



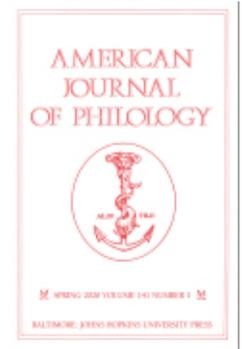
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Reading as Training: Seneca's Didactic Technique in *De Beneficiis*

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# READING AS TRAINING: SENECA'S DIDACTIC TECHNIQUE IN *DE BENEFICIIS*

SCOTT LEPISTO



*Abstract:* This article analyzes Seneca's didactic technique in *De Beneficiis*. It argues that Seneca does not merely explain his philosophy of *beneficia*; the literary design of the text actively trains the reader in the hermeneutic capabilities used in the evaluation of *beneficia*. Further, it demonstrates that *De Beneficiis* signals to readers that they ought to apply the skills that the text cultivates to the exchange of *beneficia* through resonant thematic episodes. The article argues that it is inappropriate to reduce Senecan philosophy to its objective propositions in light of the intervening role of literary form in his philosophical instruction.

THE DIDACTIC CHALLENGES THAT SENECA FACED in writing *De Beneficiis* are remarkable. Throughout the work, Seneca repeatedly enjoins the reader to consider all the factors that affect the quality of a *beneficium*.<sup>1</sup> He points out that a factor as subtle as an ill-chosen word, a hesitation, or a facial expression might ruin a gift (*Ben.* 3.8.4). He enjoins that one should attend to the timing, the place, and the social role of the recipient, because whether or not a gift prompts gratitude depends upon the occasion (*Ben.* 1.12.3).<sup>2</sup> For instance, a slave might do their master a favor by taking their master's life or saving it depending on the circumstances.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, each person ought to consider their own resources and abilities so that they give neither too much nor too little

<sup>1</sup>There is no perfect English translation for the term *beneficium*, which encompasses a range of meanings including gift, favor, or good deed; English translators (e.g., Basore 1935, Griffin and Inwood 2011) commonly render it as benefit. I use the term "exchange of *beneficia*" vel. sim. as shorthand for giving, receiving, owing, and repaying *beneficia*, the four stages of exchange that Seneca addresses. I follow the Latin text of Basore 1935. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup>See also *Ben.* 1.11.5, 2.15.3, 3.8.3.

<sup>3</sup>For instance, Seneca approvingly cites the slave of Vettius, who killed his master and himself after they were captured (*Ben.* 3.23.5) and also the slave of Domitius who refused to kill his master when the latter had asked to be euthanized after Caesar had laid siege to Corfinum (*Ben.* 3.24).

(*Ben.* 2.15.3). A small gift from someone who could give no more is of great value, while a gift given by someone wealthy who hesitated, put off the giving, moaned, etc., does not even qualify as a gift in Seneca's eyes (*Ben.* 1.7.3).<sup>4</sup> A gift that reminds the recipient of his or her weakness, such as hunting equipment for an old woman or man, books for a peasant, hunting nets for one dedicated to study, wine for a drunkard, or medicine for a hypochondriac, is almost a critique rather than a gift (*Ben.* 1.11.6). Although Seneca claims that we (Stoics) follow virtue for no other reason than to do so, we nevertheless inquire into what to do, when, and in what way (*Ben.* 4.9.3).<sup>5</sup> Seneca claims that nothing is fitting in its own right; it matters who gives, to whom, when, why, where, and all the other relevant factors are necessarily in play (*Ben.* 2.16.1).

If so much hangs on the slightest variables that shift from situation to situation, how can Seneca come up with hard and fast rules to govern the exchange of favors or advice that applies across all circumstances?<sup>6</sup> Seneca claims that there are not enough hours in the day to work out all of the difficulties (*Ben.* 3.12.4). It is no wonder that *De Beneficiis* is Seneca's longest extant work on a single topic, and that he even comes back to the topic again in *Epistle* 81. The manifestations of gifts are so varied that it is impossible fully to exhaust the subject. In his effort to address all of the various circumstances, Seneca clarifies, qualifies, adds nuance to, and reformulates his advice, sometimes offering opposing precepts.<sup>7</sup> Seneca claims, however, that philosophy teaches us, above all else, how to owe and repay favors (*Ep.* 73.9). It is plausible, then, that *De Beneficiis* offers us one of the most fully realized examples of Seneca's didactic technique in spite of the inherent difficulties of his subject.

Those few scholars who have analyzed Seneca's didactic strategy specifically in *De Beneficiis* read it as an enactment of the pedagogical

<sup>4</sup>When assessing the same gift from a wealthy or impoverished person, Seneca observes that though "the amount is the same, the benefit is not" (*Summa eadem est, beneficium idem non est*). The gift of one who goes into debt to give counts for much more than one from someone who has more than enough means (*Ben.* 3.8.2).

<sup>5</sup>He offers a different version of the same claim in *Ben.* 4.10.2.

<sup>6</sup>Receiving, owing, and repaying *beneficia* are no less difficult than giving. See *Ben.* 2.21.3, 3.2.2, 4.40.1–5.

<sup>7</sup>Griffin 2013, 122–3 lists several such emendations. For instance, Seneca claims that sages always honor their obligation to return favors (*Ben.* 2.18.4), but he later asserts that sages sometimes need reminders to return favors (*Ben.* 5.25.3); he claims that one should never ask for a gift in return (*Ben.* 1.1.3–4), but later admits that one should do so on certain occasions (*Ben.* 5.20.7). On the structure of the text, see Abel 1967, 74–103.

program that he outlines in *Epistles* 94 and 95.<sup>8</sup> In the first letter, Seneca defends his choice to teach philosophy through *praecepta*, which provide guidance to specific people in specific situations, while in the second letter, he affirms the need for *decreta*, which provide instruction in philosophical dogma. He claims that *praecepta* offer clarification (*Ep.* 94.20, 23, 32, 36), refresh the memory (*Ep.* 94.21–2, 25), divide complex problems into smaller and more manageable parts (*Ep.* 94.23), focus attention (*Ep.* 94.26), arouse virtuous instincts (*Ep.* 94.29), instill a salutary sense of shame (*Ep.* 94.44), and keep unhealthy impulses in check (*Ep.* 94.47). While *decreta* are universal, *praecepta* provide guidance as to proper functions or appropriate actions (*kathēkonta* in Greek or *officia* in Latin), which sometimes vary from one situation to the next.<sup>9</sup> *Decreta* take the form of statements of fact, while *praecepta* take the form of exhortations. Most scholars hold that Seneca teaches more through *praecepta* than *decreta* in *De Beneficiis*. According to the standard view, Seneca offers general *praecepta* and then refines, qualifies, clarifies, and reformulates them by considering various questions and applying them to different contexts.<sup>10</sup>

Although this is an accurate description of Seneca's procedure, I aim to demonstrate that it overlooks the degree to which Seneca teaches implicitly through the literary form of the text.<sup>11</sup> I aim to demonstrate that his text both admits and invites non-literal interpretations, which he signals are akin to those required in the exchange of *beneficia*. Seneca, I argue, meets and responds to the didactic crisis that his topic poses, and that he does so by creating an affinity between his own discourse

<sup>8</sup>Seneca's didactic technique in *De Beneficiis* remains relatively understudied. Mazzoli 2007 and Griffin 2013, 125–48 are essential. See also Chaumartin 1985, 297–9. Fundamental studies of *Epistles* 94 and 95 include Bellincioni 1978 and Schafer 2009. Hadot 2014, which translates and updates Hadot 1969, analyzes those letters as well as Seneca's other statements on pedagogy. Habinek 1989 situates Seneca's pedagogical approach in Roman culture more broadly.

<sup>9</sup>There is a large body of literature on perfect and appropriate actions. Inwood 2005, 100–9 offers a helpful overview.

<sup>10</sup>Roller 2005, 112–14. This is to leave aside Seneca's use of other didactic techniques such as *exempla*, on which see Roller 2018, 265–89, and metaphor, on which see Armisen-Marchetti 1989, 1991, and 2015, Inwood 2005, 31–2, and Bartsch 2009. On the relationship between *exempla* and metaphor see Dressler 2012.

<sup>11</sup>Although a rich body of literature has contributed to our understanding of the literary form of Senecan prose, few scholars have rigorously interrogated the literary design of *De Beneficiis* in particular. On the significance of style and literary form in Senecan philosophy see especially Wilson 1987, Traina 1989, and Setaioli 2000. Williams 2015 offers a useful overview. Wildberger has made many notable contributions (e.g., 2006, 2015). Inwood rightly regards Seneca as a writer "whose first concern is with his art" (2007, xviii).

on *beneficia* and *beneficia* themselves, thereby engaging the reader in the kinds of interpretations necessary to evaluate *beneficia*. Through an improvisatory, purposefully unpolished method of composition, Seneca forces readers to scrutinize his explicit claims for their implied meanings as well as for their unstated caveats and qualifications. As if coming to a realization after thinking through writing, Seneca regularly unpacks his own literal claims to articulate their implied meanings, which a skilled reader might have inferred. These interpretations serve the secondary function of alerting readers to infer implicit messages elsewhere in his text. By training the reader to make inferences about what he leaves unsaid, Seneca cultivates the skills necessary for the reader to infer the unspoken meaning of gifts, and so to “read” the behavior of benefactors and beneficiaries. Further, through thematically resonant anecdotes and digressions, Seneca signals that the hermeneutic skills that readers use to uncover unspoken messages within the text are the same as those required in the exchange of *beneficia*.

Seneca accomplishes more through the literary design of *De Beneficiis* than he could have through a more systematic exposition. I draw upon Landy’s concept of formative fiction (2012, 10):

There is, I will claim, a set of texts that we might label “formative fictions,” texts whose function it is to fine-tune our mental capacities. Rather than providing knowledge per se—whether propositional knowledge, sensory knowledge, knowledge by acquaintance, or knowledge by revelation—what they give us is know-how; rather than transmitting beliefs, what they equip us with are skills; rather than teaching, what they do is train. They are not informative, that is, but formative.

The word “formative” is of far greater importance for this analysis than “fiction.”<sup>12</sup> *De Beneficiis* fits Landy’s description. I argue that Seneca aims to cultivate a hermeneutic, and not merely to impart static knowledge. Seneca’s text not only offers useful precepts; it also trains his readers in the skills necessary to evaluate *beneficia*, benefactors, and beneficiaries.

Regardless of whether ancient authors chose to write didactic prose in order to entertain readers, to attract students, to argue for the importance of their field or mode of discourse against other fields or modes of discourse, or for any other reason, didactic texts nonetheless operate under the pretext that their primary aim is to offer instruction

<sup>12</sup>Landy construes fiction broadly: he analyzes Chaucer, Mark, Mallarmé, Plato, and Beckett.

to the reader.<sup>13</sup> While one can imagine a myriad of motivations behind Seneca's composition of the treatise (e.g., managing his own reputation as a millionaire Stoic, responding to the crisis in Britain possibly caused by the fact that he called in his loans, emending a serious social ill, correcting a disequilibrium in the exchange of favors occasioned by the emperor's power to out-give, etc.), the literary form of the text makes most sense in light of its instructional character.<sup>14</sup> The text advertises itself as instructional regardless of whether or not that advertisement is genuine: Seneca acts as an instructor throughout the text and casts Aebutius Liberalis as his student.<sup>15</sup>

Seneca spends much of *De Beneficiis* teaching Liberalis how to read, i.e., how to interpret, *beneficia*. He emphatically claims that the true gift is not whatever is handed over, but rather the will of the giver (*Ben.* 1.5.2):

Ista autem sunt meritorum signa, non merita. Non potest beneficium manu tangi; res animo geritur. Multum interest inter materiam beneficii et beneficium; itaque nec aurum nec argentum nec quicquam eorum, quae pro maximis accipiuntur, beneficium est, sed ipsa tribuentis voluntas.

Those things, however, are signs of services, not services themselves. A gift cannot be touched with the hand; the matter is carried out in the mind.<sup>16</sup> There is a great difference between the substance of the gift and the gift itself; therefore neither gold nor silver nor any of those things held to be most valuable is a benefit, but rather it is the will of the giver itself.

The material of the gift is merely a sign, potentially an ambiguous one, through which one might infer the will of the giver, which is the true gift. In the course of disabusing Liberalis of the notion that *beneficia* are material goods, Seneca claims that things falsely called *beneficia* are truly only instruments through which a friendly intention (*voluntas amica*)

<sup>13</sup>According to the schema of Volk 2002, *De Beneficiis* fits into three of the four categories that qualify it as a didactic work (didactic intent, teacher-student constellation, and poetic simultaneity, i.e., the effect that the lesson takes place as the text progresses). Seneca casts his text as if it were a journey, another trope of didactic literature.

<sup>14</sup>For Seneca's various possible motivations, see De Caro 2009, 121–58, Raccanelli 2009, 303–56, Raccanelli 2010, Romm 2014, 132–3, and Accardi 2015, 89–230.

<sup>15</sup>The text can be dated to sometime between 56 and 64 C.E. Aebutius Liberalis was an equestrian about whom almost no information survives. See Griffin 2013, 97–8 on what remains. Like Serenus in *De Tranquillitate Animi*, Seneca seems to choose the name of his addressee as an implicit exhortation to his readers, as if he were commanding them to assume the characteristics of the name. See Roller 2015, 54–67 on the designation of *De Beneficiis* as dialogue.

<sup>16</sup>Cf. *Ben.* 2.34.1.

unfolds. He distinguishes between the visible appearance (*species*) of the gift and the gift itself (*Ben.* 1.5.5). The material of a gift is merely its trace (*vestigium*) and mark (*nota*, *Ben.* 1.5.6). From these *signa*, *species*, *vestigia*, and *nota*, we must infer the giver's intention, which Seneca treats as the true gift.<sup>17</sup>

Seneca stresses the importance of reading not just the material signs of gifts, but also the behavior of benefactors and beneficiaries. He repeatedly turns subtext into text. After he enjoins Liberalis not to remind or reproach an ingrate, he claims that actions will speak for themselves (*Ben.* 2.11.6). He writes that someone who pays back a favor too quickly seems to say, "When will I be free from this? I must toil in every way in order not to be obligated to him" (*Ben.* 6.35.4). He interprets one who says, "You don't know what you've given me, but you should know how much more it is than you estimate" as signaling their willingness to assume their debt (*Ben.* 2.24.4). Elsewhere he claims that one who receives favors disdainfully seems to say, "I certainly don't need it, but since you so very much wish to give it, I'll give myself over to you" (*Ben.* 2.24.2–3). Elsewhere he provides examples of negative interpretations of *beneficia* that one ought to avoid.<sup>18</sup> In one of his most dramatic anecdotes, Seneca interprets the gift of Aeschines, who, though poor, offers himself to Socrates, saying that since he has nothing else to give, he will give himself; though others have given Socrates more, others have left more for themselves (*Ben.* 1.8.1).<sup>19</sup> Seneca gives a direct speech interpreting the meaning of Aeschines' gift. He writes that he seems to him to have said (*Ben.* 1.9.1),

"Nihil egisti, fortuna, quod me pauperem esse voluisti; expediam dignum nihilo minus huic viro munus, et quia de tuo non possum, de meo dabo."

"You've accomplished nothing, Fortune, by having wished me to be poor; I will proffer a gift no less worthy for this man and, because I can't give from your store, I will give from my own."

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *Ben.* 6.8.3: *beneficium ab iniuria distinguit non eventus sed animus*.

<sup>18</sup> For instance, he writes that envy leads people to respond with such remarks as "He offered this to me, but more to this one, but earlier to that one" (*Ben.* 2.28.1). Seneca provides a negative example of one who interprets *beneficia* unfavorably, again in direct speech, claiming that he has been given his gift too late and after so much effort that he wishes he'd not received it (*Ben.* 2.26.2).

<sup>19</sup> Li Causi 2008 argues that the example of Aeschines is paradigmatic because, by giving himself, Aeschines obviates the typical discrepancy between the *materia* of the *beneficium* and the *animus* of the benefactor.

Seneca offers the kind of moralizing interpretation typical of *chreiai*, though he presents it in direct speech. Although Seneca typically interprets *beneficia*, benefactors, and beneficiaries in order to assess whether they ought to incur or display gratitude, he implies that Aeschines' gift has a moral message that can be articulated explicitly.<sup>20</sup> In all these examples, Seneca makes the implicit meaning of a gift or behavior explicit.

Seneca even figures his own role as interpreter and evaluator of *beneficia* within the text. In Book 4, Seneca recounts the story of one of Philip's soldiers who was shipwrecked off of Macedon. An estate owner rushed to help the shipwrecked soldier. Later, the soldier not only refrained from mentioning to Philip the man who helped him, but in fact asked Philip for the man's estate. Although he granted his request, upon receiving a letter from the dispossessed man, Philip ordered that his property be restored and that the soldier be given a tattoo affirming that he was an ingrate (*Ben.* 4.37.3). Seneca adds that he thinks that the letters (*litterae*) ought to have been carved into the flesh of the ingrate because he had a man cast out of his home as if he were shipwrecked upon the very shore where his own shipwreck had occurred (*Ben.* 4.37.4). Philip, in tattooing the ungrateful soldier with letters signaling that he is an ingrate, takes on the role of the author. Throughout the text, Seneca habitually evaluates various examples of *beneficia*, deeming some recipients grateful, others not.<sup>21</sup> Philip literally writes his interpretation of the man on to him just as Seneca supplies the interpretation of countless benefactors and beneficiaries throughout *De Beneficiis*.

Seneca not only teaches the reader how to interpret different facets of gift exchange by offering his own interpretations of *beneficia*, benefactors, and beneficiaries; through the literary design of his text, he also engages the reader in the kinds of interpretation that are useful in the exchange of *beneficia*. In order to evaluate a gift, a benefactor, or a beneficiary, one must be able to read subtle, often unspoken signs towards determining the meaning of another's behavior. Similarly, one cannot appraise a gift solely on the basis of its monetary value or of how

<sup>20</sup>In *Ben.* 5.1.3, he praises Liberalis in a similar way for interpreting a *beneficium* given to anyone as a *beneficium* given to him. In many instances, he determines that poor gifts, which do not signal the unalloyed goodwill of the benefactor, do not qualify as true *beneficia* (e.g., *Ben.* 2.21.1–2, 6.18.1–2).

<sup>21</sup>He frequently criticizes autocrats as bad benefactors and beneficiaries because they only think of themselves, not their recipients or benefactors (*Ben.* 2.7.2, 2.11.1, 2.12.1, 2.19.2–20.3). Cf. *Ben.* 5.16, 5.20.4–5. This kind of interpretation by a secondary audience is typical of Roman exemplary discourse: see Roller 2018.

desirable it seems: one must look to the sentiment that the benefactor or beneficiary conveys implicitly through their speech and actions. Seneca's text trains the reader in the kinds of interpretative skills necessary to infer these implicit meanings.

Seneca offers a paradigmatic statement in the fourth book that implies a similarity between his composition of the text, the exchange of *beneficia*, and the interpretation of Seneca's text by the reader. The fourth book brings the most pressing points of his discussion of favors to a close and features some of Seneca's grandest passages on the beneficence of god and nature. Relatively late in the book, almost as if reflecting back upon the progress of his text thus far, he offers an account of the spontaneity with which one ought to bestow gifts. Seneca raises the question of whether he will wait until he knows whether a recipient will be ungrateful or grateful before giving, or give right away so as not to lose the opportunity. He observes that to wait takes a long time, and that not to wait is rash; quoting Plato, he writes, "it is difficult to divine the human mind" (*Ben.* 4.33.1). Seneca continues (4.33.2–34.1):

Huic respondebimus numquam expectare nos certissimam rerum comprehensionem, quoniam in arduo est veri exploratio, sed ea ire, qua ducit veri similitudo. Omne hac via procedit officium. Sic serimus, sic navigamus, sic militamus, sic uxores ducimus, sic liberos tollimus; cum omnium horum incertus sit eventus, ad ea accedimus, de quibus bene sperandum esse credidimus. Quis enim pollicetur serenti proventum, naviganti portum, militanti victoriam, marito pudicam uxorem, patri pios liberos? Sequimur, qua ratio, non qua veritas traxit. Expecta, ut nisi bene cessura non facias et nisi comperta veritate nil noveris: relicto omni actu vita consistit. Cum veri similia me in hoc aut in illud impellant, non vera, ei beneficium dabo, quem veri simile erit gratum esse. "Multa," inquit, "intervenient, propter quae et malus pro bono surrepat et bonus pro malo displiceat; fallaces enim sunt rerum species, quibus credidimus." Quis negat? Sed nihil aliud invenio, per quod cogitationem regam. His veritas mihi vestigiis sequenda est, certiora non habeo; haec ut quam diligentissime aestimem, operam dabo nec cito illis adsentiar.

To this man we will respond that we never wait for an absolutely sure grasp of things since the examination of truth is difficult, but rather we will go where the likeness of truth leads. Every task proceeds in this way. In this way we sow, sail, go to war, marry, and raise children. Since the outcome of all these things is uncertain, we proceed towards that which we believe has a hope of turning out well. For who promises a good harvest to the sower, a port to the sailor, victory to the soldier, a chaste wife to the husband, or dutiful children to the father? We follow where reason, not truth, has led

us. Wait so that you don't do anything unless it's bound to turn out well, and you learn nothing unless the truth has been ascertained; life stands still with every activity abandoned. Since likenesses of truth drive me in this or that direction, not truth itself, I will give a gift to a man who will probably be grateful. You say, "Many things will occur on account of which both the bad man may steal into the place of the good and the good man cause displeasure instead of the bad; the appearances of things in which we have placed our trust are deceptive." Who denies it? But I find nothing else by which to guide my thinking. I must pursue the truth by these tracks; I have nothing more certain to go on. I'll make every effort to evaluate these things as carefully as possible, and not to give my assent to them too quickly.

Seneca claims that the sage does not change his mind if circumstances are unchanged and he does not regret because no better course could have been determined at the time when he decided on that course. He approaches everything with the reservation, "If nothing should happen to get in the way" ("*Si nihil inciderit, quod impediatur*"). Seneca claims that the sage succeeds in all things and nothing happens against his opinion because of his knowledge that something could intervene to prevent what was intended (*Ben.* 4.34.4). The sage knows how uncertain (*incerta*) human affairs are and how much stands in the way of our plans. Alert, the sage persists through uncertain circumstances and weighs uncertain outcomes against certain plans. His reservation, without which he intends nothing and undertakes nothing, protects him (*Ben.* 4.34.5).<sup>22</sup>

Seneca's claims reflect the fact that, in Stoic ethics, giving a gift counts as an appropriate action (*officium* or *kathēkon*), which must merely admit a reasonable defense, not lead to an ideal outcome.<sup>23</sup> Seneca claims that, like any other *officia*, there is no guarantee that giving a gift will lead to the outcome for which one might hope. The passage reflects the larger sensitivity that Stoics generally displayed towards the role of situational variability in informing ethical action.<sup>24</sup> While the sage performs actions that are not only appropriate, but also perfect (*kathōrōma* or *recte factum*) on account of the virtuous disposition of his soul, there is no guarantee that even his actions will lead to an ideal outcome. In light of the role of situational variety in informing the appropriateness of moral actions,

<sup>22</sup> On reservation in Stoic ethics more generally, see Inwood 1985 (including 121–2 on this passage) and especially Brennan 2000.

<sup>23</sup> According to the famous definition of a *kathēkon* given by Diogenes Laertius (7.107).

<sup>24</sup> Chrysippus famously claimed that in extreme circumstances, incest and cannibalism might be appropriate. See Long and Sedley 1987, 436 for a discussion of the sources.

Seneca claims that he will give to someone likely to be (*veri simile*) grateful, and advance towards what he believes will turn out as hoped (*bene sperandum esse credidimus*) rather than waiting for certain knowledge of how a recipient will behave. In effect, it is better to give and not lose the opportunity rather than to wait for utter certainty about whether a particular recipient will be grateful.<sup>25</sup>

I argue that this passage applies not only to *officia* generally and specifically to the giving of *beneficia*, but also to Seneca's effort to write about *beneficia*. His insistence on the importance of acting without certain knowledge reads as a coded description of his own effort to offer precepts in the face of a high degree of situational variability; in order to address the variability inherent in exchanging *beneficia*, he writes claims that he rethinks later in the text after applying them to different situations. Hence Seneca's insistence on the importance of being sensitive to the needs of the moment applies to his own improvisatory writing style; his text betrays an active mind working out, and often returning to, problems as he composes the text.<sup>26</sup> Like the benefactors he describes, Seneca cannot write his treatise with absolute certainty that his precepts will apply universally: he can only offer precepts likely to be true (*veri similia*) in any given situation, which he frequently modifies, clarifies, amends, qualifies, etc.<sup>27</sup> In the same way that the right gift in one situation will be wrong in another, so too will one of Seneca's precepts be right in one situation and wrong in another.<sup>28</sup> He repeatedly compares both giving gifts and composing his text to seafaring, given the volatility of all three ventures.<sup>29</sup> In order even to theorize about *beneficia*, Seneca

<sup>25</sup> Seneca stresses the importance of giving without hesitation elsewhere in the text (e.g., *Ben.* 2.1.1–3).

<sup>26</sup> On Seneca's style, which captures his mind at work, see Wilson 1987 and Hine 2010, 15. On Seneca's "studied negligence," see von Albrecht 2014, 699–700.

<sup>27</sup> See note 7 above.

<sup>28</sup> I do not disagree with the analysis of Inwood, who argues that Seneca articulates general rules for which a moral reasoner might make exceptions (2005, 112–13); I aim to demonstrate that this view overlooks the role of literary form in instructing the reader.

<sup>29</sup> He claims that after being shipwrecked, we nonetheless return to the sea (*Ben.* 1.10.1, 7.32), i.e., we need to keep giving even when such an act turns out unfavorably. Seneca likens one's success in giving to reaching one's intended port, an outcome that is not necessarily a given (*Ben.* 2.31.3). He associates benefactor and pilot elsewhere (*Ben.* 6.25.4). He repeatedly casts his own composition of his text as if he were a pilot navigating unpredictable waters. When describing his own tendency towards digression, he writes that Liberalis (quoting the *Aeneid*, 5.162–3) encourages him to stay close to the shore, to which Seneca responds that he cannot go closer (*Ben.* 6.7.1). He quotes Vergil (*G.* 2.45–6) again near the end of the book to associate seafaring with his composition: "The land is

must continue his compositional effort with no sense of certainty that his precepts will apply universally. In the composition of the treatise, Seneca models both the sage's willingness to act without perfect knowledge of a situation as well as the reservation that makes his actions successful.

Seneca's claims equally apply to the reader who tries to make sense of the Senecan text as the author harnesses all of his powers as a literary artist to rise successfully to his inexhaustible topic. The passage suggests that we need to read his text with reservation, since he exercises his freedom to modify his claims on the basis of further reflection and casuistic analysis. On account of the variables at work in any act of exchange, Seneca can only pursue what is likely to be true (*veri similitudo*); for this reason, he repeatedly corrects and clarifies his earlier claims in later books. Seneca's discussion of giving evokes his own composition and our own reserved interpretation of the *signa* and *species* of the text, which he freely amends, interprets, explains, and rejects.

Seneca's use of similes, metaphors, analogies, and comparisons lends support to this interpretation, for he uses imagery in just the way that his programmatic claims might lead us to expect. A metaphor or simile stands for something else just as the material of the gift stands for the goodwill and consideration of the giver (at least according to his first, most paradigmatic definition). In a telling passage, Seneca underscores the affinity between the polysemy of metaphor and the material gift. Seneca beckons the reader to consider the fact that there are many more things than words (*plures esse res quam verba*). He points out that there is a great supply of things without a name, which we designate not through their own terms, but through language that is foreign and borrowed. He goes on to note that a bed, a sail, and a song all have a foot (*pedem*). Likewise, a dog (*canem*) is a hound, a sea-animal, and a star (*Ben. 2.34.2*). He claims that we call brave (*fortem*) both a gladiator and a worthless slave, whose rashness forces him to scorn death (*Ben. 2.34.3*). Seneca notes that though there is a vast difference between moderation and stinginess, we nonetheless call people possessing either quality frugal (*parcissimum*, *Ben. 2.34.4*). By the same logic, Seneca asserts that a *beneficium* is both an action and "what is given through that action" (*quod datur per illam actionem*). Seneca notes that though both possess the same name, there

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close: I will not keep you here with a long song through winding circuits and a lengthy preamble" (*Ben. 7.1.1*). By casting his own text as an improvisational inquiry, which relies on approximation and estimation, Seneca insinuates that he approaches theorizing about *beneficia* in the same way as one ought to approach *beneficia* themselves. On the sea as a symbol of flux and volatility in Senecan philosophy, see Armisen-Marchetti 1989, 138.

is a great difference between their meaning (*vis*) and import (*potestas*, *Ben.* 2.34.5). Seneca's very claim that there are more things than words reads as a statement about the restrictions of his text, or any text, in addressing the wide variety of gifts that exist in the world. The passage functions to explain not just the polysemy of the term *beneficium*, but also the limitations of language itself in providing a thorough account of the subject of his text.

Seneca suggests that there is an affinity between metaphor, the material gift, and the term *beneficium*. The substance of a gift is not just an object intelligible in its own right, but also the sign of the true gift, i.e., the giver's goodwill. It signifies twice. Similarly, an *imago* is intelligible in its own right and as the signifier of an additional signified. It too signifies twice.<sup>30</sup> Insofar as Seneca can be taken to accept Chrysippus' claim that every word is by nature ambiguous (i.e., that it can refer both to itself and its meaning), one can also see that the term *beneficium* could refer to itself, the will of the giver, or the material given. The capacity for the term *beneficium*, the material of the *beneficium*, and an image to refer to themselves and to additional signifieds suggests an affinity between the multi-referentiality of all three. Seneca exploits this shared multi-referentiality in order to disabuse the reader of a generally reductive hermeneutic, according to which the gift is *only* its material substance. Through shifting the referents of terms<sup>31</sup> and images, Seneca guides the reader to develop a contextually sensitive mode of reading that is applicable to real-world gift exchange in which the same material gift signifies different things depending on the circumstances. He trains the reader to infer the appropriate, and often unstated, signified.

Seneca's deployment of Chrysippus' analogy comparing playing ball with exchanging favors shows this affinity between his use of imagery and the material of the *beneficium*. He writes (*Ben.* 2.17.3–4):

Volo Chrysippi nostri uti similitudine de pilae lusu, quam cadere non est dubium aut mittentis vitio aut excipientis; tum cursum suum servat, ubi inter manus utriusque apte ab utroque et iactata et excepta versatur. Necessae est autem lusor bonus aliter illam conlusori longo, aliter brevi mittat. Eadem beneficium ratio est: nisi utrique personae, dantis et accipientis, aptatur, nec

<sup>30</sup> See Atherton 1993 for a thorough discussion of ambiguity in Stoicism.

<sup>31</sup> Although scholars regularly take as the final word Seneca's definition of the gift (*beneficium*) in *Ben.* 1.6.1 as a *benevola actio*, Seneca also uses the term to refer to the material sign of the gift, the goodwill of the giver, the combination of both (*Ben.* 6.10.2), and the perfect action of the sage (*Ben.* 1.5.3). The reader has to infer what he means whenever he uses the term.

ab hoc exhibit nec ad illum perveniet, ut debet. Si cum exercitato et docto negotium est, audacius pilam mittemus; utcumque enim venerit, manus illam expedita et agilis repercutiet; si cum tirone et indocto, non tam rigide nec tam excusse sed languidius et in ipsam eius derigentes manum remisse occurremus. Idem faciendum est in beneficiis: quosdam doceamus et satis iudicemus, si conantur, si audent, si volunt.

I wish to use the analogy of ball-playing drawn from our own Chrysippus: if a ball falls to the ground, it is doubtless the fault either of the catcher or the thrower. It maintains its course, when it turns between the hands of each, tossed and received suitably. However, a good player necessarily throws the ball differently to a playmate far away than to one close by. The reasoning of the favor is the same: unless each character, the giver and the receiver, is suitably matched, it will not leave the hands of one and arrive at the hands of another as it should. If engaged with someone trained and educated, we throw the ball more boldly; indeed, however it should come, his swift and ready hand will drive it back; if engaged with someone untrained and untaught, we happen to let it go not so strongly or violently, but rather gently into his hand, softening the blow. The same thing should be done with favors: let us teach certain men and judge them as being adequate if they at least try, dare, and will.<sup>32</sup>

Drawing upon Chrysippus, Seneca casts the exchange of favors as a game, with each player considering his own capabilities in relation to those of his partner. However, he denies the validity of this analogy later in the text. He writes (*Ben.* 2.32.1–2),

“Qui accepit,” inquit, “beneficium, licet animo benignissimo acceperit, nondum consummavit officium suum; restat enim pars reddendi; sicut in lusu est aliquid pilam scite ac diligenter excipere, sed non dicitur bonus lusor, nisi qui apte et expedite remisit, quam acceperat.” Exemplum hoc dissimile est. Quare? Quia huius rei laus in corporis motu est et in agilitate, non in animo; explicari itaque totum debet, de quo oculis iudicatur.

One says, “He who has received a favor, although he has received it with the kindest intention, has not yet discharged his obligation; for it remains for him to return it. Just as in a game, one should knowingly and diligently catch the ball, but he is not called a good player unless he sends it back as suitably and readily as he had received it.” This example is ill-fitting. Why? Because the praise in this matter is for the movement of his body and his agility, not his intention. Therefore, what has been judged only with the eyes should be explained in its totality.

<sup>32</sup>Cf. 2.15.3. In *Ben.* 2.17.5, he observes that only a spiteful player will outdo his opponent, thereby ending the game of *beneficia*.

As if having read Seneca's redeployment of Chrysippus' comparison in the passage above, the *fictus adversarius* applies it once again to a new object of comparison. But Seneca, as if having read the redeployment by the *fictus adversarius*, rejects its new application. The *adversarius* only fixed his attention upon the *similitudo* itself, the *materia* that Seneca borrowed from Chrysippus, not what it was meant to illuminate, namely the point that one needs to act with consideration towards situational differences, in this case specifically any given recipient's capabilities. Note that Seneca's critique centers on the fact that the interlocutor relies upon his eyes rather than investigating the meaning of his use of the image. He has attended only to the *imago*, much like one who looks to the *signa meritorum* rather than to the *merita* themselves (*Ben.* 1.5.2). His redeployment of the metaphor evinces an inflexible, literalist, materialistic mindset similar to that of someone who evaluates a gift by its material rather than what it signifies.<sup>33</sup>

Seneca's use of the farming metaphor also calls for the reader to be alert to its implied signifieds. In the opening of the text, Seneca observes that we do not sow our seeds into exhausted and infertile soil (*Ben.* 1.1.2) and, by implication, that we ought not to give to ingrates. Seneca would seem to imply that giving is like cultivation before harvesting; we need to choose the right recipient to get the right return, much as we need to plant in the right soil to receive crops. He makes similar comparisons throughout the text.<sup>34</sup> If one assumes that the metaphor stands for the same signified across contexts, then one might naturally assume that one gives (plants) in order to receive a material return (crops). One must either choose the right "plot of soil" (i.e., the right recipient) or overcome its sterility through cultivation (i.e., find ways to make an ungrateful recipient grateful), or risk not receiving the fruits of one's labor (i.e., the return of the favor).

However, Seneca elsewhere specifically and repeatedly warns against giving for the sake of any return; in doing so, he seems to imply

<sup>33</sup>A way of thinking Seneca criticizes specifically in *Ben.* 3.14.3–4.

<sup>34</sup>He claims that every form of kindness should be added to our favors in the same way that a farmer will lose what he sows if he ends his labor with merely planting the seed. He goes on to write that it is only with great care that what is planted is brought to fruition as a viable crop. Further, he claims that nothing comes to fruit that consistent cultivation does not pursue from the first day to the last (*Ben.* 2.11.4). He remarks that the same thing is true of *beneficia* (*Ben.* 2.11.5). Seneca alters the metaphor slightly in writing that, rather than selecting fertile ground into which to plant his seed (i.e., finding the right recipient), he will, like a good farmer, overcome the sterility of the soil with care and cultivation (*Ben.* 7.32).

that farming is in fact a poor metaphor if one thinks that the harvest signifies material recompense. He repeatedly claims that giving is an act of virtue: we do it for no other reason than the doing of it. From this perspective, the comparison to farming does not hold.<sup>35</sup> After describing bartering as, "I will give this and receive this" ("*Hoc dabo et hoc recipiam*"), Seneca explains that one who did a favor to receive a favor did not in fact truly do a favor (*Ben.* 4.14.1). He points out that no one cultivates a field out of a sense of justice; the reward lies beyond the activity itself (*Ben.* 4.14.3).<sup>36</sup> As if rethinking his own words, Seneca returns to the metaphor to offer an unstated qualification, which a careful reader might have already inferred. To give is like plowing a field, yet also not like plowing a field. If one applies the metaphor too uniformly, as if it referred to the same signified in every context, that reader will end up understanding the text in the same way as the literalist views the *vestigia*, *species*, etc., of the gift; the reader may notice the *materia*, but not what it means. The reward, or "harvest," might be construed as gratitude from the recipient, a return gift as a sign of the recipient's gratitude, or the act of giving itself, depending upon the thrust of Seneca's given argument. In order to guide his readers away from assuming either that a *beneficium* ought to occasion merely an equal material return or that a *beneficium* is only its material, Seneca uses the same imagery in varied ways. In teaching the reader to dissociate *imagines* from what they signify, Seneca teaches them to dissociate the physical substance of the gift from the gift itself.

Seneca deploys the metaphor of the loan in ways aligned with his programmatic claims. He persistently casts favors as a type of loans, only to reject the similarity elsewhere in the text. In the opening of the text, in which he decries our carelessness in giving to ingrates, he claims that when we are going to lend money we make a thorough inquiry into the inherited assets and lifestyle of our debtor (*Ben.* 1.1.1). He compares harsh and wicked fathers, whose cruelty is such that they have cancelled the gifts they have given, to someone who lent money to another, but burnt down his house, thereby canceling the loan (*Ben.* 6.4.2). He claims

<sup>35</sup>Having established from the outset the comparison between giving and farming, Seneca interjects that we ought to choose the recipients of favors carefully, since a farmer does not plant his seeds in sand. However, Seneca posing as his own interlocutor claims that if this much is true, we give benefits for our advantage just as one plants in order to reap the reward of the harvest, not to plant for its own sake (*Ben.* 4.9.2).

<sup>36</sup>Seneca claims twice in *Ben.* 5.19.1 that the cultivation of one's field is a benefit to its owner, not to the field itself.

by extension that a balance is struck between favors and injuries (*Ben.* 6.4.5). He makes similar claims elsewhere in the text.<sup>37</sup> In all of these examples, Seneca compares favors to loans, which demand physical repayment. He implies that the logic of *beneficia* is the same as that of debt and credit. Ideally, a beneficiary should pay back to the benefactor the equivalent of what was received. Seneca implies that the account sheet ought to be balanced.

Despite the fact that Seneca repeatedly casts favors as loans, he also persistently undercuts the similarity. He claims, for instance, that it is right only to receive back as much of the loan as the recipient wishes to pay. He writes that no one writes favors into his account book or calls them in on a set hour and day (*Ben.* 2.17.6–7). A benefactor will not think of them; otherwise they turn into a loan (*Ben.* 1.2.3). Seneca claims that being in financial debt is easier than being in debt for a favor, since the former requires only a monetary repayment whereas the latter requires recompense in the form of gratitude and/or repayment (depending upon the individual case); additionally, the expectation of further friendship follows as a result of a favor (*Ben.* 2.18.5). He claims that favors and loans are paid off differently since one requires only good intentions; as he puts it, “the business is carried out between minds” (*res inter animos geritur*, *Ben.* 2.34.1). There is no date of repayment for a *beneficium* as there is for a loan (*Ben.* 3.10.1). Seneca claims that those who do favors imitate the gods while those who seek return imitate moneylenders (*Ben.* 3.15.4). He insists that a favor is lost all at once whereas a loan can be called in (*Ben.* 4.39.2); unlike loans, which must be repaid, a favor is repaid instantly through gratitude (*Ben.* 7.14.4–6).

In the midst of a rhetorically forceful argument that truly to do a favor is an act of virtue to be done only for itself, Seneca assumes the voice of an interlocutor in stating: “You say that a favor is a loan that cannot be repaid; however, a loan is not something to be sought for itself.” Seneca responds (*Ben.* 4.12.1–2) as follows:

Cum creditum dicimus, imagine et translatione utimur; sic enim et legem dicimus iusti iniustique regulam esse, et regula non est res per se expetenda.

<sup>37</sup>He claims that you ought to return a favor from a sage even if the latter has ceased to be a sage, just as you ought to repay a loan even to a bad man (*Ben.* 7.16.5–6). He compares a lenient and wise creditor, who received repayment by waiting, to a patient benefactor who pleads on the side of his recipient (*Ben.* 7.29.2). Seneca disapprovingly compares those who prefer to accept a favor in private to those who refuse their borrowing to be entered into any kind of record (*Ben.* 2.23.2).

Ad haec verba demonstrandae rei causa descendimus; cum dico creditum, intellegitur tamquam creditum. Vis scire? adicio insolubile, cum creditum nullum non solvi aut possit aut debeat. Adeo beneficium utilitatis causa dandum non est, ut saepe, quemadmodum dixi, cum damno ac periculo dandum sit.

When we say a “loan,” we use a metaphor, a figure of speech (*imagine et translatione*). For, in the same way, we say that law is the measure of justice and injustice, and a measure is not something desirable in itself. We take recourse to these words for the sake of demonstrating something (*demonstrandae rei causa*). When I say “loan” (*creditum*), a “quasi-loan” (*tamquam creditum*) is understood. Do you want to know the difference? I add “cannot be repaid” since there is no loan that cannot or ought not be repaid. Up to this point, as I’ve often said, a gift must not be given for the sake of some advantage, since it should be given at our own forfeiture and risk.

Having deployed the *imago* several times already, Seneca explains that the reader ought to have inferred a previously unexpressed qualification. By thinking through writing, perhaps, he realizes that there were implied caveats to his use of the metaphor, without which a naive reader might misapply it. In certain contexts one ought to treat a gift as a loan and in other cases not. As was the case with his analogy with ball-playing, the crucial claim here is that he deploys it for the sake of illustration. Like the metaphor of ball-playing, the metaphor of the loan does not always stand for the same signified across different contexts.<sup>38</sup> Seneca implies that there is a coded meaning implicit within any use of this particular metaphor: in some cases, and only in certain ways, should one treat a *beneficium* as a loan. As such, the metaphor cannot be applied inflexibly to every situation. Note that this explanation occurs in the fourth book after Seneca has used the metaphor of the loan several times: what other metaphors has Seneca used, which ought not to have been taken too absolutely? The very belatedness of the clarification implies the further meta-message that we should be alert to the possibility of other potential unspoken qualifications to his metaphors.

<sup>38</sup> As Armisen-Marchetti 2015, 156 puts it, “In terms of modern linguistics, we would say that the speaker, when he creates a metaphor, selects a certain number of semes that are shared between the comparand and what is compared (in the case of the benefit and the loan, these are the semes connected to the idea of exchange) and neglects others (the ethical nature of each of these two notions).” While Armisen-Marchetti reads the inexactness of metaphor as an index of its “expressive power,” I argue that it has the didactic effect of training the reader to interpret the metaphor in a contextually sensitive way.

Seneca interprets not only his own metaphors, but also his own exhortations for their implied meanings. These interpretations raise the possibility that other claims of his require a similar decoding, especially in light of the fact that the first and seventh books have significant lacunae. Even some of Seneca's most direct exhortations contain an implicit qualification that we ought to infer. For instance, Seneca emphatically claims that the first and most necessary precept is never to reproach someone over a favor or even to remind him of it (*Ben.* 2.10.4). One should only remind someone of a favor by another favor, never by doing so explicitly (*Ben.* 2.11.2). However, later in the text, he explains that sometimes it is right to offer such a reminder. He claims that though he would rather lose than reclaim a favor, if it is a matter of his child or wife's safety or the freedom of his country, the need to recover the favor overcomes his reluctance to ask for it (*Ben.* 5.20.7). He defends himself against the objection that he is turning a favor into a loan by claiming that he is not strictly exacting the favor but merely requesting it, and not even requesting it as such but offering a reminder (*admoneo*, *Ben.* 5.21.2). He observes that some recipients are not ungrateful so much as slow and late; these kinds of people need reminders (*Ben.* 5.22.1): why should he not make these men better? Indeed, he suggests, such a reminder might in fact itself be a second favor. Seneca claims that he will ask for a favor in return and will be understood to be making the request (*Ben.* 5.22.2). Later he claims that he will remind (*admoneo*) such a recipient that he ought to repay a kindness received, since the only thing keeping him from the morally correct action is forgetfulness (*Ben.* 5.22.4–25.2). The difference in Seneca's opinion regarding reminders suggests that his thinking on the subject has evolved; yet it also raises the possibility that his earlier claims contained unstated qualifications that the reader ought to have inferred much earlier. By raising this possibility, he raises the further possibility that we were to infer other unstated qualifications in other contexts, and that we are to use our common sense in applying his injunctions. He thereby aims for us to infer the spirit of his words rather than follow them as if they were the letter of the law.<sup>39</sup> Seneca does much more than

<sup>39</sup>He then relays a story about a soldier who quite reasonably reminded Julius Caesar of a favor he did him, since the demands of Caesar's position had led him to forget the favor the lowly soldier had done him (*Ben.* 5.24.1–25.1). However, he claims that one should not apply this lesson to Tiberius, whose character was such that he would not have willingly offered a return (*Ben.* 5.25.2). Seneca then adds that one needs to be even more careful in requesting a return than in asking for a *beneficium* (*Ben.* 5.25.3). The very fact that he returns to qualify strong injunctions that he made previously underscores the sensitivity with which one must ask for a return.

merely apply general rules to specific contexts and reformulate them: he invites us to hone our inferential capacities by decoding his claims. If we can grasp unstated qualifications, caveats, and the like, we will be better prepared to decode other kinds of implicit communication involved in exchanging *beneficia*.

Seneca implicitly chides readers who interpret his text too absolutely. He separates those who understand his message from those who do not and prepares the former to deal with the latter. He observes that though it would be better if we lived among sages who needed no reminders, even in such circumstances it would still be good to make our needs known (*Ben.* 5.25.3). Comparing one amenable to instruction to a horse that obeys its reins, he asserts that the second best form of virtue is to be willing and able to take advice (*Ben.* 5.25.4). He points out that for a few men, the soul is the best guide; next best are those who return to the right path when admonished (*admoniti*). These men ought not be deprived of a guide (*Ben.* 5.25.5). He implies a similarity between those who need reminders and those readers of his text who need to have it explained to them that sometimes it is proper to offer a reminder of a *beneficium* given. Seneca elsewhere uses *admonitio* and *praeceptum* interchangeably;<sup>40</sup> his readers have been making their way through a text full of *admonitiones*. The discussion of *Ben.* 5.25.4–6 is framed in such general terms that it is apparent that Seneca is talking about *beneficia* specifically only by the time the reader reaches the final sentence; otherwise, the passage reads as if he were talking about *admonitio* in a completely general sense. The discussion of those who might be brought along to virtue through *admonitio* cannot but be applied to those who need to be told explicitly that they ought to give reminders in certain situations. Neither party grasps what ought to have been inferred. While literalist readers learn merely that they sometimes need to remind a recipient of a favor, those who can decode Seneca's instructions and apply them flexibly receive implicit encouragement to serve as patient guides for those who cannot respond so adeptly to the Senecan mode.

Seneca's belated interpretation of his own exhortation to forget a gift as soon as it is given also carries with it an implicit meta-instruction. After repeatedly exhorting the reader to forget a gift as soon as it is given,<sup>41</sup> Seneca reconsiders his position, claiming in the seventh book that he is not prohibiting someone from retaining a memory of a gift bestowed. He states (*Ben.* 7.22.1–24.2),

<sup>40</sup> See Roller 2018, 267.

<sup>41</sup> *Ben.* 2.6.2, 2.10.4, 2.17.7, 7.22.1–3.

quaedam praecipimus ultra modum, ut ad verum et suum redeant. Cum dicimus: “meminisse non debet,” hoc volumus intellegi: “praedicare non debet nec iactare nec gravis esse . . .” Quotiens parum fiduciae est in iis, quibus imperes, amplius exigendum est, quam sat est, ut praestetur, quantum sat est. In hoc omnis hyperbole extenditur, ut ad verum mendacio veniat. . . . Numquam tantum sperat hyperbole, quantum audet, sed incredibilia adfirmat, ut ad credibilia perveniat. Cum dicimus, “Qui beneficium dedit, obliviscatur,” hoc dicimus, “similis sit oblito; memoria eius non adpareat nec incurrat.” Cum dicimus beneficium repeti non oportere, non ex toto repetitionem tollimus. . . . Propter acerbos exactores repetere prohibemus, non, ut numquam fiat, sed ut parce.

Sometimes we enjoin more than what is appropriate so that things reach their true and proper value. When we say, “He ought not to remember,” we wish this to be understood as: “He ought not proclaim about it, nor boast, nor be disagreeable. . . .” Whenever you have too little faith in those whom you command, more than enough should be demanded so that the sufficient amount is offered. Every hyperbole stretches in this way, so that it comes to truth by way of falsehood. . . . Hyperbole never hopes for as much as it dares, but it asserts the unbelievable in order to arrive at the believable. When we say, “He who has done a favor ought to forget it,” we say: “He ought to seem to have forgotten it. His memory should not be evident or intrude.” When we say that it’s not fitting to request the return of a favor, we don’t prohibit requests in their entirety. . . . On account of harsh exactors, we prohibit the request for a return, not in order that it should never happen, but that it be done sparingly.

Seneca reveals that his repeated injunctions to forget a *beneficium* as soon as it is given and never to ask for a return (and presumably never even to remind someone that they ought to make a return) ought to have been read as hyperbole. Without this clarification, one might have assumed that he meant exactly what he said. One cannot read his text too literally or assume that his words apply universally. Note that Seneca makes this clarification about his hyperbolic discourse near the end of the text—it seems almost as an afterthought. His clarification raises the possibility that he has been hyperbolic elsewhere in the text, albeit without pointing it out. Even this decoding of his own claim implies a further meta-instruction, to the effect of: “Don’t always take what I say literally.”

In a thematically potent episode, Seneca brings several strands of his text together by connecting the *signa* and *species* of *beneficia*, his own use of imagery, and our interpretation of his text as readers. The episode imagines Socrates’ interpretation of an eclipse for King Archelaus. As

Seneca has it, Socrates refused King Archelaus' invitation to visit him on the grounds that the philosopher would not be able to return to him equal gifts. However, Seneca rejects this explanation. He notes, first, that Socrates could have visited him and refused his gifts; and, second, that he would have preempted Archelaus' gifts through visiting him, a worthy gift in and of itself (*Ben.* 5.6.2). Further, Seneca notes that Socrates could simply have given his thanks for Archelaus' gift in the place of material compensation. Finally, Seneca points out that whatever Archelaus would have given could not match what Socrates would have given the king in terms of philosophical instruction (*Ben.* 5.6.3).

In this way Seneca sets the scene for Socrates' speech, explaining that the king had been filled with superstitious terror at an eclipse; as a result, he closed himself up in his palace and also sheared his son's hair in a superstitious panic. Seneca introduces the hypothetical speech, exclaiming how great a benefit it would have been if he had dragged him from the shadows (*e latebris suis*) and ordered him to have a sane mind (*Ben.* 5.6.4). In this hypothetical speech, Seneca claims that Socrates would have said that the eclipse indicates no disappearance of the sun (*Non est ista solis defectio*); rather, it is a conjunction of two heavenly bodies as the moon, racing on a lower path, intrudes between the earth and the sun, thereby obscuring it with its interposition (*Ben.* 5.6.4). He goes on to explain that the moon sometimes obscures a small part of the sun, as if brushing it in passing, sometimes covering more of it, and sometimes its entirety, if it has advanced in the middle between the sun and the earth in a straight line (*Ben.* 5.6.4). He urges Archelaus to be patient; the sun will soon leave behind this cloud-like cover and once again freely send forth its light (*Ben.* 5.6.5). *In toto*, Seneca's Socrates gives a rationalizing, scientific explanation that is meant to dispel Archelaus' false, terror-inducing interpretation of the image. The image of the moon moving past the sun so that it pours forth its rays is an obvious allegory for the enlightenment that Archelaus would have experienced as a result of Socrates' instruction.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>42</sup>Cf. Arist. *Rh.* 2.23.8, 1398a24, Cic. *Rep.* 1.21–5, Plut. *Vit. Per.* 35, M. Aur. *Med.* 11.25. Curd 2011, 1 asserts that philosophy itself began with Thales' successful prediction of an eclipse. Seneca is perhaps updating for the Principate these stories from Republican Rome and democratic Athens respectively through having Socrates disabuse a fearful autocrat. It would seem likely that Seneca insinuates a comparison between his efforts to educate Nero through philosophy and Socrates' speech eliminating the king's irrational terror.

Socrates' hypothetical speech evokes the famous analogies and allegories of the fifth and sixth books of Plato's *Republic*. Seneca seems to mix the analogy of the sun (507b–509c), the analogy of the divided line (509d–511e), and the allegory of the cave (514a–520a) in the anecdote. The movement of the moon past the rays of the sun, and the fact that Archelaus confuses the obstruction of the sun for its disappearance, might remind the reader of the allegory of the cave, in which the prisoners mistake shadows for reality (515c). Seneca depicts Socrates dragging Archelaus out of the shadows of the palace (*e latebris suis*, *Ben.* 5.6.4), just as Plato describes the prisoners being led forcibly out of the cave (515e–516a). By the end of the passage, Seneca implies an association between Archelaus' mental state and the light he sees. Seneca suggests that Archelaus is moving out of the world of the shadows to gaze upon the sun, which Plato compares to the form of the good (508b–c). The anecdote seems loosely to parallel the journey of the philosopher out of the shadowy cave into the light. The straight line, which the planets form, arguably invites comparison to Plato's divided line. Despite Seneca's predominantly Stoic take on epistemology in *De Beneficiis*, he here finds a point of overlap with Platonic epistemology: according to both systems, one can make inferences about the invisible based on the visible, whether what is invisible is the mind of a benefactor or Platonic forms. Beyond the Platonic flavor of the passage, however, one should not exclude the possibility that Seneca is adumbrating a more explicitly Stoic connection between the soul of Archelaus and the orderly procession of the planets, given that the movement of the moon past the sun corresponds to Socrates' instruction of Archelaus. The procession of the celestial bodies, repeated symbols of cosmic order in Seneca, tracks Archelaus' movement from irrational superstition to rational understanding. At the risk of pressing this interpretation too far, it is possible that the intertextual relationship between the Senecan and Platonic texts is figured in the interposition of the moon before the sun. Likewise, the textual intrusion of Socrates' imagined voice temporarily obscures or interrupts Seneca's authorial voice, just as the moon interrupts the rays of the sun.

Upon concluding the hypothetical speech, Seneca continues to voice his doubts about Socrates' claim that he would not have been able to repay Archelaus with equal gifts. In answer to the question of why Socrates refused Archelaus, he explains that Socrates was a clever man whose speech proceeded through figures (*per figuras sermo procederet*), and that he was the mocker of all, especially the powerful, albeit refusing satirically rather than defiantly and pridefully (*Ben.* 5.6.6). Seneca speculates that

he did not wish to be compelled to receive gifts unworthy of Socrates (*Ben.* 5.6.6–7). He raises the possibility again that he could have refused, though Seneca explains that this might have incurred the wrath of the king. Finally, in concluding the anecdote, Seneca asks Liberalis, “Do you wish to know what he truly intended?,” to which he answers: “he, whose freedom not even a free state could endure, refused to enter voluntary servitude!” (*Ben.* 5.6.7). In essence, Seneca concludes that Socrates did not want to enter into a relationship with Archelaus based on the exchange of favors because he did not want to lose his freedom. Given Archelaus’ literalist interpretation of the disappearance of the sun, Socrates would have been right to avoid becoming indebted to him; on this analogy, could Archelaus really be relied upon to understand the distinction between the appearance of a gift and a true gift? At a literal level, the speech of Socrates demonstrates that even the rich and powerful cannot outdo a sage-like character such as Socrates in giving *beneficia*. Yet we might wonder how and why Seneca makes this point in just this way. It is odd, after all, that Socrates of all people would offer such a naturalistic explanation. The imagined speech is rich with imagery and resonances of some of the most famous passages of one of Plato’s most famous works. In a work so preoccupied with decoding *species*, *vestigia*, and the like as well as its own explicit claims, are we really to assume that the astronomical content of the speech is merely a philosophical topos without any deeper significance? Seneca has sufficiently cautioned the reader to resist any such superficial literalism of response to this last question.

In the anecdote, Seneca enfolds enigmas within enigmas. Socrates’ words, like the appearances of *beneficia*, require interpretation. Seneca’s claim that his speech proceeds through *figurae* is especially significant. On the one hand, *figura* designates Socratic irony, i.e., “A form of speech departing from the straightforward and obvious” (*OLD* 11). This would seem to be the clear, surface-level meaning of *figura* in this instance. However, Seneca’s speech impersonating Socrates is also filled with imagery, and in that sense he proceeds through *figurae*, i.e., images (*OLD* 8) and arrangements, especially of stars (*OLD* 7). *Figurae* can also mean “outward appearances (as opp. to real nature)” (*OLD* 5)—the subject of both Seneca’s speech and the passages of the *Republic* with which it resonates. The final meaning of *figura* that might be relevant is “an oblique mode of expression, insinuation, innuendo, etc.” (*OLD* 11b). Seneca communicates pervasively through innuendo in *De Beneficiis*: he is always hinting at additional meanings and messages without saying them expressly. Gifts and insinuations are similar in that their meaning is

communicated implicitly. The subtext of the passage is that it is important for interpretation to look beyond the level of superficial literalism (i.e., “The sun has disappeared”).

Seneca’s writing, like Socrates’ speech, moves through complex patterns of *figurae* that demand interpretation. Seneca’s Socrates evokes his author’s use of imagery, even as he interprets enigmatic images like the reader of Seneca’s text. The passage as a whole, in a way similar to *Ben.* 4.33.1–4.34.1, suggests an affinity between the exchange of favors, Seneca’s composition of his text, and the reader’s interpretation of it. It implies and alerts us to the underlying similarity between Seneca’s compositional style, the evaluation of *beneficia*, and our hermeneutic activity as readers. Through suggesting an implicit similarity between these activities, Seneca makes it clear that the interpretative capacities that the text invites us to develop and practice are applicable to the exchange of favors. If we read the passage with an alertness to its subtext, then, we can more capably understand why Seneca expounds on *beneficia* in the way that he does, and how the interpretation of the text relates to the exchange of *beneficia*. Reading the speech with alertness to its implicit affinities not only helps us to practice our inferential capacities: it also enables us to appreciate the relevance of Seneca’s way of writing, and the kind of decoding it invites, to the exchange of favors.<sup>43</sup>

In *De Beneficiis*, Seneca does much more than offer precepts on the exchange of *beneficia*. The text disabuses readers of their literalist mindset, according to which they estimate gifts for what they are rather than for what they mean. In writing about *beneficia* in a literary way, Seneca reveals the literary quality of *beneficia* themselves, as forms of exchange that convey meaning at multiple levels. Justus Lipsius once wrote that Seneca’s words “always say more than they say” (*plus aliquid semper dicunt, quam dicunt, Manuductio* 1.18). This description certainly applies to *De Beneficiis*. In saying more than he says, i.e., in communicating on literal and non-literal levels simultaneously, Seneca trains readers

<sup>43</sup>This may explain why Seneca denounces allegory in book 1 (3.2–4.6) only to adopt allegorizing interpretation in book 4 (7.1–8.2). His denunciation of allegory must contain the implicit caveat that allegory, if properly deployed towards the moral edification of his audience rather than as an idle, overly intellectual activity, might be useful. The denunciation, itself a *praeteritio*, would seem to foreground the allegorical dimensions of his writing (i.e., its propensity to convey non-literal meanings). Not all scholars have observed that Seneca denounces, but subsequently adopts, allegorical interpretation in *N.Q.* 2.45 (Batinski 1993, Ramelli and Luccetta 2004, 329–36, Ramelli 2011, 341). In a work deeply preoccupied with “other-meanings,” is it any surprise that Seneca’s denunciation of allegory itself carries with it an implied message?

to be better benefactors and beneficiaries. The very way in which the text maps onto the subject of *beneficia* evokes the way that *beneficia* convey implicit meanings. Few texts from antiquity so elegantly connect their own literary sophistication to lived practice.<sup>44</sup>

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