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## Are There Benefits to Benefits?

**Holly Stevenson**

The University of Iowa

### **Biography**

Holly is a third year PhD student in Philosophy at The University of Iowa and has received her master's degrees in Philosophy and Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies from the same institution. Holly received a 1st Class Honors Degree (MA) in Philosophy and the McClaggan Prize in Moral Philosophy at Senior Honors Level from The University of Glasgow, Scotland.

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# Are There Benefits to Benefits?

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## Abstract

The concept of benefits has long been at the heart of discussion in political philosophy. Many political philosophers, both contemporarily and historically, have used benefits to ground political obligation and subsequent theories which stem from political obligation. Many philosophers claim that the government having provided us with “benefits” grounds our political obligation to obey the laws of the state. Benefits are often used as grounding for political obligation which then stems into fair-play theories, consent theories, gratitude theories, associative theories etc. Thus, it is clear that benefits have a key role in the fundamental justification for political obligation and the subsequent theories which arise from it. It is important at this stage to outline what the aims of my paper are and what they are not. Firstly, my paper is not arguing for any one viewpoint. I have no commitments to whether we should incorporate benefits into our political theorizing. What is clear to me is that benefits are very much a part of political philosophy and that is why they are the subject of my paper. Similarly, I am not arguing for or against political obligation or any theories which incorporate it. However, the link between benefits and political obligation justifications is well-documented in the literature, and therefore requires philosophical investigation independently of whether discussion of benefits should feature so prevalently, or at all, within the field. Whilst a paper discussing benefits regarding political philosophy is not original, a paper aiming at trying to get to the bottom of what a benefit actually is, or at least what it is broadly understood as being, has not yet been done. Thus, this paper will not conclude that there are necessary and/or sufficient conditions which can be derived to decipher what should count as a benefit. Instead, this essay only aims to highlight that there is presently no universal understanding of the term within the literature, yet this fact is often taken for granted. Habitually, as is the case with the notion of benefits, when terms are ubiquitously used they are seldom defined. Subsequently, the problem of there being no widespread understanding of what the term actually means can, and in this instance, does, arise. Clearly, for philosophy to be the most productive and pragmatic, it is imperative that the meanings of concepts are clearly-defined and therefore when they are used in different works, they are being understood in the same way. Otherwise, progress will be stunted and, given that political philosophy is difficult enough, the more ambiguities which can be avoided, the better. Hence, this paper is trying to disambiguate the term and bring to the forefront the many ways in which people can, and indeed do, understand what it means for something to be a benefit. As I will argue, the intuitive and common interpretations of the term are not without their problems, yet I am not concluding that one construal is correct.

## Keywords

Metaethics, Ethics, Political Philosophy, Benefits

## The Relevance of Disambiguating Benefits

The concept of benefits has long been at the heart of discussion in political philosophy. Many political philosophers, both contemporarily and historically, have

used benefits to ground political obligation and subsequent theories which stem from political obligation. Many philosophers claim that the government having provided us with “benefits”<sup>1</sup> grounds our political obligation to obey the laws of the state. Benefits are often used as grounding for political obligation which then stems into fair-play theories, consent theories, gratitude theories, associative theories etc. Thus, it is clear that benefits have a key role in the fundamental justification for political obligation and the subsequent theories which arise from it.

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1. As this paper discusses, it is apparent that there is no uniform understanding of the term. I have therefore placed it in quotation marks initially to highlight this point, yet for ease of reading will refrain from repeating the quotation marks throughout.

understand what it means for something to be a benefit. As I will argue, the intuitive and common interpretations of the term are not without their problems, yet I am not concluding that one construal is correct.

### **Applications of the Term within the Literature**

To elucidate the point that discussion of benefits is customary within political philosophy, this section will present ways in which the term is used in the literature. Socrates is often viewed as the first to defend the view that receiving benefits gives rise to political obligation<sup>2</sup>. *"Since you have been born and brought up and educated, could you say that you were not our offspring and slave from the beginning, both you and your ancestors?"* (Plato, 2012, 50e). Whilst presenting an extreme position, Socrates is vocalizing the view that Plato having received an education, and indeed perhaps simply being born into the given society, means he must accept the laws. In Plato's instance, this meant accepting being sentenced to death. Hence, benefits have been at the core of discussion of political obligation from very early-on in philosophy.

More recently, Rawls used the acceptance of benefits to ground his principle of fair play. *"A person who has accepted the benefits of the scheme is bound by a duty of fair play to do his part and not to take advantage of the free benefits by not cooperating"* (Rawls, 1964, 9). Whilst Rawls is addressing his view regarding the impermissibility of free riding, and agreeing with Hart that *"if others are cooperating for mutual benefit and I benefit from their cooperation, then I have an obligation to do my share"* (Hart, 1955, 185-6), he is clearly using the concept of benefits to justify his claims. According to M.B.E Smith, fair-play theorists such as Hart and Rawls *"conclude that those who benefit from such legal systems have a prima facie obligation to obey the law"*<sup>3</sup> (Smith, 1973, 955).

Importantly, if benefits ground political obligation and any principles or theories which are derived from it (such as the duty of fair play), this will have a prodigious impact on what people are justified in doing with regard to following and breaking the law. If one is bound in every instance to follow the letter of the law because they have received benefits, this will deny people the right to engage in civil disobedience,

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2. Political obligation can be understood as *"to have a moral duty to obey the laws of one's country or state"* (Daggar & Lefkowitz, 2014).

3. A person *S* has a prima facie obligation to do an act *X*, if, and only if, there is a moral reason for *S* to do *X* which is such that, unless he has a moral reason not to do *X* at least as strong as his reason to do *X*, *S*'s failure to do *X* is wrong. (Smith, 1973, 951).

even if the government and its laws are entirely unjust and immoral. Even if some circumstances are such that they defeat political obligation, if the notion of benefits play a fundamental role in determining if and when someone must abide by the law, it is of paramount importance that we understand what benefits are. According to Socrates, receiving an education is a benefit which results in political obligation, and perhaps simply being born into a given country is also a benefit. Rawls states that accepting benefits commits us to contributing our fair share, yet is silent on what benefits he has in mind. Is it the same benefits as Socrates held, such as education? If so, do people who have not received a satisfactory education have no obligation to obey the law? What if I had an education that I did not want thrust upon me?<sup>4</sup> The notion of "mutual benefit", as mentioned by Hart, is a tenebrous notion in-and-of itself, as it appears to depend on a shared understanding of a benefit and for everyone to benefit in the same way; both of which conditions appear entirely unattainable from the outset. What is immediately apparent from considering a few scholars' uses of the term benefit is that there is no clear way to understand the term. In the subsequent sections, I will undertake a conceptual analysis of the term and try to uncover problematic ways of interpreting it by presenting counterexamples directed at the intuitive ways we understand benefits.

### **What Is a Benefit?**

At first, the question "What is a benefit?" may appear obvious and unworthy of scholarly discussion. Yet, immediately, it is very hard to provide a definition which one is comfortable accepting as having encapsulated all of the necessary components of a benefit without also including erroneous or unsettling commitments. Plainly, what it means to benefit, gain, or profit from something is not remotely obvious. To begin, let's take an initially uncontroversial example of a benefit. Alan gives Anne \$100. Anne now has \$100 more than she had before, and can now buy the designer jacket she had been eyeing up. Anne certainly seems to have benefited from Alan's act. Thus, shall we simply conclude that the mere act of getting something you did not have before is a benefit? Clearly, one can be given something that is harmful for them and does not benefit them in the slightest, such as a black eye.

To elucidate this point, let us now imagine that, unbeknown to Alan, Anne has a severe heroin addiction, and the \$100 he provided her with went entirely to her

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4. All of these issues will be discussed in the upcoming sections, yet they are relevant to bring up here also.

substance abuse problem and ultimately led to her premature death. Evidently, Alan giving Anne \$100 did not benefit her in the slightest here, yet she still received the same \$100 which she had before. Of course, perhaps getting \$100 from Alan did benefit Anne in some sense. Anne wanted heroin, and the \$100 benefitted her (at least initially) by enabling her to do what she wanted.<sup>5</sup> However, we clearly do not want to say that the act of giving something to another automatically benefits them. Hence, there may be a temporal or causal component to take into consideration. If Alan punches Anne, she is immediately harmed. If Anne goes for a massage, she immediately benefits from the instantaneous relaxation which it provides.

Therefore, we may be inclined to say that if A causes B (either directly or indirectly) in a way which increases B's wellbeing, A has benefited B. However, this type of definition of a benefit immediately runs into issues of how we will define wellbeing, and whether people can be misguided in terms of what they believe will increase or decrease their wellbeing. Moreover, the causes of events can, in many instances, be numerous and difficult to pinpoint, especially when we begin to trace them back in time. For example, did the owner of Volkswagen benefit me because I own and drive a VW beetle? If we become strict with tracing a causal chain, we appear to be committed to claiming that he did benefit me. Furthermore, this example brings up the problem of whether or not the benefactor must be aware that they are providing a benefit, which we will discuss later. Clearly, the owner of VW has no idea who I am or that I even own one of his cars. Therefore, defining benefits in terms of merely receiving something or by appealing to the notion of causes is problematic even although it initially appears very intuitive.

What the notion of causes and specifically the example of Anne's heroin addiction brings to the forefront is the notion of consequences. As we have uncovered, simply being handed the \$100 is not enough to merit the conclusion that Alan's act benefitted her. In the instance of the money directly contributing to her overdose, it seems clear that consequences matter. However, what if as soon as she is handed the \$100 bill it blows away in the wind? Now, Anne, with or without a drug problem, cannot spend the money. Did she still benefit from simply being handed it, or did she not benefit due to not being able to use it? In my opinion, if Anne cannot do anything with the money, she has not benefitted by having had it for a split second. Indeed, it is perhaps intuitive

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5. I will discuss the issue of wanting something and whether or not that should feature in our definition of a benefit later on in the essay.

to claim that having the money for such a short time then it being taken away harms Anne in some sense as she will be haunted by ideas of what could have been.

Therefore, consequences matter, but how should we understand consequences? We do not want to adopt such a strict notion of causes and consequences that we end up saying Alan caused Anne's overdose by giving her \$100, especially if he had no idea she was an addict. Yet, without Alan and his gift, Anne would never have had the money to get her next fix. Understanding benefits in terms of causes and consequences leads us to uncomfortable statements such as claiming Alan is responsible for Anne's death. Plainly, nobody can predict the future, and to only consider benefits by appeal to consequences presupposes that people are fortune tellers, or that they somehow should be. Alan has no way of knowing if Anne will spend the \$100 on heroin, parents have no way of knowing if private schooling will benefit their children more than public schooling because they do not know the consequences until they have embarked on one or other of the paths. Thus, resorting to causes or consequences will always incorporate an element of luck which, if avoided in our theorizing, will sit more comfortably.

Related to the notion of consequences are intentions. If Alan did not intend for Anne to spend the \$100 on heroin, does that matter? Did Alan still benefit Anne in some sense because his intentions were pure, irrespective of consequences or what the \$100 caused to occur? As we have discussed, if Alan did not know Anne would use the money to overdose, we probably should not hold him responsible. However, if the money blows away before Anne can buy her designer jacket, Alan's gift does not appear to have benefited her. Yet, imagine Alan did know that Anne had a drug addiction and hoped she would use the money to overdose. In this case, his intentions are deplorable, as he is hoping his money will contribute to her demise. However, suppose Anne uses the \$100 to go towards drug rehabilitation and eventually gets clean. Without Alan's \$100, Anne would never have had the funds to afford the treatment program which saved her life. Did Alan's gift benefit her? In some sense, it certainly did, as good results came from it. However, if Alan intended to do harm to Anne, it would seem incongruous to claim that he benefitted her in some way. However, perhaps the fact that he gave her the money is irrelevant in this instance, given his intentions. If that is the case, do intentions override causality? Moreover, it would be even more contentious to argue that Anne is indebted to the immoral Alan simply because his intentions did not come to fruition.

In the instance where Alan is hoping for Anne to use the money for drugs, it is perhaps relatively obvious that he has not benefitted her by giving her \$100, especially

if she indeed uses the money to fuel her recovery. However, let's assume that Alan is a multimillionaire who is providing \$100 bills to strangers in order to feel good about himself as those who see him will view him favourably. According to Smith, *"if someone confers benefits on me without any consideration of whether I want them, and if he does this in order to advance some purpose other than promotion of my particular welfare, I have no obligation to be grateful towards him"* (Smith, 953). In this instance, Alan benefitting Anne is only a fortunate by-product of Alan benefitting himself and promoting his own agenda. Does he really benefit Anne if he has no concern whatsoever for her welfare but is solely interested in his own? It seems that in order for someone to benefit another they must at least be concerned with them to some degree, and not in a negative manner. Alan was concerned with Anne's welfare when he had ill-intentions towards her, yet concern of that nature does not merit benefit. According to Boran, if a good is not *"produced intentionally by those who are producing it"* then it does not generate obligation. He further writes that *"it may seem morally intuitive to hold that intended and unintended benefits are not morally on a par"* (Boran, 2006, 105). Yet, this presupposes that one can benefit even if there is a lack of intention from the giver.

Moreover, according to Nozick *"one cannot, whatever one's purposes, just act so as to give benefits...you certainly may not [expect repayment of some kind] do so for benefits whose bestowal costs you nothing"* (Nozick, 1977, 166). Interestingly, Nozick claims not only that intentions matter but that there must be some element of cost involved on behalf of the person who is the potential benefactor. In the instance where Alan is a multimillionaire, this fits well with my intuitions. It seems that Alan's actions are certainly less praiseworthy if it costs him absolutely nothing to give Anne the \$100 bill, especially if his intentions are entirely self-interested. However, all that this tells us is that *"there is no normative basis"* for Alan's actions and that *"we do not usually think that we are under any obligation to reward people for a benefit they produced unintentionally, when doing something they already prefer or value, an activity that is not a burden, but an enjoyable experience"* (Boran, 2006, 105). Thus, all that discussion of intentions provides us with is a reaffirmation that unintended benefits where there is no cost involved to the benefactor are not morally on a par with intended benefits which include cost. Unfortunately, it does not aid us in getting any clearer on what a benefit actually is, which is our project.

Moreover, the notions of want and need should not be omitted from our discussion of benefits. If Alan gives Anne \$100, whether or not he has good intentions, if Anne is already a multi-millionaire, does she benefit from this extra cash? It would



appear that if she does it is in an extremely limited sense and she may not benefit from it at all. If Anne desperately needs the \$100 in order to contribute towards life-saving surgery, she certainly seems to benefit from the additional dollars. Even if we take Alan's intentions out of the equation and if we omit any resulting consequences from the money from discussion, it seems that whether Anne wants or needs the money does indeed matter. However, the Anne that is addicted to heroin has the want for heroin, and so it would seem wrongheaded to claim she benefits because Alan's gift satisfies a desire. Moreover, claiming that someone must want something in order to benefit from getting it immediately runs into problems. Very few people want to go on a long-haul flight, sit in a dentist chair or go to the gym every day, yet people certainly appear to benefit from doing these activities. If there was no benefit from going to the hospital and enduring injections, nobody would voluntarily ask to have needles thrust into their arm. One might claim that the benefit is indirect and therefore whilst it is not instantaneous, the benefit is increasing health or seeing family or ridding oneself of pain. This seems true; if one wants to have a painless tooth one endures the pain of the dentist, and one ultimately benefits from sitting in the dentist's chair. However, Anne the heroin addict, may not remotely want to go to rehab. She might know it will save her life to do so but she has absolutely no desire whatsoever to "get clean". Regardless, it will certainly benefit her in some sense to get clean, yet it will also benefit her to continue to do what she desires, even if what she desires will harm her. Therefore, there are immediately problems with regarding benefits as needing to be wanted by the receiver.

Clearly, things we want can harm us. Moreover, things we do not want, or things that even harm us, can ultimately benefit us. For example, imagine Sally who is forced to go on a long journey to see her distant relatives in Idaho. She does not remotely want to go for many reasons. She will miss her friend's wedding, be very behind on her work and whenever she travels she falls victim to terrible travel sickness. In addition to all of this, Sally has no interest in meeting her distant relatives as she knows they are all racists. Clearly, Sally does not want to go to see these family members; in fact, she bitterly objects to her parents making her accompany them. Sally has a horrible time with her racist relatives, vomits multiple times on the journey and is outcast by her group of friends at home for not being at the wedding. There are no perceivable benefits that arise from her trip to Idaho, not even in the months or years that follow the event. We might even be justified in claiming that the trip harmed Sally in some ways. However, twenty years down the line, Sally impresses a man she is on a date with by knowing the capital of Idaho, as it is where her racist family lived. Had she not spent

that awful week in Boise, she would not have known this fact. Did Sally benefit from the trip twenty years ago? It seems difficult to say. What if this man eventually went on to be her husband and knowledge of American State Capitols was a trait he required in potential partners? Whilst we might question the sanity of Sally's spouse, we may have to concede that she benefitted from her horrific trip to Boise. Yet, this seems very odd to conclude. Perhaps Sally had blocked the awful vacation from her memory and never knew the origins of her Idahoan knowledge. Moreover, if her marriage went on to be unhappy or very pleasant, would that matter? What is clear, though, is that some acts which we may classify even as harmful can eventually give rise to benefits, even if the individual in question is never aware of this fact.

Whilst it is often implicitly accepted that harms are the opposite of benefits, it is important to make this point explicit. Benefits and harms are therefore comparative notions *"involving the idea of people being worse off, or better off"* (Pogge, 2004, 26). Given that our earlier attempts to understand benefits have been problematic, thinking of benefits in terms of whether one is *"better off"* to the way they were before they received something seems like a logical way to proceed. The earlier example of Sally brings up the question of whether or not one must be aware that they are receiving benefits. According to Ewing, *"the obligation to one's country is more analogous to the obligation to our parents...the debt is not incurred deliberately"* (Ewing, 1947, 218). Often, receiving benefits from the government is held to be very similar to the benefits which one receives from one's parents. This is in large part due to the fact that there is frequently no realisation that the benefits are being received in both instances. For example, unconditional love does not tend to be regarded as a benefit that comes from parents, but if it has always been that way, it will only seem like a harm if it is taken away. Generally, when things have always been a certain way we do not view their continuation as a benefit. This may be in large part due to us not viewing ourselves as *"better off"* than we would have been or were in an alternative and prior state.

We certainly speak in terms of being *"better off"* in everyday conversation; Anne is *"better off"* for receiving \$100 and buying clothes. Yet, thinking of benefits as making us *"better off"* is immediately problematic. For example, African-Americans are certainly better off living in America today than they would have been living in the country 100 years ago. However, we could not infer from this uncontroversial claim that the current state of racial affairs in the USA is benefitting African-Americans. Similarly, Jewish individuals living in Germany today are certainly better off now than they would have been during the Nazi regime. Yet, this does not entail that they benefit in some

sense from the current ordering of German society. According to Pogge, “*drawing this inference* [that being better-off entails a benefit], *we would beg the whole question*” (Pogge, 2004, 26) by assuming the earlier state as the appropriate baseline. Plainly, the fact that racism is falling does not justify the claim that those who currently fall victim to it are benefitting in some sense from this fact. Therefore, it seems that diachronic, or temporal baseline comparisons, do not help us in deriving an unproblematic notion of a benefit.

Additionally, the more historic the baseline for comparison, the more problematic. For example, take the claim that African Americans in America today are no worse off than they would have been had they never had contact with people outside of Africa. Immediately, we should question how much can truly be known about how things would have been in Africa had Africans not been forcibly removed from their homeland so long ago. Such a claim cannot tell us anything very relevant about whether or not African Americans benefit from being in today’s society, as we are merely imaging a way things could have been so long ago. Thus, subjunctive comparisons are equally as problematic as diachronic ones. The more historical our baseline, the more hypothetical our theorising and the less relevant and pragmatic our conclusions become. Theorising about how Africa would have been had there not been colonization and enslavement is as hypothetical as comparing the current state of affairs to an entirely fictional alternative. For example, it would be preposterous to claim that the Nazi regime benefitted people because under the fictional Nazi regime\*, one million additional people died. Depending on purely (or even largely) hypothetical examples tells us nothing about the current state of affairs. This is due to the fact that there will always be an X (hypothetical or entirely fictional) where X benefits us more than the current state of affairs Y does. Yet, using X as a baseline for comparison tells us nothing about whether Y benefits us or makes us better off, and it also presupposes that X is the relevant and correct baseline for comparison. Thus, “*baseline comparisons do not afford a promising ground*” (Pogge, 2004 27) for understanding the notion of a benefit and therefore thinking of benefits as making us “better-off” is problematic, as we are immediately subject to the all-important question “better-off than what?”.

To summarize thus far, benefits cannot be unproblematically understood in terms of merely receiving something or in terms of causes or consequences. The temporal element of causes and results also brings up questions of whether benefits need be immediate, or how postponed an eventual benefit can be. Moreover, it seems that some things which harm us can eventually benefit us. Defining benefits in terms of intentions and costs is also problematic, as not only can we not definitively know

someone else's intentions, neither can we predict the outcomes of events. Considering benefits to require the receiver to want the thing in question is also troublesome as we can want things that are bad for us and, as mentioned, things which harm us initially can ultimately benefit us. Furthermore, making comparisons involving a baseline is problematic as the baseline we choose appears unavoidably arbitrary, and there will always be a hypothetical state preferable to the current situation so this fact alone tells us nothing valuable about benefits.

### **Summary Conclusion**

At the very least, this paper has uncovered that all of the intuitive ways of understanding the notion of a benefit are not without their problems and counterexamples. It has also shown us that a concept which is so frequently used in both everyday and philosophical discussion is not universally understood. Given the notion of benefits is so confused, perhaps an argument could be made in support of omitting benefits from discussion in political philosophy. However, given that the use of the term is currently ubiquitous, I trust that this essay will highlight to scholars that we cannot assume that our readers or other academics understand the term in the same way. Moreover, being explicitly aware of the problems which our chosen interpretations possess will always make for much more cautious philosophy. Ideally, by scholars who write about benefits being aware that there are many varying interpretations of the term, we might eventually uncover the correct way of understanding it. Perhaps the best and least problematic manner is one which is not intuitive and therefore has not been thought of yet. By assuming scholars view terms in the same way and taking concept's definitions for granted, we can never be certain that we are viewing notions in the correct, or most beneficial, way.<sup>6</sup> This essay has shown that there are multiple competing ways of understanding a benefit, yet accepting and receiving benefits plays a fundamental role in grounding political obligation which is a key concept in political philosophy.

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6. Pun intended.

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