

SENECA ON GRATITUDE AND JUSTICE: HOW TO TRANSLATE *EP. 81, 19*?

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ABSTRACT. In this paper I discuss how to translate a rather ambiguous passage in Seneca's "Letters to Lucilius" (81, 19), where he either I) opposes gratitude to justice for the reason that the former is the agent's own good and the latter regards other people's interests or, II) quite to the contrary, draws an analogy between these virtues, pointing out that both of them constitute the agent's own good. Both these alternatives seem grammatically possible and can be found in modern translations of this "Letter" into main European languages. I argue in favour of II) on the ground that it agrees better with general perfectionist approach to virtues that Seneca espouses in this context.

KEYWORDS: ancient ethics, gratitude, justice, "Letters to Lucilius", perfectionism, Seneca, virtues.

In Ep. 81, 19 Seneca writes:

Omnia facienda sunt ut quam gratissimi simus. Nostrum enim hoc bonum est, *quemadmodum iustitia non est, ut vulgo creditur, ad alios pertinens: magna pars eius in se redit*¹.

The italicized part of the second sentence can be translated in two opposite ways. On the one hand, one can translate it as follows:

I) We should do everything in order to be as grateful as possible. For this is our own good *in a way in which justice is not, as is commonly thought, since it concerns others: a great part of it* [i.e. of our own good, gratitude] returns to itself.

On the other hand, the alternative translation is also possible:

¹ The text is identical in three critical editions available to me: Hense 1898, 296–297; Reynolds 1965, I, 268; Préchac 1989, III, 96 (with minor difference that Reynolds puts in brackets "ut vulgo creditur").

II) We should do everything in order to be as grateful as possible. For this is our own good *just as justice does not concern others, as is commonly thought*: a great part of *it* [i.e. of justice] returns to itself.

Syntactically, I) presupposes that “*pertinens*” is a predicative participle, adverbial in function and, in all likelihood, having causal meaning.

<i>iustitia non est</i> (sc. nostrum bonum)	<i>ad alios pertinens</i>
Justice is not [our own good]	since it concerns others

But II) implies that this participle makes part of an analytic verb form:

<i>iustitia non est</i>	<i>ad alios pertinens</i>
Justice does not	concern others

From the grammatical standpoint, the first of these constructions is very common in Latin,² while the second is comparatively rare given that Latin has no regular analytic forms with *participium praesentis activi*. This may seem to be an argument in favour of I), but it is hardly decisive, since such forms still occur.³ On the other hand, I think, II) is given some support by what looks like more natural reading of *eius* in the final part of the phrase: I) suggests that in “*magna pars eius in se redit*” can only be meant “our own good” from the very beginning of the sentence, i.e. gratitude, whereas, according to II), it is rather “justice” positioned relatively closer to *eius* that is implied here. On the whole, however, it seems that despite such nuances we cannot definitely rule out neither of these alternatives for purely grammatical reasons. This conclusion seems to be backed up by modern translations of “Letters to Lucilius” into main European languages. English or American translators, as a rule, opt for I).⁴ “Continental” translators, on the contrary, usually prefer II).⁵

² Pinkster 1990, 157–158; Woodcock 1999, 71–73 (§ 88–92); Menge 2009, 716 (§ 500, (1)).

³ Ernout & Thomas 1953, 274–255 (§ 287); Menge 2009, 717 (§ 501, (3)). I am grateful to Elisaveta Sherbakova for helpful discussion on this topic.

⁴ E.g., Gummere 1920, II, 231: “We should try by all means to be as grateful as possible. For gratitude is a good thing for ourselves, in a sense in which justice, that is commonly supposed to concern other persons, is not; gratitude returns in large measure unto itself”. Cf. Graver & Long 2015, 267–268: “We should make every effort to show all the gratitude we can. For the good in it is our own. After all, gratitude is not justice (as is commonly believed), for justice pertains to others, but much of the good in gratitude redounds to oneself”. On this reading, the common belief Seneca mentions is simply that gratitude is not justice. This seems to me wrong as a translation, but the general idea that justice

Apparently, we have to deal with a phrase that grammatically admits of directly opposite interpretations. In order to reasonably choose between them, it is necessary to understand, which of these two translations agrees best with Seneca's thought in this particular context and also in his corpus in general. The substantial difference between I) and II) can be stated as follows: according to I), Seneca *opposes* gratitude to justice on the ground that the former is the agent's own good, whereas the latter regards other people's interests, at least from the common point of view, which Seneca here doesn't call into question and possibly even supports; but if II) is correct, Seneca *draws an analogy* between gratitude and justice, pointing out that both these qualities constitute the agent's own good, since – this time contrary to common opinion – justice is not an *exclusively* other-regarding virtue⁶. In order to adequately assess these alternatives, it is important to understand what stands behind Seneca's reference to this anonymous common opinion (*ut vulgo creditur*). My hypothesis is that in this case Seneca doesn't simply refer to some popular belief, which may be deemed characteristic of his own society⁷ or even natural for any society at all, but implicitly reacts to a quite specific topic that has been discussed for a long time in ancient philosophical and literary texts. Already Plato's Socrates in "Republic" argued against Thrasymachus' statement that justice is "the good of another" (ἀλλότριον ἀγαθόν), but

should be opposed to gratitude agrees with I). Cf. also Morell 1786, II, 38. Barker's translation (Barker 1932) is unavailable to me.

⁵ E.g., Nickel 2009, II, 71: "Alles müssen wir tun um möglichst große Dankbarkeit zu beweisen. Denn sie ist gut für uns, genauso wie sich Gerechtigkeit nicht nur auf andere auswirkt, was man in Allgemeinem annimmt: Zu einem großen Teil kommt sie einem selbst zugute". Of course, I don't claim to have taken into account all "Continental" translations, but those I was able to consult while preparing this paper unanimously favour II) (e.g., Préchac 1989, III, 96; Roca Meliá 1989, II, 23; Boella 1995, 527; Reale 2000, 856).

⁶ According to II), Seneca says: "[a] justice does not concern other people, as is commonly thought: [b] a great part of it returns to itself". It may seem that [a] completely denies the social nature of justice, but [b] corrects this impression, suggesting that justice only serves the agent's own interests in part and, therefore, can still be regarded as an other-regarding virtue.

⁷ For instance, Grimal suggests that Ep. 81, 19 is a reaction against the tendency to emphasize practical character of virtues that, in his opinion, was obvious in Roman Stoicism after Panetius (Grimal 1991, 164, n. 376). This suggestion is rather vague (although cf. Griffin 2013, 17, esp. n. 17) and probably refers to the whole text of Ep. 81, 19 and not specifically to the moot sentence discussed here, which Grimal in any case understands in accordance with II) (Grimal 1991, 163).

for the agent herself turns out to be a detriment (οικεία... βλάβη)⁸, – an attitude expressed also in Euripides’ “Heraclidae” and criticized in Isocrates’ “De pace”⁹, – and Aristotle, who seems to have borrowed the expression ἀλλότριον ἀγαθὸν from Plato, explained it by saying that justice is the only virtue (μόνη τῶν ἀρετῶν) that “is related to another” (πρὸς ἕτερόν ἐστιν) and “does what benefits another” (ἄλλω... τὰ συμφέροντα πράττει).¹⁰ Similarly, Cicero in his dialogue “De Re Publica”¹¹ described justice (*iustitia*) as “that virtue, which is the one that is most generous and liberal (if it exists at all), which loves all people more than itself, which is born for others rather than for itself”¹², but at the same time, at least according to Lactantius’ testimony, presented Carneades’ criticism of this virtue as pretty close to the above mentioned Thrasymachus’ position¹³. To my mind, Ep. 81, 19, while broaching the question of whether justice, which is believed to primarily concern other people (*ad alios pertinens*), is also “our own good” (*nostrum bonum*), appears to be in line with this tradition. This seems all the more probable given that in Ep. 113, 31 Seneca himself speaks quite in its vein:

T1 “Self-Command is the greatest command of all. [31] Let her teach me what a hallowed thing is the Justice (*iustitia*) which ever regards another’s good (*alienum bonum spectans*) and seeks nothing for itself except its own employment (*nihil ex se petens nisi usum sui*). It should have nothing to do with ambition and reputation; it should satisfy itself. Let each man convince himself of this before all else – “I must be just (*iustum esse*) without reward (*gratis*).” And that is not enough; let him convince himself also of this: “May I take pleasure in devoting myself of my own free will to uphold this noblest of virtues.” Let all his thoughts be turned as far as possible from personal interests (*privatis commodis*). You need not look

⁸ Pl. R. 343c3–6; cf. 367c2–5; 392b3–4. Most abbreviations I use are those adopted in Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon and the Oxford Latin Dictionary.

⁹ E. Heracl. 1–5; Isoc. Or. VIII, 31–32. I owe these references to Shorey 1937, I, 67 c.

¹⁰ Arist. EN 1130a3–5 (English quotations are from Irwin 1999, 69). Cf. EN 1134b5–6.

¹¹ Seneca knew this work, to judge from Ep. 108, 30 and 34.

¹² Cic. De Rep. III, [8, 12]: ...eam virtutem, quae est una, si modo est, maxime munifica et liberalis, et quae omnis magis quam sepe diligit, aliis nata potius quam sibi... (English translation is that of Zetzel 1999, 63). Cf. similar statements in Lactantius’ “Epitome”, cited in Powell 2006, 90.

¹³ Carneades’ point, among other things, was that “justice (*iustitiam*)... if there is any... is the highest stupidity (*summam... stultitiam*), since it would harm itself (*sibi noceret*) in looking after the interest of others (*alienis commodis consulens*)” (Lactant. Div. inst. V, 16, 3, quoted in Powell 2006, 96; English translation is from Zetzel 1999, 63). Cf. also Thrasymachus’ characterization of justice as “a very noble simplicity” or even “stupidity” (πάνυ γενναίαν εὐήθειαν) in Pl. R. 348c12.

about for the reward of a just deed; a just deed in itself offers a still greater return (*Non est quod spectes quod sit iustae rei praemium: maius in iusto est*)¹⁴.

This passage may seem to confirm I): here Seneca himself characterizes justice as a virtue that aims at “another’s good” (*alienum bonum*) and hence it’s quite possible that in Ep. 81, 19 he sided with this common opinion and thus opposed justice to gratitude interpreted as “our own good”. However, this would be a hasty conclusion. First of all, gratitude itself is sometimes described by Seneca as a completely unselfish virtue that one should pursue for its own sake and not for the sake of one’s own interest. For example, in his treatise “On benefits” he says:

T2 “People can be found who cultivate honorable conduct for the sake of reward (*honesta in mercedem colant*) and who do not favor virtue without some recompense (*virtus gratuita*)... [1.3] “What shall I gain,” someone may say, “if I do this with courage, if I do this with gratitude (*grate*)?” Your gain will be that you have done it – nothing more is promised you (*Quod feceris; nihil tibi extra promittitur*). If it happens that some advantage (*quid commodi*) results, then you will count that a bonus (*accessiones*). The reward for honorable actions lies in the actions themselves (*Rerum honestarum pretium in ipsis est*)” (Ben. IV, 1, 2–3)¹⁵.

Precisely as justice in T1, gratitude proves here to be a) an example of disinterested virtue that b) is only concerned with carrying out morally right actions and c) finds its own reward in this activity itself d) rather than in any non-moral advantages¹⁶. If despite all this Seneca is still able to assert in Ep. 81, 19 that gratitude is “our own good”, then, it seems, T1 does not necessarily rule out that he could make the same assertion about justice, as is implied by II). Logically, calling justice “another’s good” is quite compatible with admitting that it can be “our own good” as well¹⁷. Actually, Seneca himself explicitly states that justice is both in Ep. 102, 19:

¹⁴ The translation is from Gummer 1925, III, 299.

¹⁵ The translation is from Griffin & Inwood 2011, 85. The thesis that gratitude as any moral good should be chosen for its own sake is further elaborated at length in Ben. IV, 16–24. For analogous statements about justice cf. Ben. IV, 12, 4; Ep. 94, 11.

¹⁶ One can draw the following parallels between T1 and T2: a) *gratis = virtus gratuita*; b) *nihil ex se petens nisi usum sui = Quod feceris; nihil tibi extra promittitur*; c) *Non est quod spectes quod sit iustae rei praemium: maius in iusto est = Rerum honestarum pretium in ipsis est*; d) *privatis commodis = quid commodi*. “Commoda” and “incommoda” are terms often used by Seneca to designate traditional non-moral goods and evils that Stoics treated as “preferred” and “rejected” indifferents (cf. Ep. 66, 19–20; 74, 17; 87, 29–30 and 36–37; 92, 16).

¹⁷ Cf. note 6.

T3 “Do you doubt that justice (*iustitia*) is a good to its possessor (*habentis bonum*), as well as to the man to whom the just due was paid (*eius cui debitum solvit*)? To praise the deserving is justice (*iustitia*); therefore, the good belongs to both sides (*utriusque bonum est*)”.¹⁸

Therefore II) remains perfectly possible. But it starts looking more likely if we take into account that Seneca, as, by the way, all philosophers mentioned above, shared the basic assumptions of ancient eudaimonism, i.e. that all people aspire after their own happiness¹⁹, and that happiness consists primarily in possessing and using various goods²⁰. Within this eudaimonistic framework in order to demonstrate that virtue is to be preferred to vice, one had to explain how it proves to be the most important good for the agent herself or, which comes to the same thing, how it ensures her own happiness. This task seemed especially difficult in the case of such apparently other-regarding virtues as justice (as is clear from Thrasymachus’ or Carneades’ criticism of this virtue)²¹. Plato offered what one may call a *perfectionist* solution to this problem by insisting that as any other virtue justice is good for the agent not only instrumentally, i.e. to the extent it contributes to her having external and bodily goods²², but also in its own right²³ – first of all, because it constitutes an objectively perfect state of her own soul and she is necessarily interested in its perfection even more than in her physical health (i.e. the perfect state of her body)²⁴, and, secondly, because this state of the soul is accompanied by the intellectual pleasures that make the life of a virtuous person preferable even by purely hedonistic standards²⁵. Unlike Plato, Aristotle and Cicero didn’t seem to regard the thesis that justice is “the good of another” as

¹⁸ The translation is from Gummer 1925, III, 179 with one minor change. The story about Stilpon told by Seneca in Ep. 9, 18-19 also presents justice as one of the agent’s own goods.

¹⁹ Sen. Dial. VII, 1, 1. Cf. Pl. Smp. 204e–205a; Euthd. 278e–279a; Arist. Pol. 1331b39–40; Rh. 1360b4–13; Cic. Fin. III, 11; V, 86.

²⁰ E.g., Pl. Smp. 202c; 204e–205a; Euthd. 278e–279a; Lg. 631b; Arist. Rh. 1360b14–30; MM (sp.) 1, 2, 8 Armstrong; Cic. Tusc. 5, 28–29 and in the light of these passages cf. Sen. Ep. 44, 6; 124, 15. Of course, Stoics limited relevant goods to moral ones, i.e., first of all, to the virtues of the soul.

²¹ Cf. Adkins 1960, 67, 153, 168, and esp. 249–256, where it is shown how this philosophical question reflected problems deeply inherent in the early Greek value system.

²² A solution adopted by Isocrates (Isoc. Or. VIII, 31–34).

²³ Cf. Pl. R. 358a; 366e–367e; 427d.

²⁴ Pl. R. 443c–445b; cf. Grg. 512ab; Cri. 47e–48a.

²⁵ Pl. R. 580d–588a. On the contrary, injustice inevitably involves psychological states that are very unpleasant for the agent herself (Pl. R. 574a; 578ab; 579b–e).

a terrible threat to morality²⁶, but nevertheless they also combined it with the idea that any moral good, including other-regarding virtues and actions, is by itself the agent's own good and should be sought by her out of genuine self-love²⁷ or for her own benefit²⁸. Now, if we turn to the text of Seneca's "Letter 81" that immediately follows the ambiguous sentence discussed here, it will become clear that there he applies a very similar perfectionist approach to gratitude:

T4 "[19] [a] There is not a man who, when he has benefited (*prodest*) his neighbour, has not benefited himself (*profuit*), – I do not mean for the reason that he whom you have aided will desire to aid you, or that he whom you have defended will desire to protect you, or that an example of good conduct returns in a circle to benefit the doer... [b] but that the reward for all the virtues lies in the virtues themselves (*virtutum omnium pretium in ipsis est*). For they are not practised with a view to recompense; the wages of a good deed is to have done it (*Non enim exercentur ad praemium: recte facti fecisse merces est*). [20] [c] I am grateful, not in order that my neighbour, provoked by the earlier act of kindness, may be more ready to benefit me, but simply in order that I may perform a most pleasant and beautiful act (*ut rem iucundissimam ac pulcherrimam faciam*); I feel grateful, not because it profits me, but because it pleases me (*non quia expedit, sed quia iuvat*)... [21] [d] Thus, as I have said, your being grateful is more conducive to your own good than to your neighbour's good (*maiore tuo quam alterius bono gratus es*). For while your neighbour has had a common, everyday experience, namely, receiving back the gift which he had bestowed, you have had a great experience which is the outcome of an utterly happy condition of soul, to have felt gratitude (*magna et ex beatissimo animi statu profecta [sc. res], gratum fuisse*). For if wickedness makes men unhappy and virtue makes men blest (*malitia miseros facit, virtus beatos*), and if it is a virtue to be grateful (*gratum autem esse virtus est*), then the return which you have made is only the customary thing, but the thing to which you have attained is priceless, the consciousness of gratitude (*conscientiam grati*), which comes only to the soul that is divine and blessed (*animum divinum fortunatumque*). The opposite feeling to this, however, is immediately attended by the greatest unhappiness (*summa infelicitas*); no man, if he be ungrateful, will be unhappy in the future (*Nemo si ingratus est, miser erit*). I allow him no day of grace; he is unhappy forthwith (*statim miser est*). [22] Let us therefore avoid being

²⁶ Cf. Adkins 1960, 317 (with regard to Aristotle).

²⁷ Arist. EN 1168a28–1169b2. Cf. EN 1136b15–22.

²⁸ Cic. Off. III, 34–36; 49; 64; 74–78; 81–85; 99–101; Fin. III, 11 и 71.

ungrateful, not for the sake of others, but for our own sakes (*Itaque ingrati esse vitemus non aliena causa sed nostra*)” (Ep. 81, 19–22)²⁹.

According to T₄, gratitude is the agent’s own good not on the ground that it can indirectly bring about some external non-moral advantages ([a]), but because it contributes to her happiness in its own right, i.e. simply *qua* moral virtue or a good of the soul ([d])³⁰, and to a certain extent, it seems, also because it produces in her soul peculiar moral pleasures ([c])³¹. It is this perfectionist idea that stands behind the thesis that the reward for virtues and morally right actions lies in themselves ([b]). But the same thesis is maintained both in T₁ and T₂, where justice and gratitude seem to be described as completely disinterested virtues. It only means that even there, although less explicitly, the idea is present that these virtues still are the agent’s own good. It doesn’t really contradict their alleged disinterestedness, since the latter simply means that these virtues should not be sought for the sake of some external *non-moral* goods. However, from the perfectionist standpoint it doesn’t prevent them from contributing to the agent’s own happiness and thereby from benefiting her precisely in their capacity of *moral* goods. All this, to my mind, makes it clear enough that II) should be preferred as a translation. To admit I) is tantamount to assuming that in Ep. 81, 19 Seneca accepts perfectionist interpretation of gratitude, but for some reason doesn’t want to extend it to justice. But within perfectionist approach he clearly espouses here there are simply no good reasons for this: any moral virtue is by definition a perfect state of the agent’s soul, in addition producing moral pleasures peculiar to it, and in this sense it always constitutes a component of her happiness and her own good even if at the same time it may in some other (presumably non-moral³²) sense be “the good of another”.

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²⁹ The translation is from Gummer 1920, II, 231–233.

³⁰ Which agrees with the Stoic thesis that virtue is sufficient for happiness (cf., e.g., Ep. 74, 1–2; 76, 16; 85, 1 and 17; 87, 11; 92, 23–24).

³¹ Whereas the ungrateful and vicious person experiences psychological sufferings (Ep. 81, 23–24; cf. 97, 15). On the joy that accompanies virtue cf., e.g., Ep. 59, 16; 76, 28; Dial. VII, 4, 3–5. But in Dial. VII, 9, 1–4 and 15, 1–3 Seneca insists that virtue should be pursued for its own sake and not for the sake of this joy.

³² I don’t want to go into greater details here, but cf. interesting discussion in Ben. V, 13.

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