

Introduction

Seneca's Philosophical Literature

In Seneca, we encounter a serious reader of philosophy who was at the same time a talented and ambitious writer. Thanks to his excellent collection of books on Stoicism, Epicureanism, and other philosophical systems, Seneca has played a major role in the transmission of Greek thought. But he is much more than a reporter. Deeply invested in his reading on theoretical subjects, he also has much to contribute to the conversation, in his spirited and sometimes satirical interpretations of philosophical arguments and in his active resistance to earlier positions of even his favorite authors. Though he describes himself as merely a student of philosophy, he is now universally recognized as a philosopher in his own right. Yet the word “philosopher” is inadequate to describe what he was, for as a Roman senator well connected within a burgeoning equestrian elite, thoroughly trained in rhetoric, and steeped in poetry, narrative history, and drama, Seneca brings rich cultural resources to the service of philosophical reflection.¹ In his way of thinking, the work of philosophy is not done if it cannot also engage the imagination through illustrative analogies, through vivid descriptions of scenes from his own experience, and through the manipulation of literary form. What he produced is not only a literary sort of philosophy; it is philosophy *as* literature: a distinctively Roman answer to the intellectual artistry of Plato.

In this book I offer twelve studies that approach Seneca's major works in a coordinated though not entirely linear fashion. While most of the chapters have been previously published and each can be read on its own, they work together here to give a more nuanced account of the Roman philosopher's achievement than any one of them could do individually. For if we are to understand Seneca at all, we need to come at him

¹ Would the man we refer to as “Seneca *philosophus*” have called himself a *philosophus*? Hine (2015: 19–21) argues persuasively that he would not, on grounds that the Latin term denoted a professional teacher of philosophy, who would in that period have been a person of inferior social status.

from more than one direction. It is, in my view, absolutely essential to look closely at how he engaged with the philosophical tradition: what he actually knew about Stoicism and about other philosophical approaches that were on offer in first-century Rome, what aspects of those philosophies he chose to emphasize or deemphasize, and where he thought elements from competing traditions might be compatible – for while it is not accurate to characterize Seneca as an eclectic philosopher in the old sense of the term, he is certainly an open-minded one. At a deeper level, we must come to grips with his attitude to philosophical argument itself: where he is careful and exact in reproducing terminology and steps in argumentation, where he seems unconcerned about inconsistencies in his own presentation, why he sometimes dismisses a serious argument as silly and unproductive. But beyond all that, we need to recognize Seneca’s philosophical effusions as his attempt to make a career as a writer. Our perception is incomplete if we fail to attend to his self-conscious reflections on genre, style, and imagery; his numerous directives on approaches to reading; and his constant critique of other writers. These obviously literary features belong to one and the same project with his studies in ethics, psychology, and natural science, for in Seneca’s conception, *studia* or “studies” are not a set of different disciplines. They are a single discipline whose aim is the creation of an aesthetic and intellectual self.

The facts of Seneca’s life come into this book just insofar as they have a bearing on the ideas we find in his writings. In order to assess his project as a philosophical writer, one needs to know that he had the education and the resources to pursue whatever studies he wanted and also that he had been trained in the techniques of rhetoric, for his father, Seneca the Elder, was an authority in that area. It matters, too, that he had friends who shared his interest in books: people like Marcia, the historian’s daughter to whom he addressed his first consolatory essay, Annaeus Serenus, for whom he wrote *On Tranquility of Mind* and *On the Constancy of the Wise*, and Gaius Lucilius Junior, the civilian governor of Sicily and an author in his own right, to whom he addressed the *Letters on Ethics* as well as the *Natural Questions* and the essay *On Providence*. In order to understand his attitude toward the philosophical life, traditionally viewed as an alternative to the life of political activity, one needs also to know that he had a political career of his own, was well acquainted with the imperial court, and was cognizant of the dangers that attended political influence during the difficult years of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. He could write about wealth and privilege from the standpoint of one who had possessed them, but

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both he and his friends had reason to think that a more obscure life might be more desirable in the end.²

In this vein, it is interesting to consider the conversation imagined by the historian Tacitus between a Seneca eager to withdraw from his position in the court and a suitably reluctant Nero (*Ann.* 14.53–56). The tension depicted there between administrative work and the time required for meaningful study was a real part of Seneca’s life, one to which the philosopher himself often refers. With his usual subtle wit, Tacitus had Seneca compare himself first to Marcus Agrippa and then to Gaius Cilnius Maecenas, both client-friends of the emperor Augustus who were allowed eventually to retire from public service. Now, Agrippa was a military man, which Seneca emphatically was not. The more telling comparison is to Maecenas, like Seneca a personal rather than a military companion of the princeps, whose importance to the regime was chiefly at the cultural level. That the real Seneca is sharply critical of Maecenas both for his demeanor and for his prose style only adds force to the comparison. In his financial circumstances and social standing, both obtained through imperial favor, he indeed resembled Maecenas; in his character and writings – his *ingenium*, to use his own term – he meant to be quite different. In studying Seneca’s books, we gain privileged access to that *ingenium*. Not, indeed, to Seneca’s actions in life, for actions are hard to judge even in proximity, but to the aspect of Seneca that still exists and matters.

If Seneca’s life story has sometimes been seen as a troubling frame for his works, it is largely because of the directness with which he offers to tell other people how to live. Nearly all his works are formally therapeutic in nature, which is to say, they present themselves as seeking to improve the persons addressed by ridding them of troubling emotions like anger, fear, and grief; by teaching them how to endure hardship and to live in community; and in general by leading them toward the most fulfilling form of human life, termed variously as “wisdom,” “virtue,” or “happiness.” The position of the moral teacher is always a bit problematic. We expect the teacher to be adept

² The best overall treatment of Seneca’s life is still Griffin (1976), which also offers extensive comments on many issues in his philosophical writings. In that work, see especially 67–103, which review Seneca’s career as an *amicus principis*, giving special consideration to the reliability of Tacitus’s narrative and to the circumstances of Seneca’s retirement. Among other broad-based studies of Seneca’s career and achievement, see especially Vogt (2020), Bartsch and Schiesaro (2015), Maurach (2000), Grimal (1978). I provide an annotated bibliography in Graver (2016).

at the subject taught, but Seneca does not seem to have led an exemplary life and does not claim to have done so. At the time he was writing, though, the therapeutic stance was sanctioned by a long tradition in philosophical writing. The philosophers of the Hellenistic world had sometimes set themselves up in relation to the medical writers, as healers for the mind rather than the body. For Seneca, a notable precedent might have been the fourth book of Chrysippus's treatise *On Emotions*, called the *Therapeutic Book*, which claimed specifically to treat the "diseased" mind as a doctor would, with "item-by-item theory and therapy."³ It is in keeping with that metaphor that Seneca often speaks of writings on ethics as efficacious "remedies"; or, as he puts it in the *Letters on Ethics*, "healthful admonitions, like the recipes for useful salves" (*Letters* 8.2). Such statements imply an assumption about the power of reading: that effective instruction is not limited to the lecture hall or to live discussion but can also take place through the written word.

There is good reason to accept Seneca's statements of therapeutic purpose as crucial to the interpretation of his works. Just as in a defense speech every utterance, every inflection of the voice, every gesture of the hands works to exonerate the defendant, so in a work of therapeutic philosophy it should be possible to understand every authorial decision regarding subject matter, style, and design as an effort to improve the reader's moral state. Further, the intention to address readers' moral or spiritual ills, and in particular to rid them of disturbing emotions, necessitates reflection on the causes of mental events and the ways that certain therapeutic approaches may or may not counteract them. Seneca often addresses such points, and one can productively inquire whether his remarks are consistent with one another and with his practice.

At the same time, our sensitivity to Seneca's therapeutic aims must be balanced with recognition of his freestanding theoretical interests and of his ambitions as a literary artist in a more conventional sense. He does not limit himself to those basic lessons that he regards as essential to curing the passions and vices. Especially in his longest works, *On Benefits*, *Natural Questions*, and *Letters on Ethics*, he takes on more ambitious topics, in physics and theology, in ethical theory, even in metaphysics.⁴ One could

³ Chrysippus in Galen, *PHP* 5.2.22 (*SVF* 3.471). For this aspect of Hellenistic philosophy, see especially I. Hadot (1969, 2014); Nussbaum (1994).

⁴ Thus, Brad Inwood writes (in Inwood (2007a: xvii)), "[I]n approaching Seneca's letters philosophically, it is surely a mistake to take it for granted that the author's central motivation is to play the role of moral or 'spiritual' guide for his readers." This remark garnered a vehement response in I. Hadot (2014: 9, 30). Others who have seen the therapeutic premise as the central

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undoubtedly make the case that these topics, too, might be included for the sake of advancing us toward the perfection of our rational nature. In a sense, all philosophy is therapeutic, because all disciplined thinking and study works to improve our thought processes. But Seneca does not make that case. On the contrary, he sometimes scolds himself or his interlocutor for venturing into topics that go beyond his purview as a moralist, thus signaling a divergence between his theoretical inquiries and his therapeutic aims. For this reason, I have found it helpful at some points to think of Seneca's therapeutic premise as a *rule of genre*. It explains the existence of the work, makes a claim as to its nature, and sets the terms of interaction between author and reader, "I" and "you," in something like the way that the invocation to the Muse explains the existence of an epic, identifies its theme, and creates a role for the poet. Yet even so, it need not make manifest the entire purpose for which the book was written. There may be further objectives, formally subordinate and yet real enough, that we can discern in the author's relationship to the material, to the addressee, or to the reading public.

A useful way to think about this issue is to relate Seneca's use of the therapeutic premise to a debate that had been carried on intermittently since the time of Plato about the value of intellectual activity itself. In a world full of practical problems to be solved, how does one justify spending time on philosophical study, or on any kind of study that has no immediate application? In the Hellenistic period, the issue was typically presented as a decision among three modes of life: the life of active service, that of pleasure, and that of study. Stoic ethics had always given the priority to active service, yet Seneca in his writings appears exclusively as a man of leisure, devoting his time to reading and writing projects in retirement from the world. In Chapter 1 ("The Life of the Mind"), I review the arguments he puts forward in the fragmentary treatise *On Leisure* to support the life of study. Of particular interest among these is a claim that the secluded activity of the philosopher is justified because of the discoveries it may record for future generations. This is exactly the argument that Seneca makes on his own behalf in the much longer *Letters on Ethics*. However, this justification is both limited and limiting in that it applies only to the ethical part of philosophy. Accordingly, Seneca in this major work makes use of a series of rhetorical devices to expand the

explanatory principle of Seneca's project include Hachmann (1995), Schafer (2009), and Dietsche (2018).

therapeutic frame he has established, creating openings for more adventurous philosophical questions without violating generic decorum.

Looking now more closely at the nature of Seneca's engagement with Hellenistic philosophy, we find ourselves enmeshed in a number of interrelated questions. Conspicuously in his works the word *nostrī* ("our people") refers to the Stoics, meaning in the first instance Zeno of Citium, Cleanthes, and Chrysippus, the third-century originators of that system of thought, but also later figures like Posidonius and Hecaton of Rhodes. But there are many questions to be asked about Seneca's philosophical stance. What parts of Stoicism does he consider to be essential, and how closely do the views he expresses resemble what we know about Stoicism from other sources? What is the nature of his interest in the hedonist philosophy of Epicurus? How does he respond to the Aristotelianism of his day? Further, there are questions to be asked about his relation to philosophy itself. To what extent does he demand consistency of view from himself and others? When he claims the right to develop and change the tradition he inherited, is he signaling that he has in fact created his own versions of Stoic doctrine, or is he only making a general point about intellectual independence?

The first order of business is to work out what Seneca knew of the Stoic tradition. The remaining chapters of Part I both deal directly with Seneca's understanding of Stoicism, but from different angles. In Chapter 2 ("Action and Emotion"), I compare his views on the mechanisms of judgment, voluntary action, and emotion with what is known of the Stoic tradition on those subjects. Here abundant, though fragmentary, information about earlier Stoic thought makes it possible to verify the extent of Seneca's adherence and to discern some of his distinctive emphases. For the subject matter of Chapter 3 ("The Treatise *On Benefits*"), the situation is quite different, for while Seneca tells us that he is drawing on earlier works on the *beneficium* or deed of kindness, we have very little outside information about those sources. Thus, his treatise becomes our sole window onto a topic that has deep implications for Stoic understandings of action, autonomy, and friendship. The work is revealing, too, for Seneca's priorities as a philosopher: his interest in social relations, his deep engagement with issues of agency and volition, and his love of close reasoning and fine distinctions.

Another way to probe Seneca's relation to Stoicism is to look in some detail at what he says about its major competitors. The two chapters of

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Part II take up that challenge as concerns first Epicureanism and then the Peripatetics, Hellenistic admirers of Aristotle. There is no question that Seneca has good access to Epicurean texts; indeed, his information on some points is superior to what we have from any other source. His engagement with the school has been found puzzling, however, for while his overall attitude toward the central tenets of Epicureanism is unremittingly hostile, he is at times strikingly appreciative, even to the point of restating recognizably Epicurean claims in his own voice. To make sense of his position, Chapter 4 (“Seneca and Epicurus”) draws a distinction between Epicurus’s core philosophical views and his tactics as a writer and a therapist. In matters of pedagogy and of the psychology of the pupil, Seneca finds much in Epicurus that he can adapt to his own purposes; on such doctrines as the pleasure principle, the idleness of the divine, and the conventional basis for justice, he makes no compromise at all. When he enters Epicurean terrain, he does so “not as a deserter, but as a spy,” ready to take whatever he can use, but not in the least inclined to alter his philosophical allegiance.

Though less well known to the Romans than Epicureanism was, the doctrines of the Peripatetic philosophers seem to have been even more important for Seneca as he honed his positions in ethics and psychology. For Peripatetic thought was closely akin to Stoicism on some points, especially as concerns the centrality of virtue to human happiness. However, there were also significant differences, notably in the system of value and in the treatment of the emotions. In contesting these points, Seneca indicates the depth of his Stoic commitments. In Chapter 5 (“Refuting the Peripatetics”), I juxtapose a series of passages in the *Letters on Ethics* with the encyclopedia-style text usually referred to as Doxography “C,” which offers a résumé of Peripatetic ethics dating probably to the principate of Augustus. In particular, I show that certain features of letter 92 are best explained on the assumption that Seneca is responding point by point to a summary account of Peripatetic ethics that was similar in style to “C,” but was not “C” itself. Recognition of this fact can give insight into Seneca’s motivations, including his motivations for positing a tripartite division of mind in the opening paragraph of that letter.

The three chapters of Part III concentrate on that part of Stoic philosophy that sought to analyze the various phenomena of emotional experience and

to provide therapies for the most problematic emotions. Here, too, we want to ask not only about Seneca's positions but also about his method. In Chapter 6 ("Seneca's Therapy for Anger"), I confront some of the difficulties he seems to have had in imposing order on his material. The earliest of the multi-book treatises, *On Anger*, brings great energy both to the exposition of Stoic doctrine and to the crafting of therapeutic recommendations. There is some lack of fit, though, between the temporal structure of anger that he lays out, quite correctly from a Stoic perspective, in the first half of the treatise and the program of anger management that he outlines in the second. One cannot say, then, that the philosophical analysis has been fully integrated. I make the case, however, that the structure of book 3 gives signals of Seneca's own discomfort with this aspect of his work, and that these can be read as promising for his further philosophical development.

From this perspective it is interesting to compare a work on grief that Seneca wrote near the end of his life, in his *consolatio* to Marullus. This short piece, presented as an enclosure in the 99th of the *Letters on Ethics*, is the subject of Chapter 7 ("The Weeping Wise"). Ordinarily a *consolatio* is a conventional type of essay for comforting the bereaved. In this case, however, the content of the essay is anything but conventional, for, as Seneca explains to Lucilius, the treatment of Marullus's grief is intended to be entirely on Stoic principles. Although modern sensibilities are likely to be offended by Seneca's endeavor to argue down Marullus's grief at the loss of a young child, his disciplined handling of the task proves to be instructive for its close look at the phenomenology of both involuntary and voluntary emotional reactions. There are implications, too, for the emotions related to friendship.

In Chapter 8 ("Anatomies of Joy"), I show how Seneca's several accounts of eupathic joy can give insight into his working methods as a philosopher. Seneca is clearly invested in the idea that the fulfillment of our rational nature would result in a life filled with joy, the virtuous counterpart to the problematic pleasure or delight of ordinary agents. Yet there are interesting differences in his explanations of how wise joy relates to objects of value. In fact, there are no fewer than seven philosophically distinct accounts to be found in his works, reflecting different views of the phenomenology of joy, the nature of its objects, and its dependence on social interactions. I argue that these discrepancies reflect a tendency to preserve ideas found in his various reading materials without attempting to impose a system. We can surmise that the Stoic tradition itself had room for divergence of view concerning

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some specifics of moral psychology, as long as the core principles of Stoic ethics were maintained.

In working with Seneca's treatments of the emotions and other issues in Stoic thought, I am careful not to assume that the philosophical works of Cicero were his immediate authority. While Cicero's *De Finibus* and *Tusculan Disputations* are important sources for us, we cannot be sure that they are similarly important to Seneca, or even that Seneca was familiar with those particular Ciceronian works. Seneca does regard Cicero as a precedent for philosophical writing in Latin; indeed he comments that Cicero's books on philosophy are "almost as numerous as those of Fabianus" (*Letters* 100.9). But the works that he quotes or mentions by title are only the *Letters to Atticus* and *On the Republic*.⁵ For such points as the special importance of joy in Stoicism, it is safest to assume that similarities have arisen because both Roman philosophers have consulted the foundational writings of Greek Stoicism.⁶

While I work with a number of Seneca's essays and at length with the treatises *On Benefits* and *On Anger*, the centerpiece of this book is the *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*, or *Letters on Ethics to Lucilius*.⁷ Concerning this work, I share the view of the late Miriam Griffin, that the *Letters* were never in reality a private correspondence but were destined for a wide audience from the time of their composition.⁸ For all their verisimilitude, they are fictive epistles, like those that make up an epistolary novel, with the real Gaius Lucilius Junior named as the recipient in roughly the same way as Gaius Memmius is named as the recipient of Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* or Marcus Terentius Varro as the recipient of Cicero's *Academica*. Although this reading of the work is now widely held among specialists, it

⁵ For the quoted material, see *Brevity* 5.2, *Letters* 97.3–5, 108.30–34, 118.1–2, and fragment 1 (Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights* 12.2).

⁶ In an author who likes to cite his sources, Seneca's silence about the philosophical series Cicero completed in 45–43 BCE seems to me significant. I have also been struck by the way that in treating specific points from the Greek tradition Seneca sometimes includes information that he could not have found in Cicero, while showing no awareness of highly relevant points that Cicero treats at length, such as the alternative Epicurean accounts of friendship and the ethical position of Antiochus of Ascalon. Further to the topic see Graver (2021); Graver and Long (2015: 18); Setaioli (2003); Gambet (1970); and on page 111.

⁷ I write *Letters on Ethics*, rather than (e.g.) *Moral Letters*, on grounds that Seneca's term *moralis philosophia* is closer to our word "ethics" (a branch of inquiry) than it is to our word "morals" (good conduct). See *Letters* 88.24, 89.9, 106.2, and especially 121.1 *non quidquid morale est mores bonos facit* ("what pertains to ethics does not necessarily make for ethical conduct").

⁸ See Griffin (1976: 349–53, 416–19, 519).

remains controversial for some, and so it will be useful at this point to say a word about the argument that seems to me conclusive in its favor.⁹

The key point, in my view, is the stance assumed by the epistolographer relative to the knowledge base of his expected reader. In a letter intended for a specific individual, the content will normally be tailored to that person's point of view: it will provide just the information that person does not have and offer just the advice that person needs in their particular situation. As a point of reference, consider Cicero's letters to his close friend Atticus. Valuable as those letters are to the historian, they also leave us in the dark at many points, for Cicero constantly refers to people and events whose significance must have been obvious to Atticus but is unknown to us now and would have been almost equally opaque to the vast majority of Cicero's contemporaries. By contrast, the *Letters on Ethics* are fully comprehensible to anyone who is even minimally familiar with the contemporary culture. There are no private jokes, nothing really cryptic; indeed, when Seneca mentions an individual of his and Lucilius's acquaintance, he takes care to supply the words of identification that are needed for understanding, and when he mentions a letter Lucilius is supposed to have written, he gives indications of what that letter is supposed to have said. In a word, the letters are not written *for* Lucilius at all, but aim instead to entertain and inform a wider public. Similarly, the moral teaching within the letters is for general use; it is not calculated to match the intellectual and personal needs of the historical Lucilius. For example, as Seneca concludes an exhortation not to fear poverty, he adds, "This material applies to others, for *you* [that is, Lucilius] are more nearly among the wealthy" (*Letters* 17.10). Likewise, his disquisition on the evils of slavery, though cast in the second person, is not meant as admonishment to Lucilius, who has "no need of encouragement" on this point (*Letters* 47.21). The true role of the historical Lucilius is indicated in letter 21, where Seneca writes, "Your studies will make you famous," and compares Lucilius to Idomeneus and Atticus, made famous by the letters of Epicurus and Cicero respectively (*Letters* 21.2–5).¹⁰ Lucilius's name is made known just insofar as the letters addressed to him are in fact

⁹ Among those who have insisted on the historicity of the correspondence are Grimal (1978: 441–56), Mazzoli (1989: 1846–50), and to a large extent Setaioli (2014a: 193–94). Those who have seen it as intended for a wide audience from the time of composition include Cancik (1967), Maurach (1970), Abel (1981), Lana (1991: 269–74), Wilson (1988, 2001), Richardson-Hay (2006), Inwood (2005: 346–47 and 2007b); Conradie (2010: 60–87), Wilcox (2012), Wildberger (2014), Williams (2014), Gunderson (2015: 6–7), and Dietsche (2014: 35–38). I discuss the issue at more length in Graver (1996: 8–41).

¹⁰ *Letters* 21.2–5.