SENECA ON THE VIR INGRATUS

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I hate ingratitude more in a man
Than lying, vainness, babbling drunkenness,
Or any taint of vice whose strong corruption
Inhabits our frail blood.

Shakespeare
Twelfth Night 3.4.388-91

Seneca has long been known and esteemed as a moral and ethical philosopher; he has been lauded as Seelenarzt, a physician and guide eager to aid his fellow-men, a percipient pathologist, a brilliant observer and analyst not only of human anguish, pain, and suffering but also of man’s flaws, vices, and excesses. Scholars are becoming more and more aware and appreciative of his ability to see into the often tortured and distorted minds of men. Recently, Thomas G. Rosenmeyer has stressed the fact that Seneca’s acute awareness of man’s weaknesses and malaise was related to Stoic cosmology, which viewed the universe as disruptive, subversive, and even radically askew. What needs to be stressed is the fact that Seneca, perhaps more than any ancient writer, was highly sensitive to man’s entanglements with vice, and depressingly aware of vice’s tendency to proliferate. The pages of the Cordoban Philosopher are replete with detailed analyses of the manifold vices so prolific in the Neronian Age — avarice, lust, ambition, intemperance, wrath, cruelty, sloth, gluttony, and above all, ingratitude, which our author describes as the source of all the vices. This paper presents an in-depth analysis of Seneca’s vivid portrayal of the vir ingrat us; it aims to give the reader a striking example of the Philosopher’s insight into human nature.

The topic of benefits, of gratitude, and of ingratitude — all three so closely interwoven — is a dominant theme in Seneca’s writings and one which he treats, perhaps, more profusely and in greater detail than any other subject. In the De Beneficis, a lengthy treatise written, in all probability, between 58 and 63 A.D., Seneca hails beneficence and gratitude as the two most beautiful qualities in human life. He who gives benefits, Seneca writes, possesses a noble, generous soul and is, in fact, one who imitates the gods, and he who shows gratitude for benefits received likewise
reveals nobility of soul. All mankind agrees, our Philosopher asserts, that nothing is more honorable than the grateful heart: ‘nihil esse grato animo honestius.’ On the other hand, Seneca singles out ingratitude as the worst and most common of all vices, a vice from which all other vices spring.

Seneca’s bold and ardent condemnation of ingratitude finds similar expression in other great literary figures. Dante, too, felt that ingratitude was the greatest of sins. In his *Inferno*, he reserves the lowest pit of hell, the ninth circle, for those who have betrayed their benefactors. Worst among them all, and the last that the journeyman Dante encounters in the Underworld is, of course, Lucifer himself — the rebel angel who had betrayed the Creator. Interestingly enough, Lucifer in the *Inferno* appears as a three-faced monster, the three visages together denoting the worst religious and civil instances of treachery throughout history. One countenance reveals Judas Iscariot, the betrayer of Jesus, and the other two represent Brutus and Cassius, the arch-deceivers and assassins of Julius Caesar.

Shakespeare also poignantly assaults Brutus as an arch-betrayer. In his *Julius Caesar*, Antony speaks with horror of Brutus’s joining the assassins of Caesar:

This was the most unkindest cut of all;
For when the noble Caesar saw him stab,
Ingratitude, more strong than traitors' arms,
Quite vanquish’d him: then burst his mighty heart ... 

... , great Caesar fell.

And, as a matter of fact, base ingratitude is a repeated theme in many of Shakespeare’s most potent dramas. King Lear is undone by his ruthless daughters; Othello betrayed by his trusty ensign Iago; Troilus is broken by the unfaithfulness of Cressida; Hamlet stunned and even maddened by his mother’s indifference after his father’s death; and Prospero in *The Tempest* exiled from Milan by his brother’s guile. Amiens’ seemingly innocent and lilting song in *As You Like It* is in fact a shattering exposé of man’s unfaithfulness to man:

Blow, blow thou winter wind,
Thou art not so unkind
As man’s ingratitude:
Thy tooth is not so keen,
Because thou art not seen ...

Freeze, freeze, thou bitter sky,
That dost not bite so nigh
As benefits forgot:
Though the waters warp,
Thy sting is not so sharp
As friend remember'd not.\textsuperscript{12}

Although regarded by all (and, ironically so, by the ungrateful themselves) as a disgrace,\textsuperscript{13} ingratitude is, nevertheless, a most common, a most widespread vice. In many a striking passage, Seneca deplores the universality of man's ingratitude to man.

... omnes ... ingrati sunt. Quid ergo? non sunt? Non undique humano generi convicium fit?

\selectlanguage{la}(De Benef. 5.15.1–2)

Seneca would indeed concur with the bitter assessment of Sophocles's Ajax:

\begin{quote}
\textit{τοῖς πολλοῖσι γὰρ
φροτῶν ἀπιστὸς ἐσθ’ ἐταρείας λυμήν.}
\end{quote}

(Ajax 682–83)

Sad to say, one had best anticipate betrayal at any moment — even from one's closest intimates and companions. Unfaithfulness is omnipresent.

On this same thought, Seneca quotes Ovid:

... Non hospes ab hospite tutus,
non socer a genero; fratrum quoque gratia rara est;
imminet exitio vir coniugis, illa mariti.

\selectlanguage{la}(De Benef. 5.15.3)\textsuperscript{14}

Moreover, with irony and sarcasm, Seneca enumerates figures in the annals of Roman history whose ingratitude caused the destruction of their fatherland — Coriolanus, Catiline, Marius, Sulla, Pompey, Antony.\textsuperscript{15} And he equally chastises the fatherland for its ingratitude to its most devoted sons — Camillus, Scipio, Cicero, Rutilius, Cato.\textsuperscript{16}

Those afflicted with the sin of ingratitude are victims of folly: 'Stulta vita ingrata est ...'\textsuperscript{17} Their life is uneasy, restless, wretched, unhappy.\textsuperscript{18} They are loathed, and are useless to society as well as to themselves.\textsuperscript{19} On the other hand, human beings who feel gratitude experience happiness and joy in their soul.\textsuperscript{20}

Thus Seneca urges us to avoid being ungrateful lest such behavior demean and debase us. What is more wretched, he asks, than a man who forgets the benefits he has received?\textsuperscript{21} Such ingratitude engenders cruelty and wickedness;\textsuperscript{22} it also causes men to regard their benefactors as enemies.\textsuperscript{22}
In William Wycherley’s drama, Manly, the misanthrope, bitterly proclaims the same thought:

Those you have obliged most,
most certainly avoid you ... :
friends, like mistresses, are
avoided for obligations past.24

And Shakespeare cynically remarks:

Time hath, my lord, a wallet at his back
Wherein he puts alms for oblivion,
A great-siz’d monster of ingratitudes:
Those scraps are good deeds past, which are devour’d
As fast as they are made, forgot as soon
As done ... 25

In studying various kinds of ingratitude, Seneca divides the ungrateful man into four categories: he who denies a benefit which he has received; he who pretends he has not received it; he who does not return a benefit; and, most ungrateful of all, the man who has forgotten it entirely.26

Quis tam ingratus est, quam qui, quod in præma parte animi positum esse debuit et semper occurrere, ita seposuit et abiecit ... cui obrepsit oblivio.

(De Bene! 3.2.1)27

Just as gratitude and beneficence are inherent in the ‘summum bonum’,28 so ingratitude is a prime characteristic of the ‘summum malum’. The grateful unite society by their good deeds and foster fellowship among human beings. Such fellowship offers men support for old age, solace for grief, courage to confront adversity.

Nam quo alio tuti sumus, quam quod mutuis iuvamur officiis?

(De Bene. 4.18.1)

The ungrateful are a menace to society; they disrupt and tear asunder the harmony of the human race.29

With his usual penchant for psychoanalysis, Seneca explores the reasons for man’s ingratitude to man. Such behavior, he believes, indicates a perversity in one’s nature.30 The ungrateful man leads a life of anxiety, is devoid of gratitude for present or past benefits, and is wholly absorbed in
what the future will bring. While he thinks about receiving more benefits, he forgets the benefits he has already received and becomes more and more avaricious.

Quaeris quid sit, quod oblivionem nobis acceptorum faciat? Cupiditas accipiendorum. Cogitamus non quid impetratum, sed quid petendum sit.

(\textit{Ep. 81.28})

... nec ulum habet malum cupiditas maius, quam quod ingrata est.

(\textit{Ep. 73.2})

In addition to greed, another potent cause of ingratitude is envy: \textquote{Plus accipere debui . . . parum fecit . . . illum mihi praetulit . . .} (\textquote{I should have received more} . . . \textquote{he has done too little [for me]} . . . \textquote{he put that man ahead of me} . . .). The jealous man keeps forgetting his past benefits, becomes angry with his benefactor, ever suspecting that other recipients have been granted more than he has.

We all behold with envious Eyes,
Our \textit{Equal} rais'd above our \textit{Size};
Who wou'd not at a crowded Show,
Stand high himself, keep others low?
I love my Friend as well as you,
But would not have him stop my View;
Then let me have the higher Post;
I ask but for an Inch at most.

Closely related to the envy of the ungrateful man is his egotism — an inflated opinion of the self and its worth. Such a narcissist whenever he receives a benefit, is all too apt to complain: \textquote{It wasn't enough}, \textquote{It was given too late}, \textquote{I had to go to too much trouble to obtain it}, \textquote{I could have gotten more from someone else}. An ingrate of such selfishness, Seneca tells us, was Gnaeus Lentulus. Despite the fact that Augustus had bestowed upon him honor, prestige, and vast sums of money, he continually complained that the Emperor had not given him enough, had not given him what he deserved.

Another character flaw of the \textquote{vir ingratus} is \textquote{ambitio}, which renders him agitated and unfulfilled.

Nemo agit de tribunatu gratias, sed queritur, quod non est ad prae­turam usque perductus; nec haec grata est, si deest consulatus; ne hic quidem satiat, si unus est. Ultra se cupiditas porngit et felicitatem suam non intellegit . . . .

(\textit{De Bene! 2.27.4})
The ungrateful, the ambitious man is a Tantalus, forever teased and tormented by his appetite; he is so crazy that he considers himself last unless he is first. Yet he constantly tortures and torments himself. Thus he constantly tortures and torments himself. 39

Yet, in spite of human weaknesses, Seneca did not despair. He believed that the spectacle of ingratitude should not dissuade us from conferring benefits upon our fellow-men. 40

Quereris incidisse te in hominem ingratum. Si hoc nunc primum, age ... gratias ... .

(Ep. 81.1)

Even if one grateful person is discovered among the many ungrateful, we have not been generous in vain. Moreover, by repeated good deeds, we may at times extract gratitude even from a heart that is hard and forgetful. We should, therefore, continue to give benefits to former as well as to new recipients. In fact, Seneca urges us to imitate the gods, who bestow gifts on those who doubt their existence and who persevere in giving to the ungrateful. 44

Ingratus est: non mihi fecit iniuriam, sed sibi; ego beneficio meo, cum darem, usus sum. Nec ideo pigrius dabo, sed diligentius; quod in hoc perdidi, ab alis recipiam. Sed huic ipsi beneficium dabo iterum et tamquam bonus agricola cura culuque sterilitatem soli vincam; perit mihi beneficium, iste hominibus. Non est magni animi beneficium dare et perdere; hoc est magni animi perdere et dare.

(De Bene! 7.32) 45

Upon first consideration, it might appear unusual to us that Seneca devoted so much time to consideration of the receipt and conferral of benefits. However, any civilization whatsoever is all but impossible without the cultivation of basic habits of manners, graciousness, reciprocity, and trust. The virtues extolled by Cicero and Vergil concern offices and duties and obligations. Aeneas is presented as a Roman hero who is pious and reasonable, one who accepts his domestic and civic commitments, his manifest destiny.

Such civilized and humanistic goals continually appear as the cornerstone of Senecan thought. In short, any species of ingratitude, any demonstration of crudity or similar antisocial behavior shatters a link in the chainfence of society, and threatens to enhance barbarism and chaos.

Hanc societatem tolle, et unitatem generis humani, qua vita sustinetur, scindis ... .

(De Benef. 4.18.4)

This was Seneca's major theme; this was Seneca's major concern — throughout his writings. His philosophy called for active public service,
and for assistance to his personal comrades. 'Nullius boni sine socio in-
cunda possessio est' (Ep. 6.4.). Hence, all his works are directed to the
service of others: dialogues to Serenus, to Gallio, to Paulinus, to Novatus;
letters to Lucilius; consolations to Marcia, to Helvia. Whenever he studied
problems or questions, it was with the intention of devising practical and
applicable solutions that the public might utilize and share. He was there-
fore looked up to as a Doctor of Souls --- a lay physician who sought to
salvage and ameliorate the human condition. These were his lifelong goals.
Small wonder, then, that he always regarded crude, uncivil, and thankless
behavior as the most dangerous human disease. Whatever the odds (and
Seneca was certainly no easy optimist), he devoted most of his life to the
quest for a cure.

NOTES

1. I. Hadot, Seneca und die griechisch-römische Tradition der Seelenleitung (Berlin
1969).
2. See O. Regenbogen, Schmerz und Tod in den Tragödien Senecas (1927) (Darmstadt
1963).
4. Anna Lydia Motto and John R. Clark, 'Seneca on Vice,' Evphrosyne n.s. 21 (1993),
239–248.
5. See V. D’Agostino, ‘Gratitudine e Ingratitudine secondo gli Scrittori Antichi,’ RSC
7 (1959) 51–64. D’Agostino examines Greco-Roman attitudes concerning gratitude
and ingratitude, maintaining that Seneca’s De Beneficiis constitutes the apex of
writings on this topic.
6. De Benef. 3.7.3.
7. De Benef. 3.15.4: ‘Generosi animi est et magnifici iuvare, prodesse; qui dat beneficia,
deos imitatur . . . .' 
9. De Benef. 1.1.2; 1.10.4; 7.27.3. Cf. Ausonius, Epigrammata 140.1: ‘Nil homine
terra peius ingrato creat.’
10. See Inferno, Canto 34.
12. As You Like It, 2.7.174–81, 187–92.
13. De Benef. 3.1.1.
14. Seneca is quoting from Ovid, Met. 1.144–46. He quotes this same passage in De Ina
2.9.9.
15. De Benef. 5.16.1–6.
17. Ep. 15.9; Seneca is quoting here from Epicurus, frag. 491 (Usener).
19. De Benef. 4.16.2.
22. *Ep.* 81.32.
27. See also 3.3.4; 3.4.1–2; 3.5.1–2.
28. *De Benef.* 3.7.3.
31. *De Benef.* 3.4.2.
32. See also *De Benef.* 2.27.3–4; 3.3.1–2.
33. *De Benef.* 2.28.2.
34. *De Benef.* 3.3.2.
37. *De Benef.* 2.27.1–2.
40. *De Benef.* 1.1.9–13; 1.2.2–5; 1.3.1; 1.10.5; 7.31.5; 7.32.1.
41. *Ep.* 81.2.
42. *De Benef.* 1.3.1.
43. *De Benef.* 7.31.5.
44. *De Benef.* 7.31.2.
45. See also 7.26.1–5; 7.27.1–3; 7.28.1–3; 7.29.1–2; 7.30.1–2; 7.31.1–5.

48
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