

A liber for Liberalis: modeling giving in Seneca's De Beneficiis

The structure of Seneca's *De Beneficiis* has long baffled scholars. Lipsius famously declared: "the books are good but notably confused in order and treatment, which it is scarcely possible to unravel even for one making an effort" (Griffin 2007: 96). This confusion is invited by Seneca's own declaration that only the first four books are really necessary for the treatment of his subject (*in prioribus libris videbar consummasse propositum*) and that, by continuing, he is "not serving his subject, but indulging it" (*quidquid ultra moror, non servio materiae, sed indulgeo* (*De Ben.* 5.1)). The contents of the final three books, meanwhile, seem to bear this out, dealing, as they do, with difficult technical material and obscure limit cases, often in a piecemeal fashion.

Alongside this move to a more disconnected structure, we find a shift in argumentative style from a linear articulation of precepts concerning the best way to give and receive benefits (books 1-4) to "a series of dialectical exercises, answering hard questions and solving hard cases" (books 5-7) (Griffin 2007: 97). Griffin (2007 and 2013) has argued that the reason for this shift in style is to show that Seneca's addressee, Liberalis, has moved from the elementary education of the opening books to a higher level of understanding of the topic. From book 5 onwards, then, Seneca dramatizes Liberalis as having gained the new ability to ask questions of the author, resulting in the evolution of the treatise from an instructor-led lecture into a more disjointed dialectical exchange. In doing this, Griffin argues, Seneca is engaging in a literary technique that he has employed elsewhere in the *Moral Letters*: dramatizing the moral development of the addressee as the text progresses in order to demonstrate the efficacy of Seneca's Stoic teaching. So, just as, in the *Letters*, Lucilius moves from clueless neophyte to

Stoic practitioner (Wilson 2001), in the *De Beneficiis*, Liberalis moves from mute addressee to active participant in the philosophical discussion (Griffin 2007 and 2013).

In this paper, I shall build on Griffin's work, by examining a further function of this argumentative shift. By dramatizing an argumentative exchange between author and addressee from book 5 onwards, Seneca demonstrates not only the philosophical development of his addressee but also the ideal form of giving which is the subject of this treatise. As the text develops, we learn that it is not only material gifts that fall under the heading of *beneficia*; instead, advice and instruction are important benefits that we can provide to each other (*De Ben.* 3.27, 6.29, 6.33). The text of the *De Beneficiis* itself, then, in providing useful advice to its addressee, is an important example of a *beneficium*. In shifting to a more discursive form in books 5-7, I shall argue, Seneca is also adopting a literary form which is illustrative of his strictures on the ideal *beneficium*. In particular, as I shall show, the new focus on Liberalis illustrates how a *beneficium* needs to be tailored to the needs of the particular person (*De Ben.* 1.11), while the fact that Liberalis' facial expression, rather than words, drive the discussion, reflect that fact that an ideal *beneficium* should be given before it is requested, anticipating the recipient's needs (*De Ben.* 2.1-2).

Considering the text itself as an example of a *beneficium* in this way helps to explain why the work continues beyond its natural end point, and also allows us to see that Seneca's literary style in the *De Beneficiis* is not as wildly different from his other texts as might be supposed. In using the form of the text itself to underscore his teachings about the correctly given *beneficium*, Seneca is employing a dramatic technique that we also see in the *Letters*, which, as Nussbaum notes, form "one long rich *exemplum*, an open-ended and highly complex story of two concrete lives" (Nussbaum 1994: 340).

Works Cited

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