

IX Seneca on *beneficium* and fellowship

Dharmic giving can be put into perspective by comparing it with deferred and unspecified social exchange (see Table 1, p. 13). An example of this can be found in the theory of fellowship advocated by the Roman philosopher Seneca and by Kāmandaki's *saṅgatasandhi* (subsection VI.H(4)). Seneca stresses the importance of thankfulness, apparently absent in *dānadharma*. Section XVIII.B (in the etic part of the book) presents a small probabilistic model of *beneficium*.

A Preliminary definition of *beneficium*

Lucius Annaeus Seneca (between 4 and 1 BCE – 65 CE)⁵⁸⁰ was a Roman philosopher belonging to the Stoic school of philosophy. He is credited with several plays and philosophical treatises. For our purpose, “*de beneficiis*” (on benefits)⁵⁸¹ is of particular relevance. It can be fruitfully contrasted with Brahmanical *dāna* theory. Both theories have a moral impetus, advising agents on how to give and how to receive. In contrast to the Brahmanical *dāna* theory, Seneca stresses thankfulness and the receiver's wish to reciprocate. Since this way of thinking about gifts is closer to the typical modern mentality than the Brahmanical one is, Seneca provides a useful alternative against which to look at the Indian material. The similarities and differences between these two approaches to gifting are worth stressing.

Seneca provides the following definitions of *beneficium*:

⟨189⟩ *Quod est ergo beneficium? Beniucola actio tribuens gaudium capiensque tribuendo in id, quod facit prona et sponte sua parata. Itaque non, quid fiat aut quid detur, refert, sed qua mente, quia beneficium non in eo, quod fit aut datur, consistit, sed in ipso dantis aut facientis animo.*⁵⁸²

So what is a benefit? It is a well-intentioned action that confers joy and in so doing derives joy, inclined towards and willingly prepared for doing what

580 Asmis et al. (2011, p. vii)

581 See the monograph by Griffin (2013).

582 SB 1.6.1

it does. And so it matters not what is done or what is given, but with what attitude, since the benefit consists not in what is done or given, but rather in the intention of the giver or agent.⁵⁸³

<190> *Sic beneficium est et actio, ut diximus, benefica et ipsum, quod datur per illam actionem, ut pecunia, ut domus, ut praetexta; unum utrique nomen est, uis quidem ac potestas longe alia.*⁵⁸⁴

In the same way, a benefit is two things: it is, as I have said, a benevolent action; and it is also the thing that is given through such an action, such as money, a house, a magistracy. They share a name but their meaning and significance are very, very different.⁵⁸⁵

B Giving with a friendly face

It was clear to both the *dharmadāna* authors and to Seneca that the manner of gifting is of vital importance. Indeed, both share the concern of giving with a friendly face. Seneca explains:

<191> *Gratus aduersus eum esse quisquam potest, qui beneficium aut superbe abiecit aut iratus iniegit aut fatigatus, ut molestia careret, dedit?*⁵⁸⁶

Can anyone be grateful to a person who arrogantly tosses off the benefit, angrily throws it in his face, or gives it only out of weariness, to avoid further hassle?⁵⁸⁷

Similarly, *śraddhā* in the sense of “spirit of generosity” (section VI.B) is explained with words such as “excessive joy, a happy face”. In contrast, *śraddhā* as “conviction about the certainty of rewards” has no obvious correlate in Seneca’s thinking. See, however, the advantage of fellowship as highlighted in section F.

C Giving in line with one’s means

According to both Seneca and the Indian *dharmasāstra* authors, giving should be generous, but within reasonable limits. According to the Roman philosopher,

<192> *Respiciendae sunt cuique facultates suae uiresque, ne aut plus praestemus, quam possumus, aut minus*⁵⁸⁸

583 Griffin & Inwood (2011)

584 SB 2.34.5

585 Griffin & Inwood (2011)

586 SB 1.1.7

587 Griffin & Inwood (2011)

588 SB 2.15.3

We must each pay attention to our capacities and abilities to avoid giving either more or less than we are able to give.⁵⁸⁹

This idea is also present in the Brahmanical concept of *śakti* (section VI.C), where the interests of the donor's family are to be respected. Buddhist texts on giving are sometimes extreme (section VIII.C), at other times balanced (section VIII.F).

D The worthy recipient

Seneca argues that the recipient should be selected carefully:

⟨193⟩ *Nec mirum est inter plurima maximaque uitia nullum esse frequentius quam ingrati animi. [...] Prima illa est, quod non eligimus dignos, quibus tribuamus. Sed nomina facturi diligenter in patrimonium et uitam debitoris inquirimus, semina in solum effetum et sterile non spargimus: beneficia sine ullo dilectu magis proicimus quam damus.*⁵⁹⁰

And it is no surprise that among the large number of extremely grave vices, none is more common than those stemming from an ungrateful mind. The first is that we do not select worthy recipients for our gifts. By contrast, when we are going to lend money we make a thorough inquiry into the inherited assets and lifestyle of our debtor; we do not sow seed onto ground that is exhausted and infertile. But our benefits we cast off without any discrimination, rather than actually giving them.⁵⁹¹

The reason for carefully selecting a receiver is that the donor expects thankfulness:

⟨194⟩ *Cum accipiendum iudicauerimus, hilares accipiamus profitentes gaudium, et id danti manifestum sit, ut fructum praesentem capiat [...] Qui grate beneficium accipit, primam eius pensionem soluit.*⁵⁹²

Once we have decided to accept, we should do so with a cheerful acknowledgment of our pleasure. This should be made apparent to the giver so that he gets an immediate satisfaction; [...] Receiving a benefit with gratitude is the first installment of repayment.⁵⁹³

In Indian *dharmadāna* texts, the worthy recipient is called a *pātra*. This concept is very prominent (see ⟨94⟩ and ⟨214⟩). However, a giver of a dharmic gift does not expect gratitude.

589 Griffin & Inwood (2011)

590 SB 1.1.2

591 Griffin & Inwood (2011)

592 SB 2.22.1

593 Griffin & Inwood (2011)

E *Beneficium* without the expectation of reciprocity

For Seneca, bestowing benefits is about a donor's giving freely and voluntarily, as a token of friendship, and about the receiver's gratitude (<194>), but never about reciprocity in a narrow-minded, businesslike manner. Seneca characterises the donor's attitude in the following two quotations:

<195> *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 auarus exactor ad horam et diem appellat. Numquam illa uir bonus cogitat nisi admonitus a reddente; alioqui in formam credendi transit. Turpis feneratio est beneficium expensum ferre.*⁵⁹⁴

The bookkeeping for benefits is quite simple. A certain amount is disbursed; if there is any repayment at all, then it is a profit. If there is no repayment, it is not a loss. I gave it only in order to give. No one records benefits in an account book and then, like a greedy collection agent, demands payment at a set day and time. A good man never thinks about his gifts unless he is reminded by someone wishing to repay them. Otherwise the benefits are converted into loans. Treating a benefit as an expenditure is a shameful form of loan-sharking.⁵⁹⁵

<196> *Quotiens, quod proposuit, quisque consequitur, capit operis sui fructum. Qui beneficium dat, quid proponit? prodesse ei, cui dat, et uoluptati esse. Si, quod uoluit, effecit peruenitque ad me animus eius ac mutuo gaudio adfecit, tulit, quod petit. Non enim in uicem aliquid sibi reddi uoluit; aut non fuit beneficium, sed negotiatio.*⁵⁹⁶

Whenever someone achieves his intent, he gets the fruits of his labors. What is the intention of the person who gives a benefit? To be useful to the recipient and to give him pleasure. If he achieved this objective and if his intention got through to me and we felt mutual pleasure, then he got what he was aiming at. For he did not want to be given something in exchange; otherwise it was not a benefit but a business deal.⁵⁹⁷

Clearly, a *dharmadāna* is even more anti-reciprocal than a *beneficium*. After all, a *dharmadāna* is not an *arthadāna* (see <94>).

594 SB 1.2.3

595 Griffin & Inwood (2011)

596 SB 2.31.2

597 Griffin & Inwood (2011)

F Virtue and advantage in fellowship

Seneca stresses again and again that benefits should be bestowed because benefitting others is a virtue. The fact that this (beautiful) virtue is accompanied by advantages (attractions) does not preclude choosing the virtue for its own sake:

⟨197⟩ *Non ideo per se non est expetendum, cui aliquid extra quoque emolumentum adhaeret; fere enim pulcherrima quaeque multis et aduenticiis comitata sunt dotibus, sed illas trahunt, ipsa praecedunt.*⁵⁹⁸

It is not that something is not to be chosen for its own sake, just because some extraneous advantage attaches to it. The most beautiful things are in fact often accompanied by a host of added attractions, but it is the beauty that leads and the attractions follow along.⁵⁹⁹

The main advantage of bestowing benefits, above virtue or beauty, is fellowship (*societas*). This advantage is clear from the following long passage:

⟨198⟩ *Vt scias per se expetendam esse grati animi adfectionem, per se fugienda res est ingratum esse, quoniam nihil aequae concordiam humani generis dissociat ac distrahit quam hoc uitium. Nam quo alio tuto sumus, quam quod mutuis iuuamur officiis? hoc uno instructior uita contraque incursiones subitas munitior est, beneficiorum commercio. Fac nos singulos, quid sumus? praeda animalium et uictimae ac bellissimus et facillimus sanguis, quoniam ceteris animalibus in tutelam sui satis uirium est; quaecumque uaga nascebantur et actura uitam segregem, armata sunt, hominem cutis pro tegmine inbecilla cingit, non unguium uis, non dentium terribilem ceteris fecit, nudum et infirmum societas munit. Duas res deus dedit, quae illum obnoxium ualidissimum facerent, rationem et societatem; itaque, qui par esse nulli posset, si seduceretur, rerum potitur. Societas illi dominium omnium animalium dedit; societas terris genitum in alienae naturae transmisit imperium et dominari etiam in mari iussit; hoc morborum inpetus arcuit, senectuti adminicula prospexit, solacia contra dolores dedit; hoc fortes nos facit, quod licet contra fortunam aduocare.*⁶⁰⁰

That gratitude is an attitude to be chosen for itself follows from the fact that ingratitude is something to be avoided in itself, because nothing dissolves and disrupts the harmony of mankind as this vice. For what else keeps us safe, except helping each other by reciprocal services? Taken one by one, what are we? The prey of animals, their victims, the choicest blood, and the easiest to come by. Other animals have enough strength to protect themselves, and those that were born to wander and lead isolated lives are armed. But man is covered with a delicate skin: he has neither powerful claws nor teeth to

598 SB 4.22.4

599 Griffin & Inwood (2011)

600 SB 4.18.1–3

instill fear in others; naked and weak as he is, it is fellowship that protects him. God has granted two things that make this vulnerable creature the strongest of all: reason and fellowship. So the being that on its own was no match for anything is now the master of all things. Fellowship has given him power over all animals; fellowship has conferred on this terrestrial creature control of another's sphere and ordered him to rule even by sea. It is this that has checked the incursions of disease, provided support for his old age, and given him comfort in his sufferings; it is this that makes us brave because we can call on it for help against Fortune.⁶⁰¹

In this manner, Seneca explains why mankind rules the earth.

⁶⁰¹ Griffin & Inwood (2011)