

Introduction

Lucius Annaeus Seneca, known as Seneca the Younger because of the fame of his father, was a Roman senator, a man of letters, an influential political adviser to the last emperor of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, and a philosopher. His importance in literature, politics, and philosophy makes him an unusually interesting intellectual, but in this book only his work as a philosopher will be addressed. In philosophy Seneca adhered to Stoicism and it is as a Stoic philosopher that he has had the most powerful impact on later centuries. I was at first attracted by the problem of his relationship to earlier Stoic philosophy, but before long I found myself fascinated by his philosophical achievement for its own sake.

The twelve essays collected here represent fifteen years of work on Seneca. The earliest, 'Seneca and Psychological Dualism', was first written in 1989, and the most recent, 'Seneca and Self Assertion', was revised for a seminar at the University of Paris in May 2004. With the exception of 'Rules and Reasoning in Stoic Ethics', all were composed originally for presentation at one conference or another and I have not made a concerted effort to erase the evidence of oral delivery; similarly, I have not updated various references to the currency of various pieces of secondary literature which are embedded in many of the essays.

In each of these essays I approach Seneca from the standpoint of an historian of philosophy and not that of a student of Latin

literature or Roman cultural history. In order to do so I have tried to take as much account as possible of the historical facts about Seneca: his life, his education, his intellectual and literary background, his career and self-presentation as an author. Within that framework I have made the charitable assumption that Seneca thought and worked as a philosopher, despite his social standing. But I have tried not to extend this charity beyond the limits of plausibility in the interpretation of Seneca's work. What has emerged from this lengthy exercise in reading Seneca philosophically has surprised me. Once it became clear that I was in fact engaged in a long-term project on Seneca, I naïvely expected that a coherent general picture of Seneca's philosophical methods and commitments would readily emerge, a picture that might serve as the basis for a unified treatment of Seneca as a philosopher.

But such a general picture (if indeed there is one lurking in the rich tapestry of Seneca's prose works) has not yet emerged, at least not clearly enough to sustain generalizations that might rise above the banal. It is clear, of course, that Seneca is a highly intelligent, discerning, and well-read Stoic, though a Stoic with a strong inclination to think for himself in the context of an intellectual climate teeming with influences from other schools. And it is clear too that this inclination was facilitated by the fact that Seneca did not teach or study Stoic philosophy in a professional setting and spent much of his intellectual life interacting with broader influences in the political, cultural, and literary climate of Rome. The evidence of his works also shows, I think, that Seneca's intellectual engagement with Platonism, Aristotelianism, and even with Epicureanism was shaped by a wide range of substantial philosophical interests and concerns, and not by a dubious project of philosophical harmonization, as has often been assumed. There is no doubt that his philosophy was shaped by the fact that he was a Roman, but he was a philosopher shaped by his culture rather than a Roman writer blundering about among philosophical themes, as he has often been portrayed. But these observations are not novel and there

would be little of interest in a repeated and systematic illustration of the fact that Seneca is a product of his place and time.

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The philosophical interest of various aspects of Seneca's prose writings, whether identified by focusing on a particular work or on a theme running through a range of works, seems undeniable. Yet it is premature, I think, to generalize about an overall intellectual agenda or general philosophical method; at this point I am inclined to conclude that his philosophical *ingenium* probably worked itself out in a fundamentally particularistic way as he pursued aspects of Stoicism that engaged him most forcefully over the course of a long and active life as a writer. Nevertheless, it may be of some use to reflect for a moment on some of the philosophical issues and themes which connect the twelve essays collected in this volume.

The reader will notice very quickly an emphasis on the conservatism of Seneca's moral psychology. He was once thought of as a revisionist in this area of philosophy, but on more critical scrutiny he turns out to be closer to earlier Stoics than has been thought on issues of the passions, the structure of the soul, the nature of the 'will' and the 'self', and so forth. This is argued in Chapters 2, 5, and 12 (and to some extent also in Chapter 11). At the same time, Stoicism itself emerges as being less sharply distinct from 'Platonism' than used to be thought.

Despite this conservatism, though, Seneca appears as an original and innovative exponent of Stoic doctrine, one whose distinctive contribution seems to be a sensitivity to the value of first-hand experience in ethics and moral psychology. Seneca's attention to the 'ordinary man' rather than to the sage is a product of his epistemic humility: in many areas of philosophy the best evidence just *is* first-hand experience and Seneca turns to this to balance the occasional excesses of earlier theorizing. This does not entail major philosophical change, but it does reflect a new intellectual context for his work and a markedly different sensibility than the one which is often imagined for the leaders of the Stoic school in its Athenian period.

Sensitivity to the fact that human beings operate in sub-optimal epistemological circumstances is also reflected in Seneca's discussions of moral theory. This aspect of Seneca's thought, which no doubt underlies the traditional view that Seneca was locked in the embrace of 'middle Stoicism' and cared primarily to develop a second-best moral standard for non-sages, is prominent in Chapters 3, 4, and 7. (These philosophical concerns with the character of epistemic justification are quite general in Seneca, as is shown by his approach to physics, discussed in Chapter 6.) A closely related facet of Seneca's development of Stoic moral theory is his nuanced (and to my mind still traditional) approach to moral rules and natural 'law', a theme which links Chapters 4 and 8 quite closely. Seneca shows himself to be well attuned to situational variability in moral reasoning (much as Aristotle was); again, this is a theme which connects Chapters 4 and 7. Seneca's concentration on the centrality to human beings of social connectedness (as seen in Chapter 3) is also common ground with Aristotle, among others. But this should not, I think, lead us to conclude that Seneca was particularly drawn towards Aristotelian doctrine (any more than other Stoics were), for in ethics he is often quite sharply critical of the Peripatetics. Like many Stoics, Seneca has a powerful interest in and sympathy for the Platonic branch of the Socratic intellectual family. Chapters 8, 9, 10, and 11 reflect this leaning towards 'Platonism', just as Chapters 4 and 10 attest to his interest in the usefulness in ethics of the idealized sage of earlier Stoicism. These interests cohere with Seneca's awareness of the precarious position of human beings poised between the divine and the animal and with the appeal for him of Socratic and Platonic moral rigorism. They underlie his fascination with the nature of rationality, the one trait that unites human nature with the divine and separates us from irrational beasts.

The Socratic tradition had concentrated from the beginning on the importance of improving one's character in order to make possible the living of a happy life. The sage may have reached that goal, but most human beings need to work quite hard to achieve an even slightly improved state. Chapters 5, 9, and 12 reflect Seneca's concern, both theoretical and practical, with the

need for moral self-improvement and I argue in those essays that this intense engagement with the techniques of self-improvement is built on an essentially conservative form of Stoicism; and yet because of Seneca's unique literary and rhetorical approach we find that his works have provoked more innovation in the Western philosophical tradition of moral psychology and ethics than is evident in his own works. Seneca's considerable impact on the later tradition should not, I argue, lead us to read those novelties back into his works; but at the same time it would be sheer stubbornness not to recognize the innovative impact his work has had over the centuries.

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It is my hope that philosophers and historians of philosophy will find in at least some of these essays clear support for the view that Seneca is a serious philosophical presence in the Western tradition, worth the time and energy demanded by the study of a body of writing rendered less accessible by the author's literary genius and bravado, by the foreignness of his genres, and by the relative neglect of his philosophy since the seventeenth century. I hope also that those with a passion for Latin prose literature or a deep engagement with the twists and turns of elite Roman culture in the post-Augustan era will be convinced that the philosophy in Seneca's work is a central preoccupation rather than an elaborate excuse for stylistic and rhetorical fireworks; that a just appreciation of his accomplishments as a prose author demands more than the superficial familiarity with Stoicism and other philosophical schools that can be derived from handbooks and general histories; and that a full understanding of Seneca's literary achievement cannot come without the deep and uncompromising engagement in philosophy which Seneca, in his own day, saw as necessary for anyone with an aspiration to live a fully satisfactory human life.

I have not said a word about Seneca's poetic works, his dramas. In these essays I have focused exclusively on the prose corpus. I do so not because I think the dramas are inferior or uninteresting, nor even because I think that Seneca's philosophical commitments are irrelevant to the dramas. My decision rests partly on a sense of my own limitations and partly on the

conviction that any philosophical influence probably runs from the prose works to the plays rather than the other way around. Perhaps if one could achieve a more global philosophical assessment of Seneca than I have done it would be wise to revisit this issue, but until then I think common sense dictates that I avoid explaining the *incertum per incertius*.¹ For the purposes of this collection, Seneca the philosopher writes in prose.

¹ My best guess about the way Seneca's philosophical convictions affect his dramas is still summed up in what I said in my review of Thomas Rosenmeyer's *Senecan Drama and Stoic Cosmology* in *Classical Philology* 86 (1991), 248–52.