

# To Live Gratefully

## The Grateful Response to the Gift of Life

### Servilius and Piso

We all know the story of a “life debt.” Piso is our protagonist, either going about his daily life or trying to complete some quest. Along the way, he meets Servilius, who is in mortal danger. Piso stops what he’s doing and saves Servilius’ life. In response, Servilius is so overwhelmed that he pledges his eternal servitude to Piso, promising to do everything Piso commands until either Piso or Servilius dies, only for Servilius’ obligation to be discharged once he saves Piso’s life in return. This plot archetype is so overwhelmingly common in literature, television, and films that we begin to wonder if this reflects an aspect of ordinary morality. Must the honorable man, when his life is saved, submit himself as a slave-for-life to his savior? I argue that ultimately, approach to gratitude is inappropriate.

One problem with the life-debt response is that one’s servitude is very rarely sufficient in fully expressing one’s gratitude unless the servant ultimately saves his savior’s life. If Servilius never served Piso but merely saved Piso’s life when the opportunity arose, his debt would have been paid off. This scenario makes the servitude seem largely unnecessary. A response might be that Servilius didn’t know that the opportunity to save Piso’s life was going to present itself; if Servilius never had that opportunity and merely served Piso for his whole life, Servilius would have been absolved of his debt. But since

Servilius pays off his debt through saving Piso's life, doesn't Piso need to pay off his debt to Servilius for his servitude? Yet, we don't think that Servilius' servitude warrants a repayment by Piso. If we pay a \$15 meal with a \$20 bill, we expect a return of \$5, so why doesn't Servilius expect Piso to repay for his period of servitude? Wouldn't Piso now have to serve Servilius?

Another problem with the life debt narrative is that it doesn't take into consideration what would benefit the benefactor. Perhaps Piso doesn't want Servilius to be his servant for life; should Servilius go against Piso's wishes and be enslaved anyway? It seems ridiculous that we repay a benefit with something the giver doesn't want. Or perhaps the power Piso gains over Servilius promotes bad personal qualities in Piso, such as arrogance, hunger for power, or dependence on others. Or perhaps it would take away from his good personal qualities like sympathy, humility, and love of freedom?

Yet another objection is that sometimes our benefactor would have us do immoral things as their servants. Perhaps Piso was the ringleader of a political conspiracy and demanded Servilius assassinate a number of people in high political office. Would Servilius be bound to kill unknown numbers of people for an evil person, simply in order to discharge his debt? Of course not! Even if Piso is a good man, he could ask Servilius to do something against Servilius' personal beliefs. Perhaps Servilius is a vegetarian because of religious reasons, but Piso asks Servilius to taste his meat for poison. Should Servilius sin by breaking his religious obligations, or should Servilius sin by breaking his moral obligations?

The tale of Servilius and Piso illustrates how problematic our popular representations of gratitude are. This problem extends to all benefits, but this paper will focus primarily on the gift of life. Life will be considered to be given when one is born, when one's life is saved from mortal danger, and when one is provided the resources necessary to live life. I consider life to be one of the most valuable benefits which can be given to anyone, and since everyone has been given life or things necessary to live, our conclusion has universal practical application.

To evaluate the proper response to receiving the gift of life, we must ask what constitutes proper gratitude. I claim that there are two fundamental parts to gratitude: the mental state and the return. While this return can certainly be a benefit of the same kind (e.g. saving one's savior's life), few have the opportunity to respond in such a manner. So, for the rest of us, I argue that we should pay back these benefits by cultivating our virtues, thereby creating a relationship of beneficence and personal improvement between the giver and receiver.

Instrumental to my argument are the writings of eminent Stoic philosopher Lucius Annaeus Seneca from the 1st century AD. In his work *On Benefits*, Seneca became the first philosopher whose surviving works thoroughly address beneficence and gratitude. But Seneca is not just interesting from a historical perspective; his positions on gratitude have stood the test of time, remaining among the most viable accounts in the virtue ethical approaches to gratitude. His influence on my thesis is significant, but he spends relatively

little space in his writings discussing benefits-in-return. He focuses primarily on the mental state of gratitude, discussing exactly how we should feel when others benefit us, saying that the gifts themselves are the mere “traces and hints of a benefit.”<sup>1</sup> But while the moral significance of the mental states of gratitude and beneficence may overshadow the moral significance of the exchanged gifts, addressing the exchanged gifts themselves warrants serious examination. For if we want to benefit others appropriately, we must reflect on what benefits-in-return are most appropriate, thus contributing to our virtue of *prudencia*.

## Definition of Benefits

But before we get to the proper grateful response to the benefit of life, we must first discuss what benefits themselves are. I will define “benefit” as an action which improves the wellbeing of the receiver through the transfer of the possession of a thing from the giver to the receiver without any conditions of repayment. I thus distinguish between benefits and gifts, for gifts do not necessarily improve the wellbeing of the receiver, while benefits always do.

To begin, a benefit must improve someone’s well-being. Seneca gives us three tiers of benefits that can be given based on the kinds of benefits they grant: necessary things (*necessaria*), useful things (*utilia*), and preferred things (*iocunda*).<sup>2</sup> The most valuable

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<sup>1</sup> Seneca, *On Benefits*, bk. I, s. 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, s. 11.

category of benefits is necessary things, which I define as things necessary for human flourishing. Necessary things are further divided into three kinds of necessary things: things that make life worth living (what I call “morally necessary benefits”), things that give us life (what I call “vitally necessary benefits”), and relationships (what I call “socially necessary benefits”). Seneca considers each of these benefits to be roughly equivalent in value,<sup>3</sup> and my goal now is to justify why they are, first by describing each of the kinds of necessary things and explaining why they’re equivalent, and then explaining why useful things and preferred things are both less valuable.



Figure 1: Kinds of Benefits

Morally necessary benefits include whatever facilitate or improve the receiver’s virtues, “such as liberty, modesty, or a good mind.”<sup>4</sup> We can expand this list to include any morally significant personal qualities, or qualities which enable life to be morally valuable. These morally necessary benefits are the source of the moral significance of each of the

<sup>3</sup> I argue that, while Seneca indicates that necessary things are more valuable than useful things which are more valuable than preferred things, he values each kind of necessary thing as equivalent, despite vitally necessary benefits being listed first, morally necessary benefits being listed second, and socially necessary benefits being listed third. Seneca uses “*primum*,” “*deinde*,” and “*deinde*” to list the general kinds of benefits, indicating that the first in the list (necessary things) should be given before any of the following ones. Compare that to when he describes the kinds of necessary things, using “*primum*,” “*secundum*,” and “*tertium*.” This latter, on my reading, is a mere list of kinds, without a clear ranking of importance like with the general kinds of benefits.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

other necessary benefits, as I will describe below, but they also require the agency and relationships that vitally and socially necessary benefits create.

Vitally necessary benefits include everything necessary for someone to remain physically alive. Examples include food, water, shelter, and air. But we also have certain actions that others perform which are required for life. For instance, our parents' copulation and our birth are both necessary for us to be alive, and their protection of us from life-threatening danger—such as predatory animals, poisonous food, and falling from high places—are all examples of vitally necessary benefits. These benefits create an avenue through which morally necessary benefits can be expressed. In order for there to be liberty, there must be an agent able to be free. In order for there to be modesty, there must be an agent able to restrain his destructive desires. In order for there to be a good mind, there must be an agent whose mind can be good. And since there is no known nonliving agent,<sup>5</sup> we must value life insofar as it allows the morally necessary benefits to exist. Plus, this agency enables social relationships to exist, for, just as we do not know of a social relationship between two nonliving things, we must value life insofar as it allows the socially necessary benefits to exist. And since life requires vitally necessary things, vitally necessary benefits have value roughly equivalent to the morally and socially necessary benefits.

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<sup>5</sup> I ignore the possibility of sentient computers or other nonliving artificial actors. I do this in part because of how imprecise the term "life" is, so, to simplify my argument, I will only address beneficence and gratitude between individuals who are generally considered living, conscious agents.

Socially necessary benefits include our closest relationships with our fellow man, including familial ties and true friendships. By “familial ties,” I don’t mean relationships we have with our biological family; all too often, family members estrange, making their relationships to their biological family hollow or nonexistent. I mean the fraternal, spousal, and filial bonds which we typically associate with a healthy family. And by “true friendship,” I don’t mean fair-weather friendships, nor friendly relationships. I mean only friendships we typically associate with our “best friends.”

Rather than attempt to describe what makes fraternal, spousal, filial, and friendship relationships different from one another, I will describe what makes them similar, in order to describe what all socially necessary benefits share. They first and foremost facilitate the development of interpersonal virtues, such as honesty, compassion, and love. Without other people around to facilitate the development of these virtues, they resist our acquisition; how can we be honest, compassionate, or loving when there is nobody to be honest, compassionate, or loving toward? And these virtues can’t be fully expressed without these strong relationships. We all know of someone we would consider our “friend,” but who we wouldn’t trust knowing some of our deeper secrets, restricting our honesty towards him. Or whose previous bad decisions restrict our compassion toward him. Or whose lack of care for us reduces our love for him. While we can be moderately honest, compassionate, or loving—even perhaps to our enemies—the fullest expression of these virtues is most often with people we are closest to. So, some morally necessary

benefits can be best expressed or only expressed in a relationship, making socially necessary benefits—strong social relationships—as valuable as these morally necessary benefits.

Plus, a lack of social relationships oftentimes causes life-threatening scenarios, making them as useful as vitally necessary benefits. In early human history, cooperation between human beings would greatly increase survival in harsh environments; from collectively defending themselves against predators to specializing in tasks which more efficiently provided for their survival, people were safer together. And when faced with life-threatening scenarios today—such as war, famine, and natural disasters—the more people there are to help us survive, the more likely we leave those trials with our lives. But there's an even more subtle and (sadly) more common example of the necessity of social relationships. Scientific evidence<sup>6</sup> and intuition tell us that social relationships prevent depression, commonly associated with suicide or attempted suicide. Social relationships thus save us from ourselves, and by being a friend to those in physically or emotionally dire straits, we can literally save lives. Thus, socially necessary benefits are as valuable as vitally necessary benefits.

So, we've shown that all three kinds of necessary benefits—moral, vital, and social—are all highly valuable and roughly equivalent in value. These are the kinds of benefits

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<sup>6</sup> See Cacioppo et. al., "Perceived Social Isolation Makes Me Sad"; Hawton and James, "Suicide and deliberate self-harm in young people"; Spirito et. al., "Social skills and depression in adolescent suicide attempters."

which one should value the most highly. But there are also benefits which don't fit in these categories: merely useful benefits and merely preferred benefits. Merely useful benefits help improve our well-being, but they aren't necessary for our well-being. Seneca says these are "various and wide-ranging," including moderate amounts of money, honors and promotions for ambitious people, or anything which puts the receiver in a position to benefit himself.<sup>7</sup> The lack of these benefits does not threaten oneself in the same way as the lack of any of the necessary benefits threaten us, but they still help the receiver.

The final—and least valuable—category of benefits is merely preferred benefits. Whereas the "useful benefits" include benefits which we could use to secure more benefits for ourselves, these "preferred benefits" are benefits that the receiver would rather have than not, which are neither "necessary" nor "useful." That is, they aren't benefits that the *ideal* recipient of the benefit would want, nor what the receiver would want if he were fully rational, nor what the receiver necessarily should want. Preferred benefits as I describe them correspond to what the recipient—a fallible, imperfect agent—desires even though he/she perhaps ought not to. Examples may include sharing popcorn with a friend at the movie theater, giving children bread crumbs to feed to local ducks, or inviting a coworker to a party, assuming all the receivers (the friend, children, and coworker) want these benefits. Sometimes, then, these "benefits" may not increase the well-being of the recipient; for instance, while giving someone a cigarette may satisfy a desire (thus counting as a preferred

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<sup>7</sup> Seneca, *On Benefits*, bk. 1, s. 11.

benefit), it harms the person's well-being. Thus, preferred benefits are the least valuable kind of benefit, and one could argue that many of them ought not be given.<sup>8</sup>

So, we've described each kind of benefit and how they contribute to the well-being of the receiver. But what's common among all these kinds of benefits is that there is a transfer of something between two parties, the "giver" and the "receiver." That "something" may be a material gift—such as food, clothing, or toys—or immaterial—such as friendship, education, or peace of mind. Also, the receiver must not have possessed the benefit before the giving; how can I give someone the same thing that person already possesses? There can be cases where I give a benefit similar to what the other person owns; for instance, I can give a copy of *On Benefits* by Seneca to a friend who already possesses another copy. But because my copy is not identical to the one my friend has, it still may count as a benefit. Additionally, there can be cases where I give my friend a benefit which my friend already owns. Consider the scenario where my friend has let me borrow the car he owns for the weekend. However, on that Saturday, he suddenly needs someone to drive him to the airport, and I oblige him. This would be a benefit, because I have possession of the benefit (the car and, by extension, the car ride), and I give that benefit to my friend.

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<sup>8</sup> See Seneca, *On Benefits*, bk 1, s. 11.

And finally, a true benefit must have no explicit or implicit expectation of payment or repayment. If we expect immediate payment, it becomes a mere business transaction. If we expect repayment at a later date, it becomes a loan. Here, I distinguish “expecting” from “predicting.” In the latter case, we merely foresee our receiver trying to benefit us in return, but if our receiver doesn’t, we do not feel wronged. We recognized that our gift was merely for our receiver’s benefit--not for any future return we may receive. But in the former case, we give under the conditions that our receiver will give us a gift in return, and if our receiver doesn’t, we feel slighted. These expectations of return--these strings attached to our gifts--are what disqualify a gift from being a true benefit.

## Definition of Gratitude

Now that we’ve defined what a benefit is, we can move on to evaluating the proper response to benefits, which I call “gratitude.” There are two parts to gratitude: the mental state and the action response. I’ll first discuss the mental state, which is a kind of propositional attitude directed toward a benefitter with respect to intentional benefits which the receiver is convinced the benefitter actually performed for the receiver. Examples of this kind of attitude include forgiveness, regret, beneficence, responsibility, guilt, and innocence. Then, I will discuss the action response, which is an intention to, and attempt to, give a roughly balanced benefit to the original benefitter.

The mental state of gratitude is a propositional attitude, because we feel grateful for specific things. Unlike emotions, gratitude cannot be felt for a particular action and then “bleed over” to other actions. For instance, if I get a bonus on my paycheck, I enter into a “good mood,” causing me to attribute my happiness to any number of other events, such as the weather or traffic. When we feel grateful for a particular benefit, we don’t become any more or less grateful for unrelated benefits, nor do we attribute gratitude to non-benefits or gifts unworthy of gratitude. Also unlike emotions, gratitude cannot exist unless it is prompted by a specific action. We’ve all woken up on the wrong side of the bed, and without any particular event to cause our negative attitude, we still attribute our anger or sadness to unrelated things. We cannot wake up feeling particularly grateful and apply that gratitude to unrelated things; it must have a cause.

Gratitude is also directed toward rational actors. By rational actor, I mean that the actor can perform an action and has the ability to think about the action. Clearly, human beings are rational actors, and perhaps some animals as well, but non-actors like inanimate objects are not rational-actors, and non-rational things like plants are not rational actors. Emotions can be directed toward these non-rational-actors; I can become sad because the rain ruined my plans for the day, I can become happy because the sun warms an otherwise chilly day, and I can become angry because the hail damaged my car. No actor is responsible for any of these situations. But I cannot feel gratitude toward nature or inanimate objects without personifying them. Certainly, we see ancient philosophers like

Lucretius praising nature or chance for causing certain circumstances,<sup>9</sup> but then we're personifying nature by attributing rationality to it. Similarly, some religious people<sup>10</sup> may praise God for actions related to inanimate objects or natural events, but we still direct this attitude toward someone who we consider to be a rational agent.

Without this addition of a rational agent to whom we direct our gratitude, there seems to be little distinction between mere happiness and gratitude. In this scheme, "gratitude" would merely be the name we give feelings of joy in response to receiving a benefit, but gratitude seems deeper and more complex than that. Indeed, the very grammatical structures of "happy" and "grateful" betray gratitude's need to be directed toward an agent. I can feel happy for having received a benefit; "happy" takes only one object: the thing we are happy *for*. But gratitude takes two objects: the thing we are grateful *for* and the person we are grateful *to*, so the proper expression of gratitude in English seems to require an agent.<sup>11</sup> This isn't unique to English either; the structure is paralleled in Spanish, Latin, and Russian.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, bk. I, lines 57-61.

<sup>10</sup> Justice, "Christian Mom Gives God Glory for Hitting Lottery, but Should Believers Gamble?" Here, a woman attributes her lottery win to God.

<sup>11</sup> Some may consider this appeal to language to be unconvincing; just because our conception of gratitude *is* this way doesn't mean that it *ought to be* this way. Perhaps our common conception of gratitude is wrong, but the purpose of this essay isn't to revise our commonly understood definition of gratitude. This essay's purpose is to address what is the proper grateful response to the gift of life under the common conception of gratitude.

<sup>12</sup> English: "I'm grateful to Piso for the gift."

Spanish: "Estoy agradecido con Piso por el regalo."

Latin: "Pisoni gratiam habeo quod donum dedit."

Russian: "я благодарен Лисн за подарок."

But another important factor is that we direct gratitude toward intentional actions. Imagine there exists a rational actor who has not acted at all. Can we feel gratitude toward him? Clearly not. Unlike emotions, which, as was shown previously, can occur without any action or actor prompting it, gratitude requires an action: namely, the giving of some benefit. But this benefit must also be intentional. Imagine we are about to be killed in a dark alleyway, when someone on the top of a building accidentally drops a flower pot so that it kills our assailant before our assailant kills us. Do we feel gratitude toward the person who dropped the flower pot *for the dropping of the flower pot*?<sup>13</sup> I contend that any gratitude we show to our “savior” is a similar misattribution of gratitude that Lucretius may apply to unintended events like the weather: we misattribute intentional agency where there is no intentional agency. If something is truly unintentional—that is, any actor who performs it or causes it to be performed doesn’t mean to do it—gratitude is not required. Similarly, we do not feel grateful for people who were compelled to give benefits. For instance, say a benevolent scientist develops a mind control device and forces an unwilling, evil man to give me a fantastic present. If I know about his mind control, do I still feel grateful toward the evil man? No. I may feel grateful to the scientist for intentionally acting in such a way that I ultimately receive a benefit (though that depends on my attitude toward mind control), but I don’t feel gratitude toward the evil man, because he didn’t

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<sup>13</sup> We may feel grateful regardless to our savior in this situation. We may feel grateful for the person’s decision to carry a knife. We may feel grateful for the person’s decision to walk out on the top of his building. But we don’t feel grateful for his dropping of the knife, because he didn’t intend to.

intend to give me the benefit—in fact, if he were in his right mind, he may have intended the opposite.

But perhaps a more mundane example would be more fruitful. Consider the case of a small child, whose parent compelled the child to give a gift to his teacher. Does the teacher feel gratitude toward the child, if the teacher knew that the child was being compelled by his parent? The teacher may feel grateful for the student's choice of gift, the student's compliance with authority that the teacher has tried to cultivate in her classroom, or the student's goodwill when actually giving the teacher the present. But the teacher doesn't feel the same level of gratitude as he would if the student had given the gift entirely on his own volition, and he only responds with gratitude to the aspects of the gift which were voluntary on the student's part. If the student was unwilling to give the gift, or didn't care enough to give the gift from his own volition, and was forced to give the gift anyway, the teacher's gift would not be a benefit. It would be a chore, and any expression of gratitude would be either to teach the student that giving gifts is valuable, or out of politeness. But it certainly won't be out of a genuine sense of gratitude. Thus, we conclude that we feel grateful for intentional actions and not for unintentional ones.

We must also be convinced these actions were actually performed. Emotions can be experienced when watching a movie we know isn't real. Consider dramas, where we feel the anxiety, sadness, and anger of the main characters, knowing full well that the story isn't real. We can empathize with emotions and suspend our knowledge of its medium to

experience happiness, sadness, etc. Yet, when we watch a benefit being given on the silver screen, do we really feel gratitude toward the characters? No. While we may feel the happiness that the recipient feels, we do not feel truly grateful to the giving character, because we can only feel gratitude when we are convinced that the actor and action are real. Of course, we can be deceived into thinking that the action is real, when it's not. If an evil demon makes us convinced that the evil demon gave us a benefit, do we feel grateful to the evil demon? Yes, and, after being freed, if we admit that we felt grateful to the evil daemon while being deceived, would an onlooker blame us or call our feeling of gratitude irrational? Clearly not, because while gratitude may be wrongly given when we are given wrong information, we are justified not by what actually happened, but by what we are convinced actually happened. There is much more to say about the rightness of decisions on the basis of deceptive information, but that would be beyond the scope of this paper. I will merely assume here that we can feel justifiably grateful for any benefit which we are convinced was given to us.

But what if the giver perceives the gift as a benefit, but the receiver doesn't? I said earlier that if someone intends a gift to be a benefit, the gift, on my view, counts as a benefit. Is the receiver obligated to feel grateful for gifts which were intended to be benefits, but which don't actually benefit? I say the receiver should. The receiver should feel grateful for the giver's intention to benefit and desire to increase our well-being.

But what about when we aren't actually benefitted by the gift? I argue we should let the giver know that we weren't benefitted. If the purpose of a benefit is to improve the well-being of the receiver, the giver *wants* to improve our well-being. So, telling a giver that something doesn't actually increase the recipient's well-being allows the giver to know more accurately which gifts are best for the specific receiver. Of course, receivers should be tactful when explaining this to the giver; there is a fine line between helping givers give more effectively and appearing ungrateful. And receivers must show gratitude for the giver's intention to benefit us, which makes up the most important part of a benefit. But, where possible, communication between givers and receivers ensures that the purpose of the benefit—an increase in the receiver's well-being—actually occurs.

This discussion leads us to the second part of gratitude—the action response. This action response of gratitude includes an intention to give a benefit in return. The best way to illustrate the necessity of the intention to return is to imagine its absence. Would we say that Servilius would be grateful to Piso if he “felt” the mental state of gratitude but had no intention to repay Piso for saving his life? Certainly, we would say he is more grateful than the person who didn't experience the mental state, but does a mere mental state--without any intent to act in response--entail that one has a virtue? Consider courage. If a person merely “felt” courage when a situation prompted him to feel courageous but never tried to *act* on that courage, would we consider him courageous? Or would we consider someone modest who “felt” modesty when a situation prompted him to feel modest, but who never

tried to *act* in a modest way? I say no. If a person has the opportunity to be virtuous but doesn't try to act on that feeling of virtue, we wouldn't consider him virtuous. Thus, if Servilius has the opportunity to be grateful but never tries to act on that gratitude, he isn't truly grateful. But is this only the case for the necessary benefits? Consider the case of a neighbor who picked fresh blueberries from his backyard and gives us some of his harvest. This is a rather mundane benefit, and perhaps critics would claim that we don't need to intend to repay these kinds of merely preferred benefits. I claim we should, even in those cases.

I believe that critics deny the need to repay merely preferred benefits, because they recognize that certain merely preferred benefits are so marginally beneficial that they don't elicit an intention to repay with anything of significant value. In reality, benefits elicit intentions to repay them with roughly balanced benefits, so when a benefit is only marginally beneficial, the gift one intends to respond with has such little value, it seems almost equivalent to giving nothing. The value of the benefit, too, is proportional to the intensity at which we feel that we should respond with a benefit. So, when their neighbor gives these critics blueberries, the benefit is so minimal that they hardly feel any desire to repay, confusing it with no desire to repay at all.

Now that we know we ought to return even minor benefits, we must determine how we can value these different benefits and how those valuations affect our giving-receiving relationships. We look no further than our general categories of benefits (necessary, merely

useful, and merely preferred): we must return a benefit with another benefit of the same category. For instance, say we pick some plums in our backyard and give them to our neighbor. Our neighbor knows our mother has cancer and pays for her chemotherapy in return for our plums. While paying for our mother's chemotherapy would be a great gift on its own, if he gives the return out of gratitude for our plums, we consider the gift inappropriate, an overreaction. Similarly, if our neighbor pays for the chemotherapy of our mother and we respond with plums, we would feel that the plums are too small of a gift—there must be something more we can do. Thus, we give returns within the same category as the benefits we receive.

But what about valuing different benefits within a category? How can we determine, for instance, whether life is more valuable than moral education? Future scholarship delving into how to value benefits within each benefit class is necessary, but beyond the scope of this paper. For our purposes, we must rely on Aristotle's notion of prudence (*phronesis* in Greek, or *prudentia* in Latin; also called "practical wisdom" in English).<sup>14</sup> That is, we have a rough innate understanding of the value of a benefit, which can be cultivated through education in applied ethics. We can intuitively tell that, while blackberries and a golden chandelier are both merely preferred benefits, the chandelier is more valuable as a benefit, and this fact is reflected in our monetary valuations of the two. And we can always ask either the recipient (if we expect him to be frank about what would

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<sup>14</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. VI, s. 5-13.

benefit him) or someone who would know what would benefit the recipient (e.g. a friend or family member of the recipient).

But just because we know the value of two benefits within the same class doesn't mean we know what benefit we should give in return for a benefit. We thus turn our

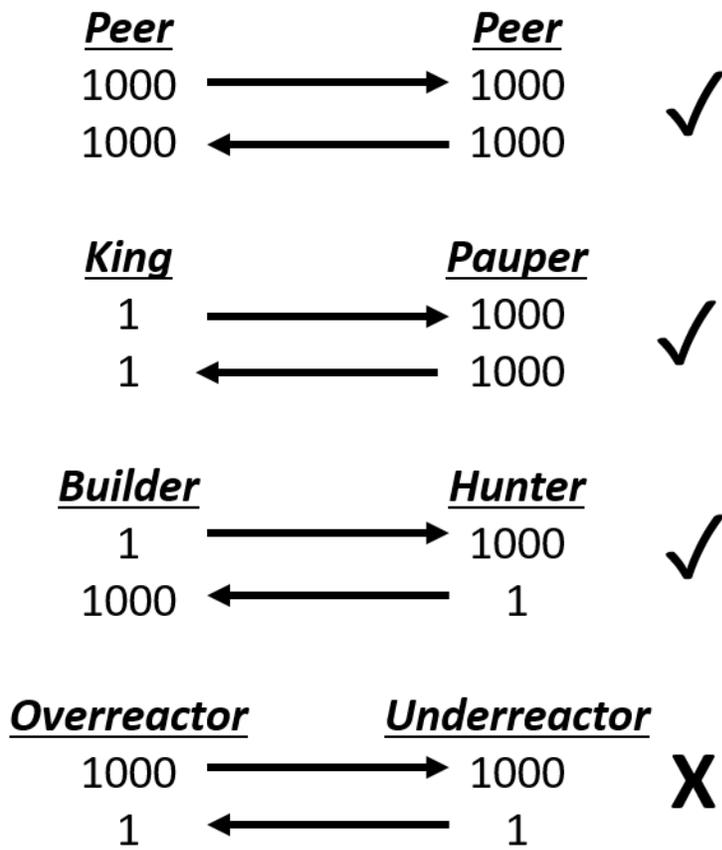


Figure 2: Benefit Balancing Chart

attention to Figure 2.

There, I divide giving and receiving relationships

into four scenarios: the

two peers, the king and

the pauper, the builder

and the hunter, and the

over-reactor and the

under-reactor. For the

purposes of this

illustration, 1 and 1000

are arbitrary units used

to illustrate the value of a benefit relative to the giver and the receiver of a benefit, where

1000 is a significantly larger value than 1, but they are all of the same class of benefits (e.g.

merely useful benefits). Arrows indicate to whom and from whom the gifts are being given,

and the instigating benefit may be the top or bottom arrow.

The second scenario, the king and pauper scenario, reflects the relationship between two people who have very different valuing schemes. In this case, the king gives the pauper something worthless to the king but extremely valuable to the pauper. The pauper then gives something back that is extremely valuable to him but worthless to the king. This vertical relationship (i.e. equivalence along vertical axes) is appropriate. The pauper is unable to seriously benefit the king, so his meager gift is excusable. And considering how much he sacrificed to give the gift—1000 units—his gift betrays true beneficence and true gratitude.

The third scenario, the builder and hunter scenario, reflects the relationship between two people who would greatly benefit from each other's gifts and not lose much well-being through that exchange. For instance, say Fabius is a builder and Agricola is a hunter. Fabius sees that Agricola needs new tools, so Fabius builds these tools for Agricola. Agricola, seeing that Fabius needs more food for his family, gives a portion of his crops to Fabius. This diagonal relationship (i.e. equivalence along diagonal axes) is also appropriate, because the receiver is benefitted both by the intrinsic value of the benefit and the knowledge that the giver did not have to greatly sacrifice for the gift (since the value of a gift is diminished if we feel the other sacrificed too much to give it). This relationship is thus the most desirable giving-receiving relationship, since value is created, and everyone ends up significantly better off than before. But not all giving-receiving relationships fit this mold, so we sometimes must settle for less efficient relationships.

The last scenario, the overreactor and underreactor scenario, reflects the relationship between someone who gives too much and someone who gives too little. Here, both people value the gifts equally, but the intrinsic values of the gifts are very different. The giver gave something valuable, and the receiver responds with something worth little. As a result, we would consider the receiver ungrateful for the original gift, since the disparity of the gifts were so large. The benefitter would feel that the receiver didn't value the benefit the way the benefitter intended.

But what if we flipped the over-reactor and under-reactor, so that the original giver gave little and the receiver responded with something great. Here, we don't consider the receiver ungrateful, but we still find the gift inappropriate. Imagine we give a friend some blackberries from our backyard, and our friend responds by giving us a brand new Ferrari. If our friend gave the Ferrari to us spontaneously, the benefit would not necessarily be inappropriate. But if our friend gave it to us specifically to show his gratitude for the blackberries, we would feel the gift wildly inappropriate. Thus, whether the original giver's gift was worth 1000 or 1 in the under-reactor and over-reactor scenario, we still consider its horizontal relationship inappropriate.

We therefore should intend to return a benefit with diagonal or vertical balance. This intention doesn't mean we know exactly what we will give, nor what is appropriate to give. For instance, let's say we receive a benefit whose value is undetermined. We don't know what we intend to give in return, because we cannot determine what return would be

roughly equivalent in value to the original benefit. But we still intend to repay the benefit with another benefit which is roughly equivalent in value, so the intention to return the benefit—even if the receiver only has a vague notion of what to return—is still a property of good gratitude.

But recall that the two parts of gratitude are the propositional attitude and the action response, and I've already shown that the receiver must have an intention to give a roughly balanced benefit back to the original giver. It seems only natural that if we have an intention to do something, we try to do it, so a natural part of the action response of gratitude is to not just intend to return the benefit, but to take proactive steps to actually return the benefit, which I call the action response of gratitude. This attempt is more than a simple intention to give; we must act in such a way that a reasonable person would consider our actions to potentially lead—directly or indirectly—to a proper return of the benefit. Consider the case of a neighbor giving us blueberries. Let's say we try to return the benefit by checking our backyard for strawberries to give to our neighbor. But we can't find any fresh strawberries growing back there, and for the purposes of this example, let's say there is no other proper gift we can give in response. We intended to return a roughly balanced benefit (the strawberries for the blueberries), and we took steps to actually return the benefit (by scouring for strawberries in our backyard). If there is no other return roughly balanced to the blueberries that we can give, we are fully justified in not giving a return on the benefit. But we still must try in good faith to give a proper return.

Thus, we have determined that a properly grateful person has a propositional attitude directed toward a person who benefitted the grateful person. This attitude is prompted by intentional benefits the grateful person is convinced the benefitter actually performed. And this attitude prompts the grateful person to attempt to benefit the benefitter in return with a roughly balanced benefit. But, as the scenario of Piso and Servilius discussed in the beginning of this paper illustrates, we have a difficult time determining a proper return for the benefit of life. I will approach this answer by analyzing how children can benefit their parents in return for giving us life.

## Benefits in Return for the Gift of Life

Our parents certainly count among those who give us life, though they do not save our lives in the same sense as Piso saved Servilius. I admit that the gift of life is far from the entire obligation a parent has to a child; there include obligations to rear the child, teach it right from wrong, and provide for its safety. But the intentional act of creating the child's life<sup>15</sup> is itself a benefit which ought to prompt the child to show its gratitude. Intentionally giving a child life entails, in many cases, economic, social, and/or physical sacrifices, especially the mother enduring the trials of pregnancy and childbirth,<sup>16</sup> indicating that the parents sacrifice their own comfort, safety, and money for the child. Of course, we should

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<sup>15</sup> See pg. 12-13 where I discuss the part of my definition of "benefit" which excludes all unintentional gifts.

<sup>16</sup> I will not make a definitive stance on when life develops—whether it is upon conception, birth, or any other particular moment. However, for the purpose of this paper, I will say that life begins at birth, since there is consensus that babies are alive at birth.

*feel* grateful to our parents, but we should also *act* gratefully. I argue we ought to benefit our parents in return by becoming more virtuous. First, I will show that we can benefit our parents with a roughly balanced benefit, despite how important life is for giving benefits. Then, I will discuss why increasing our virtue is a roughly equivalent benefit to the gift of life.

The argument against our ability to give a balanced benefit to our parents comes from an objection Seneca defends against.<sup>17</sup> The objection goes as follows: We cannot benefit someone unless we are alive. Thus, in order for us to benefit anyone, we need the gift of life that our parents gave us. Since our parents are responsible for our ability to benefit, they are responsible for the benefits we give. So, when we try to benefit our parents, we have to rely on that gift they gave us to benefit them. Every benefit I give to my parents can never “square the account,”<sup>18</sup> because there is always a part of that benefit they are responsible for. Since we cannot meet the level of benefit their gift of life gives us, we cannot give an equivalent gift, making the gift of life an unrepayable debt.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See *On Benefits*, Bk. II, s. 29.

<sup>18</sup> See Seneca, *Moral Letters to Lucilius* Ep. 9, s. 6.

<sup>19</sup> To illustrate this argument more effectively, consider it mathematically. Let’s say our parents’ gift of life is equivalent to 100 points, and because we require life to give any benefit at all, 10% of any benefit the child gives is attributed to the parent. So,

100	=immediate value of the gift of life
-100	=immediate value of the child’s gift in return
0	= difference between the gift of life and gift in return
+100 x 10%	=proportion of gift-in-return attributable to parents’ gift of life
=10	=net benefit to be returned

Let me expand upon Seneca's two refutations of the above line of reasoning: the Argument from Greater Offspring and the Argument from Infinite Regression.<sup>20</sup> After considering Seneca's objections, we will conclude that the responsibility of a benefit will wholly lie with the proximate benefitter for the purposes of this paper. I will then address what benefits-in-return would be most appropriate for us to give in return for the gift of life.

Seneca begins by arguing that the origin of a thing may be less valuable than the product of that thing. Consider a watermelon. Its origin is a mere seed, most of which fail to produce anything at all. Yet, one seed creates a vine, which in turn creates a variety of giant fruits filled with dozens of seeds, just like the original seed. Which is greater: the seed or the watermelon? Seneca uses similar imagery in the following examples: the Rhine and the Euphrates are less powerful at their origins than their mouths, and foundations for fantastic cathedrals lay out of sight. Do we say the origins of great rivers or the foundations of architectural marvels bear responsibility for the qualities which emerge further downstream or above ground? No, we do not. So, why do we attribute responsibility for children's benefits to their parents' benefit of life? Life is like that seed, that river origin, or that basilica foundation; while it can allow the rest to exist, it is not responsible for the

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<sup>20</sup> All of Seneca's defenses against the previous argument can be found in *On Benefits*, Bk. III, s. 29.

usefulness, power, beauty, or virtue of the thing it supports. Thus, the parents' gift of life is not responsible for the child's benefit-in-return.

Next, I will address what I call the Argument from Infinite Regression. Seneca argues that a variety of sources might be responsible for our benefits. Seneca's nurse is partly responsible for the man he became, and is thus responsible in part for the benefits he gave. For us, our friends, acquaintances, and community volunteers are responsible (admittedly, in different degrees) for who we are today. Can I benefit them? And if I attribute the responsibility for my life to my parents, shouldn't I also attribute that responsibility to my grandparents, since they are responsible for my parents' lives? And my great-grandparents and so on? I can find a way to attribute who I am today to the activities of many, many people worldwide. Am I unable to benefit these people, merely because they had an impact on my tendency to give benefits? This conclusion seems counterintuitive. So, why should we attribute the responsibility for our actions to other people—including my parents—unless these others coerce us against our will? Sure, these people contributed to who we are today. But we are independent rational agents, and that independent rational agency should be respected. Thus, I contend, we ought to attribute the responsibility for benefits to the rational agents who are the most proximate cause for the benefit to be given (that is, the benefitter), and I reject the claim that we are unable to give our parents benefits equivalent to their gift of life.

Now that we have determined that it is possible to benefit our parents, we must determine what kind of benefit is most appropriate. Remember that, as I said during my definition of gratitude, that our intention—and attempt—to repay a benefit with a benefit of roughly the same value is the most important part of our repayment. So, how do we determine rough equivalence in value, especially regarding the gift of life? Since the gift of life is a necessary benefit, we can look to other necessary benefits to identify a roughly balanced benefit. Of course, finding a gift of exactly the same value is nearly impossible; it would require us to place values on morally, socially, and vitally necessary benefits and compare them. And if we consider these benefits to be priceless, we cannot so easily devise a measuring system to determine which is greater. And since one kind of necessary benefit often leads to the acquisition of another,<sup>21</sup> identifying the value of a single benefit requires one to factor in its ability to bring about other benefits as well. Perhaps such a system could be devised, but I will not attempt to devise one, for, so long as we return a benefit with something roughly in balance with the original benefit—that is, another necessary benefit—we act with proper gratitude.

I claim that the best benefit-in-return is increasing one's own virtue, because it is a socially necessary benefit which leads to morally necessary benefits. I will first argue that it is a valuable socially necessary benefit, since we value our relationships with virtuous

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<sup>21</sup> See pg. 5-7 supra.

people more than those with less virtuous people. Then, I will address why it leads to morally necessary benefits.

First, the act of increasing one's own virtue is a socially necessary benefit. But this seems counterintuitive; how can something that fundamentally benefits myself also benefit others? Remember that socially necessary benefits are not the simple relationships we may have with acquaintances or people we call "friend," but who we aren't particularly close with. A truly socially necessary benefit is a relationship we greatly value. Of course, a variety of factors contribute to how much we value our relationships with others, but perhaps the most significant is the moral character of our friend.

Let's say we have two friends. Metunus is a bit of a coward. He won't try new things with us, and when we're in trouble, Metunus is too scared to help us out. He's a worry wort and spoil sport. Then, there's Virilis, who pushes us out of our comfort zone and encourages us to take chances. Of course, he's not reckless; he doesn't have us do anything dangerous or unduly risky. But his courage and vigor is contagious. Whose friendship is more valuable? I think that, while we may be very good friends with Metunus, our friendship is more in spite of—rather than because of—his cowardice. On the other hand, we value our friendship with Virilis in part because of his courage. So, holding all else equal, we value our friendship with Virilis more.

The same can be said for any virtue Virilis might have: kindness, temperance, liberality, you name it. We value our relationships with virtuous friends more than those

with less virtuous friends. In part, we value that friendship more because we're proud to be friends with someone so excellent, especially if we benefitted these friends in the past.

There is a special relationship that emerges between a benefactor and receiver, and a parent and child. The former develops an even higher sense of pride for the latter than in a typical friendship, since they feel partly responsible for enabling the latter to be virtuous, thus elevating their value of the socially necessary benefit they received. In this case, parents value their relationship to their children more due to this pride, making virtuous self-improvement a socially necessary benefit.

And if we accept that liberality and beneficence are virtuous qualities, a virtuous person benefits those around him. Of course, he benefits others by giving merely useful and merely preferred benefits, but the virtuous man also gives necessary benefits. His virtue makes others value their friendships with him more greatly. When given the opportunity, he tries to protect others from harm. And he gives moral instruction to those around him. This latter benefit need not be conveyed through tedious lectures on ethical theory, or through judgmental criticism, though perhaps there are times when those are appropriate. Instead, his mere presence can cause us to act more virtuously. We tend to act like those around us, so when we are around virtuous people, we tend to act more virtuously. Without opening his mouth, he influences others to become like him, thus giving morally necessary benefits simply by socializing with others. And a virtuous person would give similar kinds of benefits to his parents. The same merely preferred, merely

useful, vitally necessary, socially necessary, and morally necessary benefits are given to his parents, causing his parents to reap a vast array of benefits in return for their original gift of life.

His parents also feel pride that he used their gift effectively. Benefitters benefit out of the goodness of their hearts; they want to see their benefit make a positive change. Parents go so far as to benefit an unborn child, someone who the parents have never met and whose personality is completely undetermined. By making ourselves virtuous with the gift our parents give us, they feel justified in their benefit. We lived our life to the fullest, actualizing our moral potential given to us through life by greatly benefitting our community. Our parents' gift, originally given only to their children, has benefitted much more than simply their children. We benefit them by continuing their personal project of beneficence in our own lives, multiplying the impact they make on the community.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, by increasing our own virtue, we return to our parents socially necessary benefits, morally necessary benefits, and a variety of lesser benefits like pride and satisfaction. The value of these benefits are roughly in balance with the value of life itself, justifying our attempt at repayment. I claim the same can be said for any giver of life; each would be benefitted in the same way.

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<sup>22</sup> Of course, some parents may not be as beneficent as others. We can imagine a crime family who care only for the members of their family. These parents wouldn't want us to benefit anyone outside the family. In these cases, they would not *desire* our beneficence to others, but the recipient of the benefit doesn't have to *want* the benefit in order for it to be a benefit. In this case, continuing and spreading the beneficence our parents gave to us is still a benefit, because these parents *ought* to value this beneficence.

But recall that benefitters expect nothing in return for their benefits. Thus, as Seneca points out,

“The rationale of benefits is simple: it’s all expense. If [the receiver] gives another thing in return, it is profit. If [the receiver] doesn’t return, it isn’t a loss. I gave it to give it. Nobody will write down benefits in a ledger, nor will anyone be a greedy creditor, reminding [his recipients] of the date or hour [of the benefit].”<sup>23</sup>

Here, Seneca argues that we must not consider returns on benefits to be mere “repayments.” To Seneca, returns which meet all the requirements to be considered benefits *are* proper benefits, and the original giver must treat this return as an unsolicited benefit. This original giver must feel the same gratitude our original receiver felt and return in kind. If the original giver did not feel the same level of gratitude as the original receiver, we would wonder whether the original benefit wasn’t just a loan, expected to be repaid through some unwritten contract. A lack of gratitude on the original giver’s part also disappoints the original receiver, for if the original benefitter shows less gratitude, the receiver wonders if his return was appropriate enough. And a lack of gratitude on the original giver’s part ends a relationship which could significantly enrich both parties’ lives.

This relationship is what I call a “competition of benefits,” where the two parties continually benefit one another, trying to outbenefit the other. Consider this example: Magnus helps Gregorius study for an exam. Gregorius responds by helping Magnus study for an exam, trying to be slightly more helpful than Gregorius. Gregorius responds in kind.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., bk. I, s. 2.3.

After a couple semesters, both Magnus and Gregorius have learned immensely from each other and have seen each other's grades skyrocket, all due to this giving-receiving relationship.

These competitions of benefits aren't cutthroat, nor would the members try to undermine each other's attempts at benefitting the other. Either would defeat the purpose of giving a benefit, and, as Seneca points out, "oftentimes, it is to our benefit to be defeated."<sup>24</sup> Instead, they receive graciously and become better off together as a result. As shown previously, the relationship between a giver and receiver, and parent and child are extremely strong, but in this competition of benefits, the relationship becomes doubly strong, with each member acting as both giver and receiver.

Some may consider these competitions of benefits to be morally exhausting. These competitions appear to never end, and if we have to benefit the other person every time he benefits us, we can grow weary of either giving the same gifts every time or constantly having to figure out how to one-up our competitor. It seems that both parties would quickly weary from the relationship, since it demands so much from everyone involved. Wouldn't either member of the relationship have wished the other didn't benefit him in the first place? So, how would this "competition of benefits" actually benefit its members?

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., bk. III, s. 36.1.

First, we don't always have to accept a benefit from someone else, especially if that benefit harms us.<sup>25</sup> As Seneca points out, if a relationship of giving becomes vicious, we have an obligation to end the relationship.<sup>26</sup> The purpose of the relationship is to benefit, and if benefits aren't being conferred—or if more harms than benefits are being conferred—the relationship shouldn't continue as a competition of benefits.

But I don't think the perpetual nature of the competition of benefits should be considered a bad thing. A perpetual, mutually beneficial relationship seems more valuable than a temporary, mutually beneficial relationship. And how could such a relationship tire us? Benefitting others and being benefitted ourselves is engaging and exciting; we become energized and encouraged to be virtuous. When we get tired, we explain to the other person that we're tired, and the competition slows down. The other person is willing to work with us, because by doing so, they benefit us more by giving us more energy, and when we have that extra energy, the gifts we give them in return are typically more valuable. The competition's goal is beneficence, and if any party in the competition isn't being benefitted, the other party should want to know. The competition of beneficence is built to be only beneficial for the parties involved, and so long as both parties properly communicate, the relationship stays a true competition of benefits, instead of a slog where both parties begrudgingly act gratefully, as if they were paying off debts.

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<sup>25</sup> See pg. 16-17, *supra*.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, bk. II, s. 18.2.

Now that we have a greater understanding of the competition of benefits in general, let's focus on our scenario. Remember: we concluded that a grateful person should increase his personal virtue in response to the gift of life. Now, the original giver—the one who gave life—must respond gratefully with an appropriate gift. I contend the most appropriate gift would be for the original giver to increase his own virtue in return. The same benefits the original receiver gave to the original benefitter would be returned to the original receiver, ensuring that both give the same kinds of necessary benefits.

Seneca specifically mentions the competition of benefits between a parent and child, discussing how they continuously try to outpace one another in the development of their virtue. Seneca emphasizes that, rather than harming filial piety through this competition of benefits, the competition of benefits gives an incentive to benefit, since “the nature of virtue is glory, and it loves to outpace those who have a head start.”<sup>27</sup> The same, I argue, can be said of any giver of life, for these competitions of virtue aren't unique to parents and children. If anything, disparities in social status between parents and children slightly inhibit the competition of virtue among parents and children—perhaps more greatly than in any other relationship<sup>28</sup>—while in many other cases, the competition of virtue remains unhindered by social, economic, or moral barriers.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., bk. III, s. 36.1.

<sup>28</sup> Especially in Neronian Rome, the *pater* has significant influence over his *fili*. Seneca's claim that children and parents in this imperial Roman relationship can have a strong competition of virtue makes it much more plausible that, in today's much more socially stratified society, this competition of virtue is powerful enough to impact

Thus, I end the core of my argument. I've defined a "benefit" as "an action which improves the wellbeing of the receiver through the transfer of the possession of a thing from the giver to the receiver without any conditions of repayment." I've defined "gratitude" as both a "propositional attitude directed toward a benefitter with respect to intentional benefits which the receiver is convinced the benefitter actually performed for the receiver" and "an intention to, and attempt to, give a roughly balanced benefit to the original benefitter." I then argued that we can benefit our parents for giving us life, and we can appropriately benefit them by becoming more virtuous, thus increasing their pride in our relationship and increasing the frequency and quality of moral interactions between parent and child, using it as an example which reflects the appropriate grateful return we make to someone who gives us life. Finally, I showed that the giving and receiving "competition of benefits" which emerges from all good benefit relationships also applies to givers of life.

## God and Creation

Note that I leave God and out of my argument. If God exists, he is either directly responsible for giving us life or indirectly responsible by giving us the resources needed to live life. God provides a unique case of giving and receiving benefits, and I feel that His case

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widely socially disparate people. For more information about the relationship between the Roman pater and filius, see Cantarella, "Fathers and Sons in Rome."

deserves a section devoted to Him. Thus, in the next section, I will discuss what I define as “God,” whether we can benefit God, how we can benefit God, and how God responds to our benefits.

Before I define “God,” I want to define “perfection” as a state associated with being able to perform a function in the best possible way. A chair is perfect insofar as it is able to hold up a sitting person in the best possible way; it is comfortable, strong, and beautiful. Similarly, a person is perfect insofar as he is able to act in a human way; he is smart, moral, strong, and beautiful. God is perfect insofar as He is able to act. He must be capable of doing anything, making Him omnipotent. And if He is able to do anything, He must do it in the best possible way, which includes acting in the most virtuous way possible. So, I define God as an omnipotent, fully virtuous, perfect being. This definition also fits alongside similar definitions by post-Christians like Rene Descartes,<sup>29</sup> pre-Christians like Seneca,<sup>30</sup> and those in the Eastern tradition like Ramanuja.<sup>31</sup> In fact, most theists—regardless of their particular religions—would agree with this definition of God.<sup>32</sup> In our scenario, God has given us a vitally necessary benefit, either by giving us life directly or by providing us with

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<sup>29</sup> Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, bk. 1, pg. 7.

<sup>30</sup> Seneca, *Naturales Quaestiones*, bk. 1, s. 3.

<sup>31</sup> Ramanuja, *Bhagavad Gita*, pg. 5.

<sup>32</sup> Wainwright, *Concepts of God*, s. 2.

the resources necessary to live life (such as food, water, shelter, air, etc.), plus has created the entire universe from nothingness.<sup>33</sup>

So, since God has benefitted us, can we benefit Him in response? It seems pretty counterintuitive at first glance that we—God’s fallible and relatively weak creation—would be able to benefit an omnipotent and wholly virtuous being. He already has everything He wants, or at least the power to get it. And while we need the benefits He gives, He doesn’t need anything we can give Him. And it seems that God is responsible for our life, our moral sensibilities, and everything we possess, making Him ultimately responsible for the benefits we give others. I’ll address these criticisms in reverse order.

Attributing responsibility for our benefits to God is like attributing the responsibility of our benefits to our parents, grandparents, teachers, supermarket cashiers, and everyone else who has influenced who we are today. I argued a similar claim earlier,<sup>34</sup> where Seneca addressed two criticisms of the notion that children can benefit their parents. Seneca appealed to two arguments: the Argument from Greater Offspring and the Argument from Infinite Regression. I’ll address both arguments in order.

The Argument from Greater Offspring essentially says that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and just because my parents gave me what I needed to benefit them

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<sup>33</sup> It’s not necessary for my argument that God creates the whole universe. If anything, God creating the universe makes my claim harder to make, since God is now responsible for my actions, my moral sensibilities, and everything I can give God in return. If you don’t want to assume that God created the universe, my argument still holds. Just feel free to skip most of the next two pages, where I discuss how we can benefit God.

<sup>34</sup> See pg. 26-27 supra.

doesn't mean I can't create something worth more than what they gave me to work with. But in that case, my parents weren't responsible for the materials needed to give a gift or the moral sensibilities needed to give a gift; they don't have the foresight to see the consequences of their actions. But God gives us all these things and has the foresight to see that we will ultimately benefit him, making us wonder whether we can still benefit God.

To illustrate why this criticism of the Argument from Greater Offspring is unfounded, consider this scenario. There are two items, both priced at \$30. One is a box filled with a completely constructed fan. The other is a box filled with the materials, tools, expertise, and time needed to build the fan ourselves. If we were to choose between the two, would we simply flip a coin? Of course not! We would select the completely constructed fan every time, and we may even be willing to pay a little extra for the completely constructed fan. That's because even when we take into consideration the material parts, labor, expertise, and tools needed to give a gift, the gift itself is still more valuable. So, even though God has given us our moral sensibilities, the materials which make up our benefit, our labor, and our very lives, the benefit we give can still be greater than these things, meaning God is not entirely responsible for our benefits. Some of the responsibility is our own.

Then comes the Argument from Infinite Regression. The argument contends that if we attribute responsibility for our actions to our parents for giving us life, we must extend the same responsibility to our grandparents, great grandparents, and so on. Plus, we must

extend responsibility to our teachers, auto technicians, and friends, along with everyone who influenced who we are today—even in the slightest of degrees. I argued that we can't attribute responsibility for our benefit to so many people; we must instead attribute responsibility for benefits to the proximate cause of the benefit: the benefitter. But if God created the universe, then God is responsible for all their lives and everything that made them who they are today. So, God is ultimately responsible for all those responsible for our gift to God. So, how can we benefit God, if all responsibility for our benefit can be traced back to God?

I won't be able to satisfactorily address this criticism, because the underlying debate here is between free will and predestination, a debate which has plagued theology for millennia, and one which I won't attempt to settle here. Ultimately, I'm sympathetic to the notion that we have enough free will to at least be somewhat morally responsible for our own actions.<sup>35</sup> Even if we attribute most of the responsibility for our benefit to God, if we are responsible for a slight amount of our benefit, we can still slightly benefit God, and I think it's unreasonable to not at least grant ourselves *some* moral responsibility for our benefits. So, I conclude that it is at least possible for us to benefit God, because similar arguments to the ones I use to defend the notion that children can benefit their parents apply to humans benefitting God.

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<sup>35</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of free will, I recommend reading O'Connor, "Free Will," especially his s. 4. I'm most sympathetic to the compatibilist argument, which is discussed in McKenna, *Compatibilism*.

But can we give God balanced benefits? If we cannot give appropriate benefits to God, we cannot be properly grateful to God. Any other person has needs and desires they can't fulfill themselves, or which would require a sacrifice on their part to fulfill. So, I can benefit my parents or anyone else who gives me life, since I can give benefits that are necessary for their well-being, such as vitally, socially, and morally necessary benefits. But God has no needs and few desires that He can't immediately fulfill without any effort on His part<sup>36</sup>. So, if He gives me everything—including the very bosons and fermions that make up who I am—then how can I match His beneficence with an appropriate gift?

Let me draw your attention back to the king and pauper scenario,<sup>37</sup> where the king has so much wealth and the pauper has so little wealth that each benefit is worth very little to the king but worth very much to the pauper. In this scenario, we say that the balance is appropriate, because each party gives something roughly equivalent to their personal valuation of the gift given. An example might be warranted. King Pecunius gives the impoverished town blacksmith, Povertus, twenty gold coins. To King Pecunius, twenty gold coins is a measly sum, but to Povertus, twenty gold coins is more than he makes in ten years. So, Povertus puts his heart and soul into a magnificent sword for King Pecunius, the greatest sword Povertus had ever made. King Pecunius had many swords which were just

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<sup>36</sup> We may worry about God desiring humans to act in certain ways (e.g. act virtuously), despite granting them free will. However, this ends up not being problematic on my account. I will show how we should respond to God by becoming more virtuous, and if God would desire humans to be virtuous, we can benefit God in this way.

<sup>37</sup> See Scenario 2, Figure 2 on pg. 20 and its discussion on pg. 21, *supra*.

as beautiful, but he accepted it anyway. The sword was worth much to Povertus, but little to King Pecunius.

We say this giving-receiving relationship is justified, because Povertus gave King Pecunius something roughly equivalent in value to his own valuation of King Pecunius' gift. The God-man benefit relationship is simply a more extreme example of the king-pauper benefit relationship. Our benefits are worth very little to God, but we are still justified in our returns, so long as what we give is roughly equivalent in value to the gift He gives us, which in this case is a host of vitally necessary benefits.

And even if the previous arguments about our ability to benefit God are all unconvincing, remember that the most important part of a benefit is our attempt to benefit.<sup>38</sup> So long as we try in good faith to return a roughly balanced benefit to God, we are justifiably grateful. We cannot control the fact that God benefitted us, nor can we control the fact that He is infinitely better off than we are. But we can control whether we try to respond in the most appropriate way possible. So, even if we can't actually benefit God, we should try to determine what the best gift we can try to give to God is.

How, then, should we benefit God for giving us life? I argue we should treat God in the same way as everyone else who gives us life: increase our virtue. We do so because, even though God doesn't need anything, a necessary benefit is still the most valuable

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<sup>38</sup> See pg. 23-24 supra.

benefit we can give. And in God's case, this benefit would be even more appropriate than to ordinary people, because God would want others to be morally excellent. I will also address objections, including that becoming virtuous is equivalent to Servilius enslaving himself to Piso and whether nonbelievers can benefit God by becoming more virtuous. I will discuss these arguments in order.

The term "necessary benefit" makes sense when we talk about giving benefits to other people. People have needs, so certain benefits give them what is necessary. But God doesn't need anything we can give Him.<sup>39</sup> Does that mean that we can't give God a necessary benefit in return? Ultimately, the confusion here is purely semantic. Necessary benefits are the most valuable benefits we can give, and due to that intrinsic value, they're necessary for human flourishing. So, when God gives us the gift of life—something incredibly valuable—we must give a benefit in return that is within the same general class of benefits. In this case, we increase our virtue, which is literally a necessary benefit for others, but in God's case, it's the most valuable gift we can give Him.<sup>40</sup>

One reason why becoming more virtuous in response to God's gift of life is especially appropriate is because God is fully virtuous. Ordinary people don't necessarily desire what is morally good; even the most virtuous of humans don't follow virtue in the most

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<sup>39</sup> See pg. 41-42 supra.

<sup>40</sup> I admit that Seneca's terminology (e.g. "necessary" benefit) may be confusing when applied to God, but the terminology's ability to illustrate what counts as a necessary benefit in the vast majority of cases justifies my use of his terminology, in my mind.

wholehearted way. For instance, let's say an enemy insults us. We become incensed, but we decide to take the high road and let the insult slide. And yet, part of us wanted to get into a verbal or physical fight with our enemy, though doing so would be inappropriate and immoral. God, on the other hand, fully wants what is appropriate and moral, so He never experiences a part of himself who wants what isn't good. Thus, whereas many ordinary people may not fully desire our gift of becoming more virtuous—that is, some part of them would not want it—God necessarily will. Of course, desiring a gift doesn't make the gift much better. As I mentioned on page 9, merely desiring a benefit only qualifies a gift as a “merely preferred benefit,” the least valuable of all the benefits, in part because we can desire things which hurt ourselves.<sup>41</sup> But regardless, the fact that someone desires a gift makes the gift more valuable. God's greater desire for good things<sup>42</sup> makes necessary benefits—the best benefits we can give—all the more valuable. So, since becoming virtuous is a good necessary benefit, God will desire it more than the average person, making it all the more appropriate to benefit God in that way.

But if God only wants what is just, then submitting ourselves to virtue is equivalent to submitting ourselves to God. And in our opening section, Servilius' servitude to his savior Piso was considered inappropriate, because the gift was insufficient in absolving the debt, Piso didn't necessarily want Servilius to be his slave, and Piso could have Servilius do

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<sup>41</sup> See pg. 9 supra.

<sup>42</sup> And perhaps God's inability to harm himself, depending on one's theology.

immoral things. But none of these criticisms apply to God. I've already shown how God only desires what is good, and even if He didn't (which, as I argue, isn't the case), becoming more virtuous—whether or not it corresponds to the original benefitter's desires—is sufficient in acting gratefully. Additionally, in my definition of a benefit, I explicitly rejected the assumption in the Servilius and Piso scenario that a benefit left the recipient a debt to be repaid, so there is no true “debt” for us to repay God. And as I showed in the previous paragraph, God would want us to become more virtuous, eliminating the second criticism I levied at Servilius and Piso. And finally, God cannot want something immoral, meaning His will to virtue will never propel us to vice, eliminating my final worry. So, while this gift exchange may bear superficial similarity to the exchange of Servilius and Piso, Servilius' response to Piso is inappropriate, while ours with God is appropriate.

Another objection lies in the “Argument from Atheism.” People who don't believe in God—or who don't believe in the *right* God—can still become more virtuous. Thus, a virtuous nonbeliever seems to be showing proper gratitude to God, which appears counterintuitive. This criticism, however, forgets that we can only be grateful for benefits we're convinced were actually performed.<sup>43</sup> An atheist wouldn't believe God benefitted them, and someone who believed in a different god wouldn't attribute the gift of life to the God responsible. Plus, recall that the purpose of our increased virtue is to facilitate socially necessary benefits, and if someone doesn't believe in God, they won't engage with God.

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<sup>43</sup> See pg. 15-16 supra.

So, while they may be acting virtuously, they neither have the proper grateful mental state, nor does their virtue facilitate the exchange of a socially necessary benefit, so nonbelievers cannot benefit God.

So, we've shown that God can be benefitted, and in response to His gift of life, we become more virtuous, just like we do with any other giver of life. So, God must be grateful in return. But humans become more virtuous in response to others becoming more virtuous, and God, by definition, cannot become any more virtuous than He already is. So, if He cannot respond in kind, how does He engage in the competition of benefits?

To answer this question, we first need to remind ourselves the point of becoming more virtuous. Ultimately, the benefit is social and moral. Virtuous people exchange moral truths with one another and encourage one another to be more virtuous. And the exchange doesn't have to be philosophical discussions of "the good." We become like the people we socialize with, so when we socialize with good people, their virtue rubs off on us, so even when we're not talking about justice, we become more just through their presence. Also, the more virtuous we are, the more willing we are to exchange benefits between one another, so the competition of virtue often spurs on other competitions of benefits, drawing each other closer together. Ultimately, we feel pride in our relationship: proud that such a good person would have such a powerful relationship with us, through engaging in frequent and high-quality moral interactions.

But God can directly influence each of these factors. God can control the frequency and quality of His interactions with His followers directly. Ordinary people can choose how often they interact with others and control the quality of their interactions with others without becoming any more or less virtuous, so why couldn't God? Ordinary men can choose how often and the quality of the benefits they give to others, so why couldn't God? And if by controlling these two factors ordinary men can cause others to be more proud of their relationship, why couldn't God?

So, God doesn't have to be any more virtuous to benefit us in kind. As we become more virtuous, He can increase the quality and frequency of His moral interactions with us, and He can facilitate that relationship even more by starting new competitions of benefits with us. Thus, we are socially and morally benefitted in the same way that we're socially and morally benefitted by an ordinary person increasing his virtue, meaning that God can give an appropriately balanced gift in return, allowing Him to be properly grateful for the benefits we give Him. And this gratitude response doesn't just make theoretical sense; my claim appears to be empirically supported. People who become more virtuous in gratitude for what God has given them tend to be closer to God, learn more moral truths from God, notice God benefitting them elsewhere in their lives, and feel greater pride in their relationship with God.

## Conclusion

We return to Servilius and Piso. When we began reading, Servilius seemed stuck between a rock and a hard place. If he gave nothing, he would be ungrateful. If he gave something, his gift could never measure up. Servilius' ultimate decision—to enslave himself to Piso's will—was insufficient, but perhaps the best of an array of bad options at his disposal.

But now, the dilemma seems less daunting. We recognize that Piso's gift of life counts as an intentional, vitally necessary benefit, which, even though life is extremely valuable, is still repayable by other necessary benefits. We recognize that we must feel the intentional mental state of gratitude in response, and that the intentional mental state generates a desire to repay a roughly balanced benefit. We recognize that by increasing our own virtue, we facilitate the exchange of socially and morally necessary benefits, resulting in a competition of virtue, where each member becomes more and more virtuous and grows closer and closer to one another. We recognize that even God can engage in this relationship with us, though in a slightly altered way.

However, some things remain unclear for our friend Servilius. For instance, what is virtue? He knows he should be more virtuous to repay Piso, but I've provided no guidance on what counts as a virtue. I also haven't shown the process behind increasing one's own virtue, so even if he knew what to improve on, he wouldn't know how. Libraries have been

written on the nature of virtue, and I'm certainly not going to settle the matter in this conclusion. Instead, I encourage further study into the nature of virtue, particularly Seneca's *On Benefits* and *Moral Letters to Lucilius*, because by understanding the nature of virtue, we understand to a much deeper degree what it means to live gratefully.

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