

## A Kantian Account of Gratitude

[Under Review—Please do not cite]

### Introduction

Driven by a flood of new psychological studies linking gratitude to health and happiness, gratitude is becoming something of a popular movement.<sup>1</sup> Despite this cultural popularity, gratitude has received little philosophical attention and remains poorly understood. Where there is consensus, it is superficial. Consider, for example, the basic question of what gratitude requires. Philosophers have generally agreed that gratitude requires two sorts of responses, namely, acknowledgment and reciprocation.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, we fulfill our duty just by *acknowledging* the favor that we have received, usually by some public sign or token. In these cases, a 'thank you', or something to that effect, is all that gratitude requires. On the other hand, gratitude sometimes seems to require some sort of *reciprocation*. In response to a favor received, the grateful beneficiary reciprocates or, at the very least, desires to reciprocate the favor. Of course, the reciprocation must be appropriate. Too equal, too quick, or even too much reciprocation might be viewed as an insulting attempt to make what was freely given into a contractual *quid pro quo*.

But this apparent consensus quickly evaporates if we ask how these two requirements—acknowledgment and reciprocation—are related. Does gratitude require *both* together? Should we thank our benefactor *and* attempt to repay her? Or are there times when reciprocation is required and acknowledgment is out of place, and vice versa? A more radical relationship between the two requirements might also be considered. Perhaps, only one of the requirements turns out to be atomic and the other requirement can be analyzed in terms of this atomic requirement. If we take reciprocation

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<sup>1</sup> For a review of the growing psychological literature on gratitude, see Emmons (2009). As signs of its cultural force, gratitude has its own month (November), its own self-help subculture (eg. Kralik 2010), and even its own i-Tunes app (Gratitude & Happiness - A self-help journal for thoughts & mood tracking by Track & Share Apps, LLC).

<sup>2</sup> Philosophers who have noted these two aspects of gratitude include Berger 1975, Card 1988: 117, McConell 1993, Sidgwick 1981/1907, Simmons 1979, von Tevenar 2006, Walker 1980-1981, Weiss 1985, and Swinburne 1989.

to be atomic, then acts of acknowledgment could be understood as forms of reciprocation. Our thanks become a kind of currency that those who cannot afford to reciprocate use in order to pay back their benefactors.<sup>3</sup> If we take acknowledgment as atomic, then acts of reciprocation could be understood as symbolic ways of saying thank you.

Contemporary gratitude theorists have emphasized reciprocation over acknowledgment.<sup>4</sup>

Although many theorists have noted that acknowledgment plays a crucial role in our intuitions about gratitude, when they come to discuss cases, acknowledgment is quickly forgotten and the examples they consider involve failures to reciprocate.<sup>5</sup> This emphasis is supported by the following common considerations.<sup>6</sup> While acknowledgment is regarded as usually, if not always, appropriate, the more serious cases of beneficence are thought to require something more. When our benefactor has made a large sacrifice or has significantly benefited us, some sort of reciprocation seems to be in order. Reciprocation is therefore more important than acknowledgment because it governs more serious cases. A related consideration is also adduced. Failing to acknowledge a benefaction, it is said, is merely impolite and does not constitute a serious moral injury. Ingratitude only rises to the level of a *moral* offense when there is a failure to reciprocate. Taking the two points together, we could say that the requirements of gratitude are two-fold because gratitude itself is two-fold. Firstly, gratitude is a norm of etiquette that governs the minor benefactions that arise in the course of polite society—a compliment received or a minor service rendered.<sup>7</sup> But secondly, gratitude is a *duty* that governs more serious cases and requires an act of reciprocation. Whether a view explicitly endorses these accompanying

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Card 1988: 116, Von Tevenar 2006.

<sup>4</sup> McConnell 1993, Sidgwick 1981/1907: 259-61, Swinburne 1989: 65-66, Walker 1980-1, Simmons 1979. Exceptions to this trend are Berger 1975 and Lyons 1969 who have emphasized acknowledgment over reciprocation. Although Berger's account, in particular, comes very close to my understanding of Kant, he does not explain how and why acknowledgment is essential to gratitude.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, McConnell 1993: 55 remarks that acknowledgment is one of the things that gratitude requires, but most of McConnell's examples of ingrates are of people failing to make a proper return.

<sup>6</sup> See McConnell 1993: 45. Simmons 1979: 164; Lyons: 1962: 92, Swinburne 1989: 65-66.

For a criticism of the common belief that etiquette must be distinguished from the more serious domain of morality, see Buss 1999.

justifications or not, I will call any view that emphasizes reciprocation over acknowledgment a *reciprocation view*.

Contemporary gratitude theorists have long taken the reciprocation view; however, in this paper, I contend that it is acknowledgment rather than reciprocation that lies at the core of gratitude. I call such a view a Kantian account of gratitude because there is historical precedent in Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals*. Kant argues that acknowledgment is the atomic requirement of gratitude and reciprocation is only required insofar as it expresses this acknowledgment. Since Kant's own arguments for this position are powerful and unappreciated, my strategy will consist in explicating and defending Kant's original argument. However, because the crucial passages are few in number and because Kant does not explicitly state in these passages that the essence of gratitude is acknowledgment, Kant's views have often been misunderstood when they have not simply been ignored.<sup>8</sup> As a consequence, understanding Kant in these passages is critical.

In order to appreciate Kant's view, and thereby correct a distortion in how we have come to understand gratitude, it is necessary to articulate and defend three of Kant's claims. 1) Acts of beneficence are the appropriate objects of gratitude and gratitude is not owed for non-beneficent actions; 2) gratitude is a duty because acknowledging an act of beneficence supports and sustains the duty of beneficence. This claim gives acknowledgment rather than reciprocation the central place in

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<sup>8</sup> The exceptions to this trend of neglect are Smit and Timmons. In Smit and Timmons 2011, 2013, they correctly understand Kant to be defending an acknowledgment view as opposed to a reciprocation view, and my interpretation of Kant overlaps with theirs on many points. However, they do not offer a sustained defense of the view. Misunderstandings and neglect are much more usual. For example, in Schönecker 2013, his avowed task is to provide a commentary on the 13 pages of Kant that deal with our positive duties to others. Although gratitude is one of only three such duties and although Schönecker's commentary is 30 pages long, he spends only one paragraph discussing gratitude and in that paragraph he asserts only two things about gratitude: "it all depends on what 'gratitude' is, and that is not a question easy to answer because it involves, generally speaking, both a feeling (honoring) and an act of service," (Schönecker 2013: 334). According to the reading given here, Schönecker is wrong on both counts: honoring is not a feeling and gratitude need not depend upon an act of service. Gregor's (1963) landmark study of *The Metaphysics of Morals* spends very little time discussing gratitude, and falsely attributes a reciprocation view to him (1963: 196). Von Tevenar 2006 correctly distinguishes between acknowledgment and reciprocation views, argues that acknowledgment views are more in keeping with genuine instances of gratitude, but then (perversely) takes Kant to be advocating for a reciprocation view. As they arise, other examples of what I take to be misreadings of Kant will be addressed in the notes.

gratitude's justification; 3) even grateful acts of reciprocation are guided by and gain their value as acts of gratitude only because they are also acts of acknowledgment. Rather than requiring two separate things—reciprocation and acknowledgment—Kant argues that the reciprocation that gratitude requires is a form of acknowledgment. Taken together, these claims articulate an understanding of gratitude in which the grateful person performs his or her duty by acknowledging the beneficence of a benefactor.

## Section 1: Beneficence

Although there are lecture notes and scattered references, Kant's only sustained discussion of gratitude occurs in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. Gratitude, it turns out, is one of just three positive ethical duties towards others.<sup>9</sup> It is preceded by a discussion of beneficence, followed by a discussion of sympathy, and consists of two short sections and a preamble.<sup>10</sup> In the preamble, Kant offers a definition of gratitude that refers the reader to the discussion of beneficence that immediately precedes it. Catching this reference is crucial to understanding the sphere of gratitude for it will turn out that gratitude is not directed at benefits in general but rather only benefits that are acts of beneficence:

Gratitude consists in honoring a person because of the benefaction (*Wohlthat*) he has rendered us. (translation altered, *MS*: 454)<sup>11</sup>

The German word '*Wohlthat*' is a close cognate of '*Wohlthätigkeit*' (beneficence). I have substituted 'benefaction' for Gregor's 'benefit' to more closely preserve this relationship. By using this close cognate, Kant references his discussion of beneficence from the preceding sections. Gratitude, Kant means

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<sup>9</sup> Ingratitude gets its own paragraph a few pages later (*MS*: 459). Citations to Kant's works follow the pagination of the *Akademie* edition. All translations are to the translations in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*. Works of Kant are cited according to the abbreviations listed in the bibliography.

<sup>10</sup> I call it a preamble because it apparently exists outside the section numbering system that governs the rest of the *Doctrine of Virtue*. It cannot be part of §31 because that still has to do with beneficence, yet it occurs before §32. This anomaly is explained, I believe, because gratitude itself, especially its definition, points back to the duty of beneficence.

<sup>11</sup> As I discuss in the main text, I have changed Gregor's 'benefit' to 'benefaction'. Gregor sometimes translates '*Wohlthat*' to 'benefit' and sometimes to 'favor'. In her commentary on this very passage, she refers to the '*Wohlthat*' as a "kindness" (Gregor 1963: 196).

to make clear, is not owed for just *any* benefit, only those benefits that are benefactions.<sup>12</sup> This means that gratitude is a duty that has another duty as its object. So, in order to understand gratitude, we must turn our attention to beneficence.

The duty of beneficence contains puzzles in its own right. How are we to understand its status as a wide imperfect duty? Are there some occasions in which specific acts of beneficence are required? Does Kant's argument for beneficence surreptitiously appeal to prudence?<sup>13</sup> Since this paper deals only with beneficence as it pertains to gratitude, it suffices to establish four claims about beneficence:

#### 1.1 Beneficence requires us to adopt a maxim of making other's happiness our end; it does not require us to feel grateful

When discussing the duty of beneficence, Kant distinguishes beneficence (*Wohlthätigkeit*) from benevolence (*Wohlwollen*). Benevolence, Kant explains, is "satisfaction in the happiness (well-being) of others (*MS*: 452)". Since we have, at best, indirect control over our feelings, *feeling* satisfaction is not something that a moral rule can command. As such, benevolence is only indirectly an object of morality.<sup>14</sup> Beneficence on the other hand is benevolence made practical (*MS*: 451). It does not directly require one to feel anything towards others, but instead, requires one to adopt "the maxim of making others' happiness one's end" (*MS*: 452). Adopting a maxim, unlike having a feeling, *is* something that can be commanded, and such a maxim is the object of Kant's moral rule.

#### 1.2 Beneficence is directed at finite rational agents in need of aid

In both the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* and the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant argues that adopting a maxim of complete indifference to the needs of others cannot be universalized.

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<sup>12</sup> In English, though the word 'benefit' is etymologically connected to a good that has been done to you, it has lost this connection in ordinary use and applies to any good regardless of the source.

<sup>13</sup> For discussion of these issues, see Hill 1971, 2002; Herman 1984, 2001; and Stohr 2010.

<sup>14</sup> The duty is indirect because Kant says that we have an obligation to cultivate this disposition (*MS*: 45) in order to be more sensitive to opportunities for benevolence.

The reason is that finite creatures like us cannot rule out the possibility that we might someday require the assistance of others and, as such, we cannot will a world where everyone is indifferent to the needs of everyone else (*G*: 423; *MS*: 453). This argument has sounded to some like an appeal to prudence.<sup>15</sup> Barbara Herman (1984) has argued that Kant's thought here does not rest upon a prudent calculation of what is likely to be in our best interest but instead rests upon "the practical consequences of the conditions of human rationality: the natural limitations of our powers as agents" (Herman 1984: 587).

Whether Herman succeeds in differentiating Kant's argument from prudential consideration or not, it is clear that Kant thinks that beneficence establishes some sort of community of mutual aid.

Consequently the maxim of common interest, of beneficence toward those in need, is a universal duty of human beings, just because they are to be considered fellow human beings, that is, rational beings with needs, united by nature in one dwelling place so that they can help one another. (*MS*: 453)

Beneficence applies to human beings as "rational beings with needs". The neediness is a prerequisite because otherwise they would never be in a position to receive our beneficence. The rationality is a prerequisite because only rational beings could be in a position to respond in turn to our need with beneficence.<sup>16</sup> Non-rational creatures can certainly help us, but the fact that they could someday be in our position could not be the reason that they help us. Herman says that beneficence forms a "community of mutual aid for dependent beings" (1984: 591), and part of what forms this community is itself the recognition that we are part of the community.

Beneficence directs itself not just at needy targets but at needy *rational* targets. Since the rationality of the intended beneficiary plays a role in the reason why we must aid them, the rationality of the beneficiary ought also to guide the way in which the beneficence is performed. Our aid ought to be the sort of aid that is suitable for a rational agent. What exactly this requires is complicated, but Kant

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<sup>15</sup> Sidgwick (1981/1907: 389), for example.

<sup>16</sup> Without referencing this passage in Kant, Herman observes: "Membership in the community is established as much by vulnerability (and the possibility of being helped) as by rationality (and the capacity to help)" (Herman 1984: 591).

does explain that we have to benefit people according to *their* conception of happiness rather than our own (*MS*: 454). It is constitutive of rational agency that a rational agent has the capacity to set and pursue their own ends (*G*: 437). Respecting rational agency, even when the rational agent is in need, involves respecting this end-setting capacity.

In offering this advice, Kant draws our notice to a frequent phenomenon within benefactor-beneficiary relationships. Needy rational agents can appear, in their own eyes and in the eyes of their benefactors, to lose their rational agency. Perhaps, this is simply because the beneficiary and the benefactor believe that the benefactor continues to have some sort of claim on how her beneficence is disposed of. Since the beneficiary doesn't earn the benefit, the benefit may be thought to still belong to the benefactor to be disposed as she deems best. Or perhaps, there is something more insidious going on. Rational agency involves the capacity to bring something about by virtue of having represented that thing as good. When we are in need, it is because our capacity to realize our ends has been frustrated. In our own eyes and in the eyes of others, we may appear to be less of a rational agent because less effective in our agency. Whatever the explanation of this phenomenon, beneficence as Kant understands it reminds us that we do not become less of a rational agent even when we are incapable of exercising this rational agency.

Kant says that often the benefactor has an obligation to conceal their acts of beneficence (*MS*: 453). At first glance, this might seem to fit well with Kant's emphasis on rational agency. It is unpleasant for a rational agent in need to be reminded that she requires the help of others. It seems more in keeping with the dignity of rational agents to cover up the act that reveals their dependence, either by concealing that the aid is, in fact, aid or at least by giving the aid anonymously. On further reflection, however, these remarks reveal a deep and interesting tension within Kant's account of beneficence. If beneficence really does affirm the rational agency of those in need, there should be no reason to conceal the act of beneficence. In fact, insofar as acts of beneficence remind us that we are part of a community of

rational agents, shouldn't we publicize rather than conceal such acts? I will return to this tension, but, for now, it is important to note that both Kant and our intuitive understanding of beneficence are aligned: the duty of the benefactor is to downplay and conceal their acts of beneficence.<sup>17</sup>

### 1.3 Beneficent acts are motivated by duty

In the *Groundwork*, Kant famously argues that there is no moral worth in actions that are not motivated by duty, and he uses the duty of beneficence to establish this point. He distinguishes between beneficent acts done from an immediate inclination (the friend of man) and beneficent acts done from the motive of duty (the sorrowing philanthropist) and argues that only the latter's action clearly has moral worth. Nowhere does he suggest that his point about beneficence is restricted to a certain kind of beneficent act. It seems reasonable to conclude that all acts of beneficence can be motivated either by duty or inclination and that the proper motive for all beneficent acts is the motive of duty.

Some have thought that this natural reading conflicts with Kant's classification of beneficence as a wide imperfect duty. Baron (1995: 161-5), for example, argues that beneficent acts cannot have duty as their primary motive.<sup>18</sup> Since wide imperfect duties require only that we help sometimes, any specific act of beneficence is not required by duty, and therefore, cannot be motivated by duty.<sup>19</sup> Against this line of reasoning, it may be argued that the fact that beneficence is a wide imperfect duty does not imply that all beneficent acts are optional. We have discretion over the whole domain of beneficence even if some specific acts are strictly required.<sup>20</sup> But this defense concedes that many, less extreme beneficent acts simply *cannot* have duty as their primary motive. Since I will shortly argue that gratitude is owed only for those beneficent acts that are motivated by duty, this concession would end

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<sup>17</sup> As Card (1988: 117) notes, Kant here echoes Talmudic doctrine according to which the highest form of beneficence between strangers is anonymous beneficence.

<sup>18</sup> Schaller (1987: 567-570) makes the same point.

<sup>19</sup> Unless, as Baron notes, we are mistaken about what our duty is. See also, Stratton-Lake 2000: 108.

<sup>20</sup> Stohr 2011: 62.

up denying that gratitude is owed in such less extreme cases. But surely gratitude is required, perhaps especially required, in those the cases where the beneficent action is not strictly required.

My response is to deny that only strictly required actions can be done from the motive of duty. In other words, even if beneficence allows for latitude in its fulfillment, it does not follow that individual acts of beneficence are not motivated (even primarily motivated) by duty. Consider, by way of analogy, a man going on a diet. Achieving the goal of weight loss allows for some latitude in its fulfillment. Any individual act of abstinence is not required in order to be on the diet, and, in fact, complete abstinence is incompatible with the end of weight loss. However, it does not follow that individual acts of abstinence aren't motivated (even primarily motivated) by the considerations underlying his diet. In a similar way, someone who sets herself the end of beneficence may have some latitude in how she fulfills this end, but the individual beneficent acts are still motivated by the end of beneficence, namely, rendering aid to fellow dependent rational agents.

Not only *can* all beneficent acts be motivated by duty, but, I believe they *must* be motivated by duty in order to count as beneficent acts. In Kant, beneficence is an ethical rather than a juridical duty. Juridical duties require the performance of a specific action whereas ethical duties require the adoption of an end (*MS*: 218-221, *MS*: 379-382). But the adoption of an end is not something that can be compelled or accidentally undertaken, it must be willed as such by the agent (*MS*: 381-382). Since any individual beneficent act must spring from this adopted end, it follows that reference to the end is required in order for the act to even count as an instance of beneficence. If I fulfill my side of a contract accidentally (a juridical duty), I have done the required action but not for the reasons that it is required. If I benefit someone accidentally, then it fails even to count as an act of beneficence because an act of beneficence must spring from my having set for myself the end of beneficence. To see why Kant thinks this, it is useful to consider the dieting example again. If I skip dessert because I have a stomachache, my action does not count as an instance of abstinence. Although I do as the diet requires, my action is not

an instance of dieting. This is because the act of dieting involves setting an end and individual actions must spring from this end in order to count as an instance of dieting. Words like ‘beneficence’ and ‘dieting’ include a reference to the agent’s motives. I conclude that accidental or compelled acts of beneficence are not, properly speaking, beneficent acts at all.<sup>21</sup>

#### 1.4 Beneficence does not apply exclusively or even primarily to strangers

A friend or loved one can also be temporarily brought low.<sup>22</sup> In fact, we might be specially positioned to understand when the friend is brought low and also specially positioned to render aid in such circumstances. It is probably also the case that the claims of beneficence have more weight when a friend or loved one has been brought low than do the claims of a stranger. However, if Kant is right about the reasons for beneficence, then my reasons for helping a loved one are importantly similar to my reasons for helping a distressed stranger. It might seem counterintuitive to say that acts of kindness between a husband and wife are motivated by seeing each other as members of a community of finite rational agents. And, certainly, many such acts are not so motivated and are therefore not acts of beneficence. However, sometimes we do respond to the rational needs of even our most intimate loved ones, and when we do, we have reasons of beneficence that go beyond the reasons of love.

## Section 2: Beneficence and gratitude

Even these brief remarks about beneficence are sufficient to establish a few points about Kantian gratitude. First of all, taking our cue from the distinction between benevolence and beneficence, it is natural to ask whether there is a similar distinction with regard to gratitude. Does Kant distinguish be-

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<sup>21</sup> Wood (2000: 9) puts it this way: “Juridical duties, in other words, are those whose concept contains no specific incentive for doing them, while ethical duties are those connected in their concept with the objective incentive of duty or rational lawfulness.”

<sup>22</sup> Thanks to \_\_\_\_ for getting me to reconsider my views on this subject. See Herman: 2001 for an account of how the structure of the duty of beneficence changes depending upon its object. This paragraph has been heavily influenced by Herman’s arguments in that paper.

tween the feelings of gratefulness that are not in our control and a more active form of gratitude that results in us adopting a maxim? Smit and Timmons (2011: 304) argue persuasively that Kant does indeed draw this distinction. To this end they cite a passage from the Collins lecture notes:

Gratitude is of two kinds: from duty, and from inclination. It comes from duty, when we remain unmoved by the other's kindness, but see that it behooves us to be grateful, in that we have, not a grateful heart, but principles of gratitude. We are grateful from inclination, insofar as we feel love in return. (LE: 441)

While lecture notes sometimes differ from Kant's official position, this passage parallels Kant's view on beneficence and leads us to the conclusion that the duty of gratitude concerns our actions not our feelings.

This conclusion fits well with Kant's (probably undeserved) reputation of ignoring feelings, and most have recognized that gratitude, for Kant, is about actions not feelings.<sup>23 24</sup> Of course, Kant does say that we have a duty to cultivate our virtuous feelings (MS: 457), and there is no reason to believe gratitude is an exception. However, this duty to cultivate our virtuous feelings certainly does not exhaust what is required of us and is often too late when the time for expressing gratitude is at hand. It is important to distinguish Kant's rejection of the emotional component from a rejection of the acknowledgment component.<sup>25</sup> Acknowledgment, unlike grateful feelings, may require some action of expression on our part. Such actions can be commanded.

What the duty of gratitude requires here can be made clear through the following parallel. If I have wronged someone, I have a duty to apologize. Often it is hard to *recognize* that you have wronged someone. However, recognizing that you have wronged someone may not be in your control and cannot

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<sup>23</sup> Even here, however, there is an exception. Sidgwick: 223 asserts that Kant makes gratitude an exception to his general policy of not requiring accompanying feelings. Sidgwick's reasoning here seems to be grounded on Kant's claim that gratitude is accompanied by feelings of respect (MS: 454-5). But, as Smit and Timmons (2011: 302) point out, Kant does not say that the feeling of respect is required in order to comply with the duty of gratitude. He only says that respect, as opposed to other feelings, is the one associated with gratitude.

<sup>24</sup> Thus, Kant disagrees with Weiss 1985 who argues that gratitude is primarily a feeling of gratefulness.

<sup>25</sup> This confusion is explicit in Walker (1980-1: 39), but I suspect it motivates many others to rush to the conclusion that Kant must emphasize reciprocation.

therefore be commanded by a moral rule. However, once you have recognized that you have wronged someone, you now have a duty to make an apology to the injured party. Making an apology involves publicly *acknowledging* that you have wronged someone. Acknowledging a wrong is, therefore, the public expression of the internal recognition of having wronged someone. That acknowledgment is something that needs commanding follows from the fact that apologizing is often difficult. Figuring out how best to do this and actually bringing yourself to do this is the object of your duty to apologize. The duty of gratitude is similar. When someone has done a favor for you, it is important that you recognize this fact. However, this recognition may not be in your control and could therefore not be commanded by a duty of gratitude. However, once you have recognized that you have been the object of beneficence, you now have a duty to bring yourself to acknowledge this service. Expressing gratefulness is often inconvenient and difficult. The duty of gratitude commands that we do acknowledge beneficence all the same.

Recognizing our own moral wrongs and other people's benefactions might also be in our control. Perhaps, many failures of recognition are caused by carelessness or even a sort of active self-deception where we refuse to see an inconvenient truth. Conscientiousness towards certain kinds of considerations might effectively counteract such carelessness and self-deception. It is also quite likely that sensitivity towards certain kinds of reasons is something that can be cultivated and is therefore under our indirect control.<sup>26</sup> I suspect that recognition is under our control in all of the above ways, and if it is, then gratitude would command both acknowledgment and recognition. However, since these claims are more controversial, I focus in this paper on the less controversial requirement of acknowledgment.

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<sup>26</sup> Kant himself notes that acts of gratitude lead to increased sensitivity to benevolence (*MS*: 456).

Focusing our attention on beneficence as the object of gratitude allows us to determine which benefits merit our gratitude.<sup>27</sup> In 1.3, I argued that beneficence is an ethical as opposed to a juridical duty. Therefore, helping acts must spring from beneficence in order to count as genuinely beneficent acts. It follows that only beneficently motivated acts by a fellow rational agent require gratitude, and we only owe gratitude towards helping acts that are motivated by the recognition that the beneficiary is a fellow member of a community of mutual aid.

Kant would therefore agree with many of the necessary conditions for generating a debt of gratitude that McConnell (1993: 44) and Simmons (1979: 178) put forward, but instead of appealing directly to our intuitions, Kant would explain these intuitions by appealing to the conditions of the duty of beneficence. Thus, McConnell (1993: 17) and Simmons (1979: 179) consider a passerby who accidentally disrupts a robbery attempt. Surely no gratitude is owed here. They conclude that gratitude is not owed in cases of ignorance. Kant would agree, but he would add that the reason why ignorance obviates a debt of gratitude is that an unintentional benefit does not count as an act of beneficence. McConnell (1993: 30) and Simmons (1979: 177) also worry about unwanted benefits. Again Kant would agree. Since in cases of genuine beneficence the benefactor must respect the beneficiary as an equal rational agent, the benefactor will consult the beneficiary's conception of happiness and not her own (*MS*: 454). Having no regard for the beneficiary's wants demonstrates that the motive of beneficence was not present in the action, and therefore was not an act of beneficence at all.

Some theorists have expressed suspicion about gratitude as a source of obligation.<sup>28</sup> Card, for example, notes that gratitude can be used by the powerful to maintain their authority over the powerless (Card 1988: 124), and Nietzsche, referencing Pope, says that gratitude is a form of revenge that the beneficiary takes upon her benefactor for putting them in a position of inferiority (Nietzsche 1996: 36). Kant's understanding of beneficence and his observation that gratitude is directed at beneficence allay

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<sup>27</sup> Smit and Timmons (2011: 298) also focus on the connection between gratitude and beneficence.

<sup>28</sup> Thanks to \_\_\_\_\_ for pressing me on this point.

these suspicions. It is true that the fact that I am in need creates a disparity of power between me and my benefactor. However, beneficence and gratitude do not create this power disparity, and, on a Kantian account of beneficence, they do not reinforce it. In becoming someone's benefactor, I recognize and respect their rational agency, and in acknowledging this act of beneficence through gratitude, I recognize my benefactor's reasons for benefiting me. A Kantian account of gratitude does not enforce a problematic power relation but instead provides for its solution by linking gratitude to the beneficence and beneficence to respect for our rational agency.

Above I argued that beneficence can occur within a friendship. It follows that gratitude can also occur within a friendship. In fact, a friend can be a particularly effective benefactor because she is well positioned to both recognize and satisfy my needs. Nevertheless, Kant expressed caution about such beneficence-gratitude relationships within a friendship:

But if one of them [the friends] accepts a benefaction [*Wohlthat*] from the other, then he may well be able to count on equality in love, but not in respect; for he sees himself obviously a step lower in being under obligation without being able to impose obligation in turn. (translation altered, *MS*: 471, see also *LE*: 442)

Kant's caution here is justified. In many friendships, there are mutual acts of beneficence and gratitude. It may even be impossible to keep track of who is more often the benefactor and who more often the beneficiary. If, however, there is an established pattern where one friend is always the benefactor of the other, Kant is certainly right to worry about the equality of this friendship.

### Section 3: How ingratitude destroys the moral incentive to beneficence

In the last section, I explored the implications of Kant's claim that gratitude is directed at acts of beneficence. In this section, I explore Kant's view that ingratitude makes beneficence impossible. To understand this difficult claim, I will look closely at Kant's claim that gratitude is a *sacred* rather than an

ordinary duty. The sacred/ordinary distinction occurs nowhere else in Kant's writings,<sup>29</sup> and gratitude is the only duty that Kant explicitly says is sacred. For this reason, understanding gratitude and understanding the sacred/ordinary distinction are closely related tasks. Kant gives two explanations of the sacred/ordinary distinction, and a complete account of Kantian gratitude must understand each of these explanations in its own right as well as how the explanations fit together into a coherent picture of gratitude.

Here is Kant's first explanation:

But gratitude must also be considered, in particular, a sacred duty, that is, a duty the violation of which (as a scandalous example) can destroy the moral incentive to beneficence in its very principle. (*MS*: 455)

According to this first explanation, then, gratitude is sacred because its violation, namely, ingratitude, destroys the moral incentive to beneficence.

Many philosophers have noticed that ingratitude has a deterrent effect upon acts of beneficence.<sup>30</sup> It is pleasing to be appreciated for one's beneficence and painful to have one's beneficence met with ingratitude. Widespread ingratitude would impose a sort of tax on acts of beneficence—beneficence would still be possible but would face opposition. A natural way to read Kant's claim that ingratitude destroys the incentive to beneficence is to understand him to be referring to these deterrent effects of ingratitude.<sup>31</sup> Further support can be gathered from Kant's lectures where Kant remarks that ingratitude is hated by all because "generosity is thereby decreased" (*LE*: 443).<sup>32</sup> Perhaps, then all Kant

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<sup>29</sup> In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant does have an imagined egoist refer to prudence as his "sacred duty" in order to help us see the difference between prudence and morality, but this sarcastic use is hardly the technical one contained in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. See *KPV*: 5: 25.

<sup>30</sup> Simmons (1979: 165) references Hobbes (*Leviathan*: chapter 15) and Price (1974/1797: chapter 7) as proponents of this view.

<sup>31</sup> Simmons (1979: 165) reads this passage in this way.

<sup>32</sup> See also *LE* 27: 440, where Kant says that ingratitude "would also cause untold harm, if all men were thereby deterred from well-doing, and so became misanthropes, on seeing that they would be ill-used for their benevolence."

means when he says that the violation destroys the moral incentive to beneficence is that ingratitude makes beneficence difficult.

Although natural, the deterrence reading cannot be sustained. In the *Groundwork*, Kant says that an action has moral worth only if it is motivated simply by duty (*G*: 398). I argued above that beneficent acts must be motivated by beneficence to count as genuine instances of beneficence. But, if the motive of duty requires extra moral inducements in the form of an expectation of gratitude then it is not genuinely motivated by duty at all (*R*: 29-30).<sup>33</sup> It would follow that actions which could be deterred by ingratitude would not be beneficent actions at all. Indeed, at one point Kant defines beneficence as promoting “according to one’s means the happiness of others in need, without hoping for something in return” (*MS*: 453). But if beneficence is not motivated by thanks then it surely cannot be deterred by the prospect of not receiving thanks.

One might try to save the deterrence interpretation by appealing to an idea present in Kant’s theory of virtue.<sup>34</sup> According to this idea, we ought to cultivate virtues because virtuous feelings remove obstacles to the performance of our duty. One might seek to extend this reasoning towards others. Perhaps, just as we have the duty to remove our own obstacles to doing our duty, so too there is a duty also to remove the obstacles that others have towards doing their duty. If there were such a duty, then gratitude might be an instance of it since ingratitude is surely an obstacle to the performance of duty.

This attempt to improve the deterrence interpretation ultimately does not work. For starters, Kant is explicit that there is no duty to the perfection of others. He explains that their perfection involves them determining for themselves what their duty is, and attempting to perfect another is incompatible with this understanding of self-perfection (*MS*: 386). We may have a duty to remove our own obstacles to virtue, but we don’t have a duty to cultivate virtue in others. Furthermore, in the original passage,

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<sup>33</sup> In the cited passage from Kant’s *Religion*, Kant calls a will that depends upon extra moral incentives an impure will.

<sup>34</sup> Thanks to \_\_\_?\_\_\_ for raising this objection.

Kant says that gratitude is sacred because ingratitude destroys the “*moral* incentive to beneficence”.

According to the improved deterrence reading, ingratitude imposes a hindrance to the performance of duty, but it wouldn’t destroy the *moral* incentive for beneficence. Finally, the improved deterrence reading still does not square with passages like the following:

But ingratitude is a vice that shocks humanity, not merely because of the *harm* that such an example must bring on men in general by deterring them from further beneficence (for with a genuine moral disposition they can, just by scorning any such return for their beneficence, put all the more inner moral worth on it). (*MS*: 459)

Kant here acknowledges the harm ingratitude can cause as a deterrent to beneficence, but he also insists that ingratitude’s shockingness does not merely consist in its harm. The wrongness of ingratitude must consist of something besides its power to deter beneficence.

But although the text and Kant’s commitments compel us to reject the deterrence interpretation, it is unclear with what it should be replaced. Consider the following passage:

Thus the moral worth of an action does not lie in the effect expected from it and so too does not lie in any principle of action that needs to borrow its motive from the expected effect. (*G*: 401)

This passage claims that the morality of an action can be determined independently of its expected effects. Gratitude looks like one of those expected effects and should consequently have no bearing on the morality of beneficence or the moral motive to be beneficent. The problem could be put another way. In order to destroy my specifically moral incentive, the ingratitude of my intended beneficiaries must be able to change the nature of my intentions. But how could someone prevent me from forming a beneficent intention towards her?

In what follows, I will argue that the ingratitude of beneficiaries can indeed corrupt our obligation to beneficence. To make this point, I introduce the idea of a *sham practice* that is explored by Tamar Schapiro (2003). Schapiro draws our attention to “social practices”, i.e., activities for which there are rules that constitutively define the roles that we play within this activity (Schapiro 2003: 333).

Schapiro argues that within such a social practice, it could happen that a "move" made in good faith could have its nature changed because of how the move is received or reacted to by other participants within the practice. In such circumstances, even the good faith participant can no longer participate in the practice because the practice has become a sham (Schapiro 2003: 339).

As an example of a sham practice, Schapiro asks us to imagine a situation in which we think we are negotiating, but our counterpart is not negotiating in good faith at all. In fact, she is only pretending to negotiate in order to stall for time (Schapiro 2003: 337). In such a situation, it seems plausible to say our negotiation has become a sham. My counterpart's actions make it impossible, no matter what my intentions are, to perform the activity of negotiating. As a social practice, negotiation depends upon more than just my actions and intentions. It depends also upon my actions being responded to in a certain way by other people participating in the social practice.

To extend this idea of a sham practice to gratitude, it is important to bring out a feature that is not emphasized by Schapiro. In order for one of my moves to be a successful opening bid in a negotiation, it is necessary that my counterpart recognizes that my actions are in good faith. Suppose that my counterpart concludes (wrongly, perhaps) that I am not negotiating in good faith and that I am using the negotiation as a means to something else. It follows that from her point of view she can no longer participate in a negotiation but can only participate in a sham negotiation. Whatever she does then—whether she breaks off the negotiation, denounces it as a sham, or continues with the "negotiations" while thinking they are a sham—she cannot continue to negotiate in good faith. The negotiation has become a sham just because she has come to believe (falsely) that it is a sham. One of the success conditions of a negotiation is that both parties recognize that they are participating in such an activity. As such, one party's lack of recognition can frustrate even the sincere attempts of another party to engage in a negotiation. The ability to recognize that one is engaging in a negotiation becomes an important skill

in sustaining a negotiation. Let us call social practices that depend upon the recognition of the participants, a *recognition practice*.

Negotiations strongly depend upon the recognition of their participants. If just one of the parties fails to recognize that they are participating in a negotiation, then the practice immediately becomes a sham. Some recognition practices are more robust than this. They can survive a few members failing to recognize that they are participating in the practice. Consider, for example, the practice of being a 19<sup>th</sup> century British gentleman. Such a practice prescribes definite roles to its participants and depends, broadly, upon the recognition of its participants. But the practice does not assume that everyone buys into the values of this practice. A few skeptics might attempt to cynically exploit the code for their own purposes, but this would not turn the practice of gentlemanliness into a sham. The code of gentlemanliness might even include advice on how to deal with these ungentlemanly skeptics, and the inner gentlemanliness of a gentleman might most be on display in such cases. In this regard, gentlemanliness is different from negotiation since there could be no instructions on how to negotiate with someone who is not negotiating with you.

Nevertheless, the practice of being a 19<sup>th</sup> century gentleman depends upon the recognition of at least some people. If there were suddenly a widespread failure in this practice, only sham gentlemanliness is now possible. In a world in which gentlemanliness is widely viewed with suspicion, perhaps it is viewed as a product of a sexist patriarchy, then my unilateral attempts to act like a gentleman have become a sham and this is true regardless of the genuineness of my intentions. A 19<sup>th</sup> century British gentleman transported into 21<sup>st</sup> century United States could no more be a gentleman than we could now authentically be a medieval Italian troubadour or a Japanese Samurai.<sup>35</sup> I will call a practice an *individual-recognition practice* if it, like the practice of negotiation, can be turned into a sham by just one participant failing to recognize the practice. I will call a practice a *widespread-recognition practice* if it, like the

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<sup>35</sup> The Samurai example, of course, comes from Bernard Williams 1974-75:224 who uses it in a different context.

practice of gentlemanliness, can survive a few rogues, but widespread failure turns the practice into a sham.

I am now in the position to make two claims: 1) The benefactor-beneficiary relationship is a widespread-recognition practice and 2) widespread failure to acknowledge beneficence destroys the moral incentive for beneficence. I begin with the first claim. Kant is quite clear that individual acts of ingratitude cannot destroy the moral incentive to beneficence. In the passage cited above, he even says that scorning such ingratitude only serves to demonstrate the “inner moral worth” of the benefactor. Indeed, in the sacred/ordinary passage, Kant notes that it is not ingratitude that destroys the moral incentive to beneficence but ingratitude “as a scandalous example”. This suggests that it is only when ingratitude threatens to become a widespread practice that it has the power to destroy the moral incentive to beneficence. For Kant, then, if the benefactor-beneficiary relationship is a recognition practice at all, it will be a widespread-recognition practice. But, is the benefactor-beneficiary relationship such a practice?

In the previous section, I followed Herman (1984) in understanding beneficence to be motivated by recognition that we are all members of a community of mutual aid. Beneficence is a response to a member of this community requiring our assistance. One of the implications of this, as Herman notes (1984: 588), is that only a rational creature can be the proper object of our beneficence because only a rational creature can respond, in turn, to my need as a member of the moral community. This means that we can aid a distressed bird, but we could never become the bird's benefactor. A bird could never help us out of recognition that we are fellow creatures in need of aid. Notice that it is their incapacity to *recognize* acts of beneficence that makes them inappropriate objects for beneficence. Imagine someone treating a bird like a person temporarily brought low by circumstance by trying to conceal their beneficence from the bird. Such a person would be participating in a sham. Birds do not see themselves as a

part of a community of mutual aid, and therefore cannot be part of such a community. They can be the objects of our sympathy but not our beneficence.<sup>36</sup>

If the above argument is correct, then the possibility of beneficence depends upon the recognition of this beneficence by the beneficiary. But, for similar reasons, it also depends upon this recognition being publicly expressed. Here is why. Suppose that a benefactor concludes falsely that she is surrounded by people incapable of recognizing her helping actions as acts of beneficence. Coming to this conclusion makes it impossible for her to participate in the benefactor-beneficiary relationship regardless of whether she is justified in her belief. Whatever decision she takes at this point, whether she decides to continue to “play along” or refuses to engage in what to her feels like a sham, she is incapable of genuinely performing the role of a benefactor. The possibility of beneficence depends, therefore, not just on *whether* beneficent acts are recognized as such by the beneficiaries but also on whether this recognition is itself recognized by the benefactors. A community that cannot recognize acts of beneficence is therefore no better off than a community that can recognize but not express this recognition. In each case, the benefactor will think that she is only able to participate in a sham and her thinking this will make it so. But then, if the practice of beneficence is to be sustained, a beneficiary must not only recognize acts of beneficence, she must also express this recognition publicly. The practice depends upon the beneficiary *acknowledging* the act of beneficence. But since gratitude is the duty to acknowledge beneficence, it follows that widespread ingratitude makes the benefactor-beneficiary relationship impossible.

Viewing the benefactor-beneficiary relationship as a widespread-recognition practice explains why widespread ingratitude can destroy the moral incentive to beneficence. Suppose a group of people view all acts of beneficence as an aggressive ploy to put them in the giver’s debt. They neither recognize nor acknowledge themselves to be members of a community of mutual aid. Since the benefactor-beneficiary relationship is a widespread-recognition practice, such a group of people would have suc-

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<sup>36</sup> Kant does say that we owe gratitude towards animals who have served us (*MS*: 443) but, of course, this is only an indirect duty to develop our capacity to feel these emotions towards their proper objects.

ceeded in turning any act of beneficence into a sham. A would-be benefactor cannot act beneficently because acts of mutual aid will never be received as such. The failure to receive them appropriately transforms them into something else. The moral incentive to beneficence is the fact that we are members of a community of mutual aid, and widespread ingratitude destroys this community and consequently destroys the possibility of this incentive.

An analog to this sort of argument can be seen within a single relationship. Suppose that Mary is constantly helping John out of a sense that she is part of a community of rational agents who sometimes need aid. Such a relationship can survive an omission of gratitude. If John fails to thank Mary, Mary can still be thought of as John's benefactor. Now suppose, however, that this ingratitude becomes a persistent pattern. Mary helps John out constantly and John never acknowledges the reasons for her assistance. At this point, the relationship has changed. We no longer can view Mary simply as John's benefactor, and I submit, Mary cannot do so either. Regardless of Mary's original motives, the persistence of John's ingratitude changes the nature of Mary's action. An act of beneficence is not a unilateral activity, but requires the cooperation of the beneficiary—and that cooperation must come in the form of acknowledgement.

Kant commentators have wondered why there is no derivation of the duty of gratitude in the sense that Kant does not give an argument that starts with the categorical imperative and ends with gratitude as a duty,<sup>37</sup> and moral theorists have wondered whether gratitude is even an obligation. The above argument should satisfy Kant commentators and moral theorists on this point: gratitude is an obligation because the universalization of ingratitude destroys the possibility of beneficence. In a world in which no one acknowledges gratitude, attempted acts of beneficence become a sham. In the background of Kant's argument are the assumptions that acts of benefaction begin a relationship between the benefactor and the beneficiary, that the roles within this relationship must be understood against a

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<sup>37</sup> Smit and Timmons 2011: 318. McConnell tries to supplement Kant's account by providing such a derivation on Kant's behalf (McConnell 1993: 167-8).

background of similar relationships, and that the relationship endures after the act of beneficence is over. Just how long this relationship endures is the topic of the next section.

Many have thought that gratitude is only important if it can make an impact on who deserves to receive what.<sup>38</sup> If Mary is John's benefactor and John fails to thank her, then John has broken a rule of etiquette. But if he fails to return a favor when Mary is in need, then John has committed a serious moral offense. While Mary cannot demand repayment, nevertheless, repayment is due and John's failure is a serious disturbance in the normative order of things. Kant does not understand gratitude's importance in this way. Instead, gratitude is important because it sustains a community of mutual aid. By acknowledging an act of beneficence, the beneficiary affirms her membership in this community. She at once acknowledges that she is in need and has been benefited as a rational agent in need. Although as a member of the community, she may herself one day be called on to render aid, today she fulfills her duty by receiving the aid in an appropriate way. Gratitude is the duty to receive aid appropriately, and its requirement is that we recognize and acknowledge this aid. Saying "thank you" does not acknowledge a debt but acknowledges a service and the reasons for that service.

One way to see what is most central to the duty of gratitude is to investigate why gratitude is a duty in the first place. If the above argument is correct, then gratitude is a duty because acknowledging acts of beneficence is a duty. According to this understanding, acknowledgment rather than reciprocity lies at the core of our duty of gratitude.

#### Section 4: Nondischargeability

Immediately following Kant's first explanation of the sacred/ordinary distinction, Kant provides another, seemingly different, explanation of the sacred/ordinary distinction. Instead of emphasizing the

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<sup>38</sup> See footnote 5.

pernicious power of ingratitude, Kant talks about our incapacity to ever discharge the obligation imposed by a sacred duty:

*For, a moral object is sacred if the obligation with regard to it cannot be discharged completely by any act in keeping with it (so that one who is under obligation always remains under obligation). Any other duty is an ordinary duty.—But one cannot, by any repayment of a kindness received, rid oneself of obligation for it, since the recipient can never win away from the benefactor his priority of merit, namely having been the first in benevolence. (my italics, MS: 455)*

A careful reader will notice that Kant does not use the term ‘sacred duty’, but states that a “moral *object* is sacred if the obligation with regard to it cannot be discharged”. However, immediately after this, Kant contrasts “the obligation with regard to it [sacred objects]” with “ordinary *duties*”. It follows, therefore, that having an obligation towards a sacred object is the same thing as having a sacred, as opposed to an ordinary duty. In any case, Kant makes the same point about debts generated by acts of beneficence in the Collins lectures:

Beneficence creates a debt that can never be repaid. Even if I return to my benefactor fifty times more than he gave me, I am still not yet quits with him, for he did me a good turn that he did not owe me, and was the first in doing so. Even if I return it to him fifty times over, I still do it merely to repay the benefit and discharge the debt. Here I can no longer get ahead of him; for he remains always the one who was first to show me a kindness. (LE: 442-3).

Kant's striking thesis in both these passages is that beneficence imposes an obligation that cannot be discharged (hereafter, the *Nondischargeability Thesis*).

The Nondischargeability Thesis has received two different sorts of interpretations depending on whether the reader understands Kant to be emphasizing reciprocity or acknowledgment. If reciprocity is emphasized, then Kant is accused of consigning beneficiaries into a sort of permanent servitude. Under this interpretation, gratitude requires that we reciprocate benefits, and since no amount of reciprocity will ever discharge our debt, we are stuck with an infinite debt as well as an obligation to per-

manently attempt to repay it.<sup>39</sup> It is as if our benefactor has loaned us more money than we could ever hope to pay off, and we must spend our lives working off this infinite debt. If acknowledgment of beneficence is emphasized, then the Nondischargeability Thesis can be read differently.<sup>40</sup> There is no requirement that we perform endless service to our benefactor, but we are required to never forget her benefaction and honor her for it. I will argue that the infinite service reading ought to be rejected in favor of the endless acknowledgment reading.

To adjudicate between the two readings, it is necessary to understand why Kant believed that gratitude is a nondischargeable obligation. Nondischargeability arises because the beneficiary is the first person to confer a benefit – the beneficiary has "priority of merit". But what is the connection between nondischargeability and being first? After all, being first is not always so morally decisive. I may be the first person to greet a friend but the greeter-greeted relationship does not lead to a nondischargeable debt. Once my friend has returned my greeting, he is with regard to his greeting obligations, "quits" with me.

Kant's point here can be understood through an analogy. Consider two countries, A and B. Suppose that country A makes an unprovoked attack on country B, and B retaliates. Now I submit that country B can reciprocate the damage it has received on country A, but none of its attacks will be *unprovoked*. Indeed, even if country B repays its harms 50 times over, not one of these attacks is an unprovoked attack. There is no way to restore country A and country B to neutrality by means of retaliation. In a position of neutrality, an attack on country A by country B *would* count as an unprovoked attack. But we have just seen that even if the damages are returned 50 times over all of those attacks were considered acts of retaliation. If neutrality were restored at 30 times over, for example, then everything past

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<sup>39</sup> This interpretation is behind Card's criticism of Kant (Card 1988: 118). Although not explicitly endorsed, it is clear that von Tevenar also understands Kant in this way (von Tevenar 2006: 181).

<sup>40</sup> Smit and Timmons 2011: 307 – 309 interpret Kant in this way. I believe my interpretation to be very much in line with theirs. However, they offer their interpretation as a "conjecture" and acknowledge that it requires "far more elaboration and defense" (308). I hope that what follows contributes to this elaboration and defense. For an interpretation along these lines as well as a criticism of the other interpretation, see McConnell 1993: 169.

this would be unprovoked. No act of retaliation can transform the nature of the retaliator's attacks into those of an aggressor.

It should be clear from the above that country B has no obligation to infinitely harm country A. The point is not that country A has imposed an infinite harm that could only be repaid, *per impossibile*, through an infinite reciprocation. It is rather that the nature of their attack cannot be reciprocated. It is about the *kind* rather than the amount of harm. In fact, it could well be the case that a certain level of retaliation would be disproportionate to the original attack. Surely retaliating 50 times over would be wrong. Assuming that there is a point (or a range) of proportionate responses then, we might imagine that by responding within this range country B does all that it should. But doing all that it should does not restore neutrality. Continuing to harm country A is still an act of retaliation—it is a disproportionate retaliation not an unprovoked attack.

Kant's remarks about the nondischargeability of obligations of gratitude can be understood similarly. We have seen that beneficence is an obligation that is directed at fellow rational agents who require our assistance. Despite the fact that we are obligated to help, this obligation is not a payment of a debt that is owed to the person in need.<sup>41</sup> We render them a service. We do not return to them what is owed. In this sense, therefore, a benefactor makes an 'unprovoked' benefit. But unprovoked benefits are a lot like unprovoked attacks. The benefit can be repaid in full but none of my repayments are unprovoked. Indeed, even if I reciprocate the benefit 50 times over, not one of these acts is an act of unprovoked beneficence. This means that a position of complete neutrality, as existed before there was a benefit, cannot be attained through reciprocation. If it were possible to restore this neutrality, then any further benefit would become an act of beneficence. It follows that I can never by means of reciprocation turn the tables around so that I become the benefactor. As Kant puts it, a sacred obligation cannot be discharged "by any act in keeping with it".

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<sup>41</sup> For a similar interpretation, see Smit and Timmons 2011: 307 – 308.

But this point about nondischargeability should not be confused with a claim about the *amount* of reciprocation that is appropriate. To say that no amount of reciprocation will change the nature of the relationship is not to say that we have a duty to infinitely reciprocate. Just as there is disproportionate retaliation to an aggressor, there is also disproportionate benefiting of a benefactor. To repay a benefactor 50 times over goes beyond what gratitude requires. But that does not mean that in the process neutrality has been restored, and you have now become your benefactor's unprovoked benefactor. Your action is a disproportionate reciprocation, not an unprovoked beneficence.

Compare this to another situation. If Mary gives John \$50 to mow her lawn, once the transaction is complete the ledger has been wiped clear. All special obligations to Mary have been erased. John may still be obliged to rescue Mary in distress and vice versa, but these are the same obligations that apply to a stranger. Gratitude is not like this. If Mary gives John \$50 dollars out of beneficence, then he has a special obligation towards her that cannot be removed by any act of repayment. Kant says that gratitude requires that John honor Mary for her act. The fact that Mary is John's benefactor always remains relevant in their interactions.

It is for this reason that reciprocation is out of place. To return a benefit out of reciprocation implies an attempt to restore equality. Considerations like how much should be returned are governed by a sense that the greater the debt the greater the required return. This is true even if John's debt is infinite. When John "returns" a kindness to Mary out of reciprocation, he sees himself on a path to equality even if the equality can never be restored. It is as if John is less in debt after the minor service than before knowing full well that he will never be on completely equal terms. For Kant, this is not how obligations of gratitude work. John can't even make one step towards "paying down" his obligation since John's debt consists in acknowledgment rather than reciprocation.

This does not mean, of course, that John has no special obligations to benefit Mary. If someday he should come across Mary when she is in need, he cannot just ignore this need. John has reasons of

gratitude to help Mary that go beyond the reasons that he has to help any stranger. John may have an obligation to do more to respond to Mary's need or respond to lower thresholds of need. Kant's point is merely that these reasons of gratitude are not reasons of repayment. The benefit is viewed as a token of thanks rather than the first step in a repayment plan. At the core of gratitude is acknowledgment not reciprocation, and benefits given in return have value only as a token of acknowledgment rather than reciprocation. An inappropriately large gift reflects that the beneficiary is guided by the wrong principle and doesn't understand the point of gratitude.

This understanding conflicts with many interpretations of Kant. Most commentators have attributed a reciprocation view to Kant.<sup>42</sup> This common reading of Kant seems to be grounded in the following text:

But the *intensity* of gratitude, that is, the degree of obligation to this virtue, is to be assessed by how useful the favor (*Wohltat*) was to the one put under obligation and how unselfishly it was bestowed on him. The least degree is to render *equal* services to the benefactor.... (MS: 456)

It is possible, however, to simply read this passage as dealing only with the size of the benefit not its justification. In other words, Kant is asserting that, in some cases, equal returns are an appropriate form of acknowledgment. Kant specifies that the size of the return must be equal, but he does not say that re-establishing equality is the goal of the return. The passage certainly does not imply, as McConnell asserts (1993: 170), that for minor acts of beneficence we ought to reciprocate with an equal return whereas for larger acts of beneficence we ought to reciprocate with a larger return.

In the first section of this essay, I raised a problem for acknowledgment accounts of gratitude. If acknowledging the benefactor-beneficiary relationship is important for the practice of beneficence, anonymous acts of beneficence would seem to counteract this aim since they appear to undermine rather than sustain the institution of benefactors and beneficiaries. Does it follow that we have an obliga-

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<sup>42</sup> Thus, Gregor 1973: 196, von Tevenar 2006: 182, McConnell 1993: 170, Card 1988: 125 and even Smit and Timmons 2011: 303 footnote 17 attribute to Kant some sort of reciprocation view.

tion to publicize rather than conceal our beneficent acts? This seems implausible. It is now possible to resolve this tension.

According to the Nondischargeability Thesis even when we reciprocate a benefaction, our action ought to be understood as a form of acknowledgment. But acts of acknowledgment, unlike acts of reciprocation, need not be directed at the original benefactor. An original benefactor can be honored or acknowledged if I carry out their beneficent intentions towards some other person. This kind of acknowledgment is particularly appropriate when my original benefactor is somehow beyond my reach because she does not require my assistance or because she is dead. In these cases, I can acknowledge their act of beneficence by making someone else the recipient of my beneficence. Such acts of “paying it forward” are justified in the same way that other acts of gratitude are justified. By thanking someone, I acknowledge the reasons for their beneficence and affirm my membership in a community of mutual aid. I do this by having these reasons motivate me to action, particularly toward someone in a situation similar to the one I was in. But as the phrase suggests, acts of paying it forward are poorly understood as a kind of payback, and the reciprocation view of gratitude would have difficulty viewing such actions as instances of gratitude.

An anonymous benefactor is also someone who is beyond the reach of reciprocity. If I have been the beneficiary of an anonymous act of beneficence, I have no choice but to meet my obligation by paying it forward. In other words, my acts of beneficence are also acts of gratitude toward my unknown benefactor. Anonymous acts of beneficence differ from other acts of beneficence in that they diffuse the obligation of gratitude. If the point of gratitude is to sustain the practice of beneficence, then there is a sense in which anonymous acts of beneficence direct gratitude at its most proper object—humanity as a whole. As Kant puts it:

It [the least degree of gratitude] involves not regarding a kindness received as a burden one would gladly be rid of...But taking even the occasion for gratitude as a moral kindness, that is, as an opportunity given one to unite the virtue of gratitude with love of man...and so to cultivate one’s love of man. (*MS*: 456)

In this section, I have argued that reciprocation is out of place in debts of gratitude. When I benefit my benefactor, this benefit should be viewed as an act of acknowledgment rather than an act of reciprocation. There is no way that I can ever, by means of reciprocation, even the score between me and my benefactor, and nor should I want this. Instead, the benefactor's act should be acknowledged. Sometimes this acknowledgment is expressed in a thank you. Sometimes this acknowledgment is expressed in an act of kindness to the original benefactor. Sometimes this acknowledgment is expressed by paying the beneficence forward. In all of these cases, my duty to act out of gratitude to my benefactor is successful insofar as it acknowledges the original act of beneficence. The act is a form of acknowledgment and appreciation not reciprocity.

## Conclusion

According to Kant, the duty of gratitude is one of only three positive ethical duties towards others.<sup>43</sup> This may seem surprising since many modern philosophers view gratitude with suspicion or only accord it a peripheral role in moral life. Even detailed discussions of the *Metaphysics of Morals* and detailed discussions of gratitude tend to give gratitude a peripheral role.<sup>44</sup> In this essay, I have argued that Kant's remarks on gratitude are illuminating and that they show that gratitude is far more central than has previously been thought. If acknowledging acts of beneficence is part of what sustains the practice of beneficence, then gratitude becomes as important as beneficence. Gratitude affirms and ingratitude denies the very idea that we are all finite rational creatures with ends that ought to be valued. Grati-

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<sup>43</sup> According to the argument given here, two of these positive ethical duties form a mutually sustaining pair. This naturally raises a question about the third positive ethical duty of sympathy, and how it relates to the reciprocal duties of beneficence and gratitude. This is an important question that I hope to investigate in a further work.

<sup>44</sup> Even McConnell (1993: 12) justifies his monograph on gratitude by saying that investigating "peripheral" duties such as gratitude sheds light on central issues of moral theory. For the neglect of Kant's account of gratitude by most commentators, see footnote 5.

tude's centrality is thus explained by its relationship to beneficence. Gratitude is the duty that makes beneficence itself possible.

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