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## **A World Where We Can Pay It Forward: The Case for Promoting Transitive Reciprocity**

**Abstract:** We are ever the beneficiaries of favors we can never repay. Sometimes justice demands that we find ways to honor these unrequited favors anyway, by passing on the favor to others. This is sometimes referred to as transitive reciprocity, upstream reciprocity, or “paying it forward.” This paper explores ways in which individuals, communities, and governments might be obligated not just to pass on favors received, but also foster institutions and practices that encourage the passing on of favors. The paper illustrates the idea with reference to environmental and cultural goods passed on to future generations.

**Keywords:** reciprocity; transitive reciprocity; upstream reciprocity; intergenerational justice; environmental ethics; culture; identity politics

(7,617 words)

### **I. Introduction**

On his 40<sup>th</sup> birthday, a son presents his parents with a check for \$250,000 dollars. “What’s this for, son?” asks the father. The son replies, “I’m repaying you for the cost of raising me, plus a little, you know, because I appreciate everything you’ve done for me<sup>1</sup>. We’re even now.” For many, the son has misunderstood something important about his relationship with his parents. It is not just that cash is the wrong currency with which to repay what he owes his parents. The expenditures his parents incurred in raising him were themselves the result of a debt that they had – both to the child they were responsible for bringing into the world and to their own parents, to whom they owed some part of their own upbringing. If he wants to settle his debt to his parents, he should try to be as good a parent to his own children as they were to him – or, if he does not have any children, he should find another member of a younger generation (a niece or nephew, a student, a neighborhood youth) to mentor. This is not a debt he can settle with cash.

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<sup>1</sup> The average cost of raising a child born in 2012 to a middle income family in the United States is estimated to be \$241,080, according to a report by the United States Department of Agriculture. Expenditures of Children by Families, 2013. USDA Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion, Miscellaneous Publication Number 1528-2012 <http://www.cnpp.usda.gov/Publications/CRC/crc2012.pdf>

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Transitive reciprocity (sometimes referred to as upstream reciprocity) is the idea that there are circumstances when one should settle a debt by conferring a benefit on a third party. In some cases, it is the only way. African Americans cannot repay Martin Luther King or Abraham Lincoln for fighting on their behalf, but that does not mean they cannot do them justice. In fact, the failure to acknowledge and pass on the lessons and legacy of the American Civil Rights movement would count as a moral failure.

Assuming that we have to reciprocate transitively sometimes, the question presents itself as to whether this is a principle to be honored or also one to be promoted, when possible. Philip Pettit draws the distinction as follows: “With a value like that of being peaceable I promote it if I do whatever promises the maximal realization of the value; this may include not being peaceable myself, as in fighting the war to end all wars. I honor that value on the other hand if I choose options that exemplify it, being peaceable myself, even if this means that there is less peace overall.” (Pettit 1989, 115) If transitive reciprocity must simply be honored then we must raise our children well, do what we can to preserve and improve the ecosystems we have inherited, contribute to our communities roughly in proportion to the benefits they bestowed upon us, and enjoin others to do the same<sup>2</sup>. Few doubt that sometimes what we should do is reciprocate.

On the other hand, there is a question concerning the reasons why we should reciprocate (transitively or not). Do we reciprocate because a world where we reciprocate is in a better state when we reciprocate or do we reciprocate because that is, in some sense, the right thing to do, regardless of whether sometimes more reciprocation could follow if we do something else? If we

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<sup>2</sup> We can and probably should do more. But if we do more, it won't be because we honor the value of reciprocity.

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are consequentialists, we might think that sometimes what we should do is promote reciprocation even if that means that we, at some margin, reciprocate less ourselves. If transitive reciprocity is also a value to be promoted, then governments (as well as individuals and communities) have reasons to do more than just make sure that debts that should be settled transitively are, in fact, settled. (That is one way to promote reciprocity, but it's not the only possibility) In other words, we should not just pay it forward, but try and create social conditions conducive to paying it forward – whatever those are. This paper therefore defends the idea that when public decision makers consider how to settle their debts by paying it forwards, policies of “reciprocity promotion” might sometimes prove superior to policies of “reciprocity enforcement.”

## **II. Setting the Table: A Typology of Reciprocity**

People can reciprocate in at least two ways: forwards and backwards. *Symmetrical reciprocity* is the intuitive notion that individuals ought to pay back their benefactors. *Transitive reciprocity* is the notion that some kinds of benefits received ought to be instead (or in addition) passed forward to third parties (Schmidtz 2006). When children care for their elderly parents in return for the care they received as a child, they engage in symmetrical reciprocity. When they try to give their children advantages at least as great as those they received, they are engaged (and see themselves as engaged) in a kind of transitive reciprocity. Both types of reciprocity are ways of settling an account that is out of balance – a debt that individuals have acquired - and the moral imperative (or desirability) of engaging in reciprocity may properly be called a constraint on our actions (or at the very least a reason for acting). Duties of reciprocity are

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constraints because they tell us what to do in response to receiving a benefit – thus limiting our freedom in some ways<sup>3</sup>.

Though reciprocity is certainly a value to be honored wherever possible, it is also intelligible as a value to be promoted for the sake of the consequences it brings. Non-consequentialists are not the only ones who see the point of reciprocating. For one, societies where people reciprocate are better places to live than societies where people do not. Perhaps the easiest way to grasp this idea is to imagine what the world would be like if reciprocity were scarce. Imagine a world where favors were not returned, contributions were not acknowledged, and debts that could not be repaid were simply ignored. The lack of reciprocation is unattractive, but it also seems plausible to suggest that, *ceteris paribus*, this world would see fewer people fulfilling their duties, fewer people making valuable contributions, and fewer people granting favors. Social cooperation would seem to be impossible, absent norms of reciprocity. If every exchange had to be spelled out as an explicit contract, the costs of bargaining would quickly make many small but profitable exchanges prohibitively costly. So in addition to being an appropriate norm, reciprocity is a useful one.

Although intuitively we understand that a tendency to return kindness lubricates social relationships, research in social psychology, behavioral economics, and sociology confirms our intuitions by highlighting the ways in which the tendency to reciprocate plays a key role in sustaining the provision of public goods (Fehr et.al. 2000), maintaining social norms (Regan 1971), bargaining (Cialdini, et.al. 1975) and cooperative behavior in general (Tidd and Lochard

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<sup>3</sup> If transitive reciprocity acts in the way most people believe it does then we have the right (as power) to alter the duties of other individuals by unilaterally benefitting them. Recipients find their rights (as privileges) curtailed. They no longer have “no duty not to act.” Some scholars find it odd that their rights and duties can be altered without their consent (Waldron, 1988) Nozick would probably argue that benefits that are not accepted entail no enforceable obligation (1973, 93-95) but at this stage, the paper makes no claims about enforcement.

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1978; Cialdini 2001; Tsang 2006a). To borrow some jargon from economics, it appears as if the tendency to reciprocate lowers transaction costs between self-interested bargainers. The tendency to reciprocate seems to engender cooperation at relatively low cost, without the need for heavy handed governmental monitoring and enforcement mechanisms. Lawrence Becker sees this as a good reason to count the “disposition to make reciprocity a moral obligation” among the virtues. (Becker 1986)

Reciprocity therefore seems like a valuable tendency. If we want to promote it, we should not merely exhort people to reciprocate, but also have a care for the conditions that enable them to do more of it. Although the liberal tradition that dominates American political philosophy often focuses its attention on rights and duties and whether their concomitant coercive enforcement is warranted, many philosophers (including John Rawls) have had a care for the social norms that sustain liberal and democratic societies. Promoting norms is difficult however. The tendency to reciprocate depends not only on the performance of certain actions, but on the perception that those actions are properly motivated (McCullough et.al. 2001; Falk and Fischbacher 2006, Tsang 2007).

The strength of the moral obligation also seems to follow this structure. John Simmons proposes that obligations of gratitude are generated if five conditions are met: “

1. The benefit must be granted by the means of some special sacrifice
2. The benefit must not be granted unintentionally, involuntarily, or for disqualifying reasons.
3. The benefit must not be forced (unjustifiably) on the beneficiary against his will.
4. The beneficiary must want the benefit or 4a, it must be the case that the beneficiary would want the benefit if certain impairing conditions were corrected.
5. The beneficiary must not want the benefit not to be provided by the benefactor, or 5a, it must be the case that the beneficiary would not want the benefit not to be provided by the benefactor if certain impairing conditions were corrected.” (Simmons 1979, 178-179)

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Self-interested “speculation” in the reciprocity of others engenders fewer obligations than altruistically motivated behavior where no prior obligation to help existed. This is fairly consistent with the social science research on what causes feelings of gratitude and/or indebtedness. McCullough (2001) proposed that “gratitude is responsive to four types of information about the benefit-giving situation: (a) the benefit’s costliness to the benefactor, (b) its value to the beneficiary, (c) the intentionality with which it was rendered, and (d) the extent to which it was given without relational obligations to help.” (McCullough et.al. 2008) Tsang (2006b) found experimental evidence consistent with (a), (b), and (c).

Because actors must be properly motivated for feelings and obligations of gratitude to ensue, reciprocity is not likely to be easy to promote directly through inducement and punishment – the usual currency of legal institutions. If we want to use government to promote the capacity to reciprocate, the character dispositions that engender it, and social conditions that are favorable to it, we will probably have to do so more subtly and indirectly – for example, by promoting conditions that facilitate acts of reciprocity on the part of citizens. The value of reciprocity and knowledge that there are debts to settle will form part of the reason we are legislating, but the legislation itself may not have anything directly to do with reciprocation. If a magical tax reform could make us all \$1,000 dollars richer tomorrow without any concomitant decrease in government services, we would be more able to reciprocate backwards and forwards – but that policy need not be aimed at making us reciprocate. The fact that it would enable us to be better reciprocators could certainly form a (small) part of the reasons why we should endorse it (along with many other reasons no doubt).

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Perhaps inspired by Lawrence Becker (2005), David Schmitz (2006) gives a powerful example of how promoting reciprocity can involve more than just asking people to reciprocate. The disabled find it difficult to settle accounts because they sometimes lack the currency with which to pay their debts<sup>4</sup>. Asking them to reciprocate seems both churlish and unfair. Mandating it seems even worse. Enabling them to reciprocate however, seems like a much more promising response. If reciprocating is good, then anything that helps the disabled participate more fully in social exchanges ought to be celebrated and promoted. We can want to promote assistive technologies like wheelchairs, optical recognition software, prosthetics, or mood stabilizing drugs because we care about the disabled, of course, but also, secondarily, out of a concern for the value of reciprocity. Caring about justice means caring about the conditions under which everyone can pay their debts (do justice to one another). As a value, reciprocity can play a role in deciding between different sets of policies or political institutions. The ones where people are better able to return favors are more just – because they enable more people to do justice to one another.

We agree with Schmitz, Becker, and the researchers who show that reciprocity enhances people's psychological and social well-being. Places where people reciprocate are good places to live. We also agree that promoting reciprocity means doing more than reminding people they have a duty to settle their debts. However, the conceptual space articulated by Schmitz and Becker is lopsided. The table below makes this explicit:

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<sup>4</sup> This lack of "mastery" is associated with higher levels of depression among the disabled (Turner and Noh 1988)

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<b>Reciprocity</b>	Symmetrical	Transitive
As constraint	Return favors	Pass on favors
As value	Promote “favor returning”	?

Becker argues that social policy should be in part “aimed at restoring and sustaining a mutually advantageous level of reciprocal transactions.” (Becker 2005, 36) He says quite a bit about how to enable the disabled to become better reciprocators, but no immediate distinction is made between promoting transitive and symmetrical reciprocity (though both types are mentioned as fitting responses to debts). Schmidtz (2006) also appears to focus more on creating conditions that help us pay back favors (symmetrically), rather than paying them forward (transitively).

It seems to us that investing in the capacity to reciprocate transitively sometime requires different kinds of policies than investing in the capacity to reciprocate symmetrically and therefore that it is worth making the distinction more clearly. Moreover, investing in transitive reciprocity is a response to different sorts of political problems especially in the areas of intergenerational justice. Many of the debts we must settle “upstream” are the kinds we incur and repay collectively and in a diffuse manner, whereas the debts we must settle symmetrically, are most often the product of benefits targeted at us individually. Moreover, paying it forward is psychologically more difficult (the norm is not as self-reinforcing, since we have already received the benefit but must be relied upon to settle the debt) and therefore requires more aggressive support.

### **III. Defending Transitive Reciprocity as Value**

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There is one way in which transitive reciprocity seems less valuable than symmetrical reciprocity. Symmetrical reciprocity builds communities by encouraging and justifying an exchange of favors, which incentivizes the production of pro-social behavior. We have a strong incentive to engage in symmetrical reciprocity because it is fairly easy to “keep score.” We can punish non-reciprocators (or inadequate reciprocators) and reward good reciprocators because we know who they are – they are directly visible to us. In effect, the rules of symmetrical reciprocity are such that free riding is easy to monitor and punish. Favor for favor, harm for harm models of social interaction (so-called “Tit for tat” strategies in prisoner’s dilemmas) are both good at stimulating cooperation and deterring exploitation (Axelrod 2009) and prisoner’s dilemmas are at the heart of the problem of generating social cooperation. If we see some benefit in exchanging favors, then symmetrical reciprocity is a norm that helps us get ahead without enabling others to take advantage.

Transitive reciprocity seems less likely to promote good behavior. The types of favors that are “passed forward” are by their nature the kinds that are impossible or inappropriate to return to sender. This constraint on transitive reciprocity makes it a poor incentive to do anything. The egoist understands that he can be better off if it becomes known that he returns favor for favor and harm for harm. On the other hand, the egoist’s transitive reciprocation is unlikely to benefit him somewhere down the line unless there is some external mechanism at play that makes him confident that his pro-social transitive reciprocity will “come back around” at some point. If transitive reciprocity cannot be as strong a motivation for doing favors, does it thereby fail to promote good outcomes and therefore fail to be a value to be promoted? We said that a reason to promote symmetrical reciprocity as a value was that the norm seemed to

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encourage the production of useful behavior. If transitive reciprocity doesn't encourage as much in the way of good behavior, why promote it?

We still have reasons to want to live in a place where people pass on favors. The fact that the practice of passing on favors is harder to monitor and enforce than the practice of returning favors imposes constraints on how much we can require of people – no one should have to be the victim of excessive free riding – but it doesn't reduce the desirability of living in a society where favors are passed on (nor does it make it any less of an appropriate way to settle one's accounts). Especially if we view societies diachronically, as a multi-generational endeavor, then the desirability of promoting transitive reciprocity gains in salience. There are many people in the past whom we cannot thank for their contributions (or punish for the burdens they have left us). There are many people who will come onto the scene in the future who will be impacted by what we do, but to whom we are not accountable. Transitive reciprocity seems promising for addressing these sorts of asymmetries.

Because they fulfill different roles in our moral ecology, different strategies may be necessary to promote transitive and symmetrical reciprocity. Because of the potential for free-riding (the producer of the favor is not able to capture the full benefits of his or her actions) transitive reciprocity is more of a public good than symmetrical reciprocity, and public goods are generally more fertile terrain for government action. If transitive reciprocity is a value and practice that people want to see realized, but will not produce without some guarantees that others will shoulder their fair share, there appears to be a fairly strong prima facie case for coordination – governmental or other.

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There are, to be sure, non-governmental ways to enhance the desirability of paying it forward. Social entrepreneurs like the folks at the CouchSurfing project do try to create an esprit de corps among users<sup>5</sup>. The structure of their business model makes it difficult to receive many benefits without contributing and the values of the user community discourage free-riding – you have to host some people before you can claim to be hosted by other people in the CouchSurfing network. Alumni offices at universities invest considerable sums in fostering a group identity in the student body that encourages transitive reciprocity among future alumni and alumnae. In other words, the message to alumni is “Although you don’t know these current and future students, they are like you. Give to us so as to give them the same opportunities you received.” Alumni offices also invest in maintaining networks of professional graduates to help enrich alumni and alumnae – and thereby improve their ability to transitively reciprocate. Such networks can be a highly desirable reason for attending a particular university. Fostering a community spirit and providing so-called “selective incentives” to insiders in a diffuse network can promote transitive reciprocation without coercion. However, as we will see later, there are reasons to use more coercive coordination as well.

Though the social arrangements are more complicated, the reasons for caring about transitive reciprocity are similar to the ones we have for valuing symmetrical reciprocity. According to Schmitz (2006, 86-89), reciprocity diminishes our alienation from one another and contributes to our mutual recognition and affirmation of one another as partners in a cooperative venture. Transitive reciprocity does not exactly affirm a partnership since partnerships by their nature are more symmetrical. It does however affirm membership in

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<sup>5</sup> Many of the complaints and worries that users of these sites have is that this community spirit will erode over time or through commercialization.

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communities (like couch surfers and university alumni) and society. It enables people to take pride in being responsible and upstanding members of their communities by doing their part and knowing they have done it (thus providing the bases for self-esteem).

In addition to a social place, transitive reciprocity reaffirms our historical place. Passing on favors links the past to the future. It puts us at the center of a chain reaching back in time and stretching out into the future. A failure to act will cause the chain to collapse. Traditions, ecosystems, languages, religion, even jokes are passed on from one generation to the next (or lost) in this way. For example, passing on a cultural legacy lends continuity to common projects of value people see themselves as members of – families, communities, nations. This sense of historical place is much more central to transitive reciprocity than symmetrical reciprocity and helps establish it as a distinct set of reasons for acting.

#### **IV. Passing on the conditions for passing on benefits**

An area where transitive reciprocity has traditionally been proposed as a reason for action is justice between generations. Scholars of intergenerational justice have long put forth the idea of the *procellional metaphor*: that generations should pay forward debts to prior generations (Howarth 1992; Laslett and Fishkin 1992). However, these accounts seem to mostly understand transitive reciprocity as a constraint on action, and in particular as a constraint on the distribution of resources across generations. Current citizens (usually as a group) must refrain from polluting the environment (or clean it up) because they must pass on a level of natural capital at least equal to the one they received. Current citizens must preserve cultures and languages, again, because

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they owe a debt to past generations in these matters and they owe it to them to pass on the valuable aspects of their language and culture.

These concerns are separate and distinct from the egalitarian and distributive concern that generations are not equal in their capacity to harm one another (the current generation can do a lot to harm the prospects of future ones, future ones can do nothing to deter current ones). The concern for intergenerational equality and power imbalances raised by Barry (1983), Page (1983), Green (1977) or Glover, (1992) is important but it is not primarily concerned with honoring debts. In this instance transitive reciprocity provides a distinct set of reasons for acting for the benefit of the more distant future.

These distributive views run into a problem transitive reciprocity does not however: Derek Parfit's non-identity problem (1983). If we must "treat" future generations in some way, the problem of whom it is we are (mis-)treating rears its ugly head. How can the non-existent have rights against us any more than the potential lives in our ova or spermatozoa? In fact, since our acts will invariably affect the identities of whoever happens to be born by shifting ever so slightly the timing of conception, the very existence and identities of future people will be the product of our choices now. If we make choices that decrease the standard of living of whomever happens to be born 100 years from now, those who have to suffer from them will also owe their very existence to these bad choices. It seems hard to identify on what grounds they could complain, unless we make things so bad that it would truly have been better for them not to have existed at all. The choice for us, therefore, is not between one set of people at a certain level of welfare and the same set of people at a lower one, but one set of people at a certain level of welfare and an *entirely different set of people* at a lower one. Unless it is better not to be born, it

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is hard to see how we have harmed those people who actually do come into existence. (Parfit 1987, 363)

Transitive reciprocity gives us reasons to act on behalf of future generations that sidesteps this problem. The reasons we have for acting are not that some generation of unknown size and fluctuating composition will face some uncertain harm, but that we have received certain and tangible benefits from individuals or collectivities of a known size and composition and that we have an account to settle. On this view, we seek to establish enduring legacies, institutions, and standards of living not (just) for the sake of unknown future generations, but for the sake of honoring those who have come before us. The question of uncertain harm to uncertain people is side-stepped in favor of honoring a debt of definite size and scope.

Viewed merely as a constraint, transitive reciprocity runs into a different problem however. On the basis of received benefits, it can justify transmitting benefits to the next generation, but it is not clear that it does much to enable the next generation to pass to its successor. A concern for transitive reciprocation means not just that a certain level of environmental quality must be passed on (a measure of air quality, water purity, ecosystem diversity, etc.) but also that the next generation be capable of reciprocating onwards in the chain. It is not enough that we pass on the advantages that we inherited. We also have to enable our descendants to take advantage of these favorable conditions. On this broader view, we must educate our children to understand the value of the sacrifices that have been made on their behalf, give them the education to take advantage of these sacrifices, and bequeath them the financial resources and wisdom to pass them on to their own children<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Though reciprocity seems cold and calculating because of its focus on debts and repayment, actually promoting transitive reciprocity as a value requires something altogether more subtle and feeling. It requires us to transmit

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A thought experiment can help us see the added value of transitive reciprocity as a value over and above transitive reciprocity as a constraint. Imagine we have a choice between two policies (A and B). Both policies pass on some fixed amount of natural capital from one generation ( $g$ ) to the next ( $g+1$ ). Policy B, however, inevitably makes the generation after  $g+1$  (call it  $g+2$ ) vastly worse off. It will wreck their environment (through some time delayed genetic mutation, let's say). There is nothing generation  $g+1$  can do about it. Policy A, however, has no such consequences. It will be up to  $g+1$  to decide what to do. From the point of view of transitive reciprocity as a mere constraint, it's not clear at all that we have a reason to prefer policy A to policy B. Transitive reciprocity as a constraint tells us to pass on the benefits we have received to some third party. A and B both pass on the benefits received. However, if we must not only pass on some benefit, but care about the ability to reciprocate, then policy A seems vastly superior, since policy B cripples the ability of  $g+1$  to pass on the natural capital they receive.

It could be objected that in adopting policy B,  $g$  would not be in fact fulfilling their duties because part of what they have a duty to pass on is the ability to pass on natural capital – since that is what they received. To put it another way, the value of the natural capital in policy B is much lesser because it will not produce a stream of future benefits, the way the natural capital passed on under policy A does. Moreover, states of affairs with fewer options ( $g+1$  under policy B) are less valuable than states of affairs with more options ( $g+1$  under policy A). In response to this, it is by no means obvious that we always inherit the knowledge, technology, and organizational capacity to pass on the benefits we have received. Sometimes that knowledge needs to be developed/created in the face of new challenges. Second, and most importantly, this

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not so much a set of account ledgers (so much timber and hydrocarbons, this many species...) but a sense of place, history, understanding, caring, and duty that can't be easily quantified or captured in a formula.

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objection is only successful to the extent that it folds transitive reciprocity as a value back into transitive reciprocity as a constraint. In other words, it makes a hash of the distinction. The point of the thought experiment was to highlight that there was a distinction between the passing on some set of goods and passing on the conditions necessary for the continued production of such goods. To recast what we have received to be both a set of goods and the capacity to pass them one is to beg the question about what to do when these come apart.

Yet there is some use in distinguishing between having a good and having an ability, capacity, or tendency to produce that good. When the Americans and the Japanese brought World War II to Vanuatu they brought with them technologies that the Melanesian inhabitants of the island had never seen before, by ship and by plane. When they left, leaders of so-called cargo cults attempted to recreate the goods by emulating the behavior of the soldiers they met (waving landing signals on runways, carving headphones from wood and sitting in fabricated control towers) in the hopes that deliveries of goods would follow (Lindstrom, 1993). If we pass on environmental goods without skills to tend to them and reasons to care about them, then our children may enjoy its benefits for a time but end up merely emulating what we did, even as circumstances (like global warming, resource scarcity, population to land ratios, etc.) have radically changed.

In other words, making sure universities graduate enough environmental engineers, environmental economists, ecologists, or botanists is itself an environmental policy as much as mandating scrubber systems in coal plants or carbon emissions trading schemes. The latter policies make sure the air stays clean for the next generation, despite growth in production. The former make sure that the coming generations will be well-equipped to deal with challenges we do not yet clearly foresee – so that they can invent and install the next generation of

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environmental protections and pass on the goods we received from our parents to their descendants<sup>7</sup>.

Treating transitive reciprocity as a value rather than a constraint does not deny, of course, that we should reciprocate. It suggests that we should do more than merely pay it forward. We need to pay attention to sustaining the social and cultural processes that enable reciprocation (transitive and symmetrical). Setting an example by reciprocating and even being kind (because all transitive reciprocation requires a favor to start the chain) is no doubt part of the story, but, as in the example of the disabled, merely enjoining or requiring reciprocation is not always enough to get a lot of reciprocation.

What else can be done? Teaching history in high school and college helps give students a sense of their historical place – whose shoulders they stand on. Teaching ethics in business schools can help economic leaders achieve a better sense of their social place and membership in their communities. Promoting economic growth in underprivileged cultural and linguistic communities can enable those who might not have passed on languages and traditions for want of time or money to now do so. Avoiding policies that destroy social networks and social capital is also helpful (as well as encouraging those that facilitate the formation of such networks). The decline of friendly societies, fraternal orders, and lodges (like the Elks and Odd Fellows) during the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a result of the crowding out of their core functions by the state and the for profit sector is an example of tragedy of lost social capital (Beito 2000). It is not necessary to believe that on balance the rise of the welfare state was unjustified to acknowledge the losses of small-scale models of mutual aid and its concomitant decrease in a community's capacity to

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<sup>7</sup> In some cases, passing on the capacity to develop knowledge will also help us discover what needs to be preserved. We do not always know this merely because we happen to receive it.

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organize reciprocation. No doubt there are myriad more things that encourage or discourage individuals from settling their debts and appreciating their place in their communities and history. The key is to think in terms of processes that sustain the chain of obligation rather than just in terms of creating the next link.

## **V. Sustaining All-Purpose Goods: Cultural, Linguistic, Ethnic, and Religious Legacies**

In the last section, we highlighted how switching the focus from transitive reciprocity as constraint to transitive reciprocity as value tended to widen the scope of our obligations from encouraging or mandating individual acts of reciprocity to aiming at sustaining a web of enabling conditions. In this section, we focus on how thinking about transitive reciprocity as a value changes how we might discharge these obligations. We use cultural legacies and inheritance as a primary example.

People often acknowledge cultural, religious, linguistic, and ethnic debts. We would not be the persons we are without the culture that shapes our understanding of the world. Culture provides a “*system of meaning* that people use to manage their daily worlds” (Ross 1997). Without it we would be lost. Our cultural inheritance may be the single most important thing we pass on to our children. Cultural debts are difficult to settle, however. It’s often hard to know whom to thank for the norms that coordinate our behavior or the language that facilitates our daily transactions – including conceptual and philosophical investigations. Fortunately, we do not need to panic. We can settle our accounts by conforming to useful norms and transmitting them to others: children, immigrants, and anyone else in need of orientation in our community or society. In other words, we can reciprocate transitively.

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As a value, transitive reciprocity demands that we create conditions that enable individuals to discharge these debts. The change in emphasis may appear slight, but we believe it suggests some additional ways for meeting our obligations.

African Americans often believe that they must make their children aware of the sacrifices previous generations (particularly the Civil Rights generation) have made on their behalf. Jews and Germans feel strongly that one should not forget the holocaust and its lessons. Native Americans often feel as if they are swimming against the tide in passing on a language and traditions against an overwhelming background of English language media, schooling, and business.

There is nothing anyone can do on their own to make sure the Navajo language survives or the Civil Rights legacy lives on. If any individual fails to transmit their culture, the effect on the culture is negligible – but if enough people do not go to the trouble or if outside factors make it too hard, then many will shirk and the legacy will die. Culture therefore has at least some of the defining aspects of a public good – one person’s consumption doesn’t seem to diminish anyone else’s and (once you are within a cultural zone) it is hard to exclude anyone from the benefits.

Governments answer this collective action problem by funding projects aimed at preserving and spreading culture: museums, festivals, television shows, theater, opera, monuments, educational initiatives, art exhibits and the like<sup>8</sup>. The subsidy is an answer to a public goods problem but it is also the collective payment of a debt. By transmitting culture to

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<sup>8</sup> Naturally, governments and government officials have many different motives for supporting and implementing these programs - most of which have nothing to do with transitive reciprocity. The discussion here is intended to explore what might be morally required not what might motivate public officials.

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children and outsiders, we are passing on a benefit we have received and in so doing discharging an obligation. By reaffirming our cultural inheritance we are also reaffirming our membership in a community.

Cultures, like communities, are not monolithic however. Cultural legacies by their very nature are often contested. And cultures don't just provide meaning. They provide the contextual background against which disagreement and contestation can occur. (Scott 1985; Laitin 1988, 589) Languages evolve. The meaning attached to events may change. Not all of the coordinating norms we inherit are optimal, and some may well be quite pernicious. Yet when government attempts to discharge our collective debts (by funding a piece of art, a festival, a performance, or a speaker series) they are picking and choosing, as it were, which understandings are being honored and passed on. It cannot realistically reproduce the complexity of the legacy itself. The public good it needs to (re)produce is the forum for contestation – not any particular vision of what that forum should yield<sup>9</sup>.

If governments are to fund artistic projects commemorating civil rights battles (or civil war battles): whose perspective shall be adopted? And who shall make the decision? Even a benevolent committee composed of fair minded African Americans may be tempted to privilege one vision of the civil rights legacy over another. Or, due to lack of funds (not deliberate snubbing), they might simply ignore some important perspective. Even deliberative and democratic forums cannot always help individuals discharge their duties when the meaning of that duty is fundamentally contested. At best, those who have a minority view about what civil rights means will have found their tax contributions appropriated in service of a vision that - in

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<sup>9</sup> Of course, it (or its officials) will have an interest in the question.

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their mind - fails to discharge their duties. At worst, it teaches some sort of perversion to their children and others – distorting an important legacy and impoverishing its meaning.

This might be a non-ideal, but permissible state of affairs. After all, resources are limited. But perhaps there is a subtler way to do justice to our culture. Creating conditions propitious to individuals discharging their transitive duties of reciprocity does not require taking a side in contentious matters. Governments do not need to ham-fistedly create public art supervision committees or prop up mediocre television productions with themes vaguely in tune with goals it seeks to promote. Instead, governments might provide forums and resources that can be used by anyone to pass on their heritage: access to community centers, access to libraries, access to public spaces, tax breaks for cultural purchases, philanthropy, or labor, and all-purpose advisory services that can aid people in realizing their projects. In this way, the capacity to reciprocate transitively and the total amount of reciprocation is stimulated without excessive imposition by the majority or the well-connected. Of course, a major component of the ability to reciprocate is having the means to do so. In cultural matters this means having artistic skills and creating an economy prosperous enough such that individuals can feel comfortable spending significant resources on culture.

Thinking about transitive reciprocity as a value helps us think in terms of the processes and conditions likely to generate reciprocation. This places the government in the role of an enabler of genuine cultural production rather than a (usually) mediocre producer with questionable motivations. Supporting this subtler approach does not guarantee that anyone will do the right thing or that the resources devoted to passing on our cultural legacies will be well spent, but neither does asking government to directly produce and support culture – especially

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when we view culture as an arena of contestation not the outwards manifestation and reproduction of past forms.

## **VI. Conclusion**

On more than one conception, justice means settling accounts. At some margin, societies where individuals settle their accounts are also good places to live. Most of our day to day debts are symmetrical in nature, but some require transitive repayment. If transitive reciprocity is an appropriate way of doing justice to one's forebears (and contemporaries) whose contributions we cannot or should not repay symmetrically, then we have a duty to make our societies such that individuals and collectivities are able to honor those debts in a fitting way. Until the marginal return equals zero, the consequentialist is committed to investing in the conditions that improve reciprocation. Though some attention has been given to promoting reciprocity in the literature, and this article tries to highlight some further uses for the concept, we believe that the topic is still underexplored. We hope future empirical research can help articulate even more clearly what kinds of conditions foster reciprocity – both symmetric and transitive.

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