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When was the last time you gave someone a gift? Perhaps it was on an occasion when gifts are expected—a birthday, or wedding, or graduation. Or perhaps you gave spontaneously, “out of the goodness of your heart,” as the expression goes. Perhaps you treated a date to a meal, or brought a bottle of wine to a dinner party, or wrote a check to a charity or cause. Probably you did not stop to consider the moral meaning of your action, or fully appreciate the fact that, in the eyes of the Roman writer Seneca, you were, in some small way, saving the world. Your ability to give, as Seneca discussed in his treatise *De Beneficiis*,

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or *On Benefits*, is an essential part of what makes you human, and if your giving is done in the right spirit, it can even bring you close to the divine.

As a thinker of the Stoic school, Seneca saw a divine plan behind all human activity, especially the giving of gifts and doing of favors. His philosophy had strong underpinnings in religious belief. He speaks of a “Guiding Principle, from which things take their form” (1.6, on p. 23), though he sometimes imagines this as composed of a plurality of beings, or equates it with Nature or with the stars and planets. In the end, he claims at one point (4.7, pp. 135–37), it’s not important what name we give to “the first cause of all things,” whether we make it singular or plural, or whether we personify it, so long as we strive to follow the inner promptings it has instilled in us. The

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impulse toward generosity, he maintains—the “goodness of our hearts”—is foremost among these.

How does the human race survive, Seneca asks, lacking the speed, strength, and ferocity of other animals? Only through our two unique attributes (4.18): Reason and what Seneca calls *societas*, the social impulse, here rendered “Fellowship” for want of a better translation. Our ability to help one another, to pool our resources, to *give*, has elevated us above the wild creatures that otherwise outstrip us, and indeed has made us masters of creation. (Seneca was not well versed enough in the natural world to spot a similar social impulse in other animals, and he knew little of the apes and monkeys that share this trait with human beings.)

In Seneca’s eyes, we did not develop these abilities over time, as a modern

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evolutionary biologist might claim. Our impulse toward generosity was “hard-wired” from the start. We are *meant* to be generous beings, just as we are meant to be virtuous in other ways, to employ reason to guide our actions, and to prevent virulent emotions—anger in particular, as well as fear, especially fear of death—from throwing our minds off course. These are core principles of the Stoic school, explored by Seneca in the many prose treatises and open letters he published throughout his life. (My two other volumes in the “Ancient Wisdom for Modern Readers” series, *How to Keep Your Cool* and *How to Die*, present Seneca’s thinking on the problem of disruptive emotions—anger in the first case, fear of death in the second.)

In the treatise excerpted here, *De Beneficiis*, or *On Benefits*, Seneca sought to

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strengthen the giving impulse and heighten our awareness of how much we gain by following it, and how much we lose by ignoring or perverting it. Selfishness, timidity, egoism, greed, and a dozen other failings, in Seneca's view, get in the way of our divine natures. We decline to give, or we give badly, lording our gift over those who receive it, seeking renown for having given, or expecting something in exchange, a return for our "gift"—in that case a gift no longer, but something more like a loan, bribe, or business transaction. On the other side of the gifting relationship, we often also *get* badly, without the sense of gratefulness that makes us want to be givers ourselves. Our ingratitude makes others less willing to give, and the binding ties of *societas* begin to fray.

On Benefits is the longest of Seneca's extant essays, an indication of the importance

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he gave to its theme. He may well have added to it over time, for the last three of its seven books have a very different tenor than the first four, and the seventh book contains some off-topic material that feels like a later accretion. Even after completing it, he still had more to say on the subject, for he devoted one of his *Moral Epistles* to the same subject, characterizing that letter as an extension and expansion of *On Benefits*. A portion of that letter is included in this volume; its publication date is known to be 64 AD, just before Seneca's death. *On Benefits* might have been composed at any point during the eight years before that, or perhaps over much of that time span.

During all of those eight years, and indeed beginning slightly before (in 54 AD), Seneca lived a double life, composing philosophic essays and tragic dramas, but also

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serving as chief minister to Nero, ruler of Rome, whom he had tutored as a youth. Nero succeeded to the role of *princeps*, what we now generally term “emperor,” at seventeen, an age at which he badly needed the advice and moral authority of an older man. Seneca, a respected statesman, writer, and thinker three times Nero’s age, provided the new regime with that authority. Seneca worked closely with Nero for a decade, growing extremely wealthy in the meanwhile, but as the partnership deteriorated (along with Nero’s sanity), he found himself trapped. Though he offered to surrender his huge estate, Nero (according to an account of his thinking set down by the historian Tacitus) would not accept the bargain or permit him to depart the palace. Allowing Seneca to return what he had received, Nero reasoned (again in Tacitus’s

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account), would make the regime look predatory. After further estrangement, in 65 AD, the emperor seized on ambiguous evidence to accuse Seneca of treason and force him to commit suicide.

Because Seneca had gotten fabulously rich, quite possibly with the help of Nero's handouts, and then found it impossible to give back what he'd accepted, the topic of gifts and giving held special meaning in his life. One would not guess this from *On Benefits*, however. With a discretion born of the perils of tyranny, Seneca kept his own life, and political career, offstage in this treatise, as in almost all his other writings. Even when he refers to "attendants of royal power" (2.5) who keep petitioners waiting before dispensing favors, he gives no hint that he himself was on most mornings surrounded by such petitioners, "clients"

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(*clientes*) in Roman parlance, who needed imperial help and sought Seneca's support. Thus, Seneca's paradoxical position at Nero's court, a powerful man capable of dispensing favors, but also a prisoner of those he had received, underlies this text. Just how much the life influenced the work is a matter of debate.

Rather than pursue that complex (and probably unanswerable) question, let us take *On Benefits* on its own terms: as an exhortation toward generosity and gratitude, not as a self-critique or self-defense from a man weighed down by Nero's gifts. Let us look to it for an expression of Seneca's most cherished beliefs: the certainty that a divine plan guided and protected the human race, a plan established by benevolent gods; the conviction that the fallibility of all human beings demands reciprocal clemency

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and forgiveness; a sense of wonder at the world's beauty and plenitude, somehow coupled with a fear that it is descending into chaos (as in the grim image of the besieged city and its pillagers at 7.27, put forward as “a true picture of human life”). Above all, let us enjoy the rhetorical art of a first-rate wordsmith: sweeping crescendos and soaring imagery, kaleidoscopic shifts of tone and voice, and fiery verbal duels—Seneca's specialty—with imagined opponents, summoned out of the ether to serve as foils and straw men.

Many of these pyrotechnics, however, present problems for the translator. The difficulties in this case begin from the very title of the essay. *De Beneficiis* is usually translated “On Benefits,” for lack of any other English equivalent for Latin *beneficium*—a word that combines

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our notions of “gift,” “favor,” and “good turn.” In her extensive 2013 study of the essay, *Seneca on Society*, classicist Miriam Griffin opined that “benefit” is the only viable way to render *beneficium*, and at first I shared that opinion. But not only is “benefit” ungainly, it also conjures up, for American readers at least, the health and pension plans obtained through employment contracts. The problem is compounded in that Seneca speaks of *beneficia* constantly throughout the essay, so that the shortcomings of “benefit” must be revisited over and over. In the end, I largely jettisoned the word and adopted a wide array of alternatives: “gifts and good deeds,” most commonly, but sometimes only one or the other, as well as “favor,” “good turn,” “boon,” or the gerund “giving,” this last version especially useful in

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passages where Seneca speaks of *beneficium* as an activity or a process.

As with all Seneca's essays, the modern translator confronts the chauvinism of the Greco-Roman world when dealing with gendered pronouns. Like his contemporaries, Seneca addressed himself largely to males, on the assumption that, since males dominated politics and statecraft, it was their moral improvement that mattered most. His exemplars and hypothetical actors are invariably male, to judge by the masculine gender of associated Latin words. It seemed wrong to me to perpetuate this gender bias, but also wrong, or at least anachronistic, to introduce female pronouns where Seneca and his age would never have used them. I have dealt with this problem by pluralizing many of Seneca's singular pronouns, converting "he" either

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to “they” or “we,” or by using “you say” in cases where Seneca introduces an unnamed opponent with *inquit* (“he/she says”). This did not seem to me a distortion, since Seneca himself mixes first-, second-, and third-person statements, following no discernible pattern, when making moral assertions or imagining responses of an interlocutor. Wherever a singular third-person pronoun seemed stronger or clearer than the alternatives, I have chosen to preserve the masculine “he” of Seneca’s admittedly patriarchal text.

The excerpts I have selected from *On Benefits* represent less than a quarter of the entire essay. *De Beneficiis* was not only Seneca’s longest work but also his most specific and thorough: much of it deals with highly specific, even recondite problems of giving and receiving, of less interest to modern

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readers than its more far-reaching goals. In my selections, I have favored the broadest, most inspirational passages of the work, especially those dealing with the gods, for gods are crucial to Seneca's thinking about humanity.

The gods, according to Seneca—conceived here not as the Olympian deities of mythology but as vague, impersonal forces—provide us with the ultimate model of giving and doing good. The world they have provided is beautiful and filled with nurture, even if we have made it into a chaos resembling the sack of a captured city. They never withhold their generosity and never expect a return. In their benevolence, they have instilled in us an impulse to give—“the goodness of our hearts”—that knits together the very fabric of civilization. It is Seneca's conviction that we have been

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blessed by the divine, expressed sometimes in the ecstatic tones of a pulpit preacher, that, I hope, will bring his teachings home to modern readers and prompt deeper reflections about what we do when we give.