal to the epistemic significance of the gift. The possibility of giving the bike is especially salient for

[18] Cite some folks. Maybe Ross, Herman, O'Neill, maybe Sidgwick and Kagan. Actually check is Sidgwick says anything about this—check also what he says about gratitude.

Beneficiary, who unlike a similarly situated friend was once in exactly such a situation of need. One might try to leverage an appeal to salience to explain a difference in *blameworthiness* (or some other areteic notion) between Beneficiary and a similarly situated friend; or more ambitiously (and less plausibly) one could try to argue that the additional salience actually generates greater normative pressure (a further reason or normative expectation of some kind) to pay it forward. But any such appeal to salience turns on a false presupposition: that between Beneficiary and a similarly situated individual there will always be a difference in the salience of the gift. Just imagine that Beneficiary and his comparand are best friends and the comperand *knows* all that can be known about the gift; Beneficiary has told her everything, she has seen the significance of the gift in Beneficiary's life and understands that she, too, could do something similar for another. In such a case she does indeed have strong reason to give; but Beneficiary has yet still greater pressure to do so. (One could try to further a salience-based argument by citing Beneficiary's first-personal knowledge versus his friend's knowledge by testimony or observation; but any such appeal to epistemic differences has to rely either on implausibly limited views of the epistemology of testimony and perception or lose the ability to really distinguish the two normative situations.)

Moving to the second line of argument, a beneficence-based account doesn't seem to account for some of the relational reactive attitudes warranted by failures to pay it forward. 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, and I didn't pay that forward." That an address *to* the Giver is appropriate is evidence the reactive attitude in question is interpersonal.[19] And some interpersonal attitude seems apt both when Beneficiary is unjustified in abstaining from paying it forward *and* as a trace effect (or moral residue) when he had an overriding reason that justified not paying it forward. An appeal to beneficence doesn't explain the sense in which this letting down is *directed*. If my boss gives me a raise and so more means to be beneficent and I fail to accordingly adjust my charitable giving, I have not let *her* down; but when I do not pay things forward to my teacher, I do let *him* down. That Beneficiary's reactive attitudes are *directed* in these ways tells against the Beneficence Account on which we just have standing pressure to help and the gift happens to equip us with greater resources to do so. (And as I'll argue in §1.3, we can say similar things about how Beneficiary should feel towards Recipient.)

[19] Darwall (2006), maybe also cite some Wallace, Lewis, others.

A mirrored argument can be given from the perspective of Giver. She can feel, I submit, let down or disappointed by Beneficiary's not paying it forward. And crucially, she has a kind of *special* standing to have that kind of emotion. Some other onlooker not in any way bound up in the normative situation might feel some third-personal disappointment *that* Beneficiary didn't pay it forward; but Giver can feel the kind of second-personal disappoint *in* his not doing so. (As I'll argue in the next section, Recipient is also in such a position.) Imagine if a bystander to all this expressed his disappointment to Beneficiary by saying "I feel let down by you're not paying it forward"—that would be a bit outrageous! Who is he to get involved?[20] Giver, by contrast, is involved! Giver can gently say such a thing without presumption.

General ethical pressure to promote the good according to our ability cannot explain the special normative relation that Beneficiary stands in with Giver. The normative pressure to pay it forward is in some way directional, and the gift is significant beyond just equipping Beneficiary with the means (or knowledge) to give.

1.3 Toward whom is the pressure directed?: Against Gratitude

We might instead think that Beneficiary has a duty or some other kind of pressure to pay it forward owed *to* the Giver. It is of course possible for a duty to be owed to one person while having its content concern someone else; I can promise you I'll help others at the soup kitchen and in failing to do so wrong *you*. Maybe something similar is happening here: the duty is about Recipient, but owed to Giver. One natural way of developing such an account is suggested in passing by both Adrienne Martin and Barbara Herman. Though differing in their understanding of what a duty of gratitude amounts to, they both claim that we can have a duty of gratitude owed *to* our Giver to pay things forward to a third party (Martin, 2019; Herman, 2022).

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

One of this proposal's chief advantages is that like paying it forward, gratitude has some but not all the hallmarks of directed obligation. Gratitude seems (and maybe is) owed, but is not demandable. It is at once like and unlike a debt in much the same way

[20] cf. the diagnostic test in Martin (2019).

that paying it forward seems to be. So this account gives paying it forward the right kind of normative flavor, whatever exactly that is. Second, a gratitude-based understanding situates paying it forward firmly in the realm of relational normativity thereby respecting the conclusion of the last subsection.

The problem with the gratitude proposal is that it understands the relationality at play too narrowly. Whatever is at stake has to involve Recipient more centrally than just as part of the content of something that is directed (solely) towards another. The pressure to pay it forward is also directed *towards* Recipient. We can see this from the perspectives of each of the three characters in the vignettes.

First consider Giver. If the pressure to pay it forward were directed solely to Giver, Giver 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).[21] Giver does not, however, have the power of release. Consider how off it would sound for Giver to say "look, I know you appreciate staying at my home; but I don't want you to ever think you need to host others." And so, too, for the other cases "…I don't want you to ever feel the need to go above and beyond for your students," or "…to give away unused bikes." There is a sense in which Giver seems thereby to 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; if I give you a gift, there is nothing you can do to release me from my owing you gratitude (2022). I don't agree, but let's grant that she is right. The contrast with paying it forward is still telling. Even if false, there is nothing inappropriate about Giver saying "please don't feel you need to thank me! you don't owe me a thing, it was my pleasure." If Herman is right, she's making a normative error, but she isn't mistaking her *place* in the normative situation. By contrast, Giver's saying "please don't feel you need to ever host others/give bikes/go beyond with your students! You don't owe them a thing, it was my pleasure," seems outrageous—not just a normative error but a kind of overstepping. Who is *she* to release Beneficiary in that way? All of this tells against the pressure to pay it forward in terms being directed towards Giver.

Now consider Beneficiary. What does the pressure to pay it forward calls for him to do? Not just to look *back* (to Giver) but *forward* (to Recipient). Therefore, the normative

[21] See, e.g., Pallikkathayil (2017).

relation should be doubly directed, not just directed backwards as The Gratitude Account has it.

In further defense of this, consider Beneficiary's phenomenology when paying it forward successfully. To be sure, he might see his paying it forward as in some way honoring or living up to Giver or to her gift. But on the proposal we are considering, that is *all* the directionality involved; Recipient turns out to be something like the site at which Beneficiary's gratitude to Giver is appropriately discharged, but that seems contrary to the very spirit paying it forward demands. Giver did things for Beneficiary's sake, and so paying it forward should involve Beneficiary paying *that* student/new-member/guest-directed regard forward. In the good case, Beneficiary does not merely see himself as in some way relating backwards to Giver but relating forwards to Recipient.[22]

Here is one further (optional) argument from Beneficiary's point of view. What kind of self-blaming reactive attitudes he might feel when he ought to pay it forward and doesn't? He should not only feel he has let down Giver, but (would-be) Recipient as well. That is, his sense of disappointing another should be directed not uniquely towards the Giver but towards Recipient, too. When I imagine (or reflect on) not living up to my teacher's example with my students, I feel I've *let them down*, or *disappointed* them, not just my teacher (the exact attitude is delicate and will turn on the issues of §1.1). Not to feel something towards *them* feels like a case of getting the phenomenon wrong once again, now in its moral residue—it would mistake Recipient(s) as the *site* of something I should do for Giver when they are in some important sense those *for whom* I should have paid it forward and so *to whom* I feel a reactive attitude.[23]

[22] One way of developing the gratitude account would be to pair the claim that Beneficiary owes it to Giver to pay Extra forward to Recipient with Nico Cornell's influential defense of third-party wrongs (Cornell, 2015, CHECK PERMISSION TO CITE BOOK MS). Cornell argues (contra the orthodoxy since Hart 1955) 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. That seems to fit the kind of phenomenon I am pulling on. But if Cornell is right, he would (or at least should) resist extending his account to paying it forward style cases. For Cornell, rights and their correlative directed duties "capture[] the sense that we owe our attention to a particular person," and when a third party is wronged, her complaint takes the following form "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" (pp. 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 should entail that the duty at play is directed, at least in part, to Recipient (133).

[23] This argument succeeds even if Cornell is correct that inference from warranted, ex-post reactive attitudes to the presence of an ex-ante directed normative relation is invalid for the reasons given in n. 22: that in this case, Beneficiary's practical error is exactly in *not having* Recipient appropriately in view as one

This is especially sharp when we consider how Beneficiary might *apologize* or otherwise take responsibility for not paying it forward. Imagine Beneficiary says "I should have done more, and I feel I let you down." To whom could such an expression be appropriately addressed? Giver, to be sure. But imagine Beneficiary only felt such a thing was to be said only to Giver and not to Recipient—that seems a bit off. It feels like *yet another* manifestation of a failure to appreciate the normative situation that Beneficiary is in—he has forgotten Recipient yet again. It is not just about *Giver* or about the relation that Beneficiary stands in to Giver; this is also about Recipient and the new relation he stands in with her.

And lastly, consider Recipient. When Beneficiary should have and fails to pay it forward, Recipient can feel the same kind of personal hurt or disappointment, even though she cannot demand Beneficiary give Extra. This, again, suggests the relationality runs not just back to Giver but forward to Recipient. In defense of the claim, suppose *arguendo* that Recipient's disappointment is inapt. The following rebuke would then be apt (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*; Giver 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—Beneficiary did let Recipient down, and feeling personally hurt in some way makes good sense. It often (though not always) hurts or feels disappointing to be given exactly what one is owed and no more—and in cases like this it makes sense to take that *personally* (and even if something like resentment isn't warranted).

Furthermore, note that there seems to be something apt for *Recipient* to feel that other bystanders cannot. All of the other members of the club or academic department might be warranted in feeling something like indignation or impersonal disappointment, but Giver's own student or junior club mentee can feel something distinctive. That some distinctively personal reactive attitude is warranted for Recipient and not others again suggests some kind of normative relation connecting her to Beneficiary.

Throughout this discussion, I have taken for granted that there is a particular individual, Recipient, towards whom Beneficiary should relate. How do things stand before there is any such person, e.g., when there is no particular student/club-member/would-

for whom he should act.

be-guest towards whom Beneficiary might pay it forward? I'll argue in §3 that before Beneficiary relates to any concrete Recipient, her relation with Giver in some way *anticipates* a future Recipient. Accordingly, the phenomenology involved is, on this view, proleptic; but more on that later.

While not necessary for the argument, it might be helpful to see one picture on which all of this disappointment makes good sense, namely one that deploys Adrienne Martin's idea of *normative hope* (2013). She argues that in addition to holding another responsible for doing something, we can appropriately hope that they will realize an *ideal* of our interpersonal relationship. Such normative hopes do not make demand appropriate, nor does their frustration warrant resentment; but when a normative hope in another is let down, disappointment is exactly what is warranted (Telech and Katz, 2022). If something like that picture is right, then the conclusion of this section is that an undeserved gift generates a normative hope for both Giver and Recipient *in* the Beneficiary—a stance that sees the Beneficiary subject to an interpersonal norm that falls short of demand but nevertheless involves the parties in an interpersonal normative nexus.

1.4 Against fairness and free-riding

Where an appeal to beneficence is insufficiently relational, an appeal to gratitude is relational in only one direction. What about, then, an account that looks not to the norms of a two-person relationship but that of a relationship or practice that simultaneously involves both the Giver and the Recipient with the Beneficiary? As we'll see below, I think paying it forward is explained by something practice-like. But before turning to that account, we can consider the most natural and famous norm governing practices and see whether *it* can do the work: an appeal to *fairness*.

We might try to follow Rawls in accepting something like H.L.A. Hart's principle of fair play (1964 and 1955, respectively):[24]

> The Fairness Account If one voluntarily accepts entrance into a mutually beneficial cooperative scheme, one is obliged to follow the norms of that scheme. Beneficiary accepts entrance into a gift-giving (i.e., Extra-involving) scheme and so is obliged as a matter of fairness to give in turn.

[24] Thanks especially to Stephen Darwall for conversation about this.

This all makes good sense. Beneficiary availed himself of Giver's gift; in so doing he voluntarily accepted entrance into a cooperative scheme, viz., one in which teachers/senior members/hosts give Extra. To be sure, Beneficiary was in a less demanding cooperative scheme before he accepted the gift; the ordinary student-teacher/member-member/guest-host relationships don't necessarily involve doing Extra. But Giver's gift and its acceptance, one might argue, constitutes admission to a more demanding variant (the student-teacher-*plus* relationship, say) in which one does extra. Having benefited from this more generous scheme, Beneficiary must now do her part to perpetuate it and 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; and failing to pay it forward does feel akin to free-riding in some sense—who is Beneficiary to have reaped such rewards without paying back into the broader practice of the club, hospitality, or her academic discipline?

But such a picture has three key flaws. The first is Scanlon's old objection to any attempt to ground bipolar normative relations in the norms of practice (1990). If we think that the normative pressure for Beneficiary to pay it forward is *just* the same as the pressure not to free ride on the terms of a cooperative practice, it looks like any member of the club/culture/academic discipline has a complaint against Beneficiary's not paying it forward. If I cheat on my taxes, I wrong all my fellow taxpayers—so long as we live in the same state, it's *your* business;[25] but if I, qua Beneficiary, don't pay things forward to my students, it's no one's business but my students' and my teacher's.[26] (Even if you, too, are part of the more demanding practice in which you receive or give Extra, you can't feel let down by me the way *my* students and teacher can.)

Second, the view depends on an implausible metaphysics of cooperative schemes. It is a bit mysterious how giver's Gift could be seen to 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 say, of course, that the advisor started a *new* student-teacher-*plus* practice wherein the senior members of the practice give Extra. But if that's right, it isn't

[25] And that isn't just because tax violations don't have a particular victim. The breaking of any law, even one with a particular victim, wrongs the whole of *the people*, hence prosecutors representing "the people," and the law's entrusting prosecutors, not victims, with the power to prosecute crimes. The contrast is civil (private) law, in which charges *are* brought by individual complainants.

[26] Although see (Thompson, 2006, p. 339,n. 14) for a possible response. If it succeeds, it does not undermine the second two objections I make.

clear why the relationship between Beneficiary and Recipient would be a part of that *new* Extra-involving practice. Presumably my students and I stand in the broad pedagogical practice in virtue of their being enrolled in my classes, my being listed as their teacher or supervisor on various forms, etc. If we were to think that my having an outstanding advisor and my accepting that gift admitted me into a new student-teacher-*plus* practice, in virtue of what did my *students* get into *that* practice instead of the old one?

Third, the view has bad normative predictions. It treats the giving of Extra as just an ordinary obligation. Anyone can *demand* I pay my taxes and more generally not free ride; but no one can demand Extra of Beneficiary. And what's worse, it threatens to make Giver's giving Extra itself obligatory going forward. After all, if, e.g., one advisor's behavior shifts the norms to make Extra obliged, Extra is obligatory for everyone in the practice. Giver, too, voluntarily entered into the scheme—she made it! The Rawlsian/Hartian mechanics bind all occupants of a practice together, equally; but Giver is *not* bound in the same way Beneficiary is.

2 An Ideal of Balance

We need some other story that can make sense of how Giver's gift can change what Beneficiary should do for Recipient. Drawing on ideas developed by Gunnar Björnsonn and Romy Eskins, my key maneuver will be to appeal to a norm of *balance* or *harmony* within a relationship.[27] Put very crudely, Giver's gift creates an imbalance in the relationship, one that cannot be straightforwardly rebalanced by anything Beneficiary can do for Giver. Instead of paying the gift *back*, the way Beneficiary should achieve balance in the relationship is to pay it forward. I'll unpack this idea by first motivating 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 talk of "balance" may misleadingly connote a kind of balance-book mentality in which acting well requires an approach of a moral accountant; it will be a desideratum, and indeed a deliverance, of the view that one who pays it forward in a kind of balance-keeping manner, seeking, e.g., to clear out her moral debts and set the ledger clean, is not paying it forward correctly. Just as the courageous agent does not act *in order to be courageous*, the virtuosly balancing actor does not typically act *in order to rebalance*. Nonetheless, balance, like courage, is the normative standard to which her

[27] I am drawing here on ideas first developed by Björnnson's Björnsson (2022) and MS, and in other unpublished, joint work with Eskins.

actions are beholden.

2.1 Balance in a two-person relationship

Forget paying it forward for a moment and consider a two person relationship. One way in which a friendship can be flawed is for it to be *imbalanced*. Suppose that you and I are close friends, and imagine that while you are always there for me, I am never available when you need me most. That would be disappointing; I would thereby let you down. That isn't to say that if over the course of an especially rough patch in my life, you support me much more than I, you, then our relationship is *ipso facto* imbalanced. One of the best things about close friendships and many other relationships besides are their ability to sustain local imbalances. My rough patch might call for temporary prioritization; but in the best of friendships, that will not be the way things go *forever*. Over the long time horizon, the best friendships are balanced, not one-sided. In other words, the ideal of balance is an essentially diachronic one; it is satisfied over time, often in spite of—or *because of*—local imbalances. Such a norm of balance is defeasible—balance is not the end-all-be-all of relational success, but it is a dimension along which one can succeed or fail to live up to the standards of a relationship.

Balance is not always achieved in kind; often relationships exhibit healthy asymmetries: if you often help me fix up my bike, I might achieve balance by lending needed emotional support, making you a meal, etc. Balance is achieved not by the sameness of the benefits given; it is rather a matter of equilibrium in how each person *relates to* the other. What matters is that I relate *to* you as you did me, where this involves practical and affective orientations towards the other.[28] Practically, it at least means being especially attentive to the other, noticing her interests, needs, and projects, taking them as practically significant and weighty in one's practical reasoning. Affectively, it involves emotional openness or vulnerability to the other, sympathy, and doing the emotional work of friendship.[29] This can all be done to greater or lesser degrees, and a friendship is flawed when these *ways of relating* to another practically and affectively are imbalanced. None of this is to say that the benefits produced when manifesting these character traits don't matter—they do. But that which is to be balanced is not the benefit but the character of

[28] Perhaps it involves ways of relating epistemically as well; I won't take a stand on that. CITE KELLER, STROUD, Beri? Japa on deception.

[29] cf. XXXXX.

relating that (non-accidentally) produces those benefits.

One key upshot of this is that when a virtuous agent brings a relationship into balance, she does not (typically) do so "because balance requires it"; 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*, balance is achieved by my doing something in turn *for her sake*. The case where I do it *to achieve balance* is best described as a case of continence that falls short of virtue. If "balance" connotes this kind of accounting-like, non-virtuous motivational profile, perhaps "harmony" or "equilibrium" does better. What matters is that our *ways of relating to one another* are brought into *harmony* across time. The problem when she acts unmediatedly for my sake and I act for the sake of clearing my moral ledger is less a matter of material benefits being imbalanced (the benefits might be the same) than it is that our qualities of will towards one another being out of balance(/harmony/equilibrium).[30]

That ideal of balance puts a kind of normative pressure on me whose flavor matches the kind of pressure in 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. But imagine that you start to do Extra—you go above and beyond in your preparation, you field more of the students' emails, you generously grade a few extra papers, etc. What kind of normative situation does that leave me in? I should thank you, perhaps, 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: it is quite strong and when violated licenses feelings of disappointment—both your disappointment in me and my disappointment in myself for letting you down. But of course you cannot *demand* of me that I do Extra; we already agreed to Baseline. This is all to say that however exactly we understand the normative flavor at issue (as a special kind of duty, a special kind of reason, a personal bond, a matter of suberogation, etc.), the *should* in "I should step up in our seminar" seems like the same flavor of should in "Beneficiary should pay it forward."

[30] One natural way of developing this kind of account would be via orthodox understandings imperfect duty, i.e., a duty to have a certain end. That would fit especially well if one thought imperfect duties could capture the normative flavor of paying it forward and balance more generally—as being obligation-like without being ordinary, (perfect) directed obligation.

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

When we are friends or co-teachers of a seminar, your generosity is something I can often easily re-balance. I can grade a few extra papers next time or put more into my prep. By contrast, the gifts at stake in our examples of paying it forward seem impossible or inappropriate to repay. Recalling Emerson, "in the order of nature we cannot render benefits to those from whom we receive them, or only seldom" (1903). Perhaps he exaggerates in claiming reciprocation is possible "only seldom," but he is not so far off the mark. My advisor gave me an unrepayable gift. That feeling is pre-theoretically intelligible, and the account balance in *ways* of relating can help make sense of that. Our relationship is essentially asymmetrical—in ability, in need, in power, and in the *way in which* we are to attend to one another. And the gift of advising (i.e., Extra) is essentially characterized by that asymmetry. What Extra amounts to is not just comments on drafts but the attitudes that led to those comments: attentiveness to students' needs and development, motivation to sacrifice for the student, taking the students' career and projects as especially weighty reasons for action, and appropriate affective vulnerability and attentiveness.

Think, too, of the case of the club. Anyone can give anyone a bike; but the gift of Extra was essentially characterized by the asymmetry of the senior and junior members' relationship; the gift is not just a bike but support of a new member from an old one, a caring response in the context of asymmetry. And as I've set up Hospitality, the impossibility of reciprocation is built into the case.

In light of this, Emerson's claim makes sense. When the *way of relating* is conditioned by an essentially asymmetrical relationship, it is very hard to achieve balance with one's Giver.

But even more important than Emerson's claim about the frequent *impossibiity* of rendering benefits back, is the *inappropriateness* of doing so. Seeking *balance* within an asymmetrical relationship is a Procrustean folly—the right way to honor an asymmetrical relationship isn't to force it into some kind of symmetry or reverse asymmetry. We can best develop Emerson's idea in normative terms: in some instances, seeking balance via reciprocation is a mistake. Why? I have offered one explanatino: because the relationship is essentially asymmetrical, its value inherently tied to its asymmetry, and seeking to change that does violence to its character. Here is another: because Giver wouldn't want it! Good teachers don't seek reciprocity for their students; good senior club members aren't looking for payback, but to see the norms of care in the club carried forward.

Giver's preference in this way can be another reason in virtue of which reciprocation is a mistake. A third factor can be the character of the gift itself. To appreciate the gift of Extra might involve especially appreciating the value of giving in asymmetrical relationships of the kind not available with Giver (but available with Recipient).

So much the worse for balance as an ideal? No. The realization of the possibility of paying it forward is a realization that while I shouldn't pay my gift *back*, I can give to another. And *that* just is a way of re-balancing—not, of course, within the bipolar relation between me and my teacher, one that will forever be locally imbalanced. I can re-balance across generations.[31]

Balance in a bipolar relationship is an essentially diachronic ideal; balance is ideal exactly because it allows relationships to thrive amidst local imbalances. My proposal is that paying it forward is just a re-balancing across a still broader socio-temporal time scale. As I have been related to by the Giver, so I can relate to others as a Giver in turn. I will thereby have achieved balance *across the generations* in spite (or because of) local imbalances, e.g., between me and Giver and between me and my students. And if I don't, I will have failed to live up to a multi-generational, interpersonal ideal, 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 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 appear not between two people but between two relationships.

This may all seem surprising (or, rather, objectionable!). I have argued that within essentially asymmetrical relationships of giving and benefiting, it is a mistake to seek balance via reciprocation and so one must give forward, not back. That is *if* balance is an ideal of interpersonal relationships *and* one should not pay it back, *then* one should pay it forward. But why not reject the first conjunct—in particular holding that balance is not an ideal for the essentially asymmetrical relationships that generate the second conjunct?

Here are three reasons to think balance is an ideal even for the asymmetrical relation-

[31] By "generation" I mean a node in the paying it forward chain. Often generations, in this sense, will be of different demographic generations, but not always. Junior club members can be older, etc. And generations in this paying-it-forward-related sense can loop in a way that demographic generations cannot; one could imagine a circular chain guest-host relationships; that's all fine for our purposes.

ships that require one pay it forward. First is a phenomenological one: the *feeling* of imbalance in a bipolar relationship is similar to that of one-sidedness in one who has not paid it forward. Second is because the species of normative pressure generated in response to bipolar imbalance is like that in response to what I describe as inter-generational imbalance. Third is a bigger picture commitment I won't defend in full: 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. Ethicists and political philosophers of many stripes think equal, reciprocal relationships are in some respect or other normatively ideal; it is a common criticism of such approaches that they cannot do justice do essentially asymmetrical relationships. For one example of this kind of dialectic, consider a critique of Rawlsian liberalism issued by ethicists of care—a politics of free and equal individuals does violence to the asymmetrical dependency relationships (e.g., partent-child, and more generally that between the one-caring and the cared-for) that society requires. The *possibility* of seeing balance as intergenerational opens up a possibility for having one's cake and eating it, too: ideals of reciprocity and equality can have their place amidst asymmetry when they are achieved not within asymmetrical relations but across them.

Thus:

> The Balance Account One should achieve balance in one's relationships. When Beneficiary is given an undeserved gift she should not pay back, she (defeasibly) should achieve balance by paying it forward across generations (where this should involves directed normativity, relating the Beneficiary to Giver and possible Recipients).

We can see the continuity with the proposal that sees paying it forward in terms of fairness: in both free-riding and refusing to pay it forward one makes an exception of oneself and violates the terms of a broader interpersonal practice. But unlike the fairness-based view, the balance-based view does not predict that paying it forward is everyone's business or that giving Extra is demandable. The normative relation at play involves not everyone in the practice but, in particular, those above and below me in the chain of generations. Balance is the business of those *in the imbalanced relationships*, not in the practice at large.

On this picture, virtuously paying it forward is not best done with an eye towards addressing some moral balance book or righting a scale. Nor is it done with an eye towards preserving some kind of propery of a social order. If I give to my students in order to clear my moral ledger or in order to achieve balance, that's not real balance. I have not brought my way of relating to them into harmony with my Giver's way of relating to me. It's the same mistake I'd make in surprising my partner on the basis that by doing so I can have re-balanced our relationship. That would be continence, not virtue. In the virtuous case, I do so for her sake and thereby achieve balance; likewise, in the virtuous case of paying it forward, I do so for my students' (or club members' or guests') sake.

This picture is compatible with most understandings of the kind of pressure one is under to pay it forward. So long as the account countenances the essentially *relational* nature of the phenomenon, my proposal can slot in thus: imbalance within a relationship generates a reason/special kind of duty/normative hope/personal bond/(directed) norm of decency/etc., and when such imbalance arises in a multi-generational relationship, we have a reason/duty/bond/etc. towards those in our relationship to re-balance.

So, too, is this picture compatible with different levels of stringency of the requirement. The ideal of balance is defeasible in both bipolar and multi-generational relationships. Many considerations can tell against Beneficiary's paying it forward; the view is just that there is some serious, defeasible, directed pressure towards the future 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 considered and rejected above all provided some kind of normative glue or link between 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 Practice Account offered a final link: there is one large practice, behavior within which is all normatively connected by a norm of fairness.

But if instead a balance-based account is correct, what provides the normative glue to link the two relationships? In virtue of what Beneficiary can balance his relationship with Giver not by relating to *her* but instead to *Recipient*? Why does the relationship with

Giver bear on the relationship with Recipient? Or to ask a different question (which will turn out to have the same answer), why *care* about balance across generations? In the case of a bipolar relationship, the answers to both lines of inquiry is clear: balance is possible because there is a real (socially constructed) entity, the friendship (or whatever relationship), which is in part constituted by various forms of behavior, attitudes, patterns of attention and reasoning, etc., which can be balanced. Why care? For whatever reasons one has to care about the relationship and its ideals. I care about my partnership, my familial relations, my friendships, my relations with my coworkers etc., for all kinds of reasons, and I therefore also care that those relationships be *good ones*, i.e., ones that manifest good-making features like balance. But can we say the same thing about balancing *across* generations? Is there a thing which is actually being balanced and which we might care about?

There are all kinds of answers one might offer. One is simply "no." One might, on the strength of intuitions about balancing bipolar relationships on the one hand and the arguments above that balance explains paying it forward on the other, conclude that the balance norm just is something that can be satisfied both reciprocally and inter-generationally. Explanations stop somewhere, and maybe in the case of balance, we have arrived at one of the ethical principles whose shape and details cannot be further explained. As always, this is an option that most will find unsatisfactory—it threatens to leave a central most important thing unexplained, i.e., why paying it *forward* works at all!

Another approach is to think that what is being balanced is not something social, like the relationship(s across generations), but rather the *life* of the agent. Balance might be a fundamentally individualistic 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 doesn't fully vindicate the relationality involved in paying it forward. It looks like, on this picture, what goes wrong when one does not pay it forward is a failure to give one's own life the right kind of feature. Lastly, this view threatens to allow two wrongs (or defects) to make a right (or virtue): imagine I enjoy a profound imbalance in one friendship and sacrifice everything to a different, equally profoundly imbalanced, relationship with someone else. Two bad friendships don't render a life balanced on the whole; but such a view would predict they do.

I prefer a quite different route. In some elusive sense, it seems like when Beneficiary fails to pay it forward, he fails to live up to the standards of his role *as a student* and at the same time *as a teacher*. Better if we could vindicate this literally, with a picture that yields the verdict that the particular (bipolar) relationship between Giver and Beneficiary *itself* is one that, to put it metaphorically, seeks balance and knows the possibility of balance being achieved not only backwards but also forwards, with the next generation. And likewise, we should see Beneficiary's failure to pay it forward as somehow disappointing her relationship with her students, not just a standard of her own life.

3 Multi-generational Relationships

We can do so by better understanding what it really is to be an adivisee, a teacher, a junior (or senior) club member, a guest or a host. In all of these examples, the relationships between Giver and Beneficiary, on the one hand, and Beneficiary and Recipient, on the other, are not independent from one another. In this section, I'll argue that the way to understand the relationships at play is as parts of a single, multi-generational relationship. This answers the questions posed in the last section. Beneficiary's relationship with Giver can be balanced out via his relationship with his student because they are part of the *same* larger, multi-generational relationship which is itself balanced. Why care about such balance? Because each of the smaller relationships *just is* a part of a larger, multi-generational whole, and so balance of the whole is a good-making feature of the parts. I should care about inter-generational balance because I care about my particular relationships, which are parts of a multi-generational relationship. All this reveals something about what it is to be a student, a club member, a guest, and many other things besides: these social roles that seem to only to be between two people are essentially part of something larger. They are *proleptic* in already anticipating a future in which their occupants relate to another person as they were related to. To be a guest looks forward to the possibility of hosting another in turn, and so part of what it is to be a guest is to be located in a multi-generational socio-temporal order that looks not only back at one's host but forward into future possibilities with possible guests of one's own. And that proleptic element is what *links* the two relationships into something that can be balanced against one another.

3.1 Proleptic Roles

Let's set aside the phenomenon of paying it forward and just consider the relationships at play in these cases. The case of the club-membership and hospitality are clearest, so we'll start there.

Many clubs have institutions of seniority, and involve (often explicitly) a process of aging within the club. Old members were once new members, and new members become old; and with that aging often comes a shift in responsibilty. My claim here, quite plausible for such clubs is that this temporal order is part of what makes the social roles what they are. Part of what it is to be a new member is to be something that anticipates becoming an old member. Put another way (a way that I'll make much of in a moment), a generic like "young members become senior members" seems to capture something about the *form* of the club, of what it is to be a member.[32]

The same structure is culturally embedded in the social roles defining hospitality for many, though not all, cultures. Consider as a paradigm Ancient Greece, with strict norms of *Xenia*. One had to host strangers, and part of the underlying logic is that one might be or have been a stranger in need of a host oneself. Even where direct reciprocation isn't on the table, paying forward hosting was. In cultures where hospitality looks not just backwards but forward in this way, part of what it is to be a guest is to be something that will reciprocate one day as a host; guests become hosts; to understand what it is to be a guest is in part to understand that the guests *go on* to become hosts elsewhere in time. In cultures where hospitality takes an essentially reciprocal form, paying forward hospitality wouldn't be intelligble—and that's what this view predicts. (Although I'll argue one could, in such a case, pay forward beneficence, §3.4.) Unlike the club, the social roles in forward-looking hospitality cultures are not uni-directional. Just as guests become hosts, hosts become guests. Part of what it is to be a host is to be someone who might one day be a guest. One can stand in multiple generations of hospitality. But the key point is that there is such a temporal order—to be a guest is not only to stand in a relation to one's host but to occupy a role that anticipates standing as a host to some future guest.

That guests become hosts and young members become older members is no mere

[32] There are toxic manifestations of this tendency, e.g., part of what frat hazing does is make salient the possibility of pledges one day becoming senior brothers and inflicting such violence in turn. But so, too, are there positive versions—the supportive bike club, the welcoming graduate student body, a big-sib/little-sib program for first and fourth years at a college. For now, the key point is not a normative evaluation of good and bad cases but the fact that this "aging" is part and parcel of the roles themselves.

statistical regularity. It is rather a future possibility *built into the roles* themselves. When a guest becomes a host, that is no accident. It is the manifestation of a cultural form that was latent in the role in the first place; so, too, with a young club member becoming an old hand. Hosting is living out a potential that was already present in being a guest; as is one-day welcoming new members into the club. That this is something beyond statistical regularity can be clear when the "aging" is rare. Consider the German academy in which the career progression from lecturer to full professor involves quite 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 no accident; after all, *lecturers become professors*. And turning to the example of the student (which needs to be complicated in a moment) we can see much the same. Our profession is fundamentally imbalanced; 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 is part of what it is to be a graduate student in philosophy.

One might worry that these claims about students, lectures, club members and hosts are all very special cases. Consider students more generally. Most of our students don't become teachers! Is it really true that the role of student *in general* looks forward to the possibility of teaching? That is too narrow. But here is something just slightly more expansive that does seem right: part of what it is to be a student is to occupy a role that looks forward to the possibility of passing that knowledge on to others. Sometimes by way of formal teaching, i.e., as a professional teacher; often informally, when teaching a classmate, friend, coworker, or client; and even more often in *using* the knowledge in service of another. Part of what it is to be an engineering student looks forward to the possibility of using that knowledge in service of another—in teaching, in posting on an engineering stack exchange to help other students with their homework, and in serving a client. Students become those who share their knowledge in turn.[33]

These proleptic claims—students become those who share their knowledge in turn, young club members senior ones, guests hosts—can serve as part of explanation of how someone who occupies one of the former roles comes to occupy one of the latter. If we ask *why* someone is a senior club member, that they were a junior one is a good expla-

[33] This is nicely reflected by the locution used in some graduation ceremonies in which graduates are bestowed with the "rights and *responsibilities*" of their degree.

nation. Just as the fact that this academic was a lecturer can help explain why she is a professor—lecturers become professors. There is more to the explanation, of course, but these proleptic claims serve as a kind of explanatory backdrop: they characterize the form of a social role in time.

Consider by way of analogy Michael Thomson's idea of natural-historical judgements like "bobcats breed in spring," or "the acorn becomes an oak" (2008, ch. 4).[34] 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.[35] 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 might manifests a natural defect (2001). There is, of course, great skepticism about the neo-Aristotelian project; it is a massive undertaking to rehabilitate the view that nature has any such structure built in. (So, too, is there a concern about getting normativity out any such picture; we'll see in a moment that such worries do not apply to the view on offer here.) But whatever its vices with respect to the natural world, the thought that our *social roles* might have such a structure involves no objectionably Aristotelian metaphysics. Such proleptic, social-historical judgments, like guests become hosts, are true because we have constructed the roles thus. Sometimes we do so via explicit or implicit institutional arrangements, e.g., the club charter says that…; sometimes via broad cultural norms, e.g., hereabouts, guests and hosts act thusly…; sometimes via subcultures, e.g., academic philosphy is built on a model in which graduate students become professors. (That this is so despite a job market in which many do not makes our situation a bit like that of dogs in a world where disease makes three-leggedness unnaturally commonplace.)

We might, and often actually, do otherwise. It is no part of what it is to be a prisoner that looks forward to the possibility of being a guard; nor does being a movie-goer anticipate a future in which one will be a director. But being a student, young club member, or guest, is in this way (among others) unlike being imprisoned or entertained by a movie—these roles look forward to the possibility of occupying, in some way, the complementary position in the relationship. There could be other forms of learning relationship which are not like that of a student and teacher hereabouts. Imagine I join a cult and must be instructed in its ways. But suppose further that I am sworn never to share or use my occult

[34] Drawing on Anscombe 1981.

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

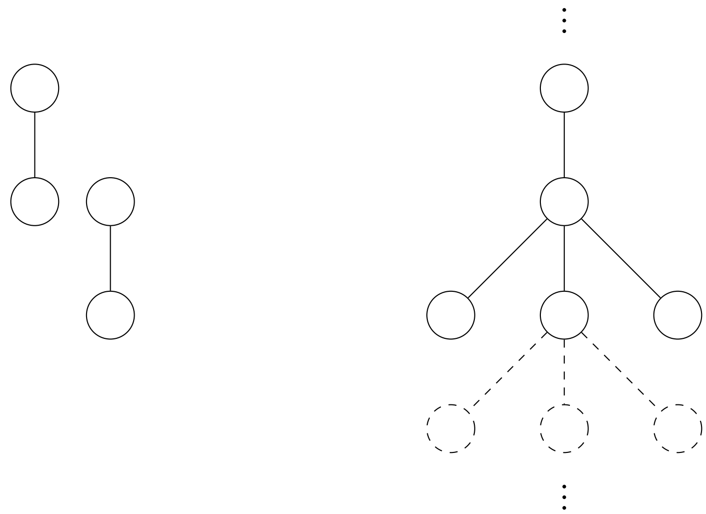
learnings with others—not only to outsiders, but even with respect to other members of the cult! I am strictly to learn, and never to share or use my knowledge in turn. Such a role may well be possible to construct. But, and again here is evidence of my key claim, such a role would be quite *unlike* that of an ordinary student. The idea that roles like that of a(n ordinary) student are proleptic explains this. Likewise, a club with permanent hierarchy, in which the junior members forever remain so, is different from the bike club which aging is natural.

3.2 From Bipolar to Multi-generational Relationships

The relationships featuring in our three cases are all paradigm sites of directional or relational normativity. Following Thompson, such normativity is often refereed to as "bipolar" (2006), and "bipolar normativity" 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 really bipolar at all. If part of what it is to be a guest anticipates the possibility of being a host, it is just a mistake to think that the relationship is has just two poles—the current guest and host. Guests become hosts in turn, and that involves still other people. They may not be involved in the relationship just yet, but the relationship of guest and host already antipicates their possible future involvement. And that later relationship, e.g., that between Beneficiary and Recipient, involves the earlier host, e.g., Giver, inasmuch as Beneficiary's hosting Recipient just is the manifestation of the proleptic dimension of Beneficiary's relationship with Giver. *Mutatis mutandis*, with the relationship of teacher and student, and between club members.

All three of these relationships are paradigms of *multi-generational relationships*, where the "younger" relational role looks ahead to its occupant one day occupying the "older" role. Put another way, these relationships are not *bi*polar at all. Advisor and advisee, guest and host, new- and old-club-member—each pair occupies two nodes of a larger chain of relationships stretching back to actual teachers/club-members/hosts of the past and possible students/club-members/guests of the future.[36] Put in pictoral terms, we should replace the picture on the left with that on the right.

[36] In a (very remote) sci-fi scenario in which one who has never been taught in any form somehow then teaches another, this account (rightly) predicts that the instructor and learner would stand in a profoundly different kind of relationship than teachers and students do—one shorn from the *practice* of which our roles are a part.



It does not follow from such relationships' being multi-generational that, e.g., guests who don't go on to host weren't guests in the first place; a given goldfinch's not mating in season doesn't disqualify it from being a goldfinch, nor are three legged dogs any less dogs than their four-legged relatives. Nor am I claiming that one has necessarily failed or made some kind of practical error as a guest if one never hosts. Instead, recognizing these apparently bipolar relationships as parts of a multi-generational whole instead puts us in a position to explain how balance across generations is possible.

3.3 The Normative Upshot of Multi-generational Relationships

The upshot of these role's proleptic dimension is that there is a kind of essential link between the earlier relationship between Giver and Beneficiary and the later relationship between Beneficiary and Recipient. And it is in virtue of that link that the two can be normatively connected to each other via a balance norm.

To put the idea metaphorically, the relationships between Giver and Beneficiary, on the one hand, and Beneficiary and Recipient on the other, each *know* the other relationship. Non-metaphorically, and in metaphysical terms, the earlier relationship just is (in part) that which anticipates the later one; and the later one just is the manifestation of the earlier's proleptic element. That metaphysical connection provides the *glue* we have been looking for. The reason that behavior in the later relationship can balance out behavior in the earlier relationship is that they two relationships are connected as a matter of what they are.[37]

To see why this is, consider again the case in which you and I are colleagues co-teaching a class in which you have stepped up. I am under pressure to re-balance. But let's tweak the case a bit. Suppose this is just a really tough semester for me and I have no opportunity to rebalance. But a year later we find ourselves on a committee assignment; I am in a position to pull extra weight, and I can thereby rebalance. But why think that work on a committee is even the sort of thing that *can* rebalance what was done in a seminar? Because while the circumstances are different, the relationship is one and the same. When there is a continuity in the relationship, *it* can be balanced across time and in different contexts.So, too, the *multi-generational relationship* can be balanced across time and in different contexts.

It is a simple fact of the ethics of relationships that behavior *within* a relationship has an impact on how one should continue to act within that relationship; how you related to me five (or fifty) years ago can bear on how I should relate to you today. Another way of putting the upshot the last few subsections is that behavior within the Giver-Beneficiary relationships is behavior within a multi-generational relationship that also includes Recipient. And so Giver's behavior can influence how Beneficiary should treat Recipient in just the same way your old behavior can influence how I should treat you today: behavior within a relationship shapes how one should act within that relationship. Again, this is *like* the fairness-based explanation in seeing a broader relationship/practice being bound by a general norm. But this account lacks the defects of THE FAIRNESS ACCOUNT.[38]

[37] Maybe a fn on Williams and retrospective justification?

[38] All that said, that is not the only normative upshot one might try to draw. Another view is tempting, one that more closely tracks a kind of artificial analogue of an Aristotelian account of normativity: multi-generational roles are *self-reproducing*. When we say that the younger role looks forward to the possibility of its occupant so relating to another, what we really mean is that part of what the role does is perpetuate itself. One might then hold that hosts, students, and junior club members are defective inasmuch as they do not reproduce their form of relationality anew. One is defective, qua guest, if one does not host another in turn. The twist that then grounds the extra pressure to pay it forward is that *what* is to be reproduced has changed in virtue of the gift. Like the rejected FAIRNESS ACCOUNT, this quasi-Aristotelian account would argue that having given and accepted the gift of Extra, the relationship at issue has been transformed into a "plus" variant, one whose essential character involves the giving of extra. Where THE FAIRNESS ACCOUNT either drew the boundaries of the relevant practice too widely (one advisor cannot change the norms of advising in general) or too narrowly (if the only change is to Giver and Beneficiary's relationship, why would that impact how Beneficiary should treat Recipient?), this account seems to do just fine: the relationship between Giver and Beneficiary is the only thing that has changed, but fully manifesting the junior role requires reproducing the new extra-bestowing relationship. Finally, one can hold that, the reason to fulfill the terms of the self-producing role are parasitic on reasons to *be in that relationship* in the first place. That is, inasmuch as one has reason to occupy the role, one has reason to reproduce it (via the transmission principle I defend below, §4.1). The problem with this kind of account is one that afflicts fairness

3.4 Paying it Forward Outside a Pre-Existing Relationship?

So much for Advising, Bike-Club, and Hosting, but are all cases of paying it forward really like this? These instances of paying it forward turned on the gift taking place within multi-generatinoal relationships that exist independently of the gift; but even if there are many such relationships, can paying it forward only take place within a pre-existing, multi-generational relationship? To what extent can one pay it forward to those *not* within such a structure? For example, suppose I were not a teacher; could I pay forward the gift of my advising not to my students but to others, e.g., by volunteering at the YMCA or being especially solicitous of my elderly neighbor? Can behavior with my neighbor *balance* anything having to do with my teacher? I'll here argue yes, with some complications. Seeing why this is will both help us understand the contours of paying it forward and recognize the surprising generality of the phenomenon.

There are two key ideas I will develop in this section. First, while paying it forward does always take place within a multi-generational relationship of some kind, it is not the case that that relationship must exist independent of the act of paying it forward (as it does in our three paradigm cases). Sometimes the act itself establishes a link between Beneficiary and Recipient which, in turn, puts Recipient into a multi-generatinoal relationship with Beneficiary and Giver. Second, relationships exhibit a genus-species structure that allows seemingly different kinds of relationships to in fact be instances of a more general kind.

Suppose Beneficiary is an engineer, no longer in the academy, whose Ph.D. supervisor was an exceptional teacher; she can pay that forward with her *clients*. Why? Because students use their knowledge; her role looked forward to the possibility of her sharing that knowledge in service of others. When she does so, she realizes the proleptic element of the relationship she bore with her advisor, and so she can thereby achieve balance in *that very relationship* with her clients. In virtue of what do her clients stand in a relationship with her? By nothing other than her work with them (a contractual engagement, the fact of her designing for them, etc.). If the gift she pays forward consists in the quality of her work for them, e.g., the terms of the contract, the carefulness of the design, the warmth of her demeanor, then it is the gift itself which forges the connection between

accounts: if the giving of the gift of Extra transforms the relationship between Giver and Recipient into one in which *extra is to be given*, it looks like *Giver* faces the same normative pressure to continue relating as an extra-giver that Beneficiary will face vis-à-vis Recipient. That is, Giver should continue giving extra in just the same way that Beneficiary should pay it forward. Thanks to Sandy Diehl for discussion about this.

her and her client and in turn between her client and her mentor. That is, she brings her client into a multi-generational relationship that can be balanced via paying it forward.

One might balk at the idea that her advisor is related to her client. But students use their knowledge for others, and Beneficiary's working with her client fulfills the proleptic essence that characterizes that role. Recipient is brought into the fold of the multi-generational relationship just in virtue of Beneficiary's working for her. This is a little different from the case in which Giver-Beneficiary-Recipient is a pedagogical relationship. In that case, Recipient is Beneficiary's student not only because of Beneficiary's teaching but because of things like Recipient's being enrolled in her class. The fact of their relating as teacher and student is grounded by facts independent of the *gift itself*, whereas the fact of the relationship between engineer and client is dependent on the gift; that is not due to anything special about paying it forward, but turns on the grounds of various relationships. That difference can seem massive since in the one case the relationship precedes the gift whereas in the other it is created by the gift. But that difference notwithstanding, the structure is the same: the Giver-Beneficiary and Beneficiary-Recipient relationships are part of a multi-generational whole and so can be brought into balance.

What if, though, what Beneficiary pays forward has no relation whatsoever to what she was taught? Imagine she had an exceptional supervisor in mathematical logic but now runs a community center. (And just suppose, perhaps artificially, she deploys no skills or knowledge from learned from her supervisor.) Can she pay forward the gift of her supervision with those who use her center? Or could she pay it forward by taking care of an elderly neighbor? Yes, but only once we supplement the idea of making new relationships with a recognition of relationships' genus-species structure.

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 the fact that Beneficary could pay forward her 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 in the relationship with her advisor by teaching undergraduates? Because the graduate advisor-advisee relationship *just is* a student-teacher relationship (plus some differentia, e.g., the student's pursuing graduate work). Beneficiary and Giver stand in an advisor-advisee relationship and *ipso facto* stand in a student-teacher relationship. And so Beneficiary achieves balance in *the very relationship* (student-teacher) that includes her advisor when she pays it forward to her undergraduates.

Now imagine Beneficiary left the profession, and volunteers to teach basketball to kids at her local YMCA. Could that be a way of paying forward her teaching? Yes! Because the student-teacher relationship just is a mentor-mentee relationship, and the Gift of her 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. And so while in a certain sense her relationship with her kids is of a different kind as that with her advisor, in another sense it is not: qua mentor-mentee relationship, she stands as one node in a multi-generational structure which she can re-balance by paying it forward. Mentees mentor; she did so, and in so doing she makes it the case that her kids are socially connected to her advisor. If she pays it forward, and does *extra* in her own way for them, she can achieve balance in the mentor-mentee relationship that she had with her advisor.

Still, you might insist, mentoring is still awfully close to teaching. Can she pay forward her extraordinary advising with special kindness to her elderly neighbor (which, lets stipulate, involves no teaching, sharing of knowledge, or mentoring whatsoever)? 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*. Put from most to least specific (with, of course, lots of intervening levels of specificity omitted): the student-teacher relationship is a kind of mentor-mentee relationship, which is a kind of benefactor-benefactee relationship. Inasmuch as her extraordinary advising was an instance of benefaction, she can pay that benefaction forward with kindness to her neighbor. Her relationship with her teacher is a kind of benefactor-benefactee relationship (albeit a very specific kind); and so her student-teacher relationship is *at once* a benefactor-benefactee relationship which 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" (CITE), 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.

That isn't to say gifts should only be paid forward and never be reciprocated. The proleptic nature of the role makes *possible* balancing 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 normative question. It turns on whether one *should* reciprocate the gift, which is settled by the considerations oultined in 2.2: whether the gift took place in an essentially asymmetrical relationship, the opportunity or lack thereof of reciprocation, the giver's preferences, the values embodied in the giving, 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 is paying 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* (which, again, is an awful lot!). But she seeks constant opportunities to pay it forward with the elderly in her neighborhood and dedicates a significant portion of her life to them. One multi-generational relationship that she stands in with her advisor is, by the argument of the last two paragraphs, in balance: that of benefactor-benefactee. But a more specific relationship she stands in with her advisor is *not* balanced: namely that of student and teacher. Qua instance of benefaction, she has paid forward the gift of her advising, and qua multi-generational benefactor-benefactee relationship she has re-balanced; but qua gift of *teaching* she has not paid her gift forward, and qua student-teacher relationship, she has *not* achieved multi-generational balance.

My hope at this point is that these "qua" claims, thought still a bit unclear, seem to be getting at something, viz., they do justice to the sense in which Beneficiary seems in *some* sense to successfully pay it forward and in *another* to have failed to. But what, in the end, should we make of these *qua* claims? To put the question in more concrete terms, how should we assess Beneficiary's behavior? Does she face any pressure to redirect her extra efforts towards her students? Or has she satisfied whatever pressure there is to pay it forward?

To answer this, first consider the different situation in which Beneficiary has no students. In such a case, there is *no person* she is in any way letting down. Moreover, when she has no students, the student-teacher relationship she stands in overlaps entirely with the benefactor-benefactee relationship she stands in with her teacher; there is no person who is one but not the other. But when she *does* have students, the relationships' members come apart, and the more particular relationship remains one which is out of balance. She more clearly stands in two *distinct* relationships with her teacher, one which involves her students (to whom she does not pay anything forward), the other which involves her neighbors (to whom she does). And in this case, she really is letting down her students; there is a distinct relationship, involving them, which remains imbalanced. She *does* face pressure to pay it forward with her students. There is space for disagreement among friends of THE BALANCE ACCOUNT here, but my rough thought is that such a picture best leans in to the relational character of paying it forward. There is particular pressure to pay it forward when there is already 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.[39]

That said, all of 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 view yields only the conclusion that she faces some special pressure to pay things forward to her students and some cause for regret that she won't.

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

Some questions remain. 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.)

[39] May need to include a discussion of a case in which she doesn't have any students but could take some on.

4.1 Paying Bad Behavior Forward?

Does the view have the (obviously damning) implication that if one has been treated poorly, one should achieve balance by paying forward the bad treatment? Some have defended an idea of *negative partiality*, and that kind of picture can fit nicely with a balance norm. Bad behavior (or ways of relating) requires *less* than good behavior to balance out. On such a picture, one might try to develop an account wherein bad treatment from a senior member of a multi-generational relationship makes permissible what would otherwise fall below a threshold of acceptability. The neglected student (guest, club-member) enjoys a kind of alleviation of pressure to do for her successors in the chain of generations.

But this is not the only way to develop the account, and I think it should be rejected. The choice here turns on what one thinks of negative partiality more generally, but if one is skeptical of such pictures, one can see paying it forward as an essentially asymmetrical phenomenon, giving us reason to pay forward the good and not the bad. It is true that by paying bad treatment forward, one will have achieved balance in a *bad* relationship; but we can maintain that one should not accord with the standards of bad relationships! Suppose you are I friends and I treat you badly; the skeptic of negative partiality will insist that you shouldn't re-balance our relationship by mistreating me or in any way doing what is typically below baseline. You should hold me to account or distance yourself from me.[40]

In light of this, one might doubt that *balance* was ever really the ideal in question. But a second kind of case shows that relationship's ideals can be asymmetric in the following respect: good relationship's ideals bind us where bad relationship's ideals do not. Consider a patriarchal marriage. A housewife's submissiveness is part of what makes a partiarchal marriage what it is; the constitutive norm that she acts well qua submissive wife inasmuch as she obeys is part of what constitutes the relationship as patriarchal and moreover toxic. A woman in such a relationship, however, is not normatively bound by its norms; she ought *not* to accord with its standards (though of course she might need to pretend to for safety). Though submitting is ideal *by the lights of the relationship*, she ought not realize that ideal or see it as genuinely normative for her. In general, relational norms are not binding just because one is in a relationship; they are binding when and because we *should* be in that relationship.

[40] Björnsson and Eskins think distancing oneself or blaming another is a form of balancing and use this to develop a balance based account of many aspects of interpersonal morality (CITE). If they are right, so much the easier for defending balance; either way, what I go on to say is still essential.

Return now to balance and the case in which I mistreat you in the context of a friendship. An abusive relationship is indeed *balanced* by returning abuse; but achieving the ideal of a toxic relationship is vicious, not virtuous; just as a domineering husband's achieving of the ideal of a patriarchal marriage is vicious. When balance is bad, the relationship is thereby bad, and its norm of balance does not generate reasons for action.

While I won't defend the view fully here, this kind of asymmetry follows from the right account of, more generally, how relationship's norms in fact generate reasons for agent's to act. While the exact details aren't relevant, one way of developing the picture is:

> TRANSMISSION If an agent is actually in a relationship, then her reasons to follow the constitutive 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.)

This kind of view yields an asymmetry across the board: good relationships pass on their norms and bad ones don't. A fortiori, relationships whose balance is good require us to balance; bad ones don't. And all of this is bolstered by the fact that the balance norm is defeasible.[41]

4.2 A Limit to Giving?

Similarly, one might worry a balance view sets a kind of ceiling on how well one can treat those beneath one 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 view says that I have reason to rectify imbalance; it does not say that I generally have reason to avoid generating generous imbalances.

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

[41] What about relationships which have very mixed normative status? See (White, 2022, §7) for a detailed discussion that applies equally here.

time. If I go out of my way for your sake, that would generate normative pressure on you to feel and express gratitude and to rebalance over the long haul. Is that a consideration that tells against helping you? I think not. I don't mean this as a kind of metaethical point about right kinds of reasons; I am making a first order normative claim about what kinds of consideration bear on my coming to the your aid as my friend. Imagine I reason "I know they are having a terrible time of things. I could pop by and drop off some dinner and see if they need some help around their place; I know this would be of great aid and be welcomed by them. That said, doing so will generate pressure on them to thank me. Worse still, it will generate some long-term pressure on them to be a friend to me, in turn. Maybe I shouldn't." That is just confused! It seems deeply condescending or infantalizing to take some resultant normative pressure on you to be a reason against lovingly and respectfully coming to your aid. Maybe such reasoning would be appropriate if there is something *wrong* with you, e.g., if you are pathologically averse to thanking or 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. While some (perhaps pathological) preferences on your part might be a good reason not to give, the fact of the resultant pressure *per se* is not.[42]

This is not just a technicality. It speaks to the normative significance of (im)balance. Imbalance is not a *bad* which is to be avoided; it is a fact that calls for further response, but it is not a state to be avoided. Consider gratitude. Is the fact that my gift to you would put you in a normative situation in which you are under pressure to feel and express gratitude to me a fact that counsels against my giving the gift? Again, absent some kind of special consideration, no. The state in which gratitude is called for is not one to be avoided. It is a state which calls for response but does not generate reasons to be in it or not. If being

[42] Arguing otherwise, Herman offers the example of her paying for one of her undergraduates to attend medical school as paradigm of a gift which oversteps; it would so imbalance their relationship that this kind of gift is inappropriate in the first place (Herman, 2022) (Double check her exact language.) I agree such a gift is overstepping, 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 as or even more materially impactful on the student's career than the tuition. But the former is not overstepping. Why? Because it is appropriate for the role of teacher even if *just as imbalancing*. Giving tuition (can) go awry because it oversteps the appropriate (contingently established) boundaries of a normal 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. And, as Herman so elegantly brings out in her discussion, *entangling* oneself in a new aspect of another's life (here financial) comes with consequences beyond imbalance. (We don't run financial aid decisions via students' teachers for good reason.)

such that one owed gratitude were *bad*, one would have pro tanto reason to avoid it. But it isn't in any way bad to owe (if that's the right word) gratitude; it's a wonderful thing to owe gratitude and to further be able to express it. So, too, for imbalance. Imbalance is not bad; relationships thrive on imbalance—welcoming and sustaining imbalance is a core feature of many of the best, dynamic, most supportive relationships. But it is a situation that calls for response: re-balancing, not because a balanced state is *better* but because that is the apt response to imbalance.

The Balance Account also lacks any weird backtracking upshots. In a case where my teacher only did Baseline and I give Extra to my students, the view does not predict that there is something *wrong* with (or disappointing about) my teacher. He, after all, is not guilty of leaving an imbalance unresolved. For him to keep *his relationships* balanced is for him to attend to the relationships on either side of him—with his teacher and with his students—not to look to balance across the whole of the multidimensional relationship. My behavior with my students is not for *him* to balance. Nor is the fact that I will generate an imbalance *itself* a reason for me not to go above and beyond if he did not; that follows from the above argument that balance norms generate reasons to rectify imbalance, not to avoid generating it in the first place.

4.3 How Many Recipients?

To how many Recipients should Beneficiary pay it forward? She was given exactly one bike; should she only pay the generosity forward to one younger club member? Or should she find other ways to manifest an especially attentive attitude towards all younger club members? Or to just some? If she is a house-guest twice-over, is balance achieved by hosting exactly twice? Should it be the same number of days? Should the lucky advisee go above and beyond with all her students? All 100 in her intro class? Can she achieve balance by mentoring just one? Or mentoring one per year in which she was mentored? In short, to how *many* people does one face pressure to pay it forward?

Above I characterized the balance norm as not about costs borne or the benefits rendered; rather, balance is about a *manner* of relating to another person—bearing to another a quality of attention and reasoning that is in harmony with how one was related to. The account of to how many recipients one should pay it forward, then, should be found by looking to the manner of in which one's Giver related to them.

Contrast the case of hosting and teaching. Imagine that Giver's decision to host Beneficiary was something exceptional; she doesn't host often and does so only very rarely. But seeing Beneficiary's need, she helped this one friend of a friend in particular. While the intuitions may be fuzzy here, it seems like Beneficiary can have discharged the pressure to pay it forward by finding *one* opportunity to host. Imagine he does so for Recipient-One, and a few years later similarly situated Recipient-Two comes along needing a host. Refusing Recipient-Two after helping the first does not seem like the same kind of failure as refusing to host at all. It would be nice, but I don't see the same pressure.

By contrast, if Beneficiary (or I) find *one* student to help as a way of paying forward our advisor's advising, something seems a bit off. Part of that stems from the dangers of unjustly inequitable attention that attend to student-teacher relationships. Whatever is going in paying it forward, many contexts make selecting a single student for favorable treatment unfair. But even setting aside any such issues of inequitable treatment of Beneficiary's multiple students, there seems something deficient about his only paying it forward to one student. One way to cache this out is by assuming a natural filling out of the case in which Giver's exceptional advising is, unlike the host, extended to *many* students. The contrast here, then, is in *how* our two Givers relate to their respective Beneficiaries. Where one's mode of relating is selective, her Beneficiary can pay things forward in a similarly selective manner. Where the other's mode of relating is more expansive, it is that same quality of will and mode of relating to those below her in the multi-generational relationship that is called for.

Again, issues of fairness and equity loom large here. Selective favoritism can often be morally noxious; but by the arguments of §4.1, the reasons to pay it forward depend on the relationship itself being a morally good one. We don't have reason to pay forward inequitable treatment. And the balance norm's generating only one consideration among many others (like equity and fairness) likewise tells against paying it forward come hell or highwater—unfairness, the needs of others outside the relationship, and other moral demands on our time and attention can all caution against paying it forward.

5 Conclusion

How central is the phenomenon of paying it forward to a life well lived? It depends on how often one is related to in such a way that generates imbalance. While I won't argue for it here, our lives are profoundly dependent on others and often characterized by forms of profound imbalance. The brilliant (and criminally under-appreciated) Danish philosopher and theologian, Knud E. Løgstrup opens his most famous book with an extended argument that the point of departure for ethical theory is the fact of our profound dependence on others.[43] It is not a surprise that he goes on to see paying it forward as central to his account of our ethical obligations to others. Despite his first-personal experience of the horrors of the Nazi regime and his participation in the resistance, he insisted that however awful one's circumstances, life itself is an undeserved gift rendered by others, and in light of our receipt thereof, we owe *everything* to others.[44] Even if he 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 life lives profoundly dependence on others, and for all life's travails, much of what *is* best in our lives is or stems from the benefits others have rendered us and which we cannot or should not pay *back* in any way. As President Obama once pithily put the point in the context of taxation for the infrastructure used to do business, "you didn't build that!" And what is true of roads and bridges is true of much of the infrastructure of our lives. Imbalances abound, and often the best way to rectify them is to pay it forward. The thesis of this paper is that among the central tasks of living well is attending to such imbalances by looking not only backwards but also forwards, across generations and into the future.

(Possible conclusion ideas: say something about debate about obligations to future generations? The balance norm picture lets you have proleptic obligations to non-existent people that makes sense? Maybe connect more directly to relational accounts of beneficence (vs Singer-style EA), especially ethicists of care who emphasize dependence? Maybe suggest other kinds of inter-generational norms besides balance?)

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[43] See also ethicists of care who emphasize this Noddings (2013); Ruddick (1995); Tronto (1993); Held (2006); Collins (2015). Especially notable in explicitly arguing dependency is the root of obligations of justice via a pay-it-forward-like argument is Engster (2007).

[44] Maybe (probably not) defend my exegetical claim that the gift comes from other human beings, not God, in light of Ch. 1's treatment of interpersonal dependency. I do not share Løgstrup's view on this, and even he non-straightforwardly takes back this claim in later writing.

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