The joy of giving: Seneca *De beneficiis* 1.6.1

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The exchange of gifts or services was a central part of Roman social life, and Seneca's *De beneficiis* ('On Benefactions'), is a lengthy and rich work that takes up such commerce in various contexts, from presents bestowed on friends to the hierarchical reciprocities of the patronage system. Although the work had for a long while been largely neglected, it has recently been the subject of several important investigations, and an excellent new English translation is now available as well.[1] In this paper, I wish to examine one detail in the text that has not, I think, received entirely adequate discussion. This is all the more surprising since the passage in question is none other than Seneca's definition of *beneficium*. His definition is quite unusual and to my knowledge has no precedent in the Greek or Roman traditions concerning mutual benefits. After considering the definition itself, I shall propose a possible explanation for how Seneca came to adopt it. Here, then, is Seneca's definition of a benefit:

> *Quid est ergo beneficium? Benevola 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* (*Ben.* 1.6.1)
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> What, then, is a benefaction? It is a benevolent action that bestows joy and receives it in the bestowing, inclined toward what it does and primed on its own. Therefore what matters is not what is done or given, but with what attitude, since a benefaction consists not in what is done or given but in the very mind of the one who is doing or giving.[2]

In the Introduction to their translation, Griffin and Inwood comment:

> This definition is the key to the most important novel claims in the treatise. The fact that genuine joy for both parties is an integral component of any benefit is a crucial feature, one that returns to influence debate at various points in the work. Even more important, the definition relies on a sharp distinction between the material object which may be the raw material of a benefit ... and the *action* which is the actual benefit.[3]

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1 Griffin and Inwood 2011. See also Picone et al. 2009; Li Causi, 2012; Picone, 2013; Griffin 2013.

2 Author's translation.

3 See Griffin and Inwood 2011, 4. How much Seneca's view reflected Roman practice is, of course, debatable. Coffee (forthcoming) remarks: 'Yet the remainder of Seneca's discussion in *De Beneficiis* demonstrates that his emphasis on pleasure as integral to the exchange of gifts and favours (*beneficia*) was largely aspirational. Gift exchange was crucial to Roman social cohesion, but the institution was in danger precisely because its affective dimension was lacking. Hence Seneca's repeated exhortations to preserve the exchange of *beneficia* as something beyond the merely instrumental.'

It is true that *gaudium*, or joy, is mentioned in several significant passages in the treatise: the noun and its associated verb, *gaudeo*, occur 17 times in all. For example, in the second book Seneca raises the question of anonymous gifts, where the recipient is not in a position to feel the appropriate gratitude. He argues that the giver should be content (*contentus*) in the knowledge of what he has done; otherwise, his delight (*delectat*) is not in doing the service but in being seen to have done it. Seneca grants that we should, when conditions permit, take note of the joy (*gaudium*) that derives from the recipient's goodwill (I take it this is the giver's joy); but it is bad form ever to remind a beneficiary of his debt to you (2.10). In a similar vein, he advises the recipient of a benefaction to manifest his joy (*gaudium*), so that the benefactor may gain the reward for his service (2.22): if we take cheer (*laetitia*) in seeing a friend cheerful, we take it all the more if we have made him so; indeed, he who accepts a benefaction graciously (or gratefully: *grate*) has paid back the first instalment. Again, Seneca argues that our aim in giving a benefaction is to help the recipient and grant him pleasure; the mutual joy that results is the fulfilment of this intention, and no further return is required, lest the transaction smack of commerce rather than generosity (2.31).[4]

The joy in bestowing a benefaction, according to Seneca, lies both in perceiving the cheer that it brings to the recipient, and in the knowledge that we have brought about that cheer, even if it is not manifested in the form of overt gratitude toward the benefactor (as in the case of an anonymous gift). In these passages, the benefit bestowed is not synonymous with the joy that results from it, whether for the donor or the recipient. What is given is assistance, which is certainly a cause of good cheer in the recipient when it is granted freely and without condescension, and this should bring delight to the giver as well; but the giver should also take delight independently in the mere knowledge of having done the service. The distinction is particularly clear in the final paragraph of Book 2, where Seneca affirms that the return of good will is not sufficient to repay a benefaction; rather, material compensation for the good received is also required. He writes:

> Gratitude (*gratia*) is returned for that benefaction which the action (*actio*) has accomplished if we receive it with goodwill (*benevole*), but we have not yet paid back that other [sc. debt] which consists in the value (*res*); rather, we wish to pay it back. We have compensated the intention (*voluntas*) with our intention, but we still owe value for value. (2.35)

4 Cf. 3.17: 'If having received [a benefaction] is pleasing [*iuvat*] to a person, he enjoys a fair and continual pleasure [*voluptas*] and feels joy [*gaudet*], looking to the mind [*animus*] of the one from whom he received it, not to the value [*res*].' The life of a grateful person, Seneca affirms, is cheerful and merry [*laetus*, *hilaris*], and he takes great joy [*gaudium*] from anticipating the chance to pay back the debt of gratitude [*occasionem referendae gratiae expectans*]. For other passages concerning joy in the context of benefactions, cf. 2.5, 3.3, 3.31–2, 4.29, 5.20, 6.13.

Yet Seneca's definition of benefaction seems to strike a different note; for in affirming that a benefaction is 'a benevolent action that bestows joy and receives it in the bestowing', he would seem to be making the joy itself the gift: it is joy that is bestowed, and the benefactor's joy derives precisely from granting this joy, as such, to the recipient. Rather than drawing a 'sharp distinction between the material object which may be the raw material of a benefit ... and the *action* which is the actual benefit', as Griffin and Inwood put it, it seems to me that Seneca is instead collapsing the difference between the actual service and the joy it brings. He does not say that a benefaction is a gift that causes joy; instead, Seneca boldly affirms that it is an act that grants precisely joy. What has induced Seneca to substitute joy for the gift that brings it?

Before attempting to answer this question, it is worth taking a closer look at Seneca's definition to be sure that he has, as I am claiming, elided the substantive or material dimension of the benefaction. He asserts that a benefaction is 'a benevolent action that bestows joy and receives it in the bestowing': is the action [*actio*] distinct from the joy that is bestowed [the verb here is *tribuere*]? The action, we might argue, consists in giving the thing or service, that is, the *res*, whatever that may be; in the process, one person bestows joy on the other and receives it in so doing. Seneca goes on to say that, as a consequence of this definition (*itaque*), what counts is the attitude or disposition [*mens*] of the benefactor, not what is done or given [*fiat*, *detur*]: here, the subject of the verbs *fiat* and *detur* must be the service or gift, not the joy: clearly Seneca is aware here, as elsewhere, that a benefaction is a two-sided phenomenon, involving both a material transfer and the bestowal of joy that accompanies it. And yet, the bare definition seems to isolate joy as the essential element in the benefaction, occluding the practical benefit and return. A benefaction is an action that bestows *gaudium*: that is what is given, and it is in that coin that the benefit is repaid, even if the beneficiary should fail to express gratitude, much less pay back the material debt, as in the case of anonymous gifts.

A sufficient explanation of Seneca's phrasing may be his desire to render benefactions by their very nature both non-commercial and reciprocal. But there may be a further influence upon his thinking, deriving from his interpretation of traditional views of favours and the gratitude they ought to inspire in the recipient. Aristotle devoted a chapter of his *Rhetoric* to gratitude, in which he affirmed that a favour (*kharis*) is 'a service to one who needs it, not in return for anything, nor so that the one who performs the service may gain something, but so that the other may'.[5] In return for such an altruistic

5 That the chapter is concerned with the *pathos* of gratitude rather than kindness or benevolence is argued in detail in Konstan 2006, ch. 7.

benefaction, one is expected to feel gratitude, which in Greek is expressed by the phrase, 'to have *kharis*' (*kharin ekhein*): the idea is that receiving the benefaction or *kharis* puts one in the position of owing it in turn – not, to be sure, in the same coin as it was given, since the gift was by definition wholly disinterested, but rather in an emotional sense, as a feeling that reciprocates the good intentions of the benefactor. Latin has a similar usage: *gratia* may signify a favour, whereas *gratiam habere* is the standard expression for gratitude (where there is no danger of ambiguity, *gratia* alone may signify gratitude).

Much of what Seneca will have to say about benefactions is already implicit in Aristotle's brief treatment, including the notion that they must look wholly to the benefit of the recipient and that recompense takes the form of gratitude rather than material compensation. Nevertheless, the favour itself is understood to take the form of a concrete service or gift. As Aristotle explains in his customary crisp style (*Rhetoric* II 7, 1385b6–9):

> One must also consider all the categories. For it is a *kharis* either because it is this particular thing or of such a quantity or sort, or at such a time or place. An indication of this is if they did not do a lesser service [when it was needed], and if they did the same things or equal or greater for one's enemies: for it is then obvious that what they did for us was not for our sake. Or if they knowingly did an unworthy service: for no one will confess to have needed what is unworthy.

The Stoics would seem to have treated *kharis* in this context in much the same way, at least to go by the one clear example I have found. According to Plutarch,[6] the Stoics maintained that the unwise neither receive favours nor have benefactors [*euergetai*]; hence, there is no such thing as ingratitude, since the good acknowledge a favour (*kharis*) and the bad are incapable of receiving one. They reason that a favour (*kharis*) is among middle or indifferent things; truly to help or be helped pertains to the wise, but ordinary people too can receive a favour (*kharis*), though they will not make good use of it.[7]

There is, however, another sense of *kharis*, which signifies something more like 'gratification' or 'delight'.[8] For example, in Euripides' *Trojan Women* (1108), *erôs* is said to bring 'sweet *kharis*', where the meaning is plainly 'joy' (cf. *Medea* 227, Aristophanes *Lysistrata* 865; in prose, Plato

6 *SVF* 672 = Plutarch *De communibus notitiis* 1068D.

7 It should be emphasized that our knowledge of earlier Stoic treatments of benefactions is scanty; Griffin 2013, 24 notes that Seneca mentions Chrysippus and Hecato, another Stoic, but concludes that, although it would be illuminating to know more about Seneca's working methods and his treatment of his sources, 'the evidence is not there'.

8 *LSJ s.v. kharis*, def. IV.

Gorgias 462D: *khara kai hêdonê*, 'joy and pleasure').[9] In this latter usage, the meaning approximates that of the related word, *khara*, which properly signifies 'joy'.[10] Now, *khara* plays a special role in Stoic ethics: it is one of the three so-called *eupatheiai*, that is, the positive emotions or sentiments that the sage experiences, as opposed to the *pathê* to which ordinary people are vulnerable.[11] The Latin equivalent of *khara* is *laetitia*, as we can see in Lucretius, who thus renders Epicurus' use of the term; in the *De beneficiis*, in turn, Seneca treats *gaudium* and *laetitia* more or less as synonyms, as we can see from 2.31 (quoted above).

I would like to suggest, then, that Seneca may have read – or more strictly, have chosen to read – *kharis* in Aristotle, or in a text indebted to Aristotle's analysis, as signifying not just a favour, nor again, in the manner of Chrysippus, a gift that falls short of a benefaction because the receiver is incapable of using it well, but rather took it in the sense of *khara* or 'joy'. He thus had a model of sorts for his affirmation that a benefaction resides precisely in the bestowal of joy. This is the currency in which the exchange takes place, as opposed to the material service. The joy of giving, then, arises not from the benefactor's awareness of having brought cheer to the recipient, but is the very thing given and received.[12] In reconstruing the idea of a benefaction in these terms, Seneca has rescued it for Stoic ethics.

9 In *SVF* 1181 = Plutarch, *De communibus notitiis* 1065D, the term is employed rather in the sense of 'grace' or 'charm': expressions ugly in themselves may nevertheless produce *kharis* in a poem as a whole.
10 For a survey of *khara* in classical Greek and early Christian thought, see Ramelli and Konstan 2010, 185–204.
11 See *SVF* 431 = Diogenes Laertius 7.115; 439 = Plutarch *On Moral Virtue* 449A.
12 Li Causi 2008, 97–8 makes the astute suggestion that the material exchange in a benefaction can be considered a signifier in relation to the attitude or *voluntas* of the giver, which serves as the signified: 'Quello che accade, in altri termini, è che nel momento stesso in cui il *beneficium* viene – per così dire – spiritualizzato, la dimensione della materialità, lungi dall'essere del tutto ripudiata (come invece accade per i seguaci del platonismo), viene di fatto relegata in secondo piano, dal momento che alle *res* scambiate o elargite si assegna la funzione strumentale di *significanti* per mezzo dei quali "comunicare" il beneficio vero e proprio, che viene identificato con la *voluntas* di beneficare.'

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