The writings of Lucius Annaeus Seneca, tutor and political advisor to the young emperor Nero, are among our most important sources for Stoic philosophy. This volume offers, in clear and forceful contemporary translations, four of Seneca’s most interesting ‘Moral Essays’: On Anger, On Mercy, On the Private Life and the first four books of On Favours. They provide an attractive insight into the social and moral outlook of a Stoic thinker at the centre of power in the Roman empire of the mid first century AD. A General Introduction on Seneca’s life and work explains the fundamental ideas in the philosophy that informs the essays. Individual introductions place the works in their specific historical and intellectual contexts. Biographical Notes, based on up-to-date scholarship, provide the information necessary for a full understanding of the texts. To assist the student further, section headings have been inserted into the translations to mark the principal transitions in the argument and reveal the organization of these writings.
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SENECA

Moral and Political Essays

EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY
JOHN M. COOPER
Professor of Philosophy, Princeton University

AND
J. F. PROCOPÉ
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Editors’ Notes

The initial work on this volume was divided as follows. The General Introduction (apart from the pages on ‘Style and Composition’), the Special Introductions and the notes to On the Private Life and On Favours were first drafted by J. M. Cooper. The translations (with the addition of section headings to clarify the course of Seneca’s argument), the Biographical Notes and the annotations to On Anger and On Mercy began as the work of J. F. Procopé. But each author has revised and amplified the work of the other to the point where neither can be held solely responsible, or escape responsibility, for any part of the book.

Numerous debts have to be acknowledged. J. M. Cooper would like to thank Kathleen Much, Alexander Nehamas and J. B. Schneewind. J. F. Procopé would like to thank Robert Coleman, John Crook, Richard Duncan-Jones, Brad Inwood, Caroline Moore, Michael Reeve, Malcolm Schofield and Edward Shils. J. M. Cooper would also like to acknowledge the hospitality of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioural Sciences and the financial support, while he was a Fellow there, of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Note on the text

The manuscript transmission of the works in this volume is varied. For a good summary, see L. D. Reynolds ed., Texts and Transmission: A Survey of the Latin Classics (Oxford 1983), pp. 363–9. Our principal manuscript for On Anger and the other Dialogi is the
Editors’ Notes

Ambrosiana (A), written at Montecassino near Naples between AD 1058 and 1087 and preserved in the Ambrosian Library in Milan; for On Mercy and On Favours the main text is the codex Nazarianus (N) written in north Italy around AD 800 and now in the Vatican Library. The transmission of On Mercy has been notably worse than that of the other essays translated here.

Except where stated in the footnotes, our translations of On Anger and On the Private Life are of the text in Seneca: Dialogi, ed. L. D. Reynolds (Oxford 1977). Those of On Mercy and On Favours follow that of C. Hosius’ Teubner edition (Leipzig 1914), reprinted by J. W. Basore in his Loeb Classical Library edition of Seneca: Moral Essays I (1928) and III (1935), and are indebted further to the Budé editions of F. Préchac (Sénèque: De la clémence 3rd edn (Paris 1967), and Sénèque: Des bienfaits 3rd edn (Paris 1972)). These modern editions rest on the work of numerous earlier scholars, from Erasmus onwards, some of whose readings and comments are mentioned in our footnotes. For the most part, a variant reading will simply be attributed to its author (e.g. Gronovius, Vahlen, Gertz, Koch, Sonntag, Kronenberg) without further references. Special mention should, however, be made here to three scholars whose work will be cited repeatedly: W. H. Alexander (Seneca’s De Beneficiis Libri VII (University of California Press, Classical Philology 1950), a monograph which continues the work of two earlier articles, ‘Notes on the De beneficiis of Seneca’ (Classical Quarterly 28 (1933) pp. 54 f.) and ‘Further Notes on the Text of Seneca’s De beneficiis’ (Classical Quarterly 31 (1937) pp. 55–9; J. Calvin (‘Calvin’s commentary on Seneca’s De Clementia’, with Introduction, Translation and Notes by F. L. Batties and A. M. Hugo (Leiden 1969)); and J. Lipsius (cited from L. Annaei Senecae opera quae extant, integris Justi Lipsii, J. Fred. Gronovii, et selectis Variorum Commentariis illustrata (Amsterdam 1672)).
General introduction

Seneca: life, public career and authorship

Seneca is the principal ancient proponent in Latin of Stoic philosophy. His surviving Moral Essays, the more political of which have been selected for this volume, are the most important body of more or less complete Stoic writings to survive from antiquity. He was born Lucius Annaeus Seneca between about 4 and 1 BC in southern Spain, at Corduba (modern Cordoba), a leading provincial centre of Roman culture. His parents had also been born in Spain, though their families were of Italian origin. They belonged to the equestrian order, a section of the Roman upper class that, unlike the senatorial families, had traditionally avoided political careers in favour of commerce and the pursuit of wealth. Seneca's father, likewise named Lucius Annaeus Seneca, had spent much of his adult life in Rome. As a young man he had interested himself in oratory, attending the disputations and rhetorical exercises of the leading declaimers there. Leaving his wife in charge of his estates in Spain, he later returned to Rome to oversee the education and subsequent careers of his three sons. As well as a history of Rome from the civil wars of the mid first century BC down to the 30s AD, which has not survived and may never have been published, the elder Seneca produced reports and commentaries on the performances he had witnessed in the rhetorical schools of Rome as a youth. Written near the end of his life at his sons' request, these have partly survived, as the so-called Controversiae and Stasoriae.1

1 Available in the Loeb Classical Library in translations by M. Winterbottom. For more about the elder Seneca's life, see Griffin, pp. 29–34.
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We have little information about the younger Seneca's life until he was well into his thirties. He was brought up and educated in Rome. His father, intending that he, like his older brother Annaeus Novatus, should pursue a political career, put him into contact with the leading practitioners of oratory at Rome. The effects of this training are much in evidence in his Essays. Philosophical in subject-matter, they are a product in style and composition of Roman rhetoric. But the younger Seneca also received extensive instruction in philosophy, again at Rome; he never went to Athens to study it. Several times in his Moral Letters to Lucilius, written in the last years of his life, he refers with feeling to his early teachers of philosophy and their profound effect upon him: Sotion, a Greek from Alexandria, of uncertain philosophical allegiance; Attalus, a Stoic perhaps from Pergamum in Asia Minor; and Papirius Fabianus, formerly an orator, who had studied in the school of the famous and very Roman philosopher Quintus Sextius. Regrettably, Seneca tells us little about what he heard in their lectures or read under their guidance, but it must have been at this time that he formed his life-long attachment to Stoic philosophy and began to acquire the extensive knowledge of Stoic writings that he was to display in his own works.

Seneca speaks often in the Letters of his frail health in youth and later on. He seems to have spent some time, in his twenties or early thirties, recuperating from tuberculosis in Egypt, under the care of his mother's sister (her husband was 'prefect' or administrative head of the Roman military government there). Not till some time after his return from Egypt in the year 31 (when he was between thirty-two and thirty-six years old) did he take firm steps towards the political career his father had intended for him. Thanks to his aunt's influence, he was appointed to his first magistracy, that of quaestor or financial officer, and was enrolled in the Senate, probably under the emperor Tiberius (who died in 37). By the end of the decade he was well known and highly regarded at Rome as an orator. Tiberius' successor, Caligula (emperor from 37 to 41), is reported by Suetonius (Life of Caligula)

2 See especially Letters 100 (on Papirius Fabianus) and 108 (on Sotion and Attalus).
3 Seneca was deeply impressed by Sextius' writings which were in Greek (we know almost nothing about them), describing him as in effect a Stoic, though he says Sextius himself denied it (Letter 64, 2).
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53) to have been offended by his successes, so much so that, according to a somewhat improbable story told by the third-century historian Dio Cassius, only Seneca’s tubercular condition saved him from a death-sentence. (He was going to die soon anyway, it was said.) We have unfortunately no evidence about Seneca’s literary or philosophical work before or at this time: with the sole exception of the Consolation to Marcia, all the surviving works seem certainly to date from after Seneca’s banishment to Corsica in 41.4

In January 41, Caligula was murdered. His uncle Claudius ascended the throne. Later that year, probably in the autumn, Seneca was accused of adultery with one of Caligula’s sisters, tried before the Senate in the presence of the emperor, convicted and actually sentenced to death. The emperor spared his life, banishing him instead to the dismal island of Corsica,5 where he languished for eight years. In 49, Claudius married Caligula’s only surviving sister, Agrippina, who promptly arranged to have Seneca recalled and even appointed to a praetorship, the office immediately below that of consul. He was then between fifty and fifty-four years old. According to the historian Tacitus (Annals xii 8), Agrippina thought that Seneca’s rehabilitation would have popular appeal, on account of his literary eminence. He was already known as an outstanding orator, poet and writer of philosophical treatises.6

But Agrippina had other motives. She hoped to insert her twelve-year-old son, the future emperor Nero, into the line of succession above Claudius’ own son, Britannicus, who was several years younger. (Her plans came to fruition when, in the following year, Claudius adopted Nero, making him thus his eldest son.) In return

4 The preceding two paragraphs are based, in the main, on the account in Griffin, pp. 34–59 and 397, which may be consulted for details and documentation.
5 In his Consolation to his Mother Helvia (6. 5, 7. 8–9, 9. 1), written to console his mother in her grief for the disgrace and deprivations of his exile, Seneca describes the island as a ‘barren and stormy rock’ (7. 9), afflicted by a harsh climate and provided neither with rivers nor harbours by the sea.
6 He seems to have devoted his exile to literary pursuits. He claims as much in his Consolation to his Mother Helvia, (1. 2, 20. 1–2). In Corsica, he also published a third consolation, the Consolation to Polybius (a disguised petition to be allowed home), as well as writing much, perhaps all, of On Anger. It seems reasonable to suppose that his (lost) Life of his father was also written then, and that some of his poetry (epigrams, conceivably some of his tragedies) had appeared by the time of his recall. So Tacitus’ account of Agrippina’s motives has something to be said for it, though he bulk of Seneca’s surviving philosophical writings were written after his return from exile.
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for her help in arranging his recall, Seneca accepted overall responsibility for Nero’s education. Thus began a long and fateful involvement in the imperial household. Seneca’s responsibilities as ‘tutor’ did not include instruction in philosophy: according to Suetonius (Life of Nero 52), Agrippina thought this an unsuitable subject for an intended emperor and forbade its inclusion in the curriculum. Even in later years, when the ban no longer applied, Nero found other instructors in philosophy, and did not turn – at least, not formally – to him for tuition. It was as a teacher of rhetoric that Seneca contributed directly to the prince’s formal education. But he was also expected to offer moral instruction and general guidance in practical politics, and here his Stoic outlook would come into prominence. It was in this capacity that, shortly after Nero’s accession to the throne in 54, Seneca addressed to him a Stoic ‘mirror of princes’, his On Mercy.

Nero became emperor at the age of not quite seventeen. For a number of years, Seneca was his principal adviser behind the scenes, writing his speeches and exercising influence in imperial appointments.⁷ He and his ally Burrus, the able and upright prefect of the Pretorian Guard, are given the credit by Tacitus (Annals XIII 2 4–5) for the decent restraint and effectiveness of the imperial government in the early years of Nero’s reign. But Seneca’s functions were not formal or official, and it is very difficult to give any detailed account of how the official acts of the emperor reflected his policies or advice. With the death of Agrippina in 59 (she was murdered on Nero’s orders), his influence and that of Burrus declined sharply; it soon became clear that Nero had relied on them largely in order to resist his mother’s attempts at domination. With Agrippina out of the way, his wilfulness, self-indulgence and murderous inclinations came rapidly to the fore. No one was any longer in a position to check him, or even to moderate his excesses. Already in 55, when the influence of Seneca and Burrus was at its height, he had arranged for the thirteen-year-old Britannicus, whom he feared as a threat to his throne, to be poisoned at a family banquet before his very eyes. By the time Burrus himself died in 62, it was clear to Seneca that he had no further useful

⁷ Seneca himself was suffect consul (a consul appointed for a couple of months to fill out the term of one of the ‘ordinary’ consuls) in 55 or 56. His brother Annaeus Novatus had received the same honour in the year before.
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role to play, and no effective power. He asked for leave to retire. The emperor refused – it would look bad if Seneca distanced himself. But though appearances were kept up, from that time onwards he no longer functioned as Nero’s adviser and agent. He absented himself from the city much of the time. Two years later, he renewed his request. Nero granted it, accepting back from him much of the vast wealth which Seneca had amassed in his service. In the following year, however, in 65, Seneca was denounced for involvement in a widely spread plot – his nephew, the poet Lucan, seems in fact to have been one of the principal co-conspirators. Seneca was questioned, and then given the emperor’s order to commit suicide, which he did by opening his veins. 8

The bulk of Seneca’s surviving philosophical writings were written after his return from exile in 49, 9 in the period of his association with the imperial household and in the relatively brief retirement (62–5) that followed it. The 124 so-called Moral Letters to Lucilius and the seven books of ‘Investigations into Nature’ (Naturales Quaestiones), also addressed to Lucilius, 10 date from this final retirement. Of the texts translated in this volume, On Favours had not been completed by then. Against that, On Anger, most of it probably written during or even before Seneca’s exile, was finished before 52; On Mercy was composed in 55 or 56, early in the reign of Nero to whom it is dedicated; while On the Private Life, though its date is uncertain, must be later than 48 and is almost certainly

8 In Tacitus’ extended account of Seneca’s accusation and death (Annals xv 60–4), his manner of dying was clearly modelled on that of Socrates as portrayed by Plato in the Phaedo. Seneca even took a supplementary dose of hemlock, but too late for it to have any effect (64, 3). According to Tacitus, Nero had no proof of Seneca’s complicity in the plot, and had already attempted to poison him a year earlier (xv 45). A judicious and complete discussion of this and the other ancient evidence for Seneca’s final years can be found in Griffin, pp. 66–128.

9 Many scholars suppose that his tragedies belong to this same time, having mostly been written during the decade of the 50s. Tacitus (Annals xv 52) connects Seneca’s writing of tragedies with Nero’s interest in the genre. See discussion and references in M. Schanz and C. Hosius, Geschichte der Römischen Literatur (Munich, 1933), pt 2, pp. 456–59. Other scholars maintain that the tragedies were largely composed during the Corsican exile, 41–9; see P. Grimal, Sénèque (Paris 1981, in the collection Que sais-je?), p. 427.

10 This Lucilius was an old friend of Seneca’s, about the same age, of the equestrian order from Pompeii near Naples. He wrote poetry and philosophical prose, while also working in the imperial government in Sicily and elsewhere. See Griffin, p. 91, for details and references.

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earlier than 63, the year in which its presumed dedicatee, Serenus, probably died. Works of Stoic philosophical theory, the four texts presented here reflect in places their author’s familiarity at the highest level with the politics of imperial Rome. How far this familiarity affected what he has to say in them, his readers must judge for themselves.

Seneca and Stoic philosophy

The Stoic school of philosophy had been founded in Athens, three centuries before Seneca’s birth, by Zeno of Citium (335–263 BC). Zeno’s teachings were refined and elaborated by his successors, most notably by Chrysippus of Soli (c. 280–207 BC). Indeed, ‘Stoicism’ was generally understood as the system bequeathed by Chrysippus. Thoroughly absorbed by Seneca, it lies at the heart of the essays in this volume.

Seneca counts as a late, Roman Stoic. Scholars customarily distinguish three principal periods in the history of the school. To the ‘Old Stoa’ at Athens belongs the original formation of the doctrines of the school and their organization into a teachable, complete system of philosophy, comprising logic, epistemology, theory of nature, ethics and politics. In the third and second centuries BC, these underwent progressive reformulation and defence – first by Chrysippus, then by Diogenes of Babylon (c. 240–152 BC) and his successor Antipater of Tarsus (died before 137 BC) – against attacks by the Academic sceptics, Arsesilaus (316/5–242/1 BC) and Carneades (214/3–129/8 BC). Next, the ‘Middle Stoa’ (c. 150–50 BC), under Panaetius (c. 185–109 BC) and his pupils Posidonius (c. 135–51/50 BC) and Hecaton (c. 100 BC), with its centres of activity still in Greece (at Athens and Rhodes), produced various innovations. Finally, with Seneca and then Musonius Rufus (c. AD 30–100), Epictetus (c. AD 55–135) and Marcus Aurelius (AD 121–180) (all three of whom, however, wrote in Greek, not Latin), the ‘Roman Stoa’, addressing Romans within the ambit of Rome itself, offers a somewhat popularized Stoic ‘philosophy of life’.

Scholars have sometimes seen departures from scholastic rigour and orthodoxy in the Middle and Roman periods, but these have been much exaggerated. Seneca and the other later authors have not in fact abandoned any essential point of traditional Stoic ethics,
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psychology, theology or natural philosophy. But they do take up new topics and introduce new focuses of attention. The original Stoic theorists, for example, had spent much effort describing the state of mind and way of life of the perfect, fully 'virtuous' human being, the 'wise man.' Seneca, following the example of Panaetius, asks instead how people who are not fully virtuous and know they are never going to be, but seriously wish to live as well as they possibly can, should organize their lives. Again, instead of writing technical philosophical treatises, contributions to debate on disputed questions with other philosophical experts, he prefers to expound to the intelligent general reader the theory of Stoicism and its application to his — or her 11 — life. Seneca's philosophical works are all oriented to questions of practical ethics; about logic, physical theory, epistemology and metaphysics he has little to say. Even his Investigations into Nature regularly stress, in the Prefaces and elsewhere, the moral edification to be derived from their subject. On all fundamental questions, however, especially those of moral philosophy, his starting-point is a firm commitment to the orthodox positions of Zeno and Chrysippus. He develops his own thought with impressive independence, but always on the basis of their philosophical system.

Here a brief account of that system may prove helpful. 12 Following Plato in the Timaeus, the Stoics thought that the world, with the earth at its centre and the 'sphere' of the fixed stars at its circumference, is a single living, rational animal. 13 They identified this 'world-animal' with the god of the universe, that is with Zeus (Roman Jupiter). Its body is Zeus's body; its mind, directing its

11 Two of the Essays (the Consolation to Marcia and the Consolation to his Mother Helvia) are in fact addressed to women. At the same time, Seneca was no more concerned than any other ancient writer with 'gender-neutral' language. He always speaks of the 'wise man', meaning nothing more specific than 'wise human-being', and he automatically treats moral agents as masculine.

12 The following is a brief account of the Stoic world-view and ethical theory, presupposed rather than expounded by Seneca in the works included in this volume. See the pages collected in Long-Sedley, Chapters 46–7, 53–5, 57–63. Cicero's On Ends iii contains a good general treatment of Stoic ethics, philosophy of action and political theory.

13 For the Stoics, the universe is limited to this single world. The Epicureans, on the other hand, held that ours is only one of infinitely many worlds situated in an infinity of space (Epicurus, Letter to Herodotus 45 = Long-Sedley 14). See On Favours iv 19.
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movements from within it and maintaining its internal variety and arrangements, is Zeus's mind, a mind perfectly and completely rational, perfectly fitted to govern that body. Everything that happens in the world of nature is caused by his thought and occurs as it does for a good reason, as a necessary part of the on-going life of the divine animate cosmos. Apart from the gods (that is, apart from Zeus himself in his various distinguishable aspects), the only other rational animals are human beings. We are the only individual things on earth which Zeus (or, equivalently, Nature) governs through an autonomous use of our own individual rational capacities. As such we have a special and specially honoured position in the world-order and in Zeus's plans for it. The reasoning power which we share with Zeus gives us a close solidarity, a sense of common purpose with one another and with him.

This thought lies at the heart of Seneca's social thinking in all four of these essays. Like Zeus himself, we have the ability to cause changes in our bodies and in the world around us through our own power of thought and decision. It is entirely up to us how we use this power, how – individually and in cooperation with one

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14 Stoic theology here creates a difficulty for anyone translating Seneca's Latin into English. For us it is still conventional, when we are not using the articles 'a' or 'the,' to write 'God' as a proper noun with a capital letter, on the tacit assumption, derived from Christianity, that the deity must be a person, named 'God.' But the Stoics saw 'God' as a physical substance, a kind of fire. They defined 'God' as 'intelligent, designing fire proceeding methodically towards creation of the world' (Long-Sedley 454A); and they understood 'nature,' simply another aspect of 'God,' in the same terms (Diogenes Laertius vii 156). Now 'fire' is normally a mass-noun, like 'gas' or 'water,' written in lower case with or without an article (e.g. 'the hottest element is fire'). That, strictly, is how 'God' or 'nature' in translations of Stoic texts should be written. Unfortunately, the divine Stoic fire has some decidedly personal characteristics. Identified with Zeus, 'father of gods and men' in the Olympian pantheon, it is intelligent; it acts with a purpose and carries out plans; it is frequently given a gender, 'god' being masculine and 'nature' feminine; and it is sometimes directly addressed as a person. There are passages in Seneca (e.g. On the Private Life 4 1; On Favours iv 5–8) where the personification becomes so strong as to make the use of capitals well nigh unavoidable. If the readers of our translation find both 'nature' and 'Nature', 'god' and occasionally 'God', the inconsistency, which also occurs with 'fortune', reflects a certain slip in Seneca's own theology. Our readers may usefully ask themselves whether, at any occurrence of the words, there is some point in our choice there of upper or lower case. They might also recall that confusions of divine 'substance' with divine 'persons' were later to cause untold difficulties to Christian theologians.

15 See Diogenes Laertius. vii 147. Seneca has an eloquent digression on this theme at On Favours iv 7 f.
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another – we organize our lives, our societies and our cultures. But we derive this power from our endowment with reason, and it is therefore subject to the rules of reason. When we choose what to think on some question or what to do in some situation, there are always better and worse reasons, more and less rational grounds, on which to rest the choice. We are free to prefer bad reasons for believing things. We are free to live in ways that we could not successfully defend on standards of reason common to all. But if we violate the rules of reason in deciding what to think or do we can legitimately be criticized.

We are privileged in another way, as well. Any living thing, be it plant or animal, can grow or fail to grow to maturity in perfect accordance with what is natural for things of its kind. It can then live out its life in the normal, unhindered exercise of its natural capacities, or it can fail to do so. An animal or plant has thus what we popularly, if incorrectly, 16 call a 'good', which will consist in the perfect growth and unhindered exercise of these capacities throughout its adult lifetime. But because we are rational animals, the perfect development and exercise of our natural capacities puts us on a wholly different and vastly higher level. In exercising our rational power to decide what to think and how to act, if we do so in a perfectly rational manner, we experience the very type of activity in which Zeus himself is continuously engaged. Zeus will always know vastly more than any human being; but his ways of reasoning and standards of evaluation can only be identical with what ours would be at our rational best. For Zeus's reason is simply reason in its perfected state. Compared in quality and value with that activity, the most perfect life possible for any non-rational being is something very low indeed. To mark this difference the Stoics reserved the term 'good' to describe the perfectly rational life and actions of Zeus and of human beings who have brought to perfection their own capacity for rational thought and decision.17 The most ideal life imaginable for any other animal, with all the successful activities and satisfying experiences which make it up, cannot strictly be called 'good', either in itself or from the animal's point of view. Not, of course, that such a life would be a bad one.

16 See below, p. xx.

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It is just that the lives of other animals, because they cannot think rationally, have to be judged along a range of values altogether separate from those of good and bad. Whether the life of a non-human animal counts as flourishing or not will depend on how far it gets what it needs for an unhindered exercise of its natural capacities throughout its adult lifetime. Even so, its activities and experiences will not count as good or bad. They are only ones ‘to be preferred’ or ‘to be rejected’ by it.\(^{18}\)

Of course, there is much more to human nature than just our power to think and decide. Most of the functions which we have as living things are like those of other animals. They take place without rational thought or decision on our part. Biological growth and functioning, the experience of sensory pleasure and pain, lie outside our rational control – we can at most decide to use them in some way. All these aspects of our lives, however, matter to us as human beings, as do the internal and external conditions that are needed if they are to be satisfactory. So also does the way in which we are treated by other human beings in the exercise of their capacity for thinking and deciding. But the fact that as rational beings we are on a level with Zeus means that these other aspects of our nature and what happens to them are much less important for the overall quality of our lives than we commonly think. For everything that happens, except our actions and those of other human beings, is controlled directly by Zeus. It is made to happen for reasons known to him. It is a necessary part of his – and hence the world’s – on-going, overall life. Our biological development, our physiological state and the material effects on us of events in the world of nature outside us – in short, our physical life – are all controlled in this way by Zeus. So are the effects of voluntary actions by ourselves and others, insofar as these depend upon natural laws maintained by Zeus’s decisions. But our own physical lives, and those of all other living things, are themselves parts of that larger unified life of the whole world. Thus in as much as what happens to us is the direct result of decisions by Zeus, we should conclude that it is what our lives – as integral parts of his life – really needed.\(^{19}\) Hence the first and crucial step if we are

\(^{18}\) See below, p. xxii.

\(^{19}\) Epictetus quotes Chrysippus as saying that ‘if I actually knew that I was fated now’ (by Zeus’s decision) ‘to be ill I would even have an impulse to be ill. For
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to perfect our own practical reasoning is to realize, with as much conviction as possible, that whatever happens to us in any way through the operation of natural laws is a positive contribution to the course of our lives. As Seneca puts it, the manifestations of nature advance the purposes of the universe and we, as a part of it, have reason to be grateful for them.²⁰ So all external states and events that affect us in any way and all states and events internal to our organisms (except the operations of our own power to think and decide) are manifestations of nature. They must never be judged to damage or harm us. When our physical lives are properly understood as integral parts in the life of the whole universe, all such manifestations can be seen instead to enhance them. Hence every disease, every painful or debilitating accident that befalls us or those whom we love, is something to be taken positively and greeted as such.

The quality of our individual lives depends crucially on the active use of our rational capacities in planning for the future and executing our plans. Zeus himself may control the course of nature. But that does not in the least mean that we should face life passively. For we, like Zeus, are endowed with reason in order to use it – by taking control of our own lives to the greatest possible extent.²¹ From experience and observation of nature itself we can learn what the natural norms are for a human being’s growth and subsequent course of life, as we can for any other animal. Whether in any individual case these norms are realized is another question. Often they are not. People are born seriously malformed and defective; they die at an early age from terrible diseases or accidents. Or rebelling against what the Stoics thought an evident fact, that we are formed by nature with a view to living cooperatively, they may choose instead to live selfishly, anti-socially and violently. We have already seen that when such things happen, their occurrence – and that includes the physical effects of selfish, anti-social and violent choices on the agents themselves and on others – is, none the less, a positive contribution to the lives of those immediately or indirectly affected by them. But what happens to us is seldom

²⁰ On Favours vi 23. 3–5. See also On Anger vii 27. 2 and note 42 there.
²¹ See Long–Sedley, 574(5) = Diogenes Laertius, vii 86.

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the effect exclusively of causes operating outside the sphere of our own decisions: our action or inaction – sometimes innocent, sometimes not – contributes to the natural disasters that befall us and to the effects of other people’s malevolence. The same is true even of our biological growth and the organic functions that lie at the greatest distance from our own decisions and actions. What we decide and do will make a difference to what comes about.

How then should we use our power of decision? What aims should we have? The Stoic answer was: we should aim at what accords most fully with the norms established, as we can see, by nature for human life. These natural norms include continued good health, material resources in plenty to maintain a comfortable existence, a good family life, the completest possible absence of bodily pain, and so forth – as well as the cooperative support owed by each member of the human community to the others. Such things, on the Stoic classification, are ‘to be preferred’, and their opposites are ‘to be rejected’, as we decide on our goals of action. They have thus a definite, if subsidiary, value; and the Stoics maintained that they are to be cared about, pursued or avoided, as things worth having or doing without, as the case may be. We should do the utmost with our powers of reasoning and decision to achieve the things that are ‘to be preferred’ and avoid the ones ‘to be rejected.’ We should care about our health, our physical welfare and comfort, our family and friends, our work, the moral, social and economic well-being of our community; and we should do all that is in our power to protect and advance these interests. In so doing, we control our lives so far as that is possible. If we simply do our best to advance these norms, we shall have done our part. The rest is up to other human agents and to Zeus.

A perfected use of our rational capacities would therefore require, firstly, a full understanding of the norms laid down by nature for everything in human life outside the exercise of these rational capacities themselves. All evaluations and decisions would be governed by the informed pursuit of these norms. Secondly, however,

22 This was a central part of the orthodox Stoic view, accepted even by Epictetus, however strongly he may have emphasized the indifference for our happiness of all ‘externals’. Chrysippus had argued for it against his fellow-Stoic Ariston of Chios, who held that such ‘externals’ were not just neither good nor bad, but of no positive or negative value whatsoever. See Long–Sedley, 26, 58A–G.
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it would include a deeply embedded recognition that, once you have done your fullest and best, no matter how things turn out in those ‘external’ respects, the outcome can only be positive for you. If despite all reasonable efforts you fail to achieve your goal, that is no loss, when viewed after the fact. Evidently Zeus did not intend it to come about. If so, your failure will have advanced the life of the whole world and hence your own life as well, since the physical life of each one of us is just a single small part of the overall life of the world. The same is true also for all other human beings – even if they have not done their fullest and best. No failure of theirs, no disappointment, diminishes the true quality of their lives. Equally, when your efforts actually meet with success, your life is in no way better than it would otherwise have been. Whatever happens is acceptable, a positive development in your life. As we have seen, the only activities in life that can be described as really good or bad for you are those of rational thought, evaluation and decision. So the perfected use of our rational capacities requires, thirdly and finally, a deep recognition that the only thing good or bad for a human being, the only thing that affects the quality of our lives for better or worse, is simply our development and use of these capacities. The person whose reason is perfected in this way lives a good and happy life, the best life possible for a human being – no matter how things may go in other, ‘external’ respects. On the other hand, all whose rational capacities are less than fully perfected live bad, failed lives – again, however things go for them otherwise.

This perfected rationality the Stoics identified with the condition of virtue.22 If you are perfectly rational, you possess human virtue, as a whole and in all its parts. This includes a full knowledge of, and a commitment to, the norms laid down by nature for private and family life – a recognition of what you should try to achieve and avoid, in your personal life, in your family and among your friends. But it also includes knowledge of and commitment to all the natural norms for life with your fellow-citizens, your business associates and with human beings generally. So it carries with it the kinds of commitments recognized by traditional standards not just of personal prudence and decency in your private life but also

22 See Diogenes Laerlius, vii 94, sub fin.
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of social morality: justice, respect for others, and mutual aid, based in the fellowship and solidarity of all rational beings with one another. It was characteristic of the ancients to group together both sorts of standards as norms simply of virtue, without special distinction. Thus the Stoic theory provides a basis for saying that critically corrected versions of all the traditionally recognized virtues – intelligence, self-discipline and courage in the pursuit of personal aims, as well as justice and respect for others and concern for their welfare – are simply aspects of this single perfected state of our rational powers. Indeed, we can now see that, on the Stoic theory, the whole of what is good or bad for a human being, the whole of what affects for better or worse the quality of our lives, is our standing with respect to the virtues. The virtuous person lives a good and happy life, the best life possible for a human being, the happiest life – no matter how things turn out in other respects. On the other hand, all who are not fully virtuous, who fall short and live faulty lives, are bound – again, whatever happens to them in other respects – to live bad (and that means unhappy) lives.

In his philosophical writings Seneca has no need to expound this fundamental theory. He is concerned with its practical consequences for ordinary people. And these consequences are far-reaching. The solidarity, for instance, of human beings with one another and with Zeus, based in our common rationality, means that it is wrong to be hostile, angry and cruel (the theme of On Anger). It is also why princes should be merciful (On Mercy), why it is quite possible to be of as much use in retirement as in public life (On the Private Life), and why we should be altruistic in doing favours for one another (On Favours). Concern for the well-being of other people and of society in general is among the norms laid down by nature, to be understood and followed by us all. A good society and a well governed state are goals which we should do our utmost to achieve. But our success in achieving them is a purely ‘external’ matter, of secondary importance at most. It is still possible in the vilest society and the worst political conditions, as Socrates and Cato proved, for individuals to live good lives. And the good life lived by the individual is what counts.

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Seneca’s writing has thus a markedly apolitical character, which it shares with other Stoic literature. The founder of the school, admittedly, does seem to have written on politics. Zeno’s notorious Republic appears to have been a work of political theory in the tradition of Plato’s Republic, prescribing an ideal community where the greatest possible concord is achieved by communist institutions and the moral character of its citizens. His somewhat Spartan city of the good and wise was still a recognizable polis, a ‘community of people living in the same place under the same law’. But it was subsequently reinterpreted by Chrysippos as the cosmic ‘city of gods and men’, in a theory which now focused on the moral potentialities of human beings – and the high moral demands placed on them – as ‘rational animals’ rather than citizens, and which treated ‘law’ no longer as a set of statutes but as the internal voice of prescriptive reason. This conception had its influence on Roman jurists as they reflected on ius gentium, ‘the sum of rules common to all legal systems’, and its relation to ius naturale or ‘law of nature’. Through them it contributed to a long and important tradition of political thought about ‘natural rights’. But that was of little concern to Seneca. The four essays in this volume may indeed touch on questions to do with social and political philosophy. But Seneca is not writing as a ‘political theorist’ nor as an advocate of any political programme. He has nothing to say about divisions of power, virtually nothing about sources of authority or forms of government, and very little on social regulation. He has no conclusions to draw for institutional reform. He is simply not interested in institutions. A slave, he argues with eloquence, is a fully human being who can do a favour just as much as a free man can (On Favours iii 18–28). But that does not mean that slavery is a social

24 It was later to have a profound effect on the ‘quietist’ attitudes of sixteenth and seventeenth century thinkers like Justus Lipsius. See Q. Skinner, The Foundations of Modern Political Thought (Cambridge 1978), i pp. 276–8.
25 SVF iii 329.
28 Even On Anger has its political dimension. See our Introduction to it.
29 But note On Mercy i 1.2 and On Favours ii 20. 2.
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evil which ought to be be abolished. It is simply an external handicap which good people can overcome. Nor are the institutions of a state what determine its well-being. The moral character of its citizens and governors is far more important. Indeed, a reader of these essays might easily get the impression that all would be well with society if only its top people such as Seneca himself and his dedicatæs – a future provincial governor, the emperor, a prefect of the Praetorian Guards and a provincial grandee – could train themselves to stay good-tempered, merciful and generous. It can hardly be claimed that a work like On Favours was conceived ‘comme un instrument de combat politique’ – though much of what Seneca says in this and other essays could provide later political theorists with a moral basis for their own contentions.

In other words, Seneca writes as a moralist – and an inward-looking moralist at that. What matters to him as a Stoic is first of all your own state of mind, your attitudes and moral endeavours; all else is ‘external’. So he speaks to his readers individually, as a counsellor, offering them advice above all on how to heal their own minds, how to foster the virtues of mercy, good temper and altruism. He attempts to make them see things from his own Stoic point of view, to deepen their conviction that it does represent the truth about the world and the way to conduct a decent human life within the confines laid down for the exercise of human freedom. And he uses his considerable rhetorical skills to encourage them to do what they can towards eliminating the recurrence of feelings and actions in which they betray and fall away from this true outlook on life.

Style and composition

Seneca was a philosopher with training in oratory, a Stoic who employed his highly developed rhetorical talents to instruct, to

30 See the sections on the ‘adressee’ in our Introductions to the essays.
31 With F. Chaumartin, ANRW II 36, 3, p. 1703.
32 E.g. satirical comments on greed and luxury, by Seneca and other Roman writers, could be invoked by a Guicciardini or Machiavelli as proof that luxurious habits and the pursuit of wealth are a threat to political liberty (see Skinner, Foundations, 1 pp. 162 f.). Again, many of the claims made by Seneca in On Mercy – that the prince should be kind, generous, affable etc. – became a stock-in-trade of the Renaissance ‘mirror of princes’ and as such a target for criticism by Machiavelli.
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persuade or simply to charm his reader into accepting the truths of Stoicism. He was not the first Stoic to use rhetoric for pedagogical ends. Chrysippus, the greatest head of the school, had done so as well. 33 What is disconcerting about Seneca’s writings as a medium for philosophy is their sheer virtuosity.

Seneca’s works are acknowledged masterpieces of ‘silver’ Latin artistry, of the pointed and brilliant style that dominated Latin literature in the century after the death of Augustus. Its hallmark was a certain cleverness, a striving for neatness and wit, for epigrammatic crispness and immediate impact, 34 which Seneca achieves largely through artful contrasts. Where Cicero 35 would use complex periodic structures with subordinate clauses arranged to form grand architectural sentences, his own prose relies principally on the juxtaposition of sharpened phrases. Its sentences are chopped up by a variety of syntactic devices; their components have a compression achieved, if need be, at the cost of imprecision; and the contrast between these components is sharpened by metaphor, word-play and the omission of connecting particles (of ‘and’, ‘but’ and ‘for’). The vocabulary is enlivened with unexpected poetical words and colloquialisms.

The result is a style 36 in which the brilliance of the parts tends to attract more attention than the argument of the whole, a style which entices, stimulates and entertains, but is less suited for systematic instruction or for rousing the stronger emotions. Its very cleverness can become too much of a good thing. ‘There is hardly a sentence which might not be quoted’, Macaulay complained, 37 ‘but to read him straightforward is like dining on nothing but


33 SYF ii 27.
35 What follows is heavily indebted to Coleman, especially pp. 285–7.
36 It translates readily into English, largely because of Seneca’s popularity among writers of the seventeenth century, a decisive period in the development of English prose. (See G. Williamson, The Senecan Amble: A Study in Prose from Bacon to Collier (London 1951)). His lapidary way of writing makes him an ancestor of the modern ‘sound-bite’.
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anchovy sauce.’ Seneca, to be sure, is quite capable of writing in a lower key, of sober exposition as well as of high pathos. A master of the well-told narrative like that of Augustus and Cinna in *On Mercy* (i. 9), he can manage all the registers in the orator’s repertory.\(^{38}\) Even so, the choppy epigrams are never far away. The virtuosity remains rather too much in evidence.

A more serious charge which has often been levelled against Seneca’s writings is that of incoherence. Seductive and brilliant, the prose of a typical Senecan paragraph has a way of sweeping his readers along from one glittering phrase to the next, ending with a clinching epigram that leaves them impressed though not quite sure how it all hangs together. ‘Sand without lime’ to bind it – Caligula’s famous comment\(^{39}\) could well apply not only to Seneca’s prose but still more to the *composition of his essays*.\(^{40}\) With their repetitions,\(^{41}\) apparent inconsistencies and abrupt transitions, they all too often leave the reader in a state of confusion about what is being said where and for precisely what reason. For the structure of Seneca’s paragraphs and essays alike is literary, not logical. The movement from one sentence to another tends, in fact, to be by association of ideas, ‘a carefully controlled progression in which a particular idea or group of ideas is approached from a number of different angles and reinforced at each new exposition. The technique is not that of the philosopher, developing a systematic argument with a logical beginning, middle and end, but of the preacher.’\(^{42}\) It is above all in the transition from one group of ideas to another that readers are likely to lose their way.\(^{43}\)

‘Seneca writes as a Boar does pisse . . . by jirkes.’\(^{44}\) The apparent jerkiness of Seneca’s prose style and composition alike reflects the

\(^{38}\) Note, for instance the effortless switch from a recapitulation of bare Stoic syllogisms to high-flew peroration at *On Favour* iii 35–8.

\(^{39}\) Suetonius, *Life of Gaius Caligula* (53. 2).


\(^{42}\) Coleman, p. 285.

\(^{43}\) For that reason, we have introduced section-headings of our own into our translation of the essays, to indicate the ordering of topics under discussion there and to mark the major transitions between them.

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oratory of his time. The first century of the Roman empire was an age of declamations, school exercises in forensic and political eloquence, treated less and less as preparation for real public speaking than as works of art in their own right. Or the principal aim of the declaimer was simply to win the applause of his fellow practitioners. For that end, instant impact was what counted. Sustained argument mattered rather less. The schools of declamation were forcing grounds for the flashier tricks of rhetoric, above all for the sententiae, or pointed epigrams, on which Seneca and his brothers, according to their father, were especially keen. But there was a further factor at work to the same effect on Seneca’s style and composition. He was not producing school treatises. He was addressing a general educated public. And the normal way at his time to do so was by the essay or homily, what scholars till recently were pleased to call ‘diatribe’, a genre which includes the so-called ‘Diatribes’ of Epictetus and the fragments of the Cynic preacher Teles (third century BC). In contrast to philosophical dialogues, these works were not meant to be a cooperative search for truth; they were combative expositions of truth already known to their authors. Their first objective was to grab the attention of listener or reader, and to hold on to it without making too many demands on his concentration. For that, they needed little more than a vivacious rhetoric; sustained or complex argument was best avoided. They did, however, share one feature of the dialogue, albeit in attenuated form. The unspecified interlocutor (‘But, someone will say . . .’) who raises objections only to have them shot down or jerks the discussion back to the purely ethical questions – which, according to the Cynics, were the only part of philosophy that matters – was an indispensable device for changing the subject and papering over cracks in the argument.

41 See, for a start, Summers, Select Letters, pp. xxi–xxxii.
42 Controversiae 1 Pref. 22.
44 The presence of this interlocutor may account for the title Dialogi (or ‘Dialogues’) given to the twelve essays, including On Anger and On the Private Life, in the Ambrosian manuscript – and indeed to all Seneca’s Moral Essays. According to Quintilian (ix 2. 31), the technical term in rhetoric for the imaginary conversation was διáλογος (Latin sermonatio). Seneca’s works could have been labelled Dialogi for their frequent use of that figure, though the title would also recall the most famous of all philosophical compositions, Plato’s Dialogues.

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None the less, Seneca’s moral essays are vastly more ambitious and successful compositions than anything by Epictetus or Teles. What holds them together is, firstly, their author’s thorough rhetorical training. There were recognized ways of putting a work together, standard ‘parts’ of a speech, conventional headings in a conventional order under which to deal with a topic. Seneca has a professional knowledge of them. In all four texts of this volume, for instance, he goes through the rhetorical procedure of ‘dividing’ the material for discussion into its principal questions.49 Having proposed a scheme of argument, Seneca broadly observs at least its major divisions, though he is rather less firm when it comes to working out the detailed discussion.50 Here his structural grip relaxes, and he indulges the temptation to call in the imaginary interlocutor and compose by association of ideas. But the relaxation is artful. The broad framework of argument is generally so fixed in his mind that he can take it for granted. On occasion, he can blur the transition, quite deliberately, from one topic to another51 – an unexpected change of direction keeps the readers on their toes. He can play about with his material, varying it to suit the immediate context, correcting and apparently contradicting things said earlier, repeating himself in such a way as to bring out the numerous facets of his subject52 and wear down any resistance.

A second and still more important factor in holding Seneca’s moral essays together – and his moral letters too, for that matter – is an underlying vision derived from his Stoic philosophy. His aim in all four essays in this volume is to present this vision, or aspects of it, to a Roman public, to translate the abstract doctrines of his school into the language of real life – of commerce, the law-courts, and so forth – at Rome.53 His efforts to do so are often brilliantly successful, well up to the high seriousness of their subject. Seneca

49 On Anger 15. 1, 11. 18. 1, 11. 5. 2; On the Private Life 2. 1; On Favours 111. 1; On Mercy 13. 1, 20. 1 (on which Calvin commented: ‘This division adds much to the clarity of the discourse and would have added still more if it had embraced the work as a whole’).

50 Compare Wright, p. 59.

51 E.g. at On Favours 111. 17. 4–18. 1.

52 Hence his multiple definitions of anger and mercy (On Anger 12. 4–3, On Mercy 11. 3. 1).


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can wear his Stoicism lightly enough. But he regularly falls back on its vision of the universe as a community of rational beings, of the gods as our exemplars, of the demands which our rationality makes upon us, of the solidarity which binds all humans together – free, freedman and slave – by virtue of their endowment with reason, a solidarity which itself reflects the cosmic order. This vision – above all, in Book IV of On Favours – is what gives strength to his most powerful writing.

The influence of Seneca’s philosophical writings

Philosophers writing in Greek – and that includes Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, both of them Stoics very familiar with things Roman – paid no attention to philosophy written in Latin. Not surprisingly, such writers do not quote Seneca or discuss his views. Only Plutarch (c. 50–120) refers to him – and then only in an anecdote as an adviser to Nero.54 But the neglect of Seneca on the part of philosophers is also explained by the character of his work. As we have seen, he was not writing technical treatises but essays addressed to the educated public. For Stoic philosophy and its development later writers had other and better sources to consult.55

Latin writers of later antiquity, especially Christian ones, appear to have appreciated Seneca more highly, especially in his native Iberia, where he is still regarded as the first great Spanish writer.56 In the sixth century St Martin, archbishop of Braga in Portugal (580), wrote a short treatise on the cardinal virtues, taken almost entirely from Seneca, which (usually under Seneca’s name) was among the most widely circulated works during the middle ages; he also wrote a work On Anger based on Seneca’s. Collections of Senecan sayings and witticisms – their origins are obscure –

54 On the Control of Anger, 461f–462a. Plutarch refers a second time to Seneca in his Life of Galba (20. 1. 1).
56 See K. A. Blüher, Seneca in Spanien (Munich: 1969) an account of Seneca’s reception in Spain from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries, with useful and full chapters on the earlier history.
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also had a wide popularity in later antiquity and the middle ages.\(^57\)

With the revival of classical learning, from the mid fourteenth century until the mid seventeenth, Seneca was among the most highly admired and widely read of all ancient philosophers. Petrarch (1304–74) called him the greatest of moral teachers and developed a philosophy of life modelled partly on his version of Stoicism. Erasmus (1467–1536) published a first edition of Seneca’s complete works in 1516, followed by another (philologically much improved) in 1529. The young Calvin wrote a commentary on On Mercy (1532).\(^58\) Seneca’s reputation and influence were at their highest in the latter half of the sixteenth century and on into the seventeenth. Montaigne († 1592), despite his engagement with Pyrrhonian scepticism, frequently cites and make extensive use of Seneca’s ideas (chiefly from the Letters) in his Essays. In seeking to establish a comprehensive Neo-Stoic philosophy, both in metaphysics and moral philosophy, to replace the Aristotelianism inherited from the middle ages, the Belgian philosopher and scholar Justus Lipsius (1547–1606) based himself almost entirely on Seneca. Frequently republished in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, his commentaries on Seneca remain invaluable. Thereafter Seneca remained the central source for the Neo-Stoic movement. But as modern science and the ‘new’ philosophy developing under its influence gained their independence from ancient models Seneca’s influence declined. The untechnical character of his writings and their rhetorical panache put him increasingly out of court with technical philosophers. His Stoic outlook on life lost much of the appeal it had earlier had. In this century he has been received little attention from academic philosophers, especially in English-speaking countries where his career and style of writing have all too often aroused a puritan disapproval.

However, Seneca remains, for us today no less than for the revivers of Stoicism in the sixteenth century, our best representative of ancient Stoicism. In his case as in few others we have the luxury of reading, with their full contexts, whole works of philosophy by a Stoic. He is still an excellent, indeed indispensable, source for those who may wish to learn about, and learn from, Stoicism and its outlook on life.

\(^57\) See Trillitzsch Seneca, i pp. 211–21, ii pp. 393–419.
\(^58\) Still highly useful. See the splendid dual-language edition of Battles and Hugo.

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