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An Analysis of Seneca's *De Beneficiis* as a Source for Roman Social Relations

Throughout much of the Roman world, in the time of the Republic and the Principate, men would commonly form relationships with one another based on the mutual exchange of gifts or services[1] known as *beneficia*, or "kindnesses."[2] The benefits that were interchanged could be anything from a word of advice,[3] to the administration of a province,[4] to the saving of a man's life.[5] The person who received a benefit was generally expected to show his gratitude by reciprocating with a suitable gift or favor;[6] this practice formed the basis of the complex social relationship known as patronage.[7]

According to the Greek historian Dionysius of Halicarnassus, patronage was instituted by Romulus himself to regulate the relationship between the patricians and the plebeians.[8] The more educated aristocrats would look out for their dependents' legal and financial interests, while the plebeians would be obligated to pay for some of their patrons' expenditures.[9] Dionysius' history is probably inaccurate,[10] but the association of patronage with the founding of Rome indicates that this social structure was deeply imbedded in the Roman psyche. The practice lasted for centuries, although it went

[1] John Crook, Aspects of Greek and Roman Life (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 93.
[2] Richard Saller, Personal Patronage Under the Early Empire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 17.
[3] Seneca, De Beneficiis (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 6.29.2; 423.
[4] Seneca, 1.5.2; 21.
[5] Seneca, 1.11.3; 35.
[6] Saller, 19.
[7] Saller, 8.
[8] Dionysius of Halicarnassus, "Antiquitates Romanae 2.9-11," in Patronage in Ancient Society, (London: Routledge, 1989), 243.
[9] Dionysius, "Antiquitates Romanae," 244.

through many transformations. In Republican times, patronage was often used as a political tool; ambitious men who were running for public office would give *beneficia* to clients in exchange for their vote during elections.[11] In the imperial era, when votes were of little importance, patronage continued to be widely practiced. The precise role it played in Roman society in this period, however, has been widely disputed by historians.[12] Seneca the Younger's essay *De Beneficiis*, written during the reign of the Emperor Nero,[13] is often used as a source of information about this practice. The author presents a detailed analysis of the exchange of benefits, which he calls "the chief bond of human society."[14] His essay, however, does not necessarily provide an accurate portrayal of this social practice. According to Miriam Griffin, Seneca may have designed his works "to serve some end outside their avowed purpose as didactic literature;"[15] the author's political and philosophical views probably influenced his writings to some extent. In using this text as a source for Roman social history, therefore, we must differentiate between Seneca's interpretation of the *beneficium* and the real function of benefits in Roman society.

Seneca attributes nearly every public good to the *beneficium*. In Book IV, the peace and security of the Roman people are due not to a good emperor's rule or a strong army's protection, but to the mutual exchange of benefits.[16] "It is only through [this] interchange," Seneca writes, "that life becomes in some measure equipped and fortified

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[10] Jo-Ann Shelton, ed., As the Romans Did: A Sourcebook in Roman Social History, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 12.
[11] Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, "Patronage in Roman Society: from Republic to Empire," in Patronage in Roman Society, 78-9.
[12] Wallace-Hadrill, Introduction in Patronage in Roman Society, 1-8.
[13] Miriam Griffin, Seneca: A Philosopher in Politics, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 396.
[14] Seneca, 1.4.2; 19.
[15] Griffin, 10.
[16] Seneca, 4.18.1; 241.

against sudden disasters;"[17] the practice of reciprocity seems to have functioned, in part, as a social welfare system in which individuals, not a centralized authority, supported one another in times of need. Seneca also presents the *beneficium* as a rare source of equality in the typically class-conscious Roman world. If a slave went beyond the call of duty to help his master, for example, he was not an inferior obeying his superior but a naturally free human being displaying his "friendly affection" for another human being.[18] The exchange of benefits created a bond of friendship in which both parties were equal[19] and "[had] all things in common."[20] Most importantly, the giving of a benefit was an act of selflessness; the benefactor was concerned not with reimbursement for his gift, but with the welfare of the person who received it.[21] All these aspects constitute what Seneca calls "verum beneficium," or the true benefit.[22]

Seneca himself makes clear, however, that this "true" benefit rarely existed in reality. Indeed, his main purpose in writing this essay is to provide a "law of conduct" for the exchange of benefits,[23] since his fellow Romans "do not know how to give or to receive" them.[24] While Seneca saw the ideal benefit as a product of selflessness and the source of harmony and equality, he indicates that actual benefits could be quite the opposite. The author speaks of people who bestowed gifts not out of selflessness or affection, but for their own benefit.[25] Those on the receiving end, who were generally

[17] Seneca, 4.18.1-2; 241.
[18] Seneca, 3.21.2; 165-6.
[19] Seneca, 2.15.1; 77.
[20] Seneca, 7.12.1; 483.
[21] Seneca, 4.29.3; 265.
[22] Seneca, 7.17.1; 497.
[23] Seneca, 1.4.2; 19.
[24] Seneca, 1.1.1; 3.
[25] Seneca, 1.7.3; 27,

known as clients if their status differed appreciably from that of their benefactor,[26] also contributed to the apparent degradation of the mutual exchange system. All too often, they were ungrateful for what they had received.[27]

Some of Seneca's descriptions of these contemporary vices seem historically accurate, since similar accounts appear in other works from the early imperial period. In Book VI of *De Beneficiis,* for example, Seneca writes that wealthy patrons would often divide their "friends" into two classes: "those to be admitted first" into their homes, "and those to be [admitted] second."[28] It was considered a privilege to be among the former group.[29] This preferential treatment shows that the exchange of benefits did not necessarily create a bond of friendship in which both parties were equal. Pliny the Younger corroborates this practice in one of his letters, where he speaks of a patron who served "sumptuous foods" to his more favored guests, and "cheap scraps to the others."[30] Martial describes a similar situation in which the host gives some of his guests a high quality wine, and others "wine which has just been made."[31]

According to Shelton, patrons often divided up their clients on the basis of social status;[32] those of low rank were more likely to receive the inferior treatment that Seneca, Pliny, and Martial describe. But even when two people of high rank exchanged *beneficia*, a friendship between equals was not necessarily the result.[33] The senator Gavius Clarus, for example, showed to another senator, Fronto, "the sort of deference

[26] Richard Saller, "Patronage and Friendship in Early Imperial Rome: Drawing the Distinction," in Patronage in Ancient Society, 52,
[27] Seneca, 2.24.2-3; 101.
[28] Seneca, 6.33.4; 435.
[29] Seneca, 6.34.1; 435-6.
[30] Pliny, "Letters 2.6.1-2," in As the Romans Did, 15.
[31] Martial, "Epigrams 10.49," in As the Romans Did, 317.
[32] Shelton, 15.
[33] Richard Saller, "Patronage and Friendship in Early Imperial Rome," 60.

which *clientes* and faithful, hardworking freedmen yield" to their superiors.[34] Social differentiation was a matter of great sensitivity in the Roman world, and even the highest levels of society possessed a strict internal hierarchy that did not simply disappear upon the mutual exchange of benefits.[35] Fronto indicates that it was quite common for a young, relatively low-ranking senator such as Clarus to try to gain the favor of "a senator senior in rank and years."[36] Thus, Seneca's description of the inequality present in patronage relationships seems valid for many segments of the population.

Seneca accuses his fellow Romans of giving benefits not for the sake of those who receive, but merely to prove their generosity and thereby satisfy their vanity.[37] Although Dionysius of Halicarnassus wrote in the first century B.C., his account of slave manumissions helps to confirm Seneca's statement. The act of freeing a slave was in itself a major *beneficium*, and it automatically made the former master the patron of the freedman.[38] According to Dionysius, men would often manumit their slaves "upon their deaths . . . so that many people wearing freedmen's caps might follow their bier in the funeral procession."[39] Thus, they did not give this *beneficium* out of affection for the slaves, but so that they might be called "good men" and have the honor of a large crowd of mourners.[40] However, in the cases of both Dionysius and Seneca, we must question their apparent knowledge of men's personal reasons for giving benefits; ascertaining the true intent behind a person's action is a very dubious achievement. Thus, their claim that

[34] Fronto, "Ad Verum 2.7," in Saller, "Patronage and Friendship in Imperial Rome," 59.
[35] Saller, "Patronage and Friendship in Imperial Rome," 60.
[36] Fronto, "Ad Verum 2.7," in Saller, "Patronage and Friendship in Imperial Rome," 59.
[37] Seneca, 1.7.3; 27.
[38] Wallace-Hadrill, "Patronage in Roman Society," 76.
[39] Dionysius of Halicarnassus, "Roman Antiquities," in As the Romans Did, 191.
[40] Dionysius, "Roman Antiquities," 191.

people gave benefits out of selfishness rather than selflessness may be a matter of opinion more than a statement of fact.

Seneca also assigns guilt to beneficiaries who saw displays of gratitude as a sign of servility.[41] According to the author, these people often failed to "[pay] their respects" to their patrons because they were too proud to admit their indebtedness.[42] In making this accusation, however, the author may be revealing his bias as a well-to-do, highly successful patron. According to Griffin, many people would come to pay their respects to Seneca during the daily *salutatio*, or "morning salute,"[43] and "trains of clients" usually accompanied him whenever he went out in public.[44] Seneca probably enjoyed being attended by an entourage of grateful men and thus would have looked favorably on these social rituals; he may not have had a clear sense of how the clients regarded the duties they were expected to perform in order to show their gratitude. The writings of Juvenal and Martial indicate that many clients were fed up with arrogant patrons and demeaning displays of deference. One of Martial's epigrams, for example, describes a patron who is offended merely because his client fails to call him "My Lord."[45] Another speaks of a "dutiful client" who, after repeatedly making a long journey to call on his patron, finds that his "cruel" benefactor is never at home to receive him.[46] As a result, the client ends his relationship with this unfaithful patron.[47] Juvenal also complains about the poor treatment of dependents, stating that a cheap dinner was often all a client would get "for

[41] Seneca, 2.23.2-3; 99.
[42] Seneca, 2.23.3; 99.
[43] Shelton, 14.
[44] Griffin, 93.
[45] Martial, "Epigrams 6.88," in As the Romans Did, 14.
[46] Martial, "Epigrams 5.22," in As the Romans Did, 14.
[47] Martial, "Epigrams 5.22," 14.

[his] earlier services."[48] He suggests that some patrons would even ask their clients for sexual favors in exchange for gifts or monetary support.[49] One character in Juvenal's *Satires,* Umbricius, apparently decides to leave Rome because he cannot put up with the degrading and often immoral activities that Roman patrons required of their clients.[50] Although Seneca's claim, which stated that beneficiaries failed to display their gratefulness out of excessive ambition and pride,[51] was probably true in some cases, Juvenal and Martial indicate that the ill treatment of clients was a significant factor in their neglect of gratitude rituals, such as the *salutatio*, and of the patronage system in general.

According to Seneca, too many people failed to respect the mutual exchange system and treat it as something "noble," "chivalrous," and sacred.[52] But in making this accusation, he assumes that most people were in the position to follow his "law of conduct" for the correct interchange of benefits and simply chose not to. Here again, the author may be showing how far removed he was from the everyday struggles of poorer men. Seneca, who had great wealth and political power when he wrote this essay, did not have to worry about acquiring resources for his survival. He, and others like him, could afford to look at the *beneficium* in abstract terms and glorify it as a way to potentially bring harmony to the human race. Many of his contemporaries, however, did not have the luxury of idealization. They were too busy obtaining basic necessities to think about the nobility or potential greatness of the *beneficium*; the existing patronage system, flawed though it might be, was virtually indispensable for those in desperate need of

[48] Juvenal, "Satires 5.12-22," in As the Romans Did, 15.
[49] Juvenal, "Satires 9.33-38, 7.17-19, 7.8-14," in The Mask of the Parasite, Cynthia Damon, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 187-90.
[50] Juvenal, "Satires 3.41-48," in The Mask of the Parasite, 175.

supplies; in exchange for "insignificant offerings" such as flattering words or basic services, the client would receive the "most indispensable of goods, namely food."[53] Juvenal writes about a client who endures cruel treatment from his patron just so that he may receive a free dinner.[54] He indicates that some patrons virtually enslaved their clients by luring them with "the fragrance of [their] kitchen[s]."[55] When a benefactor decided to eat by himself instead of inviting his dependents to a feast, the "poor wretches" had to make do with "a cabbage to eat and some fuel to cook it with."[56] Martial, too, describes men who cultivated relationships with the well-to-do so that they would have access to adequate food supplies.[57] Clients such as these saw the exchange of benefits not as a sacred social practice, but simply as a way to get their daily bread.

The historical validity of Juvenal's *Satires* and Martial's *Epigrams* has long been debated, however. Hyperbole, which is natural to these genres, prevents the works from being completely accurate in their descriptions of Roman society.[58] But, in the words of Cicero, "the characters of comedy . . . show us a picture of our daily life."[59] Juvenal and Martial may have exaggerated the cruelty of patrons, the poverty of the clients, and the flaws in the patronage system, but these problems must have existed in their society to some degree.[60] The problem of chronology also arises when comparing the writings of these two authors with *Des Beneficiis*. While Seneca wrote this essay somewhere

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[51] Seneca, 2.26.1; 103-5.
[52] Seneca, 3.15.4; 155.
[53] Damon, 4.
[54] Juvenal, "Satires 5.1-11," in The Mask of the Parasite, 180.
[55] Juvenal, "Satires 5.156-63," in The Mask of the Parasite, 183.
[56] Juvenal, "Satires 1.132-36," in The Mask of the Parasite, 173.
[57] Martial, "Epigrams 9.14, 7.20.1-5," in The Mask of the Parasite, 150-2.
[58] Duncan Cloud, "The Client-Patron Relationship: Emblem and Reality in Juvenal's First Book," in Patronage in Ancient Society, 205.
[59] Cicero, "Pro Sextus Roscius," in Patronage in Ancient Society, 195.
[60] Damon, 9.

between 56 and 62 A.D.,[61] the other works were written several decades later. According to Juvenal, "the glory of giving was greater" in Seneca's day than in his own.[62] Thus, when Seneca and the other writers differ in their descriptions of the patronage system, this difference may be due to the passage of time rather than to the inaccuracies of one or more of the works. The truthfulness of Juvenal's statement, however, is questionable; we cannot be sure if he personally observed this change in attitude towards benefits, or if he had read Seneca's essay and took the author's high praise of the *beneficium* to represent the view of his generation.

Judging the accuracy of Seneca's work by comparing it to the writing of other ancient authors is, of course, highly problematic. If specific themes or accounts are repeated in different sources, we can be more certain of their validity. But the difficulty increases when two texts seem to contradict each other, or when information is neither confirmed nor denied by other sources. Literary technique, such as hyperbole in the works of Martial and Juvenal, and the inevitable biases of authors also present major obstacles. It would be very useful when analyzing *De Beneficiis*, or any other ancient text, to have topically relevant, non-literary sources of information as well. The very nature of the *beneficium*, however, makes finding alternative sources unlikely. Seneca explains that the benefit, unlike a loan, was not a legal construct and thus did not require official documentation; while ancient Romans usually made records of their money transfers, they did not do so in the case of benefits.[63] Similarly, there are no trial records relating to the exchange of benefits because the beneficiary was not legally obligated to

[61] Griffin, 396.
[62] Juvenal, "Satires 5.107-12," in The Mask of the Parasite, 184.
[63] Seneca, 3.15.1-3; 153-4.

repay the benefactor, and lack of gratitude was not a punishable offense.[64] In North Africa, stones have been found that bear inscriptions with the names of patrons, and most of them are from the imperial period.[65] According to Saller, these carvings were expensive, and the number of surviving stones indicates that they were relatively common in Roman times.[66] This evidence suggests that the patronage system was prevalent even in the provinces of the Empire, and that one way people would honor their patrons was by having their names carved in stone. Although the presence of these stones may indicate that the clients were truly grateful and wished to show their love for their benefactor, such a conclusion is far from certain; the inscriptions may just be an outward show of thanks and not a representation of the clients' affection. Neither do the stones tell us what the patrons had done to deserve these markers of gratitude. Thus, the epigraphic evidence does not appear to be very useful in the examination of *De Beneficiis*.

Based on the methods of analysis that are available to us, however, many of Seneca's descriptions of the problems with the mutual exchange system appear to be conjectural and somewhat biased. His theory that the misuse of benefits stems from the selfishness of benefactors and the excessive pride of beneficiaries is extremely difficult to prove, since it deals with personal motives and fails to address many of the difficulties experienced by clients in the patronage system. Thus, his discussion of the *beneficium* in its non-ideal form has limited applicability to the study of ancient Roman society. But what about the *verum beneficium*? Seneca's statement that Romans "do not know" how

[64] Seneca, 3.7-16; 139-55.
[65] Saller, Personal Patronage Under the Early Empire, 200.
[66] Saller, Personal Patronage, 200.

to exchange benefits[67] implies that there was a correct and an incorrect way. He suggests that the "true benefit," although it may be very rare in reality, is the real form of the *beneficium* and thus should be the ultimate goal of society. Patronage, the current system of mutual exchange, was not living up to what Seneca saw as the true potential of the *beneficium* -- to create a harmonious society based on fellowship and mutual affection.[68] Seneca's view of the ideal use of benefits, however, was not necessarily a vision shared by the majority of Romans. Indeed, many of his contemporaries believed that the basic purpose of the mutual exchange system was not, as Seneca suggests, to create equality and friendship, but to maintain a complex social hierarchy and to make it possible for individuals to satisfy their own needs and ambitions.

Dionysius' account of the original function of patronage is probably inaccurate, but it may reveal the beliefs of contemporary Romans about how and why this practice began. According to Dionysius, the arrangement between patricians and plebeians was made "to avoid the dissension that arises in other cities through the abuse inflicted on the weak by their superiors."[69] This statement seems to imply that the system was created for the sake of the plebeians, but it could have also been used to justify the formation of a society in which "lesser men" were made subject to "their betters;"[70] as Wallace-Hadrill says, patronage was instituted as "an instrument of social control."[71] Under this arrangement, the plebeians, although "their poverty" was such that they could not afford an education,[72] were obligated to help pay their patrons' dowries, ransoms, and fines.[73]

[67] Seneca, 1.1.1; 3.
[68] Seneca, 4.18.2-4; 241-3.
[69] Dionysius of Halicarnassus, "Antiquitates Romanae," in Patronage in Ancient Society, 243.
[70] Dionysius, 243.
[71] Wallace-Hadrill, "Patronage in Roman Society," 72.
[72] Dionysius, 243.
[73] Dionysius, 244.

The plebeians did receive a benefit in the form of legal aid, but the patrons soon transformed their obligation into a way to gain prestige; it became "a source of great credit" to have as many clients as possible, which caused patrons to compete with one another over acquiring new clients.[74] Also, plebeians were not completely free to choose their patrons; they customarily became the clients of the same patrician families that their ancestors belonged to.[75] Regardless of its accuracy, this account suggests that in the first century B.C., it was thought that the original purpose of the patronage system was to keep the classes divided and to serve the interests of the patricians while providing some services for the plebeians, perhaps merely to placate them. According to Dionysius, this hierarchical system united the two classes and prevented "internal bloodshed or murder."[76] Thus, it produced the harmony that Seneca had thought would come only from ideal benefits; but instead of relying on equality and fellowship, this system was based, at least in part, on inequality and control.

As we have seen from the works of Juvenal and Martial, poor clients in imperial Rome saw the patronage system as a way to get food and other resources; few had any hope of being on equal terms with their benefactors, and there is no indication that they expected the patronage system to function in this way. In the elite levels of society, the practice of mutual exchange worked very differently; even after Republican times, people who were involved in public life utilized the patronage system as a means of political advancement. As in Dionysius' account, ambitious men aimed to became the patrons of as many people as possible; their social standing, which often determined the successfulness of their political career, was largely based on the quantity and also the

[74] Dionysius, 244.
[75] Dionysius, 244.

quality of their clients.[77] Alternately, men who were entering into politics would often try to acquire a patron of their own, known as a *suffragator*, who was an older and more experienced office-holder.[78] This patron would facilitate his protege's entry into the political world, while the younger man would honor his *suffragator* and, in some cases, protect his family after his death.[79] This elite mutual aid system was not always characterized by self-interest; senators and other high-ranking individuals often developed close friendships with those whom they exchanged benefits with. Pliny, for example, stated that he had great love for his former patron, Corellius Rufus.[80] But these relationships were initially and primarily formed out of the self-interest of both parties.[81] Although hungry clients and the political elite got very different things out of the system of mutual exchange, they both used it as a tool, not as a way to achieve peace and equality. Within the existing social structure, their interests were best served by serving others.

Seneca's main purpose in writing *De Beneficiis* was to present the correct way to give and receive benefits and to end the corruption of the mutual exchange system. Many of his contemporaries, however, would not have agreed with his proposed changes, or even that there was a problem with the existing patronage system. Why, then, would Seneca have taken such a divergent view of the role of the *beneficium*? It is quite probable that he had underlying motives in writing this essay, and that his agenda caused him to define the *beneficium* in a non-standard way.

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[76] Dionysius, 245.
[77] Wallace-Hadrill, "Patronage in Roman Society," 82.
[78] Saller, Personal Patronage, 27.
[79] Saller, Personal Patronage, 26.
[80] Pliny, "Ep. 4.17.4," in Personal Patronage, 26.
[81] Saller, "Patronage and Friendship in Early Imperial Rome," 58-60; Wallace-Hadrill, "Patronage in Roman Society," 78.

The period from 56 to 62 A.D., during which *De Beneficiis* was written, was a very turbulent time in the author's life. Seneca, who had previously been Nero's tutor, became *amicus principis*, or "friend of the emperor" when Nero acceded to the throne. This position made it possible for Seneca to influence Nero's decisions and amass a great deal of power for himself; but he had to struggle with Burrus, who was the prefect of the praetorian guard, and with Nero's mother for control over the emperor.[82] In 59 A.D., Seneca lost favor with Nero, presumably because he failed to help him carry out his mother's murder.[83] Seneca may have written parts of *De Beneficiis* specifically for the emperor, in an effort to restore Nero's trust in him after this event or simply to increase his influence over the emperor before it. In Book VI, for example, Seneca states that what a man who is "the highest in the land" needs most of all is someone "who will tell him the truth."[84] As the *amicus principis*, he would have been Nero's primary truth-teller. Seneca may have been trying to scare the emperor when he asks, "Do you not see how such persons [in positions of power] are driven to destruction by the absence of frankness. . . .?"[85] Seneca also mentions that a teacher can often become his student's friend, in which case the student owes the teacher more than the cost of his lessons.[86] He may be implying to Nero that he is not just his former teacher, but also his friend, and as such he deserves the emperor's gratitude. Seneca's statement that friends "have all things in common"[87] could even express his desire to share Nero's power.

It is far from certain that Seneca used *De Beneficiis* as a vehicle for his political ambitions. That the text contains a philosophical agenda, however, is much more

[82] Wallace-Hadrill, 78.
[83] Wallace-Hadrill, 79.
[84] Seneca, 6.30.3-4; 425.
[85] Seneca, 6.30.4-4; 425.

apparent. Seneca was strongly influenced by Stoic beliefs, and he incorporated many of them into his moral treatise. Most Stoics believed in the equality of man, and therefore in the unnaturalness of slavery.[88] Seneca was apparently a strong advocate of this theory and said that the slave was entitled to as much generosity and respect as a free person was.[89] His assertion in Book III that a slave, because the "better part of him" is free, has the ability to bestow true benefits on his master[90] is a clear example of the importance of the Stoa in *De Beneficiis*. Another Stoic doctrine declares that humans, as rational beings, were bound together in a natural community by the duty to help one another.[91] This tenet is roughly equivalent to Seneca's definition of the *verum beneficium*, which states that a true benefit is the product of rationality, the creator of the friendship bond, and the source of mankind's strength. Thus, the concept of the *verum beneficium* can be seen as the imposition of Stoic philosophy onto a pre-existing social construct.

According to Brent Shaw, Stoicism was almost inseparable from the social evolution of the ancient world.[92] Stoics used their philosophy not to abolish existing institutions, but to passively transform societal structures by redefining them according to the guidelines of Nature.[93] The coherent, universal order presented by Stoicism[94] helped to guide the development of social structures and relationships as the dominant political entity of the region shifted from the Greek *polis*, to the Hellenistic kingdoms, to the

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[86] Seneca, 6.16.3-4; 397.
[87] Seneca, 7.12.1; 483.
[88] Griffin, 257-8.
[89] Griffin, 257-8.
[90] Seneca, 3.20.1-2; 165.
[91] Griffin, 238, 329.
[92] Brent Shaw, "The Divine Economy: Stoicism as Ideology," Latomus 44, no. 1 (1985): 42-3, 55.
[93] Shaw, 54.
[94] Shaw, 31.

Roman Republic, and finally to the Empire.[95] Shaw's theory helps to place *De Beneficiis* within a broad historical context; Seneca's essay can be seen as the manifestation of a philosophical movement which lasted for more than five centuries and stretched across the ancient Mediterranean world.[96] Just as the Greek Stoics, whose homelands were absorbed into the Roman state in the second century B.C., used their philosophy to convince the Romans to rule with humanity and not with brutality,[97] so Seneca, who saw great corruption within the patronage system, used his Stoic beliefs to persuade his readers to exchange benefits out of mutual affection and not out of greed or self-interest. To Stoics, Nature was "at once an empirical reality and a transcendent idea"[98] that could be used to reform society. Seneca's *verum beneficium*, which he presents as an ideal and also as something that can be achieved in reality, seems to occupy the reformative role of the "all-enveloping"[99] force of Nature. The author may have chosen the *beneficium* to transmit the tenets of the Stoa because he believed it had the potential to absorb these ideas. The patronage system was a much more fluid entity in ancient Rome than other social structures, such as law and the family, because the *beneficium* stood outside the control of legislation and courtroom justice.[100] Seneca may have written *De Beneficiis*, therefore, to convince his fellow Romans to practice mutual exchange according to Stoic ideals so that his vision of a more equal, harmonious society could become a reality.

[95] Shaw, 54.
[96] Shaw, 17.
[97] Shaw, 37-8.
[98] Shaw, 54.
[99] Shaw, 32.
[100] Seneca, 3.7.5-6; 139.

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