

Seneca

Seneca is a major philosophical figure of the Roman Imperial Period. As a Stoic philosopher writing in Latin, Seneca makes a lasting contribution to Stoicism. He occupies a central place in the literature on Stoicism at the time, and shapes the understanding of Stoic thought that later generations were to have. Seneca's philosophical works played a large role in the revival of Stoic ideas in the Renaissance. Until today, many readers approach Stoic philosophy through Seneca, rather than through the more fragmentary evidence that we have for earlier Stoics. Seneca's writings are stunningly diverse in their generic range. More than that, Seneca develops further and shapes several philosophical genres, most important, the letter and so-called "consolations"; his essay *On Mercy* is considered the first example of what came to be known as the "mirror of the prince" literature.

After several centuries of relative neglect, Seneca's philosophy has been rediscovered in the last few decades, in what might be called a second revival of Senecan thought. In part, this renewed interest is the result of a general reappraisal of Roman culture. It is also fuelled by major progress that has been made in our understanding of Greek Hellenistic philosophy, and by recent developments in contemporary ethics, such as a renewed interest in the theory of emotions, roles and relationships, and the fellowship of all human beings. And finally, some influential scholars have found, in the wake of Foucault's reading of Seneca, that Seneca speaks to some distinctively modern concerns.

The writing that we shall primarily be concerned with are: the Moral Letters to Lucilius, the Moral Essays, the Codex Ambrosianus and the Natural Questions.

Readers who approach Seneca as students of ancient philosophy—having acquired a certain idea of what philosophy *is* by studying Plato, Aristotle, or Chrysippus—often feel at a loss. To them, Seneca's writings can appear lengthy and merely admonitory. Partly, this reaction may reflect prejudices of our training. The remnants of a Hegelian (and Nietzschean, and Heideggerian) narrative for philosophy are deeply ingrained in influential works of scholarship. On this account, the history of ancient philosophy is a history of decline, the Roman thinkers are mediocre imitators of their Greek predecessors, and so on.

Seneca does not write as a philosopher who creates or expounds a philosophical theory from the ground up. Rather, he writes within the track of an existing system that he is largely in agreement with. A reconstruction of Seneca's philosophy, if it aimed at some kind of completeness, would have to be many-layered. At several points, it would have to include accounts of earlier Stoic philosophy, and discuss which aspects of these earlier theories become more or less prominent in Seneca's thought. At times Seneca's own contribution

consists in developing further a Stoic theory and adding detail to it. At other times, Seneca dismisses certain technicalities and emphasises the therapeutic, practical side of philosophy.

Seneca thinks of himself as the adherent of a philosophical system—Stoicism—and speaks in the first person plural ('we') in order to refer to the Stoics. Rather than call Seneca an orthodox Stoic, however, we might want to say that he writes *within* the Stoic system. Seneca emphasises his independence as a thinker. He holds Stoic views, but he does not see himself as anyone's disciple or chronicler. In *On the Private Life*, he says: "Surely you can only want me to be like my leaders? Well then, I shall not go where they send me but where they lead". Seneca sees himself as a philosopher like the older Stoics. He feels free, however, to disagree with earlier Stoics, and is not concerned with keeping Stoicism 'pure' from non-Stoic ideas. Seneca integrates ideas from other philosophies if these seem helpful to him. As he explains, he likes to think of philosophical views as if they were motions made in a meeting. One often asks the proponent of the motion to split it up in two motions, so that one can agree with one half, and vote against the other. For example, Seneca thinks that there is something salutary in Platonic metaphysics. While he dismisses the theory of Forms, he still holds that studying it can make us *better*. It acquaints us with the thought that the things which stimulate and enflame the senses are not among the things that really are. Seneca also adopts metaphors or images that are associated with other philosophical schools, such as Platonically inspired images of the body as prison of the soul. But invoking such images need not commit Seneca to holding the theories in which they originate.

Another side of Seneca's independence has been emphasised as: Seneca, educated by Roman philosophers, is genuinely *thinking in Latin*. In order to see the force of this point, let us compare Seneca to Cicero. Cicero conscientiously tells his readers which Greek term he translates by which Latin term. It is thus possible to read Cicero's Latin philosophy with the Greek terminology in mind; at least for the most part, we can think about his arguments in the terms of the Greek debates. Seneca is, at many points, not interested in mapping his terminology directly onto the Greek philosophical vocabulary. Rather, he thinks in his own language, and he expects to be read by people who do their philosophising in Latin, as well.

Like other late Stoics, Seneca is first and foremost interested in ethics. Although he is well versed in the technical details of Stoic logic, philosophy of language, epistemology, and ontology, he does not devote any significant time to these fields. However, we should not let the old prejudices about Roman versus Greek thought influence our interpretation of Seneca's interest in practical questions. As Veyne puts it, "Seneca practiced neither a debased nor a vulgarised philosophy aimed at the supposed 'practical spirit' of the Romans". Rather, it is

Seneca's very conception of philosophy as a salutary practice that makes the ethical dimension of his thought so prominent.

Seneca's writings usually have an addressee—someone who is plagued by a 'sickness of the soul' (*On Peace of Mind* begins with a full diagnosis of the addressee's state of mind—first by the patient, and then by the insightful therapist Seneca). Seneca steps back from a format in which a philosopher justifies a theory in a step-by-step argument. Discussion proceeds from a (perhaps merely presumed) situation in the addressee's life, meandering back and forth between more general and more specific considerations, arguments, side-issues, and sometimes consolation. This engaging style views the reader as a participant in philosophical thought. Seneca thinks that in order to benefit from philosophy, one cannot passively adopt insights. One must appropriate them as an active reader, thinking through the issues for oneself, so as then to genuinely assent to them.

The World of Philosophy: Seneca's Cosmopolitanism

Seneca tells us that there is a much-debated choice between three kinds of life—the life of theory, the life of politics (or practice), and the life of pleasure. This is not a Stoic distinction. Rather, it is (by Seneca's time) a conventional division, going back, on the one hand, to Aristotle's discussion of the life of *theoria* ('contemplation') as compared to the life of politics, and on the other hand to Plato's and Aristotle's engagement with prominent views about the good (the good is pleasure, the good is honor, the good is wisdom). Seneca is not committed to the view that the life of theory is a different life from the life of practice. But the Aristotelian way of framing the question helps him describe choices which he and some of his addressees face in life: whether to retire from an active role in politics, or to single-mindedly pursue one's political career (for a discussion of traditional interpretations, which aim to explain Seneca's views on retirement in the context of his biography).

In *On the Private Life* and in *On Peace of Mind*, Seneca addresses this very question of how to choose between the active life of politics, and a life devoted to philosophy. The choice is, for Seneca, partly about the right kind of balance. How much do we need to retreat in order to be at peace with ourselves? Philosophy has two functions. We need philosophical insight on which to base our actions. But we also need to devote time specifically to reflecting on such truths as that only virtue is good, and thus restore our peace of mind.

Both philosophy and politics are spheres in which we can benefit others (*On Peace of Mind*). The contrast between the life of theory and the life of politics helps Seneca spell out his version of Stoic cosmopolitanism. We should not think of the choice between philosophy and politics as a choice between theory and practice. Rather, philosophy and politics represent two worlds that we simultaneously belong to. The world of politics is our local world; the world of

philosophy is the whole world. By pursuing an active career in politics, we aim to do good to the people in our vicinity. By retreating into philosophy we choose to live, for a while, predominantly in the world at large. By studying, teaching, and writing philosophy, Seneca thinks, we help others who are not necessarily spatially close to us. Philosophical study is beneficial (or ‘of benefit’), it is of use to others, in the world-wide community to which we all belong.

While Seneca takes it for granted that cosmopolitanism is concerned with the idea that it is good to benefit others, he does not seem to think that cosmopolitanism burdens us with the unfeasible task of helping everyone. Rather, cosmopolitanism liberates us. As things may play out in our individual lives, we may be in a better position to benefit others as philosophers than as Roman senators; and since both are good things to do, we can in fact be content with our lives either way. Cosmopolitanism creates a beneficial form of life that a narrower political picture may not accommodate: not only those who happen to be appreciated in their own states can benefit others. In *On the Private Life*, Seneca says: “What is required, you see, of any man is that he should be of use to other men—if possible, to many; failing that, to a few; failing that, to those nearest him; failing that, to himself.”

In Stoic philosophy, cosmopolitanism includes a view of the nature of human beings: human beings are, by virtue of the kind of beings they are, connected. Seneca at times explores fellowship among human beings in terms of family relationships. The family in a conventional sense is a place of ethical learning. Beyond this, there is an idealised and broader familial relation among people and Seneca is open to the idea that one chooses one’s intellectual ancestors independent of biological relationships. The Stoics see human beings as parts of a whole, namely as parts of the cosmos. Seneca fully embraces this idea. In *On Benefits*, a treatise concerned with *beneficere* as a social practice, but also, more literally, with *beneficere* understood as ‘doing good,’ Seneca asks in which ways God benefits human beings. His answer aims to explain why, though we do not have the natural weapons other animals have and are in many ways weaker than they are, human beings have the kind of standing in the world he takes them to have, the standing of “masters.” “God has granted two things that make this vulnerable creature the strongest of all: reason and fellowship. [...] Fellowship has given him power over all animals [...] Remove fellowship and you will destroy the unity of mankind on which our life depends.” Seneca’s focus on fellowship is in line with earlier Stoic thought about affiliation (*oikeiôsis*) between human beings, as well as with the Stoic view that the cosmos is a large animal with us as some of its parts. Ideally, human beings relate as friends to each other. On the orthodox Stoic conception of friendship, only wise and virtuous people are friends. Seneca endorses this ambitious notion of friendship. In order to be a friend, one must first attain a consistent mindset.

The Natural Law

The Stoics are considered ancestors of the natural law tradition. The standard epithet of the law, in early Stoicism, is ‘common’ (*koinos*), not ‘natural’. Seneca, however, characterises laws or the law as natural and talks of the *lex naturae* (“law of nature”). Early Stoic thought about the law is partly rooted in the theory of appropriate action, and partly in a physical account of how reason—Zeus—pervades the world.

It is this physical notion of the law that is most prominent in Seneca. In his discussion of earthquakes and human fear, Seneca points out that we err by assuming that in some places, there is no danger of earthquakes; all places are subject to the same law (*lex*). In another context, Seneca points out that the natural laws (*iura*) govern events under the earth as much as above. The world is constituted so that everything that is going to happen, including the conflagration of the world when it comes to an end, is from the very beginning part of it. Natural events like earthquakes, and in fact all events, help nature go through with the natural statutes (*naturae constituta*). Since nature (or Zeus) decided in the beginning what was going to happen, everything is easy for nature (3.30.1). The study of nature aims at accepting facts of nature, first and foremost the fact that human beings are mortal. Seneca refers to the necessity of death as a natural law. Death is a “done deal” already at conception. It is the task of science to understand why death need not be feared, that the philosophical life is particularly indispensable because it prepares us for death, and that the kinds of death that we are prone to fear particularly, such as death through an earthquake, are really not much different from more usual kinds of death. To be free according to the law of nature is to be prepared to die any minute. That we are all equals in death reflects the *justice* of nature.

A theme that is equally present in Seneca’s natural philosophy and in his therapeutic practice is *time*. Book 3 of the *Natural Questions* is entitled *On the waters of the earth* and begins with reflections on the enormous time which the task of natural philosophy may consume; on time that has been wasted with worldly concerns; and the claim that it can be regained if we make diligent use of the present. The fact that human life is finite is thus present from the very first lines of the book. Seneca then turns to the way in which the world’s life-cycle is as finite as that of a human being. Just as a human foetus already contains the seed of its death, the beginnings of the world contain its end. It is precisely for this reason that things are easy for nature. Its death does not, as it were, come as a surprise—nature is well-prepared. Nature does what it initially determined; nothing in nature’s doings is *ad hoc*. Seneca points to examples: Look at the way the waves roll onto the beaches; the oceans are trained in how to flood the earth. The world’s preparedness for its death seems to be the perfect analogue of how, for Seneca, we ought to spend our lives. In *Letter*, Seneca says that everything, light *and* darkness, is contained in a single day. To use the present well is to be aware of this completeness. More days, and months, and years, will (or at least may) make up our lives. But we should not think of them

as stretching out into the future; rather, they are concentric circles surrounding the day which, right now, is present. And since even this very day stretches out, from its beginning to its end, we can appreciate it as containing everything—there can be more such days, but they will be more of the same. Thus, on every such day, if it is lived well, we can be fully prepared to die.

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