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SENECA
MORAL ESSAYS
VOLUME III



Translated by
JOHN W. BASORE

SENECA

MORAL ESSAYS

江苏工业学院图书馆

WITH AN ENGLISH TRANSLATION BY

藏书章
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HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

LONDON, ENGLAND

First published 1935
Reprinted 1958, 1964, 1975, 1989, 2001, 2006

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ISBN 0-674-99343-8

Printed on acid-free paper and bound by
Edwards Brothers, Ann Arbor, Michigan

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SENECA

III

LCL 310

INTRODUCTION

THE seven books *On Benefits*, addressed to Aebutius Liberalis of Lyons, are a discursive and repetitious treatment of the morality of giving and receiving—the casuistry of benefaction and gratitude. The gist of the matter is given more briefly in one of the *Epistles*,^a written in A.D. 64 after the publication of a part or the whole of the *De Beneficiis*. The theme was not new, but the lengthy elaboration of it is surprising. Some apology for this may be found in the necessities of the ancient social order, in which, by reason of many of its relations, benefaction and gratitude were counted, not private graces, but social virtues.

Seneca's chief source was Hecaton, a Stoic philosopher of Rhodes, who had studied under Panaetius and written numerous treatises now lost.

The date of the work is variously conjectured on the basis of internal evidence, but there can be no doubt that it belongs to the closing years of Seneca's life.^b Books I.-IV., from their essentially technical character, form a unit, and probably appeared several years after the death of Claudius (A.D. 54). That he

^a lxxxix.

^b Waltz, *Vie de Sénèque*, p. 7, n. 2, places it between A.D. 58 and 62.

INTRODUCTION

was no longer living becomes evident from the sneer revealed at the end of Book I. The later books, which are supplementary and informal, are perhaps the most interesting. Books V. and VI. are placed by Duff^a before Seneca's retirement in A.D. 62, and Book VII. still later, very near the end of his life (A.D. 65).

The best manuscript of the treatise is the *Codex Nazarianus*, of the eighth or ninth century, in the Palatine collection of the Vatican. Others of importance are R (*Codex Reginensis*), G (*Codex Guelferbytanus*), M (*Codex Monacensis*), and P (*Codex Parisinus*). In the critical notes O is used to designate a consensus of all or of most of these.

The Latin text, except for some matters of punctuation and orthography and the divergencies noted, is that of Hosius (second edition), Leipzig, 1914.

In general, for the elucidation of proper names the reader is referred to the Index.

^a *Literary Hist. of Rome in the Silver Age*, p. 218.

J. W. B.

ROME, September, 1935

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SENECA
MORAL ESSAYS

L. ANNAEI SENECAE

AD AEBUTIUM LIBERALEM

DE BENEFICIIS

LIBER I

1 1. Inter multos ac varios errores temere inconsulteque viventium nihil propemodum indignius,¹ vir optime Liberalis, dixerim, quam quod² beneficia nec dare scimus nec accipere. Sequitur enim, ut male collocata male debeantur; de quibus non redditis sero querimur; ista enim perierunt, cum
2 darentur. Nec mirum est inter plurima maximaque vitia nullum esse frequentius quam ingrati animi. Id evenire ex causis pluribus video.

Prima illa est, quod non eligimus dignos, quibus tribuamus. Sed nomina facturi diligenter in patrimonium et vitam debitoris inquirimus, semina in solum effectum et sterile non spargimus; beneficia sine ullo dilectu magis proicimus quam damus.

3 Nec facile dixerim, utrum turpius sit infitiri an repetere beneficium; id enim genus huius crediti

¹ indignius *commonly supplied*; diffusius dixerim quam quod *Bourgery*; discerni haec duo dixerim quod *Préchac*.

² quam quod *MG*²: quod *N*, *Hosius* after a lacuna.

LUCIUS ANNAEUS SENECA

TO AEBUTIUS LIBERALIS

ON BENEFITS

BOOK I

AMONG the many and diverse errors of those who live reckless and thoughtless lives, almost nothing that I can mention, excellent Liberalis, is more disgraceful than the fact that we do not know how either to give or to receive benefits. For it follows that, if they are ill placed, they are ill acknowledged, and, when we complain of their not being returned, it is too late ; for they were lost at the time they were given. Nor is it surprising that among all our many and great vices, none is so common as ingratitude. This I observe results from several causes.

The first is, that we do not pick out those who are worthy of receiving our gifts. Yet when we are about to open an account with anyone, we are careful to inquire into the means and manner of life of our debtor ; we do not sow seed in worn-out and unproductive soil ; but our benefits we give, or rather throw, away without any discrimination.

Nor would it be easy to say whether it is more shameful to repudiate a benefit, or to ask the repayment of it ; for from the nature of such a trust, we

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est, ex quo tantum recipiendum sit, quantum ultro refertur. Decoquere vero foedissimum ob hoc ipsum, quia non opus est ad liberandam fidem facultatibus sed animo; reddit enim beneficium, qui
4 debet. Sed cum sit in ipsis crimen, qui ne confessione quidem grati sunt, in nobis quoque est. Multos experimur ingratos, plures facimus, quia alias graves exprobratores exactoresque sumus, alias leves et quos paulo post muneris sui pacniteat, alias queruli et minima momenta calumniantes. Gratiam omnem corrumpimus non tantum postquam dedimus bene-
5 ficia, sed dum damus. Quis nostrum contentus fuit aut leviter rogari aut semel? Quis non, cum aliquid a se peti suspicatus est, frontem adduxit, vultum avertit, occupationes simulavit, longis sermonibus et de industria non invenientibus exitum occasionem petendi abstulit et variis artibus necessitates prope-
6 rantes elusit; in angusto vero comprehensus aut distulit, id est timide negavit, aut promisit, sed difficulter, sed subductis superciliis, sed malignis et vix exeunti-
7 bus verbis? Nemo autem libenter debet, quod non accepit, sed expressit. Gratus adversus eum esse quisquam potest, qui beneficium aut superbe abiecit aut iratus impegit aut fatigatus, ut molestia careret, dedit? Errat, si quis sperat responsurum sibi, quem
8 dilatione lassavit, expectatione torsit. Eodem animo

ON BENEFITS, I. 1. 3-8

have a right to receive back only what is voluntarily returned. To plead bankruptcy is, surely, most disgraceful, just for the reason that, in order to perform the promised payment, what is needed is, not wealth, but the desire ; for, if a benefit is acknowledged, it is returned. But, while those who do not even profess to be grateful are blameworthy, so also are we. Many men we find ungrateful, but more we make so, because at one time we are harsh in our reproaches and demands, at another, are fickle and repent of our gift as soon as we have made it, at another, are fault-finding and misrepresent the importance of trifles. Thus we destroy all sense of gratitude, not only after we have given our benefits, but even while we are in the act of giving them. Who of us has been content to have a request made lightly, or but once ? Who, when he suspected that something was being sought from him, has not knit his brows, turned away his face, pretended to be busy, by long-drawn conversation, which he purposely kept from ending, deprived another of the opportunity of making a request, and by various tricks baffled his pressing needs ? Who, when actually caught in a corner, has not either deferred the favour, that is, been too cowardly to refuse it, or promised it with ungraciousness, with frowning brows, and with grudging words that were scarcely audible ? Yet no one is glad to be indebted for what he had, not received, but extorted. Can anyone be grateful to another for a benefit that has been haughtily flung to him, or thrust at him in anger, or given out of sheer weariness in order to save further trouble ? Whoever expects that a man whom he has wearied by delay and tortured by hope will feel any indebtedness

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beneficium debetur, quo datur, et ideo non est negligenter dandum ; sibi enim quisque debet, quod a nesciente accepit ; ne tarde quidem, quia, cum omni in officio magni aestimetur dantis voluntas, qui tarde fecit, diu noluit ; utique non contumeliose ; nam cum ita natura comparatum sit, ut altius iniuriae quam merita descendant et illa cito defluant, has tenax memoria custodiat, quid expectat, qui offendit, dum obligat ? Satis adversus illum gratus est, si quis beneficio eius ignoscit.

- 9 Non est autem, quod tardiores faciat ad bene merendum turba ingratorum. Nam primum, ut dixi, nos illam augemus ; deinde ne deos quidem immortales ab hac tam effusa nec cessante benignitate¹ sacrilegi negligentesque eorum deterrent. Utuntur natura sua et cuncta interque illa ipsos munerum suorum malos interpretes iuvant. Hos sequamur duces, quantum humana imbecillitas patitur ; demus beneficia, non feneremus. Dignus est decipi, qui de recipiendo cogitavit, cum daret. At male cesserit.
- 10 Et liberi et coniuges spem fefellerunt, tamen et educamus et ducimus, adeoque adversus experimenta pertinaces sumus, ut bella victi et naufragi maria repetamus. Quanto magis permanere in dandis

¹ nec cessante benignitate *corrected by Lipsius* : necessitate O.

ON BENEFITS, I. 1. 8-10

deceives himself. A benefit is acknowledged in the same spirit in which it is bestowed, and for that reason it ought not to be bestowed carelessly ; for a man thanks only himself for what he receives from an unwitting giver. Nor should it be given tardily, since, seeing that in every service the willingness of the giver counts for much, he who acts tardily has for a long time been unwilling. And, above all, it should not be given insultingly ; for, since human nature is so constituted that injuries sink deeper than kindnesses, and that, while the latter pass quickly from the mind, the former are kept persistently in memory, what can he expect who, while doing a favour, offers an affront ? If you pardon such a man for giving a benefit, you show gratitude enough.

There is no reason, however, why the multitude of ingrates should make us more reluctant to be generous. For, in the first place, as I have said, we ourselves increase their number ; and, in the second place, not even the immortal gods are deterred from showing lavish and unceasing kindness to those who are sacrilegious and indifferent to them. For they follow their own nature, and in their universal bounty include even those who are ill interpreters of their gifts. Let us follow these as our guides in so far as human weakness permits ; let us make our benefits, not investments, but gifts. The man who, when he gives, has any thought of repayment deserves to be deceived. But suppose it has turned out ill. Both children and wives have disappointed our hopes, yet we marry and rear children, and so persistent are we in the face of experience that, after being conquered, we go back to war and, after being shipwrecked, we go back to sea. How much more fitting

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- beneficiis decet ! Quae si quis non dat, quia non recepit, dedit, ut reciperet, bonamque ingratorum facit causam, quibus turpe est non reddere, si licet.
- 11 Quam multi indigni luce sunt ! Tamen dies oritur. Quam multi, quod nati sunt, queruntur ! Tamen natura subolem novam gignit ipsosque, qui non fuisse
- 12 mallent, esse patitur. Hoc et magni animi et boni proprium est, non fructum beneficiorum sequi, sed ipsa et post malos quoque bonum quaerere. Quid magnifici erat multis prodesse, si nemo deceperit ? Nunc est virtus dare beneficia non utique reditura, quorum a viro egregio statim fructus perceptus est.
- 13 Adeo quidem ista res fugare nos et pigriores ad rem pulcherrimam facere non debet, ut, si spes mihi praecidatur gratum hominem reperiendi, malim non recipere beneficia quam non dare, quia, qui non dat, vitium ingrati antecedit. Dicam, quod sentio. Qui beneficium non reddit, magis peccat ; qui non dat, citius.

- 1 2. Beneficia in vulgus cum largiri institueris,
 perdenda sunt multa, ut semel ponas bene.

In priore versu utrumque reprehendas ; nam nec in vulgum effundenda sunt, et nullius rei, minime beneficiorum, honesta largitio est ; quibus si detraxeris

^a From an unknown author.

ON BENEFITS, I. I. 10—II. 1

to persevere in bestowing benefits ! For if a man stops giving them because they were not returned, his purpose in giving them was to have them returned, and he supplies a just excuse to the ingrate, whose disgrace lies in not making a return if it is permissible. How many are unworthy of seeing the light ! Yet the day dawns. How many complain because they have been born ! Yet Nature begets new progeny, and even those who would rather not have been, she suffers to be. To seek, not the fruit of benefits, but the mere doing of them, and to search for a good man even after the discovery of bad men—this is the mark of a soul that is truly great and good. What glory would there be in doing good to many if none ever deceived you ? But as it is, it is a virtue to give benefits that have no surety of being returned, whose fruit is at once enjoyed by the noble mind. So true is it that we ought not to allow such a consideration to rout us from our purpose and make us less prone to do a very beautiful thing, that, even were I deprived of the hope of finding a grateful man, I should prefer not recovering benefits to not giving them, because he who does not give them merely forestalls the fault of the ungrateful man. I will explain what I mean. He who does not return a benefit, sins more, he who does not give one, sins earlier.

To shower bounties on the mob should you delight,
Full many must you lose, for one you place aright.^a

In the first verse two points are open to criticism ; for, on the one hand, benefits ought not to be showered upon the mob, and, on the other, it is not right to be wasteful of any thing, least of all of benefits ; for, if you eliminate discernment in giving them, they cease

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iudicium, desinunt esse beneficia, in aliud quodlibet
2 incident nomen. Sequens sensus mirificus est, qui uno
bene posito beneficio multorum amissorum damna
solatur. Vide, oro te, ne hoc et verius sit et magni-
tudini bene facientis aptius, ut illum hortemur ad
danda, etiam si nullum bene positurus est. Illud enim
falsum est “perdenda sunt multa”; nullum perit,
3 quia, qui perdit, computaverat. Beneficiorum simplex
ratio est: tantum erogatur; si reddet aliquid, lucrum
est, si non reddet, damnum non est. Ego illud dedi,
ut darem. Nemo beneficia in calendario scribit nec
avarus exactor ad horam et diem appellat. Numquam
illa vir bonus cogitat nisi admonitus a reddente; alio-
qui in formam crediti transeunt. Turpis feneratio est
4 beneficium expensum ferre. Qualiscumque priorum
eventus est, persevera in alios conferre; melius
apud ingratos iacebunt, quos aut pudor aut occasio
aut imitatio aliquando gratos poterit efficere. Ne
cessaveris, opus tuum perage et partes boni viri
exsequere. Alium re, alium fide, alium gratia,
alium consilio, alium praeceptis salubribus adiuva.
5 Officia etiam ferae sentiunt, nec ullum tam imman-
suetum animal est, quod non cura mitiget et in
amorem sui vertat. Leonum ora a magistris impune