

Gratitude as an Economic Ideal

Abstract. Each of us plays a part in a vast web of mutually beneficial economic relationships. I argue that these relationships give rise to debts of gratitude. We should be grateful to those who benefit us economically and they should be grateful to us. I then show how this bears on three economic issues. First, it bears on trade. International trade gives us debts of gratitude to foreigners. This means we should take their welfare seriously in setting trade policy. Second, it bears on markets. Market exchange, I argue, creates looser bonds of gratitude than does gift giving. We should, usually, regret the looseness of such bonds. Thus, we have reason to limit markets. Third, it bears on economic inequality. Some people make a greater economic contribution than do others. We owe them more gratitude than we owe to others. Thus, we have reason to give them a greater share of the economic pie. Together, these points give us a broad understanding of how gratitude matters to our economic interactions. They trace the outlines of gratitude as an economic ideal.

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1 Introduction

One Tuesday in 2018 A. J. Jacobs, popular author, beheld a special cup of coffee. The cup was special not because of its taste, texture, temperature. It was special because of what Jacobs had decided to do with it. He had decided to thank everyone who had made its production possible. This turned into a quest. He first thanked Chung Lee, the barista. He then thanked Ed Kaufman, the man who chose the coffee beans for the coffee company. He thanked the coffee grinders and roasters. He thanked the people who made the cardboard cup and the coffee cup lid. He thanked those who invented that coffee sleeve which protects your fingers. He thanked the truckers who got the coffee from port to factory, the pavers who paved the roads that the trucks drive on, the steelworkers who made the steel which goes into the trucks. He thanked the Colombian brothers (all six of them) who grew the coffee beans. But, early on, his resolve faltered. He decided that he would stop after thanking a thousand people. It was impossible to thank everyone who contributed to his Tuesday cup of coffee. They were too many. His quest failed.

But the story was a success. Millions of people watched Jacobs talk about his quest. Many, but not millions, bought the book.¹ What struck a nerve, what people thought right, was the idea that we have reason to be grateful to those whose work helps us out: who provide us with food, warmth, shelter—with coffee. Yet the economic import of gratitude has been neglected by political philosophers. The idea that we have reason to be grateful to our economic partners is almost wholly unexplored.² This, in my view, is a serious oversight. Gratitude is an important part of morality. It also, I believe, illuminates an important part of political philosophy: how we should view and manage our economic relationships. My aim in this paper is to describe how it does so. It is to map the contours of gratitude as an economic ideal.

The order of affairs will be as follows. In the next section, I lay out a conception

¹The talk was, of course, a TED talk. The book is Jacobs (2018).

²In contemporary political philosophy, gratitude only appears prominently in discussions of political authority. Some people think we should obey the law because we owe gratitude to the state. See Walker (1988). For a contrary view, see Simmons (1979). Feinberg (2000, 241–42) and Scanlon (2013, 114) both mention the possible economic import of gratitude, but they dismiss the possibility quite briefly. We'll return to their views in section 5.

of gratitude and argue that we do indeed have reason to be grateful to our economic partners. The most important objection to this view is that our economic partners are insufficiently benevolent, or too self-interested, for us to have reason to be grateful to them. A second objection is that our economic partners have to intend to benefit us in particular for us to have reason to be grateful to them, and they do not. Both objections, I argue, rest on a too miserly picture of when gratitude is owed. With a better, more munificent, picture of gratitude, we can see that the benefits our economic partners bestow on us do give us reason to be grateful to them. I then apply this view to concrete issues. In section 3, we apply it to trade. In section 4, we apply it to markets. In section 5, we apply it to inequality. These applications will give us a good grip on how gratitude matters to our economic interactions. They chart the implications of gratitude in the economic sphere.

2 The basic framework

I will start by outlining a conception of gratitude. Let's first clarify the nature of gratitude. Gratitude, as we'll understand it, is an attitude.³ When one is grateful to someone, one has a certain attitude towards them. This attitude involves, in part, caring about how their life is going. It involves caring for their well-being. Such caring may in part be affective. It may be that, when we're grateful towards someone, we feel positively about their successes and negatively about their failure. But, more salient for our purposes, such caring is in part dispositional. When we're grateful towards someone, we are disposed to make their life better. When we can make them better off, without too much personal sacrifice and consistent with our obligations, we do so. If we lack such a disposition, we are not grateful towards the person.⁴ Second, let us clarify how to think about the normativity around gratitude. One can have moral reason to be grateful to someone. That is just to say that, sometimes, moral considerations speak in favor of your being

³This kind of view is common. See e.g. Berger (1975, 302), Walker (1980, 47), Fitzgerald (1998, 120) and Riedener (2020).

⁴This too is a common view. See e.g. McConnell (1993, chap.2), Wellman (1999) and Riedener (2020).

grateful to people.⁵ We can understand what it is to owe someone gratitude in terms of these reasons. You owe someone gratitude when you have reason to be grateful to them which is not undermined or outweighed by another reason. It is simpler to assess when one has reason to be grateful to someone than when one overall owes gratitude. So, I'll often stick to talk of reasons for gratitude.⁶

When do we have reason to be grateful to someone? Benefits are the most common source of such reasons.⁷ They generate them in two ways. First, and most straightforwardly, we have reason to be grateful to those who benefit us. I'll understand these benefits counterfactually. Someone doing something benefited you if, and to the extent that, had they not done the thing, you would have been worse off than you actually are. Now, perhaps not all such benefits create reasons to be grateful. You might not have any reason to be grateful for benefits owed to you.⁸ When someone keeps their promises to you, you needn't be grateful. They owed you the fulfillment of their promises. But, usually, we have reason to be grateful to those who benefit us.

Second, we have reason to be grateful to those who *contributed* to benefiting us. Imagine you're caught in an earthquake. You get stuck under a fallen beam. It takes three strong men to lift it. But you're lucky: four arrive. They together do the job. In this case, none of them benefited you in the counterfactual sense. We could have subtracted any one of them and you would still have been saved. But they each contributed to benefiting you. Here the notion of contribution is a notion of partial, rather than full, causation.⁹ Each man's actions partially caused the beam to be lifted off your chest. In this sense, each helped get the beam off your chest. Thus, you should be grateful to each of them. More generally, when someone contributes to benefiting you in this sense, you have reason to be grateful to them. That, for now, completes our conception of gratitude. This is not a controversial conception: its component parts are widely

⁵This view features prominently in Ross (1931, ch.II). It is also the view, I take it, of every author cited in n.3 and n.4.

⁶Some also deny that gratitude can be owed. See Card (1988) and Wellman (1999). So, it's doubly useful to understand that, whenever I talk of debts of gratitude, this could be translated into talk of reasons of gratitude.

⁷This view that benefits generate such reasons is widely endorsed. See e.g. Ross (1931, ch.II), Berger (1975, 299), McConnell (1993, 44). Some deny that benefits are the *only* source of reasons of gratitude (see e.g. Fitzgerald (1998) and Riedener (2020)). But they don't deny that they are one such source.

⁸For this view, see e.g. Walker (1980, 48), Heyd (1982, 140), Weiss (1985, 493) or Macnamara (2019).

⁹For more on this notion, see Goldman (1999).

endorsed. So let us now apply this conception to economic relationships.

To start with, reconsider A. J. Jacobs' cup of coffee. Jacobs enjoys his coffee. It makes his life better. It benefits him. Thus, Jacobs' has two reasons to be grateful to those who made its production possible. First, they contributed to a benefit to him: him getting the cup. That doesn't mean that, if any of those individuals had stopped working, he wouldn't have got a cup of coffee. Their particular part in making the coffee was replaceable. But they nonetheless helped him get the cup. Second, often, they also each directly benefited him. If any of them had stopped working, his coffee would be a little worse. It might be a little more expensive or a little less tasty. Or, if not this particular cup of coffee, one of his other cups further down the line would have these ills. The direct benefit here is usually small, but it generates a reason of gratitude too. He owes them gratitude for this benefit too. Thus, Jacobs' owes gratitude to those who contributed to him getting his coffee cup.

The point generalizes. When you buy your morning coffee, get on the subway, greet the building guard, start your work, you play a part in a vast web of mutually beneficial economic relationships. This web extends very widely and touches every part of your life. You have reason to be grateful to the other participants in this web. They have reason to be grateful to you. That includes those of your economic partners you meet face-to-face. But it also includes those you never know and who never know you. All benefit, or help benefit, you. All play a part in the web of economic relationships. The central claim of this paper is that we have reason to be grateful to this vast multitude of people. Economic relationships give rise to reasons of gratitude.

Let us turn to some objections to this claim. There seems to be one critical objection to it. Some people think that we only have reason to be grateful to people who benefited us *out of benevolence*.¹⁰ They think that we have reason to be grateful to a benefactor only when that benefactor was driven mainly by a moral concern for our well-being. If true, this undermines the claim I've just made. Our economic relationships are often not relationships marked by benevolence. Jacobs' barista might not have much cared about his well-being. Likely, she was serving coffee for the money. The person who

¹⁰Most prominently, see Berger (1975, 299).

chooses the company's coffee beans doesn't orient their life around Jacobs' welfare. Likely, they care more about coffee than him. The truckers who take the coffee from port to factory need not be driven by moral concern. Likely, they mainly want to finish their day. The central point here, is, of course, that "it is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love..." (Smith, 1776, Bk. 1, Ch. 2). Economic exchange, very often, is not driven by benevolence. Thus, if benevolence is necessary for benefits to generate reasons of gratitude, economic exchange rarely creates such reasons.¹¹

But benevolence isn't necessary for such generation. We should often be grateful to benefactors who don't benefit us out of benevolence.¹² Good evidence for this claim occurs in exactly the economic cases under discussion. Consider, first, the economic interactions many of us regularly have with those in service professions. Consider the barista who serves you coffee, the waiter who brings you a meal, the taxi driver who takes you to the airport. Likely, in none of these cases do they do this out of the goodness of their heart. Yet, in each case, you should feel some gratitude. Now, these cases don't warrant an enormous upwelling of gratitude. This is because the people in these cases didn't benefit you all that much. But some gratitude is obligatory. This seems to me a completely quotidian part of morality. It is the kind of thing parents teach to young children, the kind of thing that you better remember on a date. It is why you should thank your barista, waiter, driver. Not doing so is falling short of your moral obligations. Benevolence, then, is not necessary for reasons of gratitude.

Other more extreme cases cement this point. Sometimes our lives are saved by those acting out of motives other than benevolence. Imagine that you swim too far out into a rough sea. The lifeguard sees you struggling. They're annoyed: didn't you see the warning signs? But they know it's their neck if you drown. They dive in and save your life. They're not acting out of benevolence. But you should be enormously grateful to them. It would be wrong for you to get back to dry land, dust yourself off,

¹¹Feinberg (2000, 241–42) and Scanlon (2013, 114) raise this point.

¹²Although this is a controversial claim, many endorse it. See McConnell (1993, 19–22) and Fitzgerald (1998). I myself think the arguments in the text provide it with strong support.

and just walk away, without a word of thanks. This would be objectionably ungrateful. Or imagine you're in a hospital. The hospital is overburdened, the doctor overwhelmed. But they inspect your file, they prescribe you the right treatment. They might do this mechanically. They might not be thinking about your benefit. They might be focused on being a good doctor, at excelling at the art of medicine. But they too save your life. Again, you should be enormously grateful to them. I suspect many of us will experience something like this at some point in our lives. Many of us will have our lives saved by someone who didn't do it strictly out of benevolence. Yet in these cases, despite the lack of benevolence, gratitude is owed. You would, in Shakespeare's words, be a "marble-hearted fiend" not to be grateful to the lifeguard or doctor (*King Lear*, 2004, I. 4). Thus, debts of gratitude arise outside even when benevolence is absent.

These cases also furnish a reply to a variation on the objection. This variation doesn't insist that benevolence is necessary to reasons of gratitude. Rather, it says that self-interest precludes such reasons. The thought is that *some* non-benevolent motives might be compatible with creating reasons for gratitude. But self-interest is not one of them. Self-interest is special in undercutting such reasons. Now economic relationships are often mainly motivated by self-interest. Thus, the thought goes, they often fail to give rise to reasons of gratitude. The reply to this is straightforward. We can construe the cases we've just considered as ones in which one's benefactor acts self-interestedly. Service staff might be motivated by self-interest alone. They might want a big tip. The lifeguard might want to avoid the charge of negligence. The doctor might see the good life as the life of excellence. Their commitment to medical excellence might be a commitment to the good life for themselves. Thus, these cases provide weighty evidence against these motivational constraints on gratitude.

Nonetheless, it is plausible that motives play some role in gratitude. But they play a less direct role than the objection presupposes. In my view, the role they play proceeds via a principle linking gratitude to one's duties.¹³ The principle is that, when a benefactor wrongs you, that diminishes how much gratitude you owe them. When they do more than they owe for you, that amplifies how much gratitude you owe them. Now

¹³It is standard to think there is some such link. See n.8.

motives matter because we often owe people attitudes. We owe everyone a minimum level of moral regard. We owe them, at least, a minimum level of concern for their welfare. Thus, when our benefactor's attitudes fall short of this minimum, we owe them less gratitude for benefiting us. Imagine the lifeguard saved you out of malice. They (incorrectly) thought your life so miserable that you would be worse off living than drowning. Then you might not owe them any gratitude. Yet, the more their attitudes rise above this minimum, the more gratitude do you owe them. Imagine the lifeguard saved you out of an urgent and saintly concern for your welfare. Then, you owe them more gratitude than if they saved you out of self-interest. Thus, benefactors' motives do impact how much gratitude is owed to them. But not in the way that the objection relies on. They can amplify or diminish such debts, but substantial benevolence is not a precondition for reasons of gratitude.¹⁴

Now, of course, that would mean that were our economic partners to have unconscionable attitudes towards us, that would diminish how much gratitude we owed them. Imagine that people generally wanted to make your life worse via economic participation. You would owe no gratitude to such people. But I see no reason to think that this is common. It seems much more likely that people usually have mildly benevolent attitudes towards their economic partners. They participate in the economy, in part, to benefit others. They would rather provide people a useful service, than do something utterly useless for the same reward. This is anecdotally plausible, but it is also supported by some survey evidence. A nationally representative survey from Pew (2009) found that three in four Americans cite "to help improve society" as a reason that they work. Six in seven cite "to feel like a useful and productive person." Both seem indicative of mildly benevolent motives. So, unless this evidence is misleading, any objection based on the motives of our economic partners cannot be sustained. Our economic partners might not be angels, but nor are they devils. That is enough for us to owe them gratitude for the benefits that they bestow upon us.

Let us turn to a second objection. One might think that there are intentional constraints on reasons of gratitude. Perhaps we only have reason to be grateful to a bene-

¹⁴For a more extended defense of this sort of view, see Riedener (2020).

factor when they intended to benefit us in particular. They have to have had us in mind when doing the thing that made us better off. They must have done it to make us in particular better off. The objection is that many of our economic partners don't know who we are. The truckers who trucked Jacobs' coffee, for example, had probably never heard of him. But then these economic partners cannot have us in mind when doing their jobs. They cannot have intended to benefit us in particular. Thus, if there are such intentional constraints on gratitude, we don't have reason to be grateful to such partners. The reply to this is straightforward. There are no such constraints on gratitude. Some cases make this clear. Imagine a philanthropist endows a scholarship and you receive the award.¹⁵ The philanthropist might not know who you are. Thus, they might be unable to intend to benefit you. But, still, one owes a debt of gratitude to this benefactor. If you later see this philanthropist in distress, you have special reason to help them. Thus, you have reason to be grateful to a benefactor even when they didn't intend to benefit you in particular.

Now that's not to say that you have reason to be grateful to someone who benefits you by complete accident. Imagine that you're getting mugged in a New York alleyway. A stranger, annoyed but oblivious, shouts from their apartment window: "Keep the noise down!" This spooks the mugger; they flee. In this case, perhaps you have no reason to be grateful to the stranger.¹⁶ That they benefited you was purely accidental. But when your economic partners benefit you, it is not pure accident. They can foresee that their economic participation will benefit others, much like philanthropists can foresee that their donations will benefit someone. Indeed, in both cases the benefactors intend to benefit *someone*. They just can't identify who that person is. This, I think, is enough to ensure that their benefit isn't accidental. Thus, our economic partners might not have intended to benefit us. But their so doing is sufficiently purposive for us to owe them gratitude. So neither objection is sustainable. Both rely on being too miserly with one's gratitude, in not admitting duties of gratitude when gratitude is due. So nothing precludes the benefits one receives from one's economic partners from gen-

¹⁵The case is from McConnell (1993, 28).

¹⁶Perhaps you should have propositional gratitude, gratitude *that* you weren't mugged. But you needn't have targeted gratitude, you needn't be grateful *to* the stranger. For the difference between these attitudes, see McAleer (2012).

erating reasons of gratitude. Since one's economic partners do benefit you, and indeed do so a tremendous amount, you have reason to be grateful to them. That completes my defense of this paper's central claim.

Let's turn to a new point. How exactly should we regard our having such reason? Is it good or bad? Well, generally speaking, debts of gratitude are not something to be lamented. You shouldn't dread being given a gift at Christmas. You shouldn't think that it onerously binds you to your family. You should treasure such bonds, not shunt them aside. The explanation of this, I think, is that caring relationships are valuable. It is intrinsically good to be in relationships in which the participants care about one another. But the value of such relationships is amplified when the participants care about one another on the basis of good reasons. If we care for people who we have no reason to care for—the abusive partner—the value of our relationship is much diminished. If we care for people who we have great reason to care for—our loving parents—the value of our relationship is much enlarged. Thus, bonds of gratitude amplify the value of a valuable relationship. Now what goes for family members goes too, I think, for economic partners. Bonds of gratitude can amplify the value of caring for our economic partners: our business partners, our employers or employees, those we buy from or sell to. Thus, we should not, on the face of it, regret the fact that we have reason to be grateful to our economic partners. We should treasure it. It puts us in a position to be in especially valuable relationships with them.

Yet there is an important caveat to this. It is, generally, worse to violate an obligation than not to have had an obligation at all. It's worse to make a promise and break it than to make no promise. It is worse to make a friend and betray them than it is to make no friend at all. The same goes for gratitude. It is worse to owe a debt of gratitude and not pay it than it is to never owe such a debt. Ingratitude, in other words, is a distinctive bad. It is, in Hume's words, the "most horrid and unnatural [crime]" (Hume, 1738, III.II). It follows that we should not always treasure debts of gratitude. When such debts will go unpaid, it would be better were they not incurred in the first place. In personal cases, this is usually not such an important consideration. We have control over whether we make good our debts of gratitude to our friends and family. But it

does matter in political cases. As we'll see, there are cases where policies create debts of gratitude that one might reasonably think will go unpaid. In such cases gratitude's bonds should be shunned rather than treasured.

Let's sum up. I've argued that we have reason to be grateful to our economic partners. This has two consequences. First, it means we have reason to care about these partners' welfare. This, in turn, means we have reason to benefit them when we can. Doing so is just to repay our debt of gratitude. Second, when we do repay the debt, the debt itself should be treasured. It is valuable to be in relationships of care with people. This value is amplified by the appropriateness of those relationships. But, when we don't repay the debt, the debt itself should be lamented. It is bad to be locked into debts that we do not repay. We now turn to the implications of this for concrete issues.

3 Trade

We begin with international trade. Nowadays, about one fourth of the world's production comes from export industries. That amounts to roughly twenty trillion dollars. In the United States, export industries directly support about 11 million jobs. In China, they support about 70 million jobs. The parts from the computer on which you are likely reading this paper are made in about a dozen countries. The raw materials for those parts come from many more. Economic activity now crosses borders to a very great extent. This means foreign workers benefit us tremendously. They provide us with goods and services that make our lives much better. Now, that isn't to say that such things wouldn't be provided without this international trade. But they would be provided at higher prices and probably lower quality. American lives would be worse without Chinese factory workers or German engineers. This gives us reason to be grateful to our foreign trading partners.

Why does this matter? Abstractly, it matters because it gives us reason to care about the welfare of our trading partners. This means we must be disposed to make their lives better. When we can make them better off, without too much sacrifice to ourselves, we should do so. More minimally, this gives us a weighty reason of non-maleficence. We

have weighty reason not to harm our trading partners. This is because inflicting harm on a benefactor is a paradigm case of ingratitude. You don't care about the welfare of those you knowingly harm for little benefit. Now, of course, sometimes we might harm even those we care about. We might, for example, do this when the benefits to us are much greater than the harm. I might borrow my friend's umbrella without asking, because I can't go to my job interview soaked through. But when we harm someone for a commensurate personal gain, that means we do not care about them much. Thus, we have reasons to benefit, and not harm, those with whom we trade.

Concretely, that matters to the ethics of trade policy. It does so in three ways. First, it affects how trade negotiations should be conducted. It is inappropriate to threaten someone to whom you owe gratitude. If we owe gratitude to Chinese workers, it is wrong to threaten them with tariffs or other trade barriers. This is to threaten the infliction of harm. But one should not harm one's benefactors. And, in this context, that means one should also not threaten to harm one's benefactors. So, the use of threats in trade negotiations is inappropriate; it is ungrateful. Second, it affects the proper aim of trade policies between existing trading partners. When the United States is negotiating with Chinese officials, it should not aim to get the best deal for Americans *alone*. It should put some weight on the welfare of the Chinese. It should do this because it owes them a debt of gratitude. Thus, the demands of gratitude make a type of economic nationalism morally unsustainable. When setting their trade policies, nations shouldn't be just in it for themselves. Such nationalism expresses ingratitude for the benefits that their partners have bestowed on them. Trade policy towards existing trading partners should take account of the well-being of both the partner and the policymaker.

These two points apply just to current trading partners: those who have already benefited us. They don't apply to potential new partners. That brings us to our third point: the fact we'll owe gratitude to our trading partners impacts whether we should support policies that increase trading links. It impacts, for example, whether we should support further free trade agreements. Should the United States sign such agreements with countries on the Pacific Rim? With the United Kingdom? The key point is that such policies will increase the number and depth of beneficial economic relationships

between Americans and people in these countries. Thus, they'll increase the bonds of gratitude between the two. Whether this is good or bad is a delicate matter. If these bonds of gratitude come along with relationships of mutual care, then they are good. Such bonds amplify the value of such relationships. But, if they do not, then they are bad. They mean Americans assume obligations which they do not discharge. Americans owe gratitude, but are not grateful (and, perhaps, vice versa). In this case, it would have been better if they had never assumed the obligations at all. Thus, what gratitude means for pro-trade policies depends on an empirical issue. It depends on whether cross-nationals tend to discharge their debts of gratitude or not.

This is an open question. I myself think the evidence currently supports some mild optimism. Kleinberg and Fordham (2010) finds that people are more likely to have favorable opinions of their country's major export partners.¹⁷ Baker and Cupery (2013) find that, in Latin America, "day-to-day economic exchange with the United States—trade, aid, migration and remittances—promote good will" (2013, 107).¹⁸ This suggests that, often, trade creates the very attitudes it makes especially valuable. Now, of course, this does not always happen. It takes but a casual reader of the news to notice the bitterness that trade can create. Trade sometimes creates relationships of contempt rather than care. Yet there is little evidence that this happens systematically. Thus, on balance, it seems to me that the current evidence favors optimism. But I want to stress that the issue is empirically open. Whether gratitude supports freer trade or not is dependent on the effects of such trade on people's attitudes. This can be discovered only with empirical work.

Let me sum up the section. My central claim is that international trade creates debts of gratitude. This has three important consequences. It means trade negotiations should be conducted without threats. It means we should take our trading partners' welfare seriously in forming trade policy. And it makes free trade agreements a fraught business. If repaid, the debts such agreements create are valuable. If ignored, they are

¹⁷Although they don't find evidence of favorable attitudes to import partners. They themselves think this is because importing produces more mixed benefits and burdens than exporting.

¹⁸In a working paper, they find that this extends to far more cases than those in Latin America. See Baker, Cupery, and Molina (Baker et al.). In contrast to Kleinberg and Fordham, they think that imports drive the good will.

lamentable.

4 Markets

In this section, we turn to how gratitude matters to a particular type of economic transaction: market exchange. Market exchange is to be distinguished from gift giving. Both involve transfer of ownership over some good, or a right to some service, from one person to another. But they differ in the motives underlying the transfer. In market exchange, each participant is motivated by the benefit they get from the thing they receive in return. I give you my car because I want the money you're offering. You give me the money because you want the car. In contrast, in gift giving we're not motivated by such benefits. We're motivated by benevolence. I give you my car because I know you need a car to get to work. I'm concerned about your well-being, not about what you will give me in return. We can define a market as a situation in which market exchanges happen. Markets are, by definitional fiat, places where people transfer goods for the benefits they get in return.

There is a tradition of thinking that market exchange is inferior, in some respect, to gift giving. Richard Titmuss (1970) is the prime example of this tradition. Titmuss thought that gift-giving was superior to market exchange and so he argued against allowing markets in blood. Now, Titmuss' main claim was that allowing market exchange in blood reduces the quantity and quality of the blood provided.¹⁹ But this was not his only thought. He also thought that gift giving was inherently superior to market exchange.²⁰ This is an attractive idea. In this section, we'll see exactly how it can be spelt out. The main pay-off of this lies in helping us to see exactly how much influence it should have on policy. My own view is that it might sometimes make a difference to what policies we should support, but such times will be rare. Market exchanges have

¹⁹Most of Titmuss (1970) consists in arguing for this claim. It is likely incorrect. See Lacetera et al. (2013) for a contemporary summary of the counter-evidence.

²⁰Thus, in a long list of problem with market exchange in blood, he claims that it "represses the expression of altruism, erodes the sense of community...limits both personal and professional freedoms..." (Titmuss, 1970, 210). At another point, he laments that "no money values can be attached to the presence or absence of a spirit of altruism in a society" (1970, 167). These points differ markedly from claims about quantity and quality of market supply of blood. I read them as claims about the noninstrumental superiority of gift giving.

defects, but usually their virtues outweigh the defects.

Let's spell out the thought. The key point is simple. Benevolence amplifies bonds of gratitude. When someone benefits us out of benevolence, we owe them more gratitude than when they benefit us out of self-interest. Indeed, plausibly we owe them more gratitude than when they benefit us out of any other motives. Being the subject of benevolence creates uniquely strong bonds of gratitude. Thus gift giving creates stronger bonds of gratitude than do market exchanges. We should be more grateful to those who give us gifts than those with whom we engage in market transfers. Now we've seen how it's valuable to be bound to others more tightly by bonds of gratitude. It is good to have reason to be grateful to others, and for them to have reason to be grateful to you. Thus, gift giving is, in this respect, superior to market exchange. It creates a more valuable form of bond. It creates a stronger bond of gratitude. Again, the caveats we noted in section 2 apply. These bonds are valuable only insofar as they align with caring relationships. If they don't, they are bad. But concrete cases of gift giving will plausibly generate such attitudes. When the gift is blood, or a kidney, it seems likely to make the recipient grateful. Thus, we should prefer people gift such goods than exchange them for their market value.

What is the upshot of that? Under certain conditions, it gives us reason to limit markets. These conditions are those in which allowing market exchanges crowds out gift giving. Suppose allowing market exchanges of blood makes it less likely that people give it away as a gift. Then we have reason to forbid such exchange. Allowing it impairs the value of people's relationships. Such conditions are probably quite common. The evidence for this comes from the literature on intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. This literature probes whether giving people extrinsic motivations to perform certain tasks makes them less likely to perform the task in the absence of such motivations. Extrinsic motivation is usually monetary compensation. Intrinsic motivation is the interest or perceived value of a task. If extrinsic motivations make one less likely to do something absent such motivations, they crowd out intrinsic motivation. Most, albeit not all, meta-analyses of this literature suggest that such crowding out happens.²¹ This suggests that

²¹See, for example, Rummel and Feinberg (1988); Wiersma (1992); Tang and Hall (1995); Deci et al. (1999). Cameron and Pierce (1994) and Eisenberger and Cameron (1996) are the two (very similar) dissenting

market exchanges also crowd out gift giving. This would be an instance of extrinsic motivation crowding out intrinsic motivation. Thus, we probably do have reason to limit markets. We have reason to restrict market exchanges in goods, like blood, for which we can expect much gift giving.

Yet this is not the end of the matter. For policy purposes, the weight of that reason is critical. Many of the relevant goods—blood, organs—are very important to their recipients. Shortages of these goods mean people die. We have more reason to save a single life than to create a very large number of bonds of gratitude. So if forbidding market exchange creates such shortages, this likely outweighs our reason to promote gift relationships. The crowding out concern may sometimes make a difference. Suppose instrumental considerations are finely balanced. Or suppose we're highly uncertain which way they push. Then the crowding out concern may mean we should limit markets. But in other cases it won't outweigh instrumental considerations. When such limits mean people don't get the blood or kidneys they need, we should prescind from market limitations. Their costs are not worth their benefits.

Let me sum up. The import of gratitude does show us a serious defect in market exchange. Market exchange likely creates worse relationships than does gift giving. This gives us some reason to limit markets. But, practically, this reason will often be outweighed by the benefits such markets create.²² Thus typically, I think, we should see markets as regrettable, but justifiable, sacrifices for instrumental good.

5 Inequality

We now turn to our final issue: inequality. The argument of this section is that the import of gratitude justifies some level of economic inequality. In particular, it justifies a level of inequality commensurate with the inequality in people's contribution. To put the point vividly, let's characterize two types of people. First, consider the Big Producers. Perhaps the Big Producer is Alexei Stakhanov, hero of Socialist Labor. Stakhanov,

reviews. Their concerns seem to me well answered by Deci et al. (1999).

²²Anderson (1995, 150–58) and Satz (2012, 91–112) gives some other reasons why markets in certain goods may be objectionable. These reasons might make a difference in cases where gratitude doesn't. I take no stand on this.

reputedly, mined 102 tons of coal in five hours and forty-five minutes. That's a lot: it got him on the cover of *Time* magazine. Or perhaps the Big Producer is someone like Elon Musk. Musk's companies have cut the cost of getting a satellite into space tenfold. They've produced almost a million electric cars. He's made more of a contribution to two great problems—climate change and space exploration—than most of us will make to anything. Compare these Big Producers to the Beach Bums. The Beach Bums have never made any contribution to anything. They spend all their time bumming around Long Beach. It's a good life for them, but it doesn't much help the rest of us. The argument of this section is that we collectively, as a society, owe more gratitude to the Big Producers than to the Beach Bums. And that means we should give the Big Producers a bigger share of the economic pie than the Beach Bums. Some level of economic inequality is justified.

We'll start by spelling out two more aspects of gratitude. First, note that debts of gratitude aren't only owed by individuals. They can also be owed by pluralities. Consider the philanthropist who gives your department a new scholarship. It's not just the awardee who owes them gratitude. The entire department benefits. Thus, the entire department owes gratitude. You owe it collectively, as a plurality.²³ Second, how much gratitude we owe someone is proportional to how much they've benefited us. I owe more gratitude to the person who saves my life than to the person who gives me a coffee. Indeed, I think we can say something a bit more precise than this. Typically, when we owe someone gratitude, we should give them a benefit commensurate to the benefit they gave to us. If they benefited us an enormous amount, we should try to benefit them an enormous amount. If we can do so without violating other weighty obligations, or incurring undue sacrifice, then not doing so is an ingratitude.

We can now bring these points to bear on economic inequality. The Big Producers benefit us much more than do the Beach Bums. The Beach Bums don't make us better off at all, the Big Producers make us much better off. Here 'us' refers to society as a whole. Members of society are, collectively, benefited by the Big Producers more than by the Beach Bums. Thus, we have reason to be more grateful to the former than the

²³See Dietz (2016) for a recent defense, and exploration, of such collective obligations.

latter. Yet, to feel grateful for someone is in part to care about their well-being, how they're doing in life. So, we have a special reason to care about the well-being of the Big Producers. This means we should care about their welfare more than that of the Beach Bums. After all, there's a certain level of care both are owed purely by dint of their common humanity. This is the baseline level of care owed to all. We then have reason to care more about the Big Producers welfare. That should push how much we care about them above the baseline. But, then, we have special obligations to be disposed to promote the well-being of the Big Producers. Thus, we have a special obligation, an obligation of gratitude, to promote the well-being of the Big Producers.

How can we discharge that obligation? Well, we might give the Big Producers special medals or fancy thanking ceremonies. But some people don't care much for ceremony. This is not a very reliable way to benefit them. Yet consumption does very reliably benefit people. People like nice cars, big houses, holidays in the Bahamas. So, a simple way to repay our debt of gratitude to the Big Producers is to let them consume more. We can give them a bigger share of the economic pie. The Soviets can let Stakhanov have a nicer apartment. The Americans can let Musk have a big house. Thus, some level of economic inequality is a justifiable reflection of our unequal obligations of gratitude. What is that level? Well, we should give the Big Producers a benefit commensurate to their contribution. Thus, when the Big Producers contribute much more than the rest, the level of inequality this supports may be substantial. When they produce only a little more, the level of inequality supported is small. Thus, the level of inequality that gratitude justifies matches the level of inequality in contribution.²⁴

This thought is not entirely novel. Both Joel Feinberg and Tim Scanlon have considered whether gratitude might ground a defense of economic inequality. Both give little time, and short shrift, to the idea. They share an objection: they think that we only owe gratitude to people who have benefited us for the right reasons (Feinberg 2000, 241–42; Scanlon 2013, 114). Both claim we don't owe gratitude to people when they've bene-

²⁴Mulligan (2018) also thinks economic inequality should match inequality in contribution. He argues that such a level would be "highly egalitarian by contemporary standards" (2018, 137). I agree. Simply put, in many countries, the remuneration of the very-well remunerated outstrips their contribution. I take Piketty (2014, 330–35) to provide a plausible explanation for why this is: executives set their own pay. But that doesn't preclude a defense of *some* level of economic inequality.

fited us out of self-interest. We addressed this point in section 2. Motives do matter to gratitude. You should feel more gratitude to those who benefit you out of good motives. But motives are not the *sine qua non* of debts of gratitude. We owe gratitude to all the many people who benefit us in their daily life, even when we've addressed their self-love rather than their humanity. We owe it to our baristas, waiters, drivers. Feinberg and Scanlon, on the face of it, look committed to denying these quotidian moral facts. So, their shared objection seems to me to rest on a shared mistake.

There is another way to resist this argument. One might agree with Elizabeth Anderson, when she says that “the attempt, independent of moral principles, to credit specific bits of output to specific bits of input by specific individuals represents an arbitrary cut in the causal web that in fact makes everyone’s productive contribution dependent on what everyone else is doing” (Anderson, 1999, 321). And this might ground an objection. To see how, let’s first reiterate what it means for a Big Producer to benefit us. We understand this counterfactually: were the Big Producers to have stayed idle, we would be much worse off. Now here’s the objection. The idea is that the distinction between Big Producers and Beach Bums is a misleading one. It is rarely or never the case that some people benefit us more than others. It’s not even the case that they make more of a contribution to such benefits. They benefit us no more, the thought goes, than anyone else. This is because economies are such complex entities. Their complexity means that everyone’s work depends on everyone else’s. And thus, one might think, it’s not true of anyone that, were they to stop working, we would be worse off.

This would astound me were it true. It seems clearly false for people like Stakhanov and Musk. It is straightforward to identify the benefits these people have produced. Were Stakhanov to have worked less hard, the USSR would have many tons less coal. Were Musk to have slacked off, it would be much costlier to get satellites into space. Very complex causal chains underpin these counterfactuals. But that is little evidence against their truth. And I think the same goes for many doctors, engineers, teachers. If they stopped working, someone would surely replace them. But, often, this would leave us a little worse off. We would have poorer medical care, costlier bridges, worse schools. Again, very complex causal chains underpin the truth of the relevant counterfactuals;

economies are complex entities. But that doesn't imperil their truth. Some people do, through work, benefit us more than others. Intuitively, the same point goes for contributions. Doctors make more of a contribution to the general good than Beach Bums. Doctors save lives. Beach Bums surf. The former is a greater contribution to our collective good. In practice, it is of course hard to quantify differences in contribution.²⁵ But in theory it seems deeply misguided to deny that there is such a difference. Thus, I think neither of these objections hold water. Reasons of gratitude do ground a defense of economic inequality.

Yet is this enough to justify such inequality? That depends on the weight of the reasons of gratitude. If they are lightweight, they may be easily outweighed, and thus be far from sufficient to justify economic inequality. I don't have a full account of how weighty these reasons are. But we can shine some light on it. The key to doing so is to rely on the principle linking gratitude to duty. Specifically, we owe less gratitude to those who just did what they're morally obligated to do. When someone keeps their promises or respects your rights, you needn't be very grateful to them. They owed this to you. Thus, failing to discharge an obligation of gratitude to a benefactor is, typically, acting as if they were obliged to benefit you. In the case of the Big Producers, it is acting as if they're obliged to work for your well-being, rather than their own. I think there is an expressive complaint against this. Acting as if someone had such obligations expresses disrespect to them. It does this by expressing that they have a lesser moral status than they actually do. It expresses that they must live their life for your benefit, rather than as they see fit. Nobody who was your moral equal would have such a duty. Intuitively, we have weighty reason not to express such disrespect. Thus, the reasons of gratitude is weighty. By spurning it, we express that some are moral inferiors. Now I doubt this exhausts the weight of such reasons. But it provides a high lower limit on such weight, a weight not easily outweighed.

We can buttress the point with intuitions. The most common counterweight to reasons of gratitude, in the economic arena, are distributive egalitarian reasons. Some

²⁵See Mulligan (2018, 131–34) a recent argument that, in an ideal labor market, this difference in contribution would equal difference in wages. In our non-ideal markets, as Mulligan recognizes, the issue is not so simple.

think that people generally have complaints against unequal distributions.²⁶ If such complaints generate weighty reasons, then the reasons of gratitude may be outweighed. But, intuitively, such complaints generate less weighty reasons than those of gratitude. Imagine one has a benefactor. This might be a great benefactor: someone who fed you, housed you, put you through school. Or it might be a minor benefactor: someone who commented on your manuscript. Now suppose that you can benefit your benefactor alone, or you could split the benefit between them and a stranger. The stranger has a distributive egalitarian complaint against you helping out your benefactor alone. This gives you reason to split the benefit. But this reason is usually outweighed by those of gratitude. Overall, you should usually give the benefit, or at least more of the benefit, to the benefactor in such a case. Thus, reasons of gratitude are at least not lexically inferior to distributive egalitarian complaints: indeed, they tend to outweigh them. So we may well have distributive egalitarian reason to distribute the economic pie equally. We have weightier reason of gratitude to give the Big Producers more than the Beach Bums. So, gratitude justifies some amount of distributive inequality.

I want to contrast this argument with some justifications of economic inequality that invoke desert. We sometimes say that people deserve gratitude. We just mean, I think, that sometimes people are owed gratitude. In that (thin) sense of desert, this is a desertist justification of inequality. But it is a distinctive one. Many other such justifications say that some people deserve more because of their greater moral character, effort or ability.²⁷ These desert bases are, in some sense, internal to each person. On these views, the desert is based on one's intrinsic qualities. This is not so for the justification I've just offered. When one deserves gratitude, what matters centrally is one's contribution.²⁸ There's no sense in which each person's contribution is internal to them. How much anyone contributes depends on a wild variety of external factors. Thus, this type of justification invokes a very different bases for desert than these others. Indeed, I myself am skeptical of the non-gratitude justifications. Moral character seems to have little

²⁶Temkin (1993) has this view.

²⁷For discussions of some such views, see Dick (1975, 259–60) and Sher (1979).

²⁸Miller (1999, 177) also invokes contribution as a basis of desert. But he never links it to gratitude. My own view is that, once we have the moral significance of gratitude firmly in sight, there's no need to think that contribution is a *sui generis* desert basis in any interesting sense.

economic import. The morally upright deserve praise, not money. And I doubt effort and ability alone ground any desert. I might put a huge amount of effort into digging worthless holes. And I might be very good at it. Few may be able to find as worthless a spot for a hole as I. But that doesn't mean that I deserve high wages.²⁹ So, the key point is that the justification for inequality from gratitude is distinctive. But I also happen to think that it is uniquely good.

6 Conclusion

Let me sum up. Economic activity, I have argued, isn't just the sphere of work and production and allocation. It is a sphere in which millions of people benefit one another. Iowan farmers feed New York bankers; New York bankers finance Californian actors; Californian actors entertain Iowan farmers. Chinese workers clothe American programmers; American programmers code for German engineers; German engineers equip Chinese workers. We are economically interconnected. These interconnections amount to a vast web of mutually beneficial relationships. The moral import of this is twofold. First, it gives us reasons to be grateful to those who so benefit us. We have reason to care for, and thus promote, their well-being. Second, it gives us something of value. In the right circumstances, the duties these reasons generate are not burdens to be born; they're bonds to be cherished. It is valuable to be bound together by a web of gratitude to other people. Gratitude, as an economic ideal, should draw our attention to both facts.

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²⁹For a similar point, see McLeod (1996, 208).

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