Piety as a Virtue

Abstract: Piety belongs on a short list of virtues that are important for a flourishing life. Its sphere of concern includes not only the divine but all of those agents thanks to whose efforts we acquired the sense that some things are worthwhile even though they may not be pleasant. Since a sense of the worthwhile is imparted in many upbringings whose particulars we have come to reject, piety is owed to these agents generally and not just the uniformly good ones. The virtue of piety is important because impiety is distorting for the central human good of having progeny in the widest sense, whether these are children, students, literary descendants or anyone else upon whom we seek to have a lasting impact.

In 1994 on Chicago's West side, a statue was unveiled in front of a basketball stadium. Upon its base, the Achillean inscription reads: "The best there ever was. The best there ever will be." And so Michael Jordan was immortalized. Five years later on Chicago's North side, another statue was unveiled outside a baseball stadium. The figure represented, a corpulent, thickly bespectacled Harry Caray, was not the best there ever was at baseball or even the best Cubs player there ever was. He didn't even play professional baseball. He had broadcast games for them for 16 years, which is hardly a lifetime of service. Prior to that, he had broadcast the games of the Cubs' South side rival White Sox and before that – for 25 years! – of their nemesis St. Louis Cardinals. For what kind of greatness, and with what kind of thought and feeling, did the Cubs immortalize Caray?

The Caray statue is an instance of our subject in this paper. Caray was not a great player of baseball; he was a great mediator of baseball. People experienced baseball by listening to him experience it, and in so doing, they learned to care about and delight in the game. Even though they hadn't won anything in a century, Caray made Cubs baseball seem worthwhile. For this, he received a fairly extraordinary act of public remembrance and gratitude. Insofar as we live flourishing lives, each of us is likely to have had a Harry Caray in our past, and likely more than one: an agent or agents thanks to whose direct or indirect efforts we acquired a sense that some objects or activities are worthwhile.

The “thanks” indicates that what is called for in respect of these agents is gratitude. While the example may seem trivial, such expressions of gratitude are important – in fact, as we will argue, they are important in a flourishing life. Such expressions of gratitude are often difficult because the distinctive character of the benefit being responded to, especially its difference from material benefits, make acknowledged dependence seem peculiarly threatening to our personal autonomy.[1] Because of this difficulty, a particular virtue needs to be lifted out from gratitude as a genus and examined in itself, just as Aristotle lifted magnificence out of the genus virtue of generosity because he thought that spending large sums of money was both important and involved distinctive difficulties.

For want of a better term, we will call the virtue that we lift out and examine *piety* because of its resemblance to filial piety, although the class of objects it responds to will typically include but not be restricted to one’s parents, and although gratitude rather than obedience, respect, or reverence is the emotion that it concerns.

Once we have clarified what we mean by piety, we believe that many will grant that there is a virtue that concerns the class of agents who have helped us see what is worthwhile about the things that we take to be so. But we hope to establish more than this. While there may well be as many virtues as there are domains of behavior that require governance, some of these virtues are especially important for living a good life. Piety, we will argue, is one of these important virtues because it enables the virtues that govern our relationship to progeny in the widest sense of the word; that is, anyone we hope to inspire in a lasting way.

Section 1: The Objects and Attitudes of Piety

When Aristotle individuates a virtue, first he specifies its sphere of concern and then he specifies the kind of reaction that is appropriate to the sphere. Thus, courage is individuated by specifying that it has to do with situations involving the possibility of death in battle, and then further specifying that the appropriate reaction involves feeling fear and confidence to the right degrees. Similarly, moderation is individuated by specifying that its sphere of concern is bodily pleasures and that the appropriate reaction is to feel these pleasures to the right degree. The virtue with which this paper is occupied has as its sphere of concern those agents thanks to whose efforts we gained a sense that some activities are worthwhile. The appropriate reaction to them is gratitude.

Somewhat reluctantly, we settled on "piety" as the name for this virtue. While piety often has religious connotations, there is a recognizable extended sense of piety that has parents as its objects. In some cultures, this sense is commonly recognized. In other cultures, such as ancient Rome, the sense of piety can extend still further to include nation, teachers, and literary ancestors. Since these objects are usually the ones who have played an important role in transmitting to us an appreciation of something worthwhile, we think that this extended sense of piety has the same objects as the virtue with which we are occupied.

Despite the encouraging fact that others have used the term piety in much the same way as us, we remain somewhat dissatisfied with our choice.[2] This is because piety, as it is typically understood, implies that we feel some reverence or awe towards its objects. Our own virtue, however, need have no such implication. In Woodruff's book-length analysis of reverence, he argues that reverence has to do with "'knowing your place' as a human being" and feeling "awe for what we believe is above us all as human beings."[3] While reverence directs our attention to some of the very same objects that our virtue of piety does, it draws attention to their power and their position above us. We are overwhelmed by the greatness of the objects of our reverence, and we are both humbled and uplifted by this recognition. But the virtue that we are concerned with, which we are calling

piety, draws attention not to the greatness of the objects but to the fact that they have benefited us. We can imagine a deeply human, almost pathetic figure, who nonetheless transmitted to us a sense that something is worthwhile. Such a figure would be a proper object of piety, but not reverence. Harry Caray is a figure of piety; Michael Jordan a figure of reverence.

Filial piety comes closer to our use of the term than religious piety, bound up as the latter is with notions of reverence and awe. When we are children, our parents may have been figures of power and authority. But what of aged parents, who may be frail and needy? In one of the canonical images of filial piety, Aeneas carries his aged father Anchises out of Troy on his back. The frail Anchises is hardly a figure that fills us with Woodruff's "awe for what we believe is above us all as human beings." Yet this is very much an image of filial piety. Possibly, some understandings of piety are bound up with feelings of awe. Insofar as our use of the term is idiolectic, we are regretful.

Gathering together what we have already mentioned, we have a rather long list of potential objects of piety: Harry Caray, our parents, teachers, gods, and literary predecessors. Coaches, therapists, and others might easily be added to the list. Further, we have focused attention on the fact that all of these people have been important mediators (or transmitters) of a sense that something is worthwhile. A worthwhile activity is something that seems worth doing even when we don't happen to feel like doing it at the time. We take ourselves to be talking about the same thing as Frankfurt's "what we care about" or "what we regard as important to ourselves."[4] As Frankfurt argues, this category is not defined by the strength of the desire or even whether it is desired for its own sake. We can have a very strong craving for something we regard as not worthwhile. We can also think that a momentary craving, that is itself not a means to anything else, is not worthwhile. While the worthwhile does not reduce to any of these other more common notions, we take it as familiar enough that this brief discussion will suffice.

We also believe that it is relatively uncontroversial to claim that our sense of the worthwhile is acquired in culture rather than possessed by nature, and that this acquisition is usually the result of the more or less directly intentional efforts of others. There is a widespread sense that what we hold to be worthwhile is tightly connected with our practical identities. If this is correct, then some agents are the sources of our very practical identities. Again, filial piety is the model for the virtue we are individuating. There is a sense in which our inspiring high school English teacher is our literary mother and Harry Caray is our baseball father. Each has initiated us into what we, following MacIntyre, might call a practice, viz., a shared activity that has goods that are only appreciated once one has in some sense been brought into the practice.[5] In another sense, Jane Austen is our literary mother and Willie Mays our baseball father. In still another sense, our parents are the novel and baseball, or even literature and sports. But as the practices get more abstract, their intentionality with regard to us weakens. Our reverence for them gains in strength, but our gratitude – and therefore our piety – weakens.

Since having a practical identity is a good, the appropriate response to our mediators is gratitude. Setting out the exact borders of when gratitude is owed is a difficult task.[6] Fortunately, gratitude theorists agree that if we regard someone as having intentionally tried to benefit us, and if we think of them as succeeding in their efforts, then gratitude is owed. In typical cases of the transmission (or mediation) of something we come to regard as worthwhile, both of these conditions apply. Our long-suffering violin teacher who taught our clumsy fingers to produce music that we find beautiful intended this exact result, did her job successfully, and her efforts amount to a benefit. Gratitude is owed and likely felt.

If gratitude is the appropriate response towards the objects of piety, then people who are inappropriate objects of gratitude will not, on our theory, be proper objects of piety. This might seem overly restrictive. In particular, it might be thought to rule out two kinds of objects of piety:

our literary (and other artistic) ancestors and parents whose ways we have come to reject. Both of these objects seem important in an extended understanding of piety, but neither seems to be an appropriate object of gratitude. Our literary ancestors seem not to have intended anything toward us and failed parental efforts seem not to have benefited us.

In what follows, we attempt to uphold the intuition that both of these groups are sometimes appropriate objects of piety because they may be appropriate objects of gratitude. Let us turn first to the claim that gratitude (and therefore piety) could not have literary figures as its object because gratitude can only be owed to those who have intended to benefit us. Consider a young writer who has been inspired by the work of Jack Kerouac. She feels indebted to him because he opened her eyes to a certain kind of literary possibility. Her own style seems to be made possible by what he has accomplished, and she dedicates her first book to him with gratitude. Such cases are common enough, and we would like to include them in our understanding of piety. The problem is that according to most understandings of gratitude the young writer's feeling is misplaced. Gratitude can only be owed when a benefit is intentionally given, and since Jack Kerouac died before the young writer was even born, he could not have intended anything towards her.

One option, of course, would be to simply drop the requirement that benefits must be intended in order for gratitude to be owed. Although some gratitude theorists have pursued such a possibility, we hold with the majority in thinking that a benefit must have been intentional if gratitude is warranted.[7] No doubt, a person may benefit from others who even intend him harm, but gratitude to a would-be persecutor is neither appropriate nor called for. If Jack Kerouac is going to be properly considered an object of gratitude, the young artist must think of him as intending to benefit her.

But isn't it the case that Jack Kerouac probably did intend something, if not toward the young artist specifically, then towards those like her? As a novelist publishing in a certain tradition,

Jack Kerouac likely thought of himself as contributing to this tradition. Some philosophers of art would insist that if Jack Kerouac did not have at least an opaque understanding of himself as relating to this tradition his work wouldn't count as art at all.[8] Here we need make no such conceptual claim. Since we are talking about whether the young writer's gratitude is warranted we need only ask about what she has good reason to believe is true of Jack Kerouac. Her beliefs are likely grounded, not in a biographical study of Jack Kerouac's intentions, but in what is usually the case with artists, viz., they see their work as contributing (in a good way) to a tradition that continues on after them. This means that Jack Kerouac probably *did* intend, in an indirect sense, a benefit towards the writer who dedicates her first book to him in gratitude.

The example extends beyond novels and other kinds of art. It is mostly safe to assume that someone who is participating in a cultural practice understands herself to be doing just that and this self-understanding involves a sense of her potential impact on future participants. So even in a case in which a solitary chemist has no mentees, or a hermit painter works and reworks her canvasses, sparing no time for the young artists who want to visit and learn from her, future participants in chemistry or painting may be justified in feeling gratitude to these figures. In the beginning of this essay, we contrasted the statue of Michael Jordan with the statue of Harry Caray and suggested that while the former was worthy of our awe only the latter was an object of our piety. But the considerations adduced in the preceding paragraph show that both may be proper objects of piety. Michael Jordan, too likely thought of himself as participating in the practice of basketball and intended his style of play to be instructive of its possibilities.[9] The practitioners, like mediators or transmitters, intend something toward all those who will participate in the practice. We should also note that for participation in a practice, as we understand it, it may be sufficient to appreciate it as worthwhile. One participates in the practice of literature not only by personally writing, but also by

reading when reading is sensed as a worthwhile activity. Someone who loves Jack Kerouac's novels may think of him with deep gratitude, even if she never writes a novel herself.

As a contrast, consider the relationship of a young writer and a dead author who did not intend his works to contribute to a tradition. Kafka apparently left instructions for most of his works to be destroyed after his death, and we have these works only because his literary executor failed to carry out his intentions. While a young author may well be inspired by Kafka's works, feelings of gratitude toward Kafka seem more complicated than they do to Kerouac. Did Kafka just think his works weren't good? If so then maybe he *would have* intended something towards his literary descendants had he had a proper appreciation of his own work. In this case, gratitude might be appropriate after all. But suppose Kafka knew that his works would be influential, but was so horrified by the idea of his own literary fatherhood that he would rather have his work destroyed than have progeny. In this case, it seems that gratitude would indeed be inappropriate. Our theory predicts that our literary ancestors are only appropriate objects of piety if they intended their work to contribute to the tradition of which they are a part. Mostly those intentions can be assumed. But when there is evidence to the contrary, gratitude may not be owed.

Next consider the case of parents whose ways we have come to reject. Since, by our own lights, we do not consider the same things to be worthwhile that they do, do we owe them the gratitude that is the basis of piety? It is useful to consider a rather detailed example. Suppose there is a young man named Miles who has been brought up by success-oriented parents, in a materialist culture, at an expensive prep school, with summers at Leadership Camp, and *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens* a constant presence on his nightstand. In his twenties, however, Miles himself comes to reject these ways, dropping out of business school and making a new life for himself as an artist who waits tables to pay the bills. According to Miles's own standards, his mediators have all attempted to lead him away from rather than toward what he now finds worthwhile. Perhaps Miles

owes his parents gratitude for having provided him food, clothing, and shelter throughout childhood. But with regard to his practical identity rather than material being, they seemingly had a deleterious influence. Nonetheless, let us suppose, Miles feels something like filial piety. When his parents virulently criticize his life choices, or try to shame him for waiting tables, he is forbearing. When his more accomplished artist friend Phil suggests that Miles should make a piece about his crass and idiotic parents, Miles even feels offended. Given that his parents seem not to have contributed at all towards Miles's sense of what is worthwhile, our account seems unable to justify this felt piety.

Some gratitude theorists believe that we ought to be grateful for the extreme efforts of attempted benefactors even if their efforts do not ultimately benefit us.[10] This might be a way out of the difficulty of justifying Miles's piety. But we think that a deeper explanation is that Miles's parents have not really failed in their efforts. Yes, the parents believe that their son is wasting his life with so called performance art that nobody even pays to go see, and Miles, in turn, thinks that his parents wasted their lives by working 60-hour weeks in order to acquire material goods and a high social status. If it turns out that his art makes him rich and famous, Miles's parents might come to endorse his life choices. But this would not bring Miles and his parents one inch closer to a shared view of what is worthwhile. What Miles and his parents do share, however, is the idea that life should be evaluated in terms of what is worth doing. While Miles has rejected the particular content of what his parents consider worthwhile, he does not reject the underlying category of the worthwhile.

Miles's piety rests on the intuition that his possession of a sense of the worthwhile owes something to his upbringing, which in our example includes but is not limited to his parents. While his parents took themselves to be raising Miles to be someone who thought that money and status were more important than what he simply happened to desire, their most fundamental work was that their son should distinguish between what he happens to desire and what he finds worthwhile.

If this is the case, then shedding their influence would take more than rejecting any particular practices or objects: Miles would have to lose touch with the sense that anything might be worth doing. This means that Miles should feel gratitude to the agents who intended him to be someone capable of feeling anything, including art, to be worthwhile, even if he rejects everything that these agents themselves take to be worthwhile.

One of the reasons that piety is a controversial virtue is because it seems to be called for even when our parents, teachers, etc. have not passed along anything that, by our current lights, is worthwhile.[11] Few would argue that we do not owe gratitude towards those who have encouraged and introduced us into what we now hold to be worthwhile. The case of Miles is our attempt to capture a more difficult intuition about piety. In many cases of good-enough upbringings, we end up rejecting what our parents or other agents have attempted to impart. Our account explains why we often continue to feel gratitude, and therefore piety, towards these agents. Although their important ends and objects are not ours, they are recognizably instances of the same kind of thing. This does not mean that all upbringings justify piety. We will examine such cases later in the paper.

We have argued that the ability to hold some things to be worthwhile is typically the result of the intentional efforts of others for whom gratitude is therefore in order. Typical examples are cicerone-type figures who patiently help us to see what is valuable in a practice. What of the people who made this possible without themselves participating in the practice? If Harry Caray deserves piety, what of the rich uncle who knew nothing of baseball but supported our activity by buying us season tickets every year? What of the therapist who treated our agoraphobia, which made going to the games possible? What, again, of the rich uncle who paid for this therapist? All of these people seem to be contributing, at least in the sense of making possible, our appreciation of baseball. Surely they too are owed thanks? Does this mean that they are objects of piety?

Our intuitions say no. Gratitude can and should be expressed in different ways. It is responsive to the nature of the gift and the kind of relationship that exists between the benefactor and the beneficiary. A stranger who buys you a drink is owed something completely different from the friend who has comforted you in a time of trouble. There is a sense in which the uncle who bought you season tickets and the father who shared his love of the game both have contributed to your love of baseball. But the latter gift is more intimately connected with the kind benefit we are discussing. We have previously noted that many people hold that the things we care about and find worthwhile are connected with our practical identity. Therefore, there is a sense in which these cicerone-type figures have shared themselves. In successful cases, something important about their identity is now part of ours. This is not so in the case of enablers, like the rich uncle.

No doubt, there is a virtue that concerns proper expressions of gratitude to enablers. Since we have admitted a (somewhat) idiolectic use of "piety," perhaps we should just allow both types of people to be objects of piety? We demur on two grounds. First, even if our term is idiolectic, we hope that we are successfully pointing to a phenomenon, perhaps without a name, that is sufficiently recognizable so that we can have reliable intuitions about it. Insofar as we do, transmitters or mediators and not enablers are the objects of piety. Second, and more importantly, in the second section of this paper, we will argue that piety is important for flourishing. When we do this, we will appeal to the importance of giving thanks to the transmitters of the worthwhile. The enablers will play no role in the argument and are therefore better left for another virtue.

By restricting piety to agents who have intended to benefit us, we rule out some things that are sometimes thought to be objects of piety in a wide sense. Consider, for example, feeling pious towards nature. In a 2015 interview, the poet Mary Oliver talks about how she was saved from her abusive childhood by poetry and "the beauty of the world".[12] Although she doesn't use the term "piety," Oliver's sentiment is a pious one. Those who were supposed to raise and teach her failed;

instead, she got her appreciation of worthwhile objects from nature itself. Nature, she seems to imply, raised her. Shouldn't it be an object of her piety? According to our account, nature cannot be the proper object of piety because, intending nothing towards us, it cannot be an appropriate target of gratitude. Of course, if one believes that nature is an agent who intends towards us, then piety towards it becomes possible.

Amongst gratitude theorists, there is some controversy over whether gratitude is dyadic (X feels grateful for Y) or triadic (X feels grateful to Z for Y).[13] A similar division between dyadic and triadic understandings of piety can be made. Dyadic piety need have no person to whom we are grateful. Under such a dyadic conception of piety, one could be pious for nature (though not *to* nature). We are persuaded by Manela's recent criticism of the dyadic conception of gratitude and believe that similar arguments would apply to dyadic piety.[14] However, here, we just note that in the second half of this paper we will be arguing that piety is important for a flourishing life. The kind of piety that we hold to be essential is triadic. We therefore restrict our attention to the triadic understanding of piety.

In our experience of presenting this paper, a number of objections arise at this point. Since we have argued that we may owe piety towards people who have raised us in ways that we come to reject, could piety be owed in cases of abusive upbringings? What about cases in which a person has raised us well enough, but without love? Even in cases of good-enough upbringings, our account seems to invite further questions. Supposing that most upbringings do indeed confer the benefit of a sense of the worthwhile, what exactly does this mean for those who have received it? Do we owe some sort of obedience to the agents who have shaped us? Can we not criticize them if they do evil? Must children spend the rest of their lives thanking their parents? Does gratitude toward gods mean that we ought to spend all of our lives in their service? Once we have thanked our parents, coaches, literary ancestors, etc., have we thereby reciprocated and brought ourselves into a state of equality

with them? These are obviously important questions that any account of piety such as ours must answer, and in what follows we will try to address some of them. It is important to note, however, that many of these questions are the very ones that arise for the wider virtue of gratitude. With regard to benefactors in general, it is difficult to know how to behave when they have both benefited and harmed us, how to behave if they have benefited us but do not care for us, and whether respect for their wishes is part of gratitude. Here we will focus on the two objections that seem to pertain most particularly to piety: we need to explain 1) why our account does not entail that perpetual obedience is owed to our transmitters, and 2) why piety is not owed to an abusive parent.

In explaining 1) and 2), it is important to observe that the structural inequality in relationships of piety is permanent. According to Kant, *all* benefactor/beneficiary relationships are permanently structurally unequal.[15] No reciprocation can ever restore both parties to a state of pre-benefit equality because the benefactor is always and importantly the first party to give. The reciprocating beneficiary can never erase this fact, no matter how splendid the thanks. Whether Kant is right about this or not, he is certainly right when it comes to transmitters of a sense of the worthwhile. What they did for us, we can never do for them. When it comes to these unequal relationships, gratitude looks quite different than it does in relationships of equality. While gratitude in both kinds of relationships involves recognition and appreciation, the recognition and appreciation of unequal relationships must also recognize and appreciate the inequality. In particular, it must recognize that attempts to repay the debt in order to establish relations of equality are out of place. For example, the benefits that parents confer upon us are poorly understood as the opening moves in a budding friendship or as the establishment of a "relationship of moral community . . . consisting of mutual respect and regard".[16] In fact, to treat parents in such a way would be more like displaying ingratitude than gratitude.

The claim that our structurally unequal relation to transmitters of the sense of the worthwhile is a permanent one may seem disturbing, especially in light of the worry that all gifting and giving of favors can be a way of asserting control and establishing relationships of inequality. Gratitude probably is a *pro tanto* reason to give way to the wishes of a benefactor. To give way in this spirit, however, is not the same as obedience. And the duration of a reason is not the same as its strength. The fact that considerations of piety never go away does not mean that these reasons are always overriding. One might rightly refuse a service to one's parents for any number of reasons – for example, if the service blocked the practice of what one takes to be worthwhile. This does not change the fact, however, that we can never, through our actions, bring ourselves into a state of equality with our transmitters of the sense of the worthwhile.

When one imagines an abusive parent, a permanent state of gratitude seems more like a curse than the basis of a virtue. Does our account suggest that we owe gratitude toward such an abuser if she also mediated or transmitted the worthwhile? Our answer is that a parent who is abusive because she treats the child instrumentally is not intending the child's simple welfare, much less trying to bring her to a sense of the worthwhile. Since gratitude is for intended benefits, such a parent would not be owed any gratitude. The harder case is the mixed parent, who both intends and succeeds in imparting a sense of the worthwhile while also hurting the child, perhaps to the point of scarring her for life. One may say that any abuse is a sign that a parent never truly intended benefit. If this were so, then the apparently mixed case turns into a case of pure abuse. However, we doubt that this is always true. Parents, teachers, coaches, etc. are all capable of having mixed motives towards their charges. In our account, gratitude is called for. But this need not mean that it is the only thing one should feel.

In some cases, it may be difficult to disentangle the benefit from the injury. Suppose, for example, that a parent or coach thinks that the worthwhileness of an activity cannot be understood

without undergoing some suffering for its sake. Coach Sarah thinks that practicing through the pain is what it takes to understand the meaningfulness of ballet. Parent Tony thinks that the painfulness of sitting still for a few hours is an important part of attending church. In these cases, the suffering is not conceived as a necessary evil but as part of the attainment of the sense of the worthwhile. If the child comes to agree with the parent or coach about the worthwhileness of the activity, and even about the importance of the suffering in attaining this, our claim that gratitude is owed seems quite plausible. But what about cases where the child never comes to see the meaningfulness of the activity? From this point of view, the suffering was entirely meaningless and the parent's efforts just seem like cruelty. Is gratitude really plausible in such cases?

Such cases raise important questions about the relationship between suffering and worthwhile activities. While it is true that the capacity to take pleasure in an activity is crucial to understanding its point, the harsh parent and the coach are also correct insofar as they believe that no one gets to the point of taking pleasure in a practice if, from the beginning, she is guided exclusively by pleasure. But this thought can easily be mistaken for a closely related but pernicious one, viz., that suffering is itself a sign that something is good or, as Thomas Paine put it, "it is dearness only that gives every thing its value".[17] So the ungrateful child has a point too. In practice, it may be difficult for an adult looking back at her childhood to decide whether the harshness of a parent or coach truly aimed at her good, especially since a capacity for endurance is useful for all kinds of practices. But forcing a child to stand still in a corner, or to have only a single grape for lunch, on the grounds that it will be good for their practice of mathematics or ballet seems more like abuse than a meaningful, but unpleasant part of a practice.

All of this just means that what is owed in complicated cases depends a lot on the details of the case. This is true for other virtues as well. Indeed, it is precisely in such matters that virtues are needed. Argument can tell us that benefactors who transmitted a sense of the worthwhile to us

remain our benefactors, even if they are also, or turn into, something else. The virtue must tell us what to do in specific cases.

Section 2: Important Virtues

Once a feature of the normative landscape has been correctly specified, a further question can arise as to the importance of this feature in human life. Christine Swanton has argued *against* the tendency to designate certain virtues as important. For Swanton, those who engage in the exercise that we are about to engage in are open to the charge that they fail to see how even seemingly small virtues pervade the "warp and woof" of everyday life. On her view, "moral virtues are legion." [18] Swanton's inclusivism is particularly threatening to a project such as ours: the specification of a neglected virtue. Perhaps piety as we define it is indeed a virtue, but merely one among thousands. Then we should probably have focused our efforts on virtues that people already care about and know by name.

But many virtue theorists recognize a distinction between important and unimportant virtues, although philosophers have identified this with different terminology, e.g., cardinal virtues, core virtues, or basic virtues.[19] A broad consensus says that carving up the normative landscape well consists in more than figuring out which considerations are relevant to our ethical deliberations. These considerations also need to be distinguished according to some understanding of importance. There is little consensus, however, on how to make these distinctions. In contrast to ideas of importance such as a virtue's cross-cultural ubiquity, or its interrelatedness with other virtues (especially as a kind of gateway), in what follows we adopt a roughly eudaimonist conception of importance according to which a virtue is important if it is indispensable for a central good of

human life.[20] Important vices, like weeds in a garden, choke off the possibilities for the enjoyment of these core goods.

Consider the virtues of justice and moderation and their relationship to the central goods of friendship and meaningful work. An argument for the importance of moderation might proceed by showing that someone who would always rather have chocolate and a nap can hardly be expected to develop the capacity for concentration that is required for any kind of meaningful work, and an argument for the importance of justice might proceed by showing that someone who always takes the larger share for herself can hardly be expected to have friends. If successful, these arguments would establish the importance of these virtues by showing their indispensability to the central goods of friendship and meaningful work. Importance could be denied by showing that these central goods could be attained in other ways or by denying that the central good is really all that central.

In what follows, we will argue that the virtue of piety is necessary for the central good of having a proper relationship to one's progeny in the widest sense. Above, we discussed those thanks to whom we have the various worthwhile practices that we have. But we too can pass along an appreciation of a worthwhile practice to others. Our progeny in the widest sense are those for whom *we* are an object of piety. Our children are probably our progeny, but so is anyone whose practical identity and sense of the worthwhile has been shaped by our efforts. What we will argue, then, is that having the proper emotio-cognitive response to those who have shaped us is necessary for having the proper emotio-cognitive response to those we intend to shape. Although some lives may be able to do without any progeny whatsoever (Aristotle's self-sufficient, happy contemplator at the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics* comes to mind) we take it that for most of us a flourishing life involves having some sort of progeny. This is what might be meant by "touching others people's lives for the better," which is commonly believed to be a central part of a worthwhile life.

Considerations from the first section suggest a quick argument for the indispensability of piety. We have argued that gratitude is the proper response to the objects of piety. But perhaps there is a master virtue concerning gratitude (call it *gratitude*) for all kinds of benefactors. We might even generalize further. Gratitude itself might be a species of a still bigger virtue of appreciativeness: the disposition to respond appropriately to all kinds of received goods, whether intentionally conferred or not.[21] It is natural to think that these master virtues are more likely candidates for indispensability. Perhaps the way to go would be to argue that gratitude or appreciativeness is indispensable for some central good, and then argue that piety inherits its indispensability from the master virtue. Indeed, an argument for the indispensability of these master virtues seems readily to suggest itself. Since so much of what is good is received rather than created by us, and so much of what good we create is built upon what we receive, it is hard to see how a hypothetical virtue of appreciativeness could fail to be indispensable. When we think about how we respond to concrete instances of ingratitude towards other human benefactors, gratitude in general also seems indispensable. What parent doesn't teach her child to say "thank you" for his present? The picture of an adult who receives and enjoys a gift without acknowledging a giver is always disturbing.

Perhaps some such argument for the indispensability of gratitude or appreciativeness could be made to work, and then piety would be indispensable as an important part of the indispensable master virtue. We do not pursue this strategy for two reasons. First, it seems unlikely that species virtues necessarily inherit their indispensability from their genus virtues. Moderation, for example, is a canonically indispensable virtue; this does not mean, however, that it is indispensable for someone with a sweet tooth, who is otherwise moderate, to get control of herself in that area on pain of loss of some central human goods. This suggests that if piety is indispensable for a flourishing life it will have to be so for its own particular reasons.

The second reason that we have focused specifically on piety rather than the wider virtues of gratitude or appreciativeness is that, presumably, the wider the virtue the less likely it is to actually be a unified character trait. A sign that a virtue is a unified character trait is that people tend not to have the virtue piecemeal; displaying the virtue in one area tends to make it more likely that the virtue is displayed in other areas. Take courage, for example. Courage is something that some people are better at as a whole. If black bear courage was completely unrelated to snake courage, or grizzly bear courage, then we would be hard pressed to think of courage as an interesting virtue. If the virtue fractured in this way, we might start to look more narrowly to see if one of the species virtues maintained its unity. The more specific we get the more likely for people to display the virtue across the whole, narrower field. Conversely, if we expand the virtue of courage to include responding correctly to all stressful situations, or at the limit to responding appropriately in any situation whatsoever, then we will be less likely to find that excellence in one area of the virtue tends to go together with excellence in all the others.

If this is right, then widening our claim to be about gratitude or appreciation might make it easier to argue for its indispensability. But we might lose sight of the phenomenon or fall into the trap of trying to reason about something that isn't even a unified virtue. Indeed, David Carr has argued that the wider virtue of gratitude is not focused enough to be a virtue at all and has recommended narrowing it down exclusively to piety.[22] While we think that gratitude may well count as a virtue too, Carr's arguments show that wider isn't always better.

While moderation, justice, and probably also a general virtue concerning gratitude seem indispensable because they are developmentally early virtues, so to speak, piety is developmentally late. Looked at from the point of developmental psychology, the vices of immoderation and injustice look like characteristics of childhood. The immoderate adult basically looks like a child. Most of us understand we should help to bring children out of this realm so that they can experience

higher, more adult, or more specifically human forms of pleasure. Seeing yourself as one person among equally real others is clearly preparatory for meaningful social activities, and getting a handle on our desire for physical pleasure is clearly preparatory for distinguishing the merely pleasant from the worthwhile.

Unlike moderation, however, piety is not a prerequisite for the sense of the worthwhile. In fact, the opposite is true. Since the virtue of piety is one of giving acknowledgment and thanks for our sense of the worthwhile, it applies to individuals who have already achieved such a sense. From the point of view of developmental psychology, piety is not a virtue necessary to escape moral childhood, but, if anything, the virtue necessary to escape moral adolescence. One of the consequences of this fact is that the picture of impiety will not be as obviously ugly as the pictures of immoderation or injustice that one can sketch in a few sentences. The impious person will be able to have friends, for example, and meaningful work. In fact, because there is something beautiful about adolescence—precisely its focus on the new, on what is possible without regard for the past—it can be hard to see the ugliness of impiety in adults. A grown child is easily detectable. A person frozen in adolescence can pass herself off tolerably well.

Section 3: The Importance of Piety

The previous section concluded with quick arguments for the necessity of moderation and justice. We need moderation in order to have meaningful work; we need justice in order to have friends. Since our more detailed argument for the importance of piety will follow the same model, it is worth pausing in order to be clear about the nature of these arguments.

The argument about justice worked by considering the unjust worldview. We inferred that a core belief of this vice, a belief that has taken root in the agent's emotio-cognitive worldview, might

be expressed by the sentence: "I am not one person among many equals." Finally, we argued that this belief is incompatible with the beliefs required for true friendship. If the argument were expanded, we would have to consider cases in which friendships seem to obtain between people who reject equality. One possibility might be that the agent suspends her belief, as if by magic, in one other person's case. But another possibility is that the inegalitarian belief (which cannot be dislodged in a person with the vice) exerts its influence upon the "friendship," distorting it in some way. The argument may seem psychological but is actually conceptual. A certain activity, friendship, can only be properly engaged in if the agent has certain core beliefs that are central to the virtue of justice.

In this section, we will make a similar conceptual argument about piety. We will identify some core beliefs associated with the vice of impiety and show that these are incompatible with the activity of relating to one's progeny in the widest sense. In cases in which the impious person appears to have progeny, a closer examination will show that the character of the relationship is distorted.

One motive for piety is alethic since, like an ordinary ingrate, the impious person fails to recognize something that is true. She takes as her own doing, or perhaps as merely good luck, what is in fact a conferred gift. But alethic motivations, even about central matters, are not sufficient to make a virtue important since it seems that many truths can be safely ignored.

Instead, in this section we will argue that there is a tight connection between gratitude and liberality. In the case of piety, this means that there is a tight connection between it and the ability to become an object of another's piety in turn. Impiety impairs a person's ability to comfortably inhabit the role of parent, teacher, coach, therapist, novelist, or other kinds of progenitor.

Other philosophers have likewise found a tight link between gratitude and liberality. Aristotle makes the virtue of generosity concern both the giving and the getting of money.[23]

Similarly, Kant claims that "ingratitude destroys the moral incentive to beneficence in its very principle".[24] The reference to a "moral incentive" suggests that Kant is here referring to a deep connection at the level of universality rather than the platitude that gratitude makes beneficence easier. Neither Aristotle nor Kant say much to explain their claims, however.

We hold that when someone's failure to recognize the efforts of cultural transmitters rises to the level of a character flaw, they will not themselves be able to become a transmitter. While it is possible, and even inevitable, to fail on particular occasions to recognize the efforts of others, having a character flaw in this area means that this failing is not just accidental but is somehow connected to one's emotio-cognitive worldview. So what is the worldview of the impious person like? Piety involves recognizing that we have been intentionally shaped and benefited by others when it comes to our ability to find something worthwhile. To deny this would be to assume that our capacity to recognize worthwhile objects and activities was either our own work, given to us by nature, or given to us unintentionally. For some people, presumably like Mary Oliver, this may in fact be true. The impious case, however, is the case where it is not. The impious person stably and mistakenly takes credit for his own sense of what is worthwhile, mistakenly attributes it to nature, or mistakenly assumes that someone's efforts were accidental rather than intentional. What's more, as a character flaw, the mistake is not one that an ordinary person would make because (as Aristotle said) ordinary people are neither virtuous nor vicious (but vacillate between continence and incontinence). Because of a character flaw, an impious person consistently chooses not to see or willfully misreads evidence that points to her debt of thanks.

Can we imagine what it would look like for Harry Caray, or some other cultural transmitter, to possess such a character flaw? Could Harry Caray make sense of his own activity if he thought that the capacity to appreciate baseball was inborn—something you either had or you didn't have? Or suppose he thought that while all of us are born with the potential to appreciate baseball,

everyone is on his own when it comes to actualizing this potential. Other people can at best display what baseball means to them. But their appreciation is essentially unshareable, with each display no different than an inexplicable and inarticulate shout of enthusiasm. Or, finally, suppose Caray thought that while an appreciation of baseball can be taught, those who teach it rarely do so out of care for those who they are teaching. So baseball is passed from one generation to the next by cynical play callers merely trying to pick up a paycheck, or feigning their love of the game because it boosts the ratings. Rather than aiming to transmit a cultural practice, with its own cultivated pleasures, they look for whatever sparks cheap enthusiasm in the ignorant majority and pattern their own responses accordingly. If he had possessed any of these worldviews, it is hard to see what sense Harry Caray could have made of what he was doing. In the first two scenarios, his efforts to share his appreciation of the game of baseball are totally futile. In the third scenario, in which he is just feigning interest, he could not see baseball itself as very worthwhile. A person who lives in a world where the efforts of others are not important for one's success immediately jeopardizes the ability to see his own efforts as important for the success of others. Such an emotio-cognitive worldview prohibits anything but a fatalistic participation in the practice of transmission.

This argument extends not just to those who are consciously committed to transmission. We have argued earlier that participants in a practice likely see their actions as part of this practice and must see their efforts as impacting the future of the practice The bizarre alternative would be to see oneself as calling the last game of baseball or as writing the last novel. Or perhaps, it is just impossible without adopting a sort of fatalistic resignation. Apparently, the futurist poet Vasilisk Gnedov attempted just such a thing in his "Poem of the End" which was a blank page and was supposed to be performed with a "silent gesture of resignation."[25] The usual, not fatalistic case, involves practitioners seeing their participation as part of something and affecting those who come after. An impious person cuts herself off from recognizing her own influence.

It might be thought that there is an interesting exception to this general argument. Above, we tried to accommodate the intuition that piety is owed not just to those whose views of the worthwhile we have adopted but also those whose views of the worthwhile we have discarded. But one might think that piety towards these agents can be safely ignored without compromising our ability to become transmitters (or participants) ourselves. Couldn't I gratefully acknowledge my piano teachers and happily attempt to pass on my love of the piano while ignoring all my parents' misguided attempts to get me to appreciate baseball? While we agree that cultural participation is here possible, it will be distorted. When a person selectively appreciates her benefactors her own forward-looking efforts will be problematically rigid.

To see this last point, it is useful to imagine a little more fully what it looks like for someone with no piety towards her own transmitters to pass along a practice. Imagine a teacher of ethical philosophy whose own philosophic mentor in college was a utilitarian. Later, in graduate school, she comes to emphatically reject utilitarianism in favor of deontology. Without piety, she considers that her old college professor merely led her into error—when in fact, say, it was thanks to her old professor's devoted comments on papers, long hours of one-on-one conversation, and even friendship that this person began to seriously devote herself to philosophy at all. Now consider how this impious deontologist relates to her own best student. She will have trouble seeing the value of her own devoted activity unless her student comes to agree with her. Such a teacher (or parent, or coach, etc.) will have a difficult time letting her students (or children, or players, etc.) grow in their own ways. Lacking the resources to understand her own activity as beneficial apart from the specific conception of the good she intends to pass along, she will tend to dogmatism, favoring students who she sees as potential disciples. It is easy to see that it is inappropriate for a violin teacher to write off her student as a failure because she prefers Bartok to Beethoven. If we are right it is also inappropriate to write the student off if she switches to the cello or even baseball.

A vice is associated with an emotio-cognitive distortion. Her own vice distorts her ability to appreciate that philosophy, or any practice, itself is a good apart from its particular doctrines. Alternatively, we could say that she sees philosophy only as a solo inquiry into truth and not as a collective human endeavor of which she is a part. Piety would allow her to appreciate that any candidate for a worthwhile activity contributes to the student's sense of the worthwhile even if the student rejects philosophy entirely for the sake of poetry, psychology, baseball, or farming.

Conclusion

We have argued that piety is an important virtue by arguing that it is indispensable for having progeny in the widest sense. To do this, we have argued that the sphere of piety includes not only the divine, but all of those thanks to whose intentional efforts we acquired the sense that some activities are worthwhile even when they are not be pleasant. We have argued that piety consists in gratitude towards those transmitters, even if we reject the specific practices that these agents attempted to transmit to us. A failure to feel this gratitude makes it difficult for a person to spend herself forward by transmitting a sense of the worthwhile to others, or she may do so in a distorted way. Piety is an important virtue because contributing to the future of a practice is part of cultural participation, and because for most people their lives are good and meaningful (flourish) when they pass along something worthwhile, that is constitutive of their own practical identities, to others who come after them. Therefore, it turns out that for living a worthwhile life it is often not enough to have a sense of the worthwhile. We must also be able to express gratitude to those thanks to whom we possess this sense.

References

[1] See Alasdair Macintyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 1999).
[2] See David Carr, "Varieties of Gratitude," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 47, no. 1-2 (2013), p. 27.
[3] See Paul Woodruff, *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 57-58.
[4] See Harry Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 11.
[5] See Alasdair Macintyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, Indiana: Univerisity of Notre Dame Press, 1984), chapter 14.
[6] The three philosophers who have attempted to draw these boundaries are: A. John Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligations* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 157-83; Terrance McConnell, *Gratitude* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1993), pp. 13-45; Tony Manela, "Gratitude," in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab, 2015).
[7] For philosophers who have defended the idea that a benefit need not be intentionally given, see Patrick Fitzgerald, "Gratitude and Justice," *Ethics* 109, no. 1 (1998); Sean McAleer, "Propositional Gratitude," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (2012). For philosophers who have held that the benefit must be intentionally given see Fred R. Berger, "Gratitude," *Ethics* 85, no. 4 (1975), p. 299; Simmons, op cit., p. 178; McConnell, op cit., 44; Robert Roberts, "The Blessings of Gratitude," in *The Psychology of Gratitude*, ed. Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 62; Manela, op cit.
[8] For example, see Jerrold Levinson, "Refining Art Historically," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 47, no. 1 (1979).
[9] Jordan himself seemed to recognize exactly that by choosing David "Skywalker" Thompson to present him at his hall of fame ceremony. Given the affinity of their games, Jordan seems to be honoring Thompson's playing style as an ancestor and inspiration to his own. While he recognized the influences of many, he choose David Thompson for "what he represented." (https://onbeing.org/programs/mary-oliver-listening-to-the-world-jan2019/)
[10] See, for example, McConnell, op cit., p. 42.
[11] Michael Slote even holds that piety is a vice. Michael Slote, "Obedience and Illusion," in *Having Children: Philosophical and Legal Reflections on Parenthood*, ed. Onora O'Neill and William Ruddick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).
[12]Interview downloaded at (https://onbeing.org/programs/mary-oliver-listening-to-the-world-jan2019/.
[13] McAleer and Fitzgerald defend dyadic notions. See McAleer, op cit., and Fitzgerald op. cit. Philosophers who defend a triadic understanding include Fred Berger, op. cit., p. 85; Roberts, op. cit.; McConnell op. cit.; Liz Gulliford, Blaire Morgan, and Kristján Kristjánsson, "Recent Work on the Concept of Gratitude in Philosophy and Psychology," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 47, no. 3 (2013); Tony Manela, "Gratitude and Appreciation," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 53 (2013).
[14] Ibid.
[15]See Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, in *Practical Philosophy* ed. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood, trans. Mary Gregor(New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 6: 445.
[16] See Berger, op cit., p. 302.
[17] See Thomas Paine, "The American Crisis," in *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, ed. Philip Foner (Binghamton, N.Y.: The Citadel Press, 1945), p. 50.
[18] See Christine Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 71.
[19] For philosophers who use the terminology "cardinal", "non-cardinal", see Julia Annas, "Aristotle and Kant on Morality and Practical Reasoning," in *Aristotle, Kant, and the Stoics: Rethinking Happiness and Duty*, ed. Stephen Engstrom and Jennifer Whiting (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); David Carr, "The Cardinal Virtues and Plato's Moral Psychology," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 38, no. 151 (1988); David S. Oderberg, "On the Cardinality of the Cardinal Virtues," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 7, no. 3 (1999); Daniel Russell, *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2009); Michael Slote, "Utilitarian Virtue," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13 (1988). Peterson and Seligman use the term "core virtues." (C. Peterson and MEP Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).) Sometimes the phrases "basic virtues" or 'important virtues" are used. See S. M. Gardiner, "Aristotle's Basic and Non-Basic Virtues" *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 20 (2001); Martha Nussbaum, "Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13 (1988); Neera Badhwar, "The Limited Unity of Virtue," *Nous* 30 (1996).
[20] For the view that a virtue's importance has to do with cross-cultural ubiquity, see Nussbaum, op. cit., 36. For the idea of a virtue as a gateway to other virtues see, Oderberg, op. cit., 306.
[21] Thomas Aquinas does something similar when he considers and rejects the possibility that there is only one virtue that concerns what we owe to others, viz., justice. Instead, he argues that there are various virtues for various kinds of debt (*Summa Theologiae* I-II, question 60, article 3). Furthermore, it is encouraging for our paper to note Aquinas' use of "piety" to name the virtue that concerns our debts to parents and country, while he uses "religion" to name a separate virtue by which we pay our debt to god, and "gratitude" for a virtue that concerns what we owe to "benefactors."

However, Aquinas' treatment of "piety" seems incomplete. He must have some feature in mind, something that parents and countries share such that they should be grouped together under the same virtue. What is that feature? Could it not, as we believe, apply to other kinds of objects as well (such as gods, literary traditions, therapists, coaches, etc.)? Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for drawing our attention to this passage.

[22] See Carr 2013, op. cit, pp. 22-26.

[23] See Aristotle 1119b25.

[24] See Kant op. cit, 6: 455.

[25] Thanks to _____ for this example. See Gerald J. Janececk, "Futurism," in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger, et al. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 447.