Introduction

What is the relationship between ethics, literature, and metaphysics in the writings of Seneca? The title of this volume, not being punctuated as a question, implies that an answer might be on offer. Something like an answer is. But it is useful to retain from the outset a hesitation relative to ready answers. Even asking the sort of question that might yield a ready answer should give us pause. Seneca himself warns us against this.

What is designated by the terms ethics, literature, and metaphysics? What do these terms mean in standard contemporary discussions of philosophy? Is there a distance between their English meaning and their Greek and Latin precursors? What is the nature and scope of this difference? How does Seneca fit in here? And, most importantly, does Seneca himself use these terms in a non-complex manner? That is, is "ethics in Seneca" a simple, discrete concept?

There are other fundamental problems that need to be flagged from the outset. The present discussion does not even start from the assumption that it knows quite who Seneca is or how to read what he wrote. A briefly annotated table of contents to the present volume might offer an overview of the project. In their way, the chapters furnish a set of questions relative to reading Seneca. Put somewhat flippantly, such a table of contents might run thus: Seneca writes reading. Seneca writes being. Seneca writes the being of meaning. Seneca writes seeing. Seneca writes Seneca's erasure. Seneca writes that desire erases. Seneca writes that only suffering means anything. This is overly schematic. It also hides a key problem in the course of pretending to be the presentation of and solution to still other problems.

The above questions and answers are linked. And their answers have a cumulative force. The first chapter informs the next and so on to the last. I am not offering a collection of chapters, each about its own little world. The reader is first asked to see that reading Seneca is a problem, and that Seneca himself knows this. Then one sees that philosophical writing is also a problem: what "is" philosophical writing when read within the Senecan

story of ontology? Then comes the third chapter which offers a key to the whole: "the author" furnishes a would-be solution to some of the initial difficulties. Next we see that "optics" and "perspective" (as mobilized by "the author") provide a means of moving ahead towards Seneca's version of enlightenment. However, as the next chapters argue, there are a variety of reasons to greet these literary and theatrical solutions to philosophical difficulties with caution. Seneca's treatment of gender justifies our hesitation: claims that femininity is defective and masculinity is whole yield immediate resistance in the modern reader. Finally, we will find that in his tragedies Seneca engages with important philosophical impasses without, though, feeling constrained to offer the orthodox philosophical answers that doctrinaire Stoicism has at the ready: What is the relationship between desire and reason? Is the mundane self somehow doomed to a species of guilt and misery by the very fact of the transcendental? Ironically, these literary texts offer some of the most philosophically engaging ideas that speak most directly to contemporary interests.

Throughout one has to be concerned about the ways Seneca has made the status of "Seneca" into an element of the philosophy. We need to know something about the agent of the verb before reading any of those noun-verb-object phrases just above in which Seneca-writes-X. This will not, however, be a presentation of Seneca in the manner in which one might lay out a corpse in an autopsy theater. There one gestures to the cold, clean table and commences with a description of the structure and function of the organs on display as well as the various and ultimately fatal defects to be found in the cranium.

The present project is instead a Senecan hunt after Senecan wisdom. This somewhat dangerous complicity with Seneca is meant to illuminate his working the better in the end. But it also takes seriously Seneca's own insistence that a theater of knowledge does not involve corpses and scalpels but instead living players whose play is not mere play.[1] This pursuit of Senecan wisdom requires that the alpha and the omega lie on the same circuit, that mortal spirit and cosmic spirit communicate. For this last, consider the unusual properties of a Möbius strip. It joins the beginning to the end. It also has but a single outer edge: the seemingly disparate surfaces of the band turn out to be one and the same. Meanwhile the "other" outside edge has gone missing: just before joining the ends to form a loop the artificer's hand gives the band a twist, and the outside edge vanishes.

Ethics, literature, and metaphysics: what do these words designate? For present purposes ethics can designate "reflective answers to the question, 'How should I live?'"[2] Not every modern evocation of the word ethics

understands it in that manner, but it is not unusual to see it used after this fashion, and, more to the point, this sense takes us efficiently back to ancient philosophy and its preoccupations.

But one must not be over-hasty here: at its core this is not a discussion of Stoic ethics or even Seneca's relationship to Stoic ethics.[3] Seneca sets forth answers to the question, "How should I live?" But I am not aiming at a rehearsal of the answers on offer. Instead I am interested in examining when, where, how, and why Seneca has presented the question itself. Hence the simultaneous insistence on retaining a literary-critical relationship to this question: the manner of presentation is of as much interest as are the answers.

Literature is a portmanteau word in contemporary English, and one that likely provokes a certain measure of reserve. The term is heterogeneous at best, and narrowly elitist at worst. Everyone would likely agree that "literature" is some sort of marked use of language.[4] Disputes will presently arise: what exemplifies this privileged subset of language? What is the nature of the claims to privilege? As with "literature," so with the Latin *litterae*. *Litterae* can designate, *inter alia*, an epistle, a public document, an edict, literary composition, scholarship, and *belles lettres*. In form and content Seneca's *Moral Letters* can be called "letters" in more than one sense.

"Literature" is obviously an ill-fitting translation for the term *litterae*. And yet the ill-fittedness itself might sensitize us to key questions: How is it that language can suture together the incommensurate? How can it transform mere words into "something more"? And what is this "more"? And then this "something more": what is it? It is something higher, better, stirring: it is sublime, then. Before discussing the sublime – another fraught and impossible term – we should pause to note that the literary operation is often philosophically consequential without, however, being philosophically explicit, rigorous, or, frequently, justified. Philosophical work gets done, but one will want to think through the nature and scope of the work before hastily praising the synthesis of the two modes. Nevertheless, one is advised by Seneca that elements of the ethical project ought not to be entrusted to philosophy in its most rigorous form. "All men are mortal. Socrates is a man. Therefore Socrates is mortal." The syllogism is true, but it does little to stir in its auditor a sense that he or she should live more like Socrates. Philosophical rigor can pass over into *rigor mortis*. And, unlike Socrates, the student of philosophy is not yet dead, despite being on the march towards his or her own inevitable death.

"The sublime" likely evokes aesthetics first and foremost for an English speaker, especially when seen in a phrase using the word literature: "Of

things in nature and art: affecting the mind with a sense of overwhelming grandeur or irresistible power; calculated to inspire awe, deep reverence, or lofty emotion, by reason of its beauty, vastness, or grandeur."[5] This sense of the word will play its role in the argument to follow. But, importantly, the way in which one reaches this version of the term is itself important. *Sublimis* means "aloft" in Latin. But it also means "lofty" in the more abstract sense, and it can be applied to styles of speech, for example, to indicate what we would call an elevated literary style.[6] How does the "up there" and the "out there" become something that provokes awe down here and within us? And what sort of ethical consequences follow in the wake of this awe? And given that awe tends to be an "ineffable" sensation, what sort of explicit argument goes unspoken at this rapturous moment?

Finally, metaphysics. "Is there a Stoic metaphysics? The answer obviously depends on what we mean by 'metaphysics,' a word which no classical philosopher would have understood, despite its two Greek components and its familiarity as the title of the most famous of Aristotle's works." Thus begins the chapter entitled "Stoic Metaphysics" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics*.[7] Nature, or *physis*, is everything for the Stoics. And, accordingly, there is nothing after or beyond it (*meta*). Brunschwig does not discard the category, though. He instead opts to pick one of the traditional modes of addressing the issue of metaphysics: he refines his object and turns to an account of Stoic general ontology.[8]

If it is not unambiguously true that there is a Stoic metaphysics, it is also difficult even to determine if there is a specific "metaphysics of Seneca."[9] Seneca's letter on Platonic ontology looms large in the whole of this study even if the doctrinal question of ontology is not really the point of emphasis in the letter. Modes of being are not an abstract topic for this study. They yield concrete problems of interpretation in the larger context of the whole endeavor to read Seneca: What is the relationship between being and literature? And the sublime? And ethics? And Seneca? And here we will not give a simple primacy to "the question of being." Nor will we concern ourselves overly with the way that Seneca purportedly struggles to integrate Platonic metaphysics with the Stoic supreme genus. First, I am not sure that there is all that much of a struggle: the battle is in fact pointedly deferred. Next, if there is such a struggle, it is a topic that ought to be addressed within the framework of the history of ideas: How do Stoics variously incorporate or fail to incorporate Platonic ideas? In any event, these questions can be largely left to one side for the moment. This volume aims to explore Senecan stories and storytelling: we will occupy ourselves with topics like "the story of being" and the issues that arise when articulating it as a story.

This survey of key terms, does it satisfy? Probably not. Each term is itself overly complex, fraught with contradictions, and each makes for an imperfect fit with Stoic orthodoxy or Latin idiom. Of course, is there really a Stoic orthodoxy? And is Latin so stable? Categories such as those essentialize objects: Stoicism as a discrete thing, Latin as an ossified language that tidily maps signifier upon signified. But I have already said that Seneca says we have to worry about ontology. And do words ever fit so neatly with things?

Not for readers of Seneca, they don't. Seneca's terminology is fluid. His style is "deliberately non-professional."[10] Seneca's distinctions and Seneca's claims may ultimately have a fixity to them – if, that is, one can ever reach "the final analysis" – but their immediate articulation can be striking. Words can and will have multiple senses in play at once. The technical and non-technical meanings of words will both be active simultaneously. Improper terminology is put forward to advance a point. To the extent that the Senecan project resembles a *Bildungsroman* of the *animus*, there are a number of reversals, plot twists, and detours on the road to wherever it is we end up.

In a magisterial moment one might declare, "Someone who doesn't care about the distinction between *beata uita* and *felicitas* doesn't care about Stoic philosophy." The two really are to be distinguished as a matter of Stoic orthodoxy. And yet Seneca himself uses them as if they were synonyms: "Anyone who hesitates over the question of Diogenes' happiness (*felicitas*) is able as well to doubt the condition of even the immortal gods: or are they too little blessed (*parum beate degant*) because they don't have estates and gardens?"[11] Seneca "knows better" than to write this way, but this is, in the end, the way he chooses to write. Why? What is the connection between the technical and the commonplace, the everyday and the philosophical?

Consider, then, the opening of *Moral Letter* 59, the letter, that is, that comes to us right after his letter about ontology. Seneca addresses this problem of vocabulary directly. The letter opens: "I got a great deal of pleasure (*uoluptas*) from your letter. Allow me to use words in their common sense, and don't apply to them their Stoic signification."[12] Seneca demonstrates his understanding of the Stoic distinction between *gaudium* and *uoluptas*: the former designates a positive affective experience, the latter is a vice. Seneca next gives a grammatical commentary as well as a sociological one. And this after gently mocking schoolmasterish modes elsewhere in the *Letters* and even in the letter just before this one. But at the close of these various readings and re-readings of the Latin terms Seneca reaffirms the propriety of his initial transgression: "Nevertheless, I did not improperly say that I got a great deal of pleasure from your

letter . . ."[13] It does one no good, then, to be convinced in advance that we know that for a Stoic *uoluptas* is bad; that Seneca is a Stoic; and, thus, that *uoluptas* designates bad pleasure whenever we see it in the Senecan corpus. That is not how Seneca writes. He knows that you might read him that way. And so he writes lessons about reading Senecan writing. We will want to be careful, then, about making too many presuppositions given that the rules are being set forth and even modulated in the very passages where one might be tempted to bring some abstract and *a priori* sense of the Rules of Reading Seneca to bear. It seems safest to stay *ad hoc* and *ad loc.* when approaching his texts. Seneca could have written a textbook, but he did not. And he simultaneously shows and tells us why he did not.

Which brings us back to the problem of how to read this book about how to read Seneca. It too can be a bit slippery: now loose, now technical. It is less so, I believe, than one might fear at first. Much is either a commentary that sticks fairly close to how Seneca works or a sort of direct imitation of his own moves. But a few sleights of hand will be detected, ones that allow us to connect Seneca's discussion to ways of reading his discussion that are informed by post-Senecan considerations. The value of these anachronisms is supposed to be heuristic. I am not arguing that one needs to see Seneca in Kant or Kant in Seneca, but instead looking for a manner in which one can rephrase Seneca so as to have a productive and critical encounter with him. This too is the sort of thing Seneca does all of the time with his own antecedents: "Epicurus has a couple of fine ideas, but let me rephrase them somewhat . . . "

In Seneca questions of narrative matter. They really matter. And so they must matter to us as well. For example, Seneca writes *Moral Letters* to Lucilius. But Seneca also writes to us. He knows we will be reading this. He knows that we do not know what was in that last letter which Seneca claims to have received and to which he responds. This is where *Moral Letter* 1 begins, by the way, with a reference to a letter Seneca has just seen and that we never will see.[14] Our confusion and asymmetrical knowledge is an element of the project proper, it is not some accident that arises as a function of incomplete knowledge and the lamentable loss owing to the vicissitudes of historical preservation. The problem before us is not a function of some failure to transmit both sides of a discussion that is being faithfully recorded in the *Moral Letters*. Seneca implicates us in this seeming discussion and in the circuit of exchange. We are invited to mistake ourselves for eavesdroppers and interlopers who have landed in the middle of a conversation about wisdom. But it is not Lucilius's enlightenment that really matters. We matter. We are the ones being constantly addressed though never addressed.

Who are we? What are we doing? What, if anything, is happening to us as we read?

A Senecan lesson: of import is the conversation itself and its particular flow. The product cannot be dissociated from the process. A stark enumeration of conclusions is insufficient. Seneca himself insists on this point. Seneca never radically segregates form from content. The medium and the message are fundamentally interrelated. In fact one could correct this to "they are ethically related." Seneca thinks closely about the ontological status of philosophy-as-discourse. Seneca is concerned with the conditions of possibility for efficacious communication. And for Seneca the literary *is* philosophical. That is, the valorized literary performance is a performance that has philosophical weight, one that is philosophically consequential and efficacious.[15]

And yet it is not enough to merely herald this synthesis of philosophy and literature. How will it all work? What can Seneca tell you that will genuinely touch you in your *animus*? Reading, writing, and speaking are never taken for granted. Or, if we wish to employ a metaphor derived from our own Hollywood spectacles, Seneca never jump-cuts to "The Truth" without making us aware that there is a camera, a perspective, a director, an editor.

Many ways of reading Seneca have not been entertained. Some of these alternatives have been documented in the end-notes. These notes come at the end both figuratively and literally: those who are looking for something more or something different or even just something to one side should consult them. In the body I tend to offer readings of selected passages and accounts of individual works. Throughout I am as much interested in how these texts work as in what they explicitly say. Accordingly, cross-references to similar claims as found in Seneca or others, though potentially abundant and enlightening, have been deprecated. I am principally interested in the architecture of relatively large units.

This discussion is sparing of details that fall outside the texture of the immediate co-ordinates of the discussion itself. The basics of Seneca's life are strikingly unimportant in what follows. Seneca lived from ?1 BCE to 65 CE. He was a provincial who rose to literary and political prominence. He was exiled owing to intrigue in the imperial house. He returned as the tutor to the young emperor Nero. He was later driven to suicide by the same. There is, naturally, much more that could be said.[16] But only the exile gets any play in the course of this volume. And one will find that neither intrigue nor the imperial house is ever mentioned in Seneca's discussion of his banishment.

Concrete historical issues are not the sort of things that especially preoccupy either the texts under discussion or the readings of them on offer. Indeed, despite some noteworthy exceptions such as the *On Clemency*

addressed to Nero, and the nasty *Apocolocyntosis* that arrives in the wake of Claudius' death, and the all too practical etiquette lessons of the *On Benefaction*, there is a marked silence surrounding questions of actual public life in Seneca's works. The contrast with Cicero is stark: the one author routinely situates his works in a specific moment, the other regularly moves with all possible haste from the specific to the abstract.[17] Knowing more about Seneca's particulars can, of course, be very useful: there is a politics to the erasure of the political from these texts. But others have written about these worldly subtexts.

This complicity with Seneca is an experiment: Where might it take us? Even as there are many other kinds of reading than one that prioritizes taking a text in the terms that the text itself sets forth, it seems very useful to linger within the framework set out by Seneca. He is, after all, so often insistent about the question of framing. His texts are routinely giving us their own elective contexts and then working within them. Why not take the journey walking by his side, at least to begin with?

This is not an especially comprehensive reading of Seneca. It is a targeted reading. The results are meant to be broadly significant, but the treatment is not exhaustive. A select number of themes have been put in the foreground, and it might be difficult to appreciate any number of things that are going on in the background. Seneca's pervasive discussions about major issues such as the self, death, and pleasure are not especially prominent in my own discussion.[18] Nevertheless, those ideas are important in their own right, would provide useful preliminary knowledge with which to approach this discussion, and they might furnish places where one might return in light of it. But they are not my central concerns.

An *ad hoc* and rough-and-ready Stoic primer on selected issues can be found at the heads of chapters. And yet Seneca is not afraid to rewrite orthodoxies when he thinks it suits his ends. Think again of pleasure and joy above, of *uoluptas* and *gaudium*: How and why do we keep them apart and how and why do we bring them together? I have not hesitated to rewrite Seneca when it suits my own ends. A good deal of my own method turns on retaining double senses, refusing to resolve issues, and forging "improper" associative links. For example, and it is no mere example, Seneca's cosmology uses a lot of ideas that could be used to explain and explore literature. Mind and body, meaning and matter, author and text: the attempt will be to think with and through this disparate set of terms for as long as and as best we can.

Seneca traffics in disparities that turn out in the end to be unities. This book itself aims to demonstrate the unity of a seeming diversity. As Stoic logic, ethics, and natural history are subdivisions of a larger whole, namely

Stoic philosophy in general, so too are ethics, literature, and metaphysics a plurality that subsists within a logically antecedent unity, namely Senecan thought. And Seneca preoccupies the body of the present study. But even the generality of this genus, "Seneca" itself, needs to be worked through. This itself is a philosophical question: What is a Senecan author?[19]

The preface to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* gives us an admonition: "[T]he real issue is not exhausted by stating it as an aim, but by carrying it out, nor is the result the actual whole, but rather the result together with the process through which it came about."[20] The journey itself matters. The present introduction states an aim. The body of the text attempts to carry it out. And, moreover, it attempts to demonstrate that process always matters when it comes to determining the result of Seneca's labors.

The first chapter provides what I see as a fitting introduction to the reading of Seneca, namely an account of Seneca's story about misreading. Seneca leaves it to us to pick the proper frame within which to pin him down. A frame offers four corners, four sides, a delimited space. We can capture everything within this domain, step back, and coolly appraise. That sounds appealing. But note that Seneca himself offers no "general introduction to Senecan thought." Seneca's *Moral Letters* lack an introduction and conclusion. Seneca's tragedies can lose their divine frame. An *ex cathedra*/*ex machina* declaration as to "The essence of Seneca" runs the risk of violating the spirit even as it pretends to give the letter. Seneca's individual texts generally avoid prefatory remarks that stand apart from the actual work at hand. That is, Seneca offers his reader both process and product: he does not present the aim as the essential, abstractable matter and something that leaves the execution of that aim inessential. There is an unwisdom, then, in premature abstraction, in stepping back too soon and surveying the whole from a vantage not yet properly gained.

Have questions been begged by Seneca himself, though? Perhaps. And they affect the result in that the process no longer seems uncomplicated. On the one hand, the Stoic sage exists nowhere in the world. On the other hand, the *proficiens* knows the end-point of his journey without having yet reached it.[21] Indeed, the emblematic figure of this very process of progress is someone looking back at himself *as if* from the terminus of the journey as he advances along the road towards that same end. For me this "as if" reveals the ethical, literary, and metaphysical knot *qua* knot. The "as if," if nothing else, adverts as to the literary dimension of the enterprise.[22] But the key feature to be noted in this aggregation of issues is the very fact of their correlation: none can be segregated from the rest or even given true primacy without the dissolution of the whole problematic.

And this brings us to our own presuppositions. How do we look back at Seneca? We have a strong tendency to place ourselves in the position of *sagesse*: Seneca's fitful struggles offer us a spectacle. We look on, more advanced not just in time, but so too in sensibility. What is beheld is an object-of-knowledge. The contours of this object vary: but, in general, Seneca is that object commonly known as the situated historical subject.[23] We behold a species of the *genus Romanum*. As a complex compound he potentially exemplifies a number of categories: Roman, imperial subject, provincial, poet, philosopher. On the one hand, the knowledge gained from the objectification of Seneca is indeed variously enlightening. On the other hand, we generally avoid taking Seneca and his project seriously.[24] And by this I mean to indicate that we set a distance between what he was doing and what he thought he had to say to us and what, for our part, we are going to allow all of it to mean to us.

There is an irony to this situation: Seneca himself is fascinated by the possibilities of apathetic spectatorship. He is attracted by the notion that a self could be an object.[25] However, Seneca does not simply assume a figure positioned to draw a conclusion: he examines as well the process of reaching the moment for conclusion. Conversely, we often presuppose our own apathetic spectatorship as an opening move in our own reading of Seneca. More advanced on the road to wherever it is we are going, we would never think to let Seneca play Seneca to us, to let him be for us the *proficiens* who set out before us and who offers guidance to the addressees of his works.

Readers of Seneca are often reading through him and looking for his sources.[26] Of interest is the original, not the copy. The founder of a school is wanted, not a follower. The situation is again ironic. Chrysippus becomes the sage, Seneca the mere *proficiens* who did not quite get Stoicism yet (or ever). We rush down the road to Stoic wisdom. We hasten past our encounter with Seneca so as to find "enlightenment," namely the dogma of Chrysippus. One is to note that in this case enlightenment specifically means the acquisition of information about doctrine rather than any subjective shift on our own part.

If Seneca were original and productive, then he would have more of a claim to our attention. Again, this statement says much about ourselves, and less about the co-ordinates within which Seneca, or any ancient philosopher for that matter, worked. Innovation and revolution are not especially prized in their own right: the Cynics are (counter-)revolutionary Socratics.[27] Zeno, the first Stoic, is happy himself to be considered a "Socratic" as he makes his own break with Plato and further evolves Cynic themes.[28] Stoicism itself was a living tradition that continually evolved through its history, but the