

CURING HUMAN MISERY: A STUDY OF SENECA'S MORAL PHILOSOPHY

by

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DEDICATION

For Dena & Charlotte

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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation I outline and argue for a new approach to Seneca's moral philosophy – with particular emphasis on the notion that human misery can only be eliminated through philosophy. I argue that a careful reading of Seneca's philosophical texts reveal that a concern for philosophical progress dominates Seneca's writing. This concern manifests itself both in what might be called practical projects in Seneca's philosophical work – including his approaches to reading, writing, teaching, and advising his audience – and in his more theoretical accounts of the nature of philosophy and its role in producing a sound mind. Seneca's concern for philosophical progress shapes his works both substantively and methodologically. This is true of his account of the nature of philosophy and the structure of philosophical discourse, his understanding of philosophical pedagogy, and his approach to reading and writing philosophical texts. The concern for progress is perhaps most pressing on the issue of the emotions. Here, too, Seneca is devoted to helping the audience in a principled, if restrained, way. I argue that Seneca's conception of philosophy as therapy is both more subtle and more successful than those accounts available from his Stoic predecessors.

INTRODUCTION

Sapientia perfectum bonum est mentis humanae. Philosophia sapientiae amor est ad adfectatio. Haec eo tendit, quo illa pervenit.

Wisdom is the perfect good of the human mind. Philosophy is the love of wisdom and the endeavor to attain it. The latter strives toward the goal which the former has already reached. Seneca, *Ep.* 89.4 (*trans.* Gummere)

Qui ad philosophum venit, cotidie aliquid secum boni ferat: aut sanior domum redeat aut sanibilior. Redibit autem; ea philosophiae vis est, ut non studentes, sed etiam conversantes iuuet. Qui in solem venit, licet non in hoc venerit, colorabitur; qui in unguentaria taberna resederunt et paullo diutius commorati sunt, odorum secum loci ferunt. Et qui ad philosophum fuerunt, traxerint aliquid necesse est, quod prodesset etiam neglegentibus.

He who comes to a philosopher should everyday take away with him something good: he should return home a sounder man or in the way to become sounder. And he will thus return; for such is the power of philosophy that it helps not only those who study her, but also those who associate with her. He that walks in the sun, though he walk not for that purpose, must needs become sunburned. He who frequents the perfumer's shop and lingers even for a short time, will carry with him the scent of the place. And he who follows a philosopher is bound to derive some benefit therefrom, which will help him even though he be remiss. *Ep.* 108.4 (*trans.* Gummere, with modifications).

These passages from his *Epistles to Lucilius* (*Ep.*) indicate Seneca's commitment to the idea that the study and practice of philosophy are capable of improving the lives of those who pursue them. Philosophy, moreover, is a pursuit which promises to help not only those who adopt it but also those who encounter it in less direct – or perhaps, less active – ways. For Seneca, then, philosophy both involves a striving for the human good – i.e., wisdom – in the minds of those who adopt it for themselves and also promises to benefit, in some way, those who encounter it. Seneca's statements here about philosophy

and its power, though they are broader in scope, find precursors in the early Stoa. Chrysippus held that Stoic principles concerning the nature and appropriateness of emotions, for example, can be brought to bear on – and effect psychological improvement in – even those who have exactly the wrong beliefs, according to the Stoics, about the good.¹ Cicero, though not a Stoic, defends the Stoic therapeutic recommendations – together with the definition of emotions they involve – against the Peripatetic doctrines.² What Chrysippus, the Cicero of the *Tusculan Disputations*, and Seneca have in common, then, is a commitment to the idea that Stoic philosophy is successful as a kind of psychotherapy. The broad objective of my project is to articulate and evaluate Seneca’s defense of the therapeutic effectiveness of philosophy.

Though the effectiveness of Stoic therapy has recently received attention³, Seneca’s contribution to the Stoic position is not well understood. There are a number of reasons for this. I will consider two related ones here. First, for someone concerned to evaluate the – or a – Stoic account of the effectiveness of philosophy as therapy, Seneca’s philosophical work is not the obvious starting point. Such accounts are typically concerned primarily, if not exclusively, with the effectiveness of Stoic therapy in eradicating the emotions. Though Seneca’s letters and other works contain much that is relevant, the only place where Seneca gives the kind of theoretical treatment of the

¹ Cf. Origen, *Against Celsus* 8.51 = SVF 3.474

² Cicero, *TD*, IV.34 ff.

³ Cf. especially, Nussbaum (1994), Williams (1994), and Sorabji (1997)(2000).

emotions which can be usefully compared to the *loci classici*⁴ is in the first four chapters of *De Ira*, II. Since these chapters admit of interpretation independently of the rest of Seneca's philosophical work, they are often so treated. Second, perhaps because of a tendency among scholars to emphasize the unity and cohesiveness of Stoicism, relatively little attention is given to the idiosyncrasies of particular Stoic authors. Though there are exceptions to this⁵, serious attempts to understand Seneca's philosophical approach, or what might be called *Seneca's Stoicism*, have not yet fully addressed those features of his philosophical writing that are relevant to the question of the effectiveness of philosophy as therapy.

My aim in the dissertation is to take up this last task. While it is clear that Seneca thinks Stoic philosophy is effective in improving lives, the details of his position are not well understood. In particular, Seneca's position on *how* philosophy can succeed in this enterprise remains obscure. Aside from this, it is not generally recognized that the kinds of improvement that occupy Seneca's attention are wider ranging than those typically associated with Stoic therapy. I address these two issues in a number of ways in the dissertation.

First, the question of how Seneca thinks philosophy can improve lives is inextricably linked to questions about his style. This is because, aside from thinking about and working out *how* philosophy can achieve its end, Seneca aims, in his writing,

⁴ Cf. e.g., Long & Sedley (1987), 65; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* VII, 111 ff; Arius Didymus, *Epitome of Stoic Ethics*, 9-10e; Cicero, *TD*, III-IV.

⁵ Most notably A. A. Long's account of the philosophy of Epictetus in Long (2002).

to actually *do* this. Unlike the expositions of Stoic ethics which survive in the doxographical texts and even in Cicero's texts, Seneca's texts are not catalogues or summaries of Stoic philosophy and the arguments for its positions. Though his deep familiarity with the latter is clear in his works, his aim is simply not to re-convey them to his audience. Seneca is explicit about his policy. He has no interest in merely re-tracing the steps of those who have come before. Instead, he devotes his philosophical writing to advancing the aims of philosophy in the ways he deems appropriate. Seneca's positions on what advancements are appropriate and on the proper ways of moving forward are thus in need of attention. Such attention, I argue, rewards the effort, since it reveals that Seneca's understanding of philosophy as therapy – and his implementation of its resources in bringing about improvement in the condition of his audience – is more comprehensive than that found in or reconstructed from other Stoic sources.

Attention to Seneca's aims as a writer helps to clarify the second issue raised above – namely the question of the scope of philosophy's therapeutic promise. It is helpful to distinguish from the outset two ways in which the notion of philosophy as therapy can be understood. Recent work on Stoic philosophy has tended to construe therapy narrowly as addressing itself primarily to the emotions. Such a construal is not without precedent. Cicero conceives of the question of Stoic therapy is roughly this way in the *Tusculan Disputations* and it is clear from our sources that Chrysippus and later Posidonius were also concerned with the effectiveness of Stoic principles in eradicating the emotions.⁶ Seneca is also very clearly concerned with how philosophy may address

⁶ Cf. Cicero, *TD*. III.5 ff. & Galen, *PHP* 4-5.

itself to emotional disturbances. He is also concerned, however, with what can be identified as a much broader notion of therapy. According to this broader notion, philosophy's concern is not simply that of administering 'cures' to those who are afflicted by emotional states, but is more broadly that of bringing about an improvement in the minds of both *studentes* (those studying it) and *conversantes* (those who encounter it). The improvements Stoic philosophy *qua* therapy – construed broadly – addresses include the extirpation of emotions as but one aim among many. Seneca's conception of philosophy is not, then, one according to which philosophy – aside from whatever else it is – is something that happens to be useful in settling emotional disturbances. Seneca sees philosophy as nothing other than a pursuit which aims to rid the mind of all ills that are obstacles to having a *mens bona*. This of course includes emotions but also extends more widely to, among other ills, non-virtuous dispositions, false beliefs, and bad forms of reasoning.

These two kinds of questions – about Seneca's method and his conception of the aims of philosophy – are the focus of the first three chapters of the dissertation. Each of these three chapters investigates an aspect of Seneca's philosophical writing that is relevant to these. I begin, in Chapter 1, with an investigation of Seneca's account of the nature of philosophy and his relation to it. I argue that there are two important strands in Seneca's thinking about philosophy that are relevant to understanding his own aims. First, Seneca conceives of philosophy as a tradition to which he is himself an inheritor and contributor. His task, as he conceives it, is that of advancing – rather than simply taking up – philosophy. This strand of Seneca's thinking distinguishes his writing from

those Stoic texts which survive in doxographies. Seneca does not completely reject the framework which he receives from his predecessors, but neither does he simply take it as it is. His stance is best understood as one of forward-looking reverence of the past. While the first strand of Seneca's thinking about philosophy is primarily in terms of philosophy as an ongoing tradition, the second concerns Seneca's thinking about the nature of philosophy as the pursuit of wisdom. Seneca, I argue, is deeply committed to the idea that philosophy is something that aims beyond itself. His commitment to this gets expressed in a number of ways in his work. I focus in this chapter on Seneca's account of the structure of philosophical investigation. His account of the subdivision of philosophical discourse into the standard (Hellenistic) grouping of ethics, physics, and logic is distinctive in that he defines each subdivision functionally in terms of the particular contribution it makes to the overall aim of philosophy – i.e., achieving wisdom. For Seneca, one who is pursuing philosophy must remain constantly focused on this goal.

The features of Seneca's conception of philosophy addressed in Chapter 1 support two theses that are important for moving forward. The first thesis is methodological. Given Seneca's conception of philosophy and his relation to it, and given that he is himself guided by this conception, it is important that any account of his philosophical output take into consideration his idiosyncrasies. Simply put, it is a mistake to ignore the uniqueness (whether in style or substance, or both) of the philosophical approach of a philosopher who professes his freedom and independence from his own authorities. The second thesis is substantive. Seneca's texts indicate that his conception of the *vis philosophiae* (power of philosophy) largely determines his understanding of philosophy

itself. The parts of philosophy are divided according to what role they serve in bringing about the goal. Unlike other Stoic accounts of the division of philosophy, Seneca's is not concerned with outlining the content to be studied under each part. Rather, the parts of philosophy which Seneca outlines are best understood as criteria for inclusion in philosophical study. In Seneca's view, whether something counts as worthwhile depends on whether it plays some role in advancing toward wisdom. All of this suggests that the question whether philosophy can serve as a form of therapy would seem a strange question to Seneca. For him, philosophy just *is* therapy – construed in the broad sense above. Asking whether philosophy can serve as therapy amounts to asking whether philosophy can achieve its aim.

I turn, in Chapters 2 and 3, to an account of how Seneca thinks philosophy can achieve its aim. In these chapters, I employ the same general interpretative strategy. In each chapter I focus on a feature of Seneca's writing that is peculiar to him and which clarifies his understanding of how philosophy can achieve its end. In Chapter 2, I focus on the fact that Seneca sees himself as both a philosopher and a teacher. Seneca has much to say about the nature of moral education. But more importantly than this, Seneca is consistent in keeping to his principles when he endeavors – as he does in most of his philosophical works – to bring about the moral improvement of himself and others. I argue that Seneca's understanding of the constraints on teaching and learning philosophy, and more broadly on moral improvement, inform and guide his philosophical writing. These roles bring certain constraints and obligations which set boundaries, which Seneca recognizes, for what he can and cannot accomplish. A teacher, for example, cannot *force*

a pupil to learn, though she can provide instructions, advice, and support to aid the pupil's learning.

Seneca's account of moral education and his implementation of it provide further support for the methodological and substantive claims above. In addition to this, however, Seneca's attention to the nuances of education, properly understood, provides a new starting point for an account of his philosophical writing. It is sometimes claimed, and not without some support, that Seneca is uncharacteristically (for a Stoic) inattentive to the importance of certain kinds of intellectual pursuits. Part of what seems to substantiate this kind of worry about Seneca's work is the fact that Seneca seems to favor a form of discourse that is highly rhetorical. The account of moral progress and moral education that I identify in Chapter 2, however, suggests that this kind of criticism of Seneca (or Seneca's Stoicism) largely misses the mark. It does so because it fails to take into account Seneca's careful thinking about how one makes progress at all stages.

A general result of Chapter 2 is that there is good reason – given Seneca's thinking about an implementation of the proper program for moral improvement – to reconsider certain of his literary practices. In Chapter 3, I pursue this by looking at one feature of Seneca's style – his widespread use of certain rhetorical devices – that has seemed a point of difficulty in understanding Seneca's approach. I focus in this chapter on Seneca's use of *exempla* (illustrations) in moral arguments. Many of these *exempla* seem aimed at provoking an emotional reaction in the reader. While such an aim is not unexpected in Roman oratory, it does not sit comfortably with the Stoic principle that emotions are or involve false judgments – and are, as a result, to be avoided or extirpated.

The argument of this chapter begins from premises developed and supported in the previous chapter. Seneca is committed to and seriously engaged with promoting the moral improvement of his readers. He recognizes that achieving this aim requires negotiating a variety of cultural, epistemological, and psychological constraints which obstruct the progress of his audience. Drawing on these considerations, I argue that although Seneca clearly in some cases misses the mark, his objectives in the use of *exempla* are governed in a principled way by his understanding of the very constraints which he aims to navigate. Seneca's objective in the use of *exempla* is to bring about an improvement in the psychological states of his audience.

The conclusion that Seneca's use of *exempla* is principled is supported by two features of Seneca's conception of moral reasoning. First, Seneca recognizes that the quality of people's reasoning is affected by their psychological state. For some – for example, those afflicted by certain emotions or false beliefs – arguments will not be effective as first measures. Such people must be shocked or dazzled by *exempla*. For these people, the *exempla* aim to prepare them for serious arguments by *forcing* their reasoning in certain ways. Seneca often uses *exempla* to force his audience to the correct beliefs, though such forcing is not itself an irrational process. Seneca carefully chooses *exempla* which encourage a certain kind of self-awareness as the beginning of moral reasoning. A second feature of moral reasoning that is important for understanding Seneca's use of *exempla* takes into account that Seneca's audience is diverse in terms of their psychological states. Aside from aiming to bring those who are emotionally affected around to the correct beliefs, Seneca intends the *exempla* to play a role in the

reasoning of those who are already susceptible to correct reasoning. For this group of readers, Seneca's *exempla* provide the resources for drawing important conceptual connections relevant to the lesson at hand. It is expected that this group of readers focus, as Seneca advises, not on the style or ornamentation – i.e., not on the *verba* – of the *exempla*, but rather on their substance - the *res*.

The idea that Seneca's use of *exempla* functions at two levels gains support from further considerations about peculiarities of Seneca's authorship and his aim to promote the improvement of his audience. Seneca's reports about his own experiences of reading and his exhortations to Lucilius show that he takes seriously that written works – unlike lectures or conversations – can and should be re-read. This feature of texts places constraints on an author about what should be included given that the aim of the text is to promote improvement.

The first three chapters of the dissertation serve two roles in the overall project. First, they provide some much needed methodological insights. Seneca is often quite explicit about his aims and methods. Taking these kinds of claims into consideration makes it possible see Seneca's philosophical projects on their own terms. Secondly, though, these chapters point the way forward to an examination of Seneca's thinking about the promise of philosophy in actually bringing about improvement in the lives of those who are affected by it. This issue is explored in Chapters 4 and 5.

The question explored in Chapters 4 and 5 partly coincides with a question about Stoic philosophy that has a long history. That question is whether Stoic 'therapy' – the part of Stoic doctrine and practice that is aimed at eliminating the emotions – is effective.

This is a question that engaged Cicero and continues to engage commentators now.⁷ I will argue that Seneca's response to this question is both novel and more satisfactory than any in the extant sources. Seneca's success, however, in resolving the issues that arise in this debate is largely the result of his distinctive approach to philosophy. Now equipped with a general strategy for reading Seneca's texts, I begin the task (anew) of searching for Seneca's answer to this question.

I begin, in Chapter 4, with a discussion of the debate surrounding the effectiveness of Stoic therapy. I then turn to Seneca's texts and ask what, if anything, Seneca contributes to this debate. I argue that Seneca is keenly interested in this question, though not in its usual form. The usual question – the one posed by Cicero and by modern interpreters – is whether the Stoic recommendations can succeed in eradicating emotions, which the Stoics hold to involve false judgments about value. Seneca, I argue, would think that this question is far too narrow – and that an answer that is accordingly narrow would be inadequate. For Seneca, the power of philosophy must be understood *as a whole*. Philosophy, on his view, promises to improve the lives of those who pursue it not just by eradicating the emotions, but more broadly by transforming the mind in such a way that the whole host of faults – not just emotions – that plague the minds of those who are not wise are eradicated. Indeed, the emotions are themselves best understood as symptoms of other faults. Philosophy must begin by

⁷ Most recently between Nussbaum (1994) & Sorabji (1997) both of whom defend the thesis (though Sorabji has some qualifications) and Williams (1994) and (1997) who argues against its plausibility.

addressing the underlying problems – especially false beliefs – of which emotions are symptomatic.

The main point of Chapter 4 is not to deny that the question of whether philosophy can succeed as therapy in the narrow sense described above is important, but rather to show that Seneca's answer to this narrower question must be understood as part of a much broader philosophical approach to promoting a *mens bona*. Though Stoic therapy is often criticized for its failure to recognize the complexity of human psychology, I outline an argument in Chapter 4 that this cannot be said of Seneca. Seneca's attention to the nuances of human psychology – as these relate to learning, reading, and moral reasoning – shows that he is well aware of such complexity.

An important result of Chapter 4 is the conclusion that for Seneca, philosophy can succeed in ridding the mind of emotions but only by transforming one's mind and character in the appropriate ways. Such a transformation is one that one must do for oneself. Thus philosophy, on the one hand, is therapeutic in the relevant sense. Through philosophy, that is, the emotions can be eradicated. This sense of therapy, however, is one that strains the usual models for understanding therapy. It strains the models because of the fact that Seneca's account of philosophy as therapy is one according to which one can only be 'cured' through one's own efforts. Seneca does not hold that arguments can be 'administered' in the manner of physical remedies to produce a sound mind. Genuinely curing the mind is something that one must do for oneself. Neither Seneca nor any other authority or expert can bring about this result in another.

In one way, this result is surprising given the rivalry among the ancient – particularly Hellenistic – schools in terms of their efficacy in eliminating or controlling the emotions. Seneca’s view is one according to which the philosopher cannot help one – that is, one who is advanced in her progress toward wisdom - who is seeking to eliminate emotions. Such a person must do the work themselves.

This conclusion of Chapter 4 is surprising in another way as well. Given Seneca’s commitment to the idea that a genuine cure can only be produced by oneself, much of his philosophical corpus may seem to lack solid grounding. Chapters 1 through 3 have shown the various ways in which Seneca’s concern for moral progress shape his thinking about philosophy, the philosopher’s goals, and philosophical study, yet the conception of philosophy as something which requires that one ultimately go it alone calls such concern into question. To put the point more sharply: if success in philosophy is ultimately achieved through a solitary venture, then why is Seneca occupied with what are best recognized as therapeutic texts – especially his *Consolations*? It would seem that in these texts Seneca aims to do the very thing which, by his own lights, one cannot do for another – namely, rid the mind of an emotion.

The answer to this is the topic of Chapter 5. I focus in this chapter on Seneca’s *Consolation to Marcia*. I argue that a proper understanding of Seneca’s aims in this text – and other similar texts – illustrates yet again Seneca’s concern and careful thought about philosophical progress. Though it remains true that the ‘cure’ that philosophy promises requires, ultimately, a solitary venture, it is nonetheless true that one must begin somewhere. Seneca’s real aim in the *Consolation to Marcia* is not to rid the reader of an

emotion, but rather to help the reader make a beginning. Seneca's arguments here succeed not in eliminating grief, but in calling into question the reader's perspective. The arguments call upon the reader to re-evaluate her beliefs, herself, and the ways she reasons about important matters. Seneca's attention to arguments of the kind that achieve this again shows that he harbors no illusions about curing the reader. Instead, he aims to help the reader by helping them acquire a perspective from which they can begin to make progress.

CHAPTER 1: SENECA'S PRESENTATION OF PHILOSOPHY

1. Introduction.

The problem that I begin to solve in this chapter is one that has far reaching implications for our understanding of Seneca's philosophical work. I begin here with a brief sketch of these implications. The problem is this: The study of Seneca's philosophical texts – here I am concerned primarily with his *Epistles to Lucilius* (*Ep*), his treatises on ethical topics known as the *Dialogi*, and his *Natural Questions* (*NQ*), a treatise on physics – has not yielded any coherent general account of Seneca's philosophy. While it is possible that no such account is available because Seneca's philosophical texts do not reflect any coherent philosophical outlook, such an interpretation itself requires an argument. As things stand, failure to account for Seneca's philosophical texts in a general way, and on their own terms, has led to an unfortunate trend in the study of Stoicism. If one ignores or discounts the possibility that Seneca's texts are unified by his own conception of philosophy, then one can find in his corpus evidence for a variety of contrary claims. What is needed is a clearer account of Seneca's conception of philosophy. How Seneca himself regards the pursuit of wisdom and how he sees himself in relation to his own tradition are the first topics of this chapter. I argue that we can learn much about Seneca *qua* philosopher by attending on the one hand to his accounts of the history and structure of philosophy and, on the other, to the ways in which he advances that history. What emerges from this line of inquiry is a clearer account of Seneca's conception of philosophy which can inform and provide a basis for

more careful investigation of Seneca's ethics, which will be the focus of the following chapters.

2. Seneca and the Stoic Tradition

Seneca's remarks on the appropriate stance toward Stoic teachings appear throughout the *Ep.* I begin here with *Ep.* 33. Here Seneca opens the letter by responding to a request that he close his letters with Stoic 'utterances' (*vocas*)¹. Seneca understands this as a request for maxims, which the reader might commit to memory. Seneca makes use of this context to say something about what the philosopher's concern with the writings and teachings of his school's authorities should be. His first point is that while certain philosophical principles, once excerpted, can have an effect on the learner, this effect is achieved for the wrong reasons. The learner perhaps remembers such utterances, but only because they are delivered out of context, not because of their connection with the rest of the theory. Though the practice is useful for beginners and children, it is not one that the philosopher should favor. In particular, is not one which Lucilius, who is portrayed as one who is making progress, should favor.² This discussion gives way to Seneca's second – and main – point of the letter. This is the claim that it is not the job of the philosopher to memorize the wisdom of distinguished men, but rather to make that

¹ Here, and throughout, I rely, for the *Ep.*, primarily on the Loeb translation of R. M. Gummere, with occasional modifications.

² On Lucilius' progress, cf. eg., *Ep.* 4.1, 5.1, 10.3, 34, 35.1

wisdom his own. “Knowing”, he says, “is making each thing one’s own” (*scire est et sua facere quaeque*).(*Ep.* 33.8).

Seneca discusses in greater detail here what it means to make the wisdom of distinguished men one’s own. Two important aspects of this emerge from the following texts:

Certi profectus viro captare flosculos turpe est et fulcire se notissimis ac paucissimis vocibus et memoria stare; sibi iam innitatur. Dicat ista, non teneat. Turpe est enim seni aut prospicienti senectutem ex commentario sapere. “Hoc Zenon dixit”; tu quid? “Hoc Cleanthes”; tu quid? Quousque sub alio moveris? Impera et dic, quod memoriae tradatur. Aliquid de tuo profer.

For a man, however, whose progress is definite, to chase after choice extracts and to prop his weakness by the best known and the briefest sayings and to depend upon his memory, is disgraceful; it is time for him to lean on himself. He should make such maxims and not memorize them. For it is disgraceful even for an old man, or one who has sighted old age, to have a note-book knowledge. “This is what Zeno said.” But what have you yourself said? “This is the opinion of Cleanthes.” But what is your own opinion? How long shall you march under another man’s orders? Take command, and utter some word which posterity will remember. Put forth something from your own stock. (*Ep.* 33.7)

Numquam autem inveniatur si contenti fuerimus inventis. Praeterea qui alium sequitur, nihil invenit, immo nec quaerit. Quid ergo? Non ibo per priorum vestigia? Ego vero utar via vetere, se se propriorem planioremque invenero, hanc muniam. Qui ante nos ista moverunt, non domini nostri, sed duces sunt. Patet omnibus veritas, nondum est occupata.

...the truth will never be discovered if we rest contented with discoveries already made. Besides, he who follows another not only discovers nothing, but is not even investigating. What then? Shall I not follow in the footsteps of my predecessors? I shall indeed use the old road, but if I find one that makes a shorter cut and is smoother to travel, I shall open the new road. Men who have made these discoveries before us are not our masters, but our guides. Truth lies open for all; it has not yet been monopolized. (*Ep.* 33.10-11).

These texts bring out two aspects of the philosopher's task. First, the philosopher's task is that of gaining knowledge in such a way that it is 'his own'. This way of knowing is contrasted with 'note-book' knowledge (*ex commentario sapere*). While note-book knowledge enables its possessor to recite what others have said, the philosopher's knowledge enables its possessor to 'make' such maxims. The exhortation to 'put something forward from your own stock' is an exhortation to engage reason in an active way, rather than merely memorizing another's words. It is possible that Seneca's remarks here are partly aimed at the Epicurean practice of memorizing Epicurus' words. To the extent that followers of Epicurus aimed only at *ex commentario sapere*, Seneca would find the practice objectionable. Seneca's deeper concern, however, is not with a particular school's practice, but more generally with thinking of philosophy as a venture in which success can be determined by what one has memorized, what one can recite, or what one can point to in the texts or thought of another. On Seneca's view, success in philosophy requires more than this. It requires activity that goes beyond what one gains by the possession of note-book knowledge.³ The genuine pursuit of wisdom, on Seneca's view, is a pursuit not merely of facts – Zeno says this, Cleanthes that – but of a certain way of thinking and a certain perspective.

The second feature of the philosopher's knowledge is that the philosopher does not see himself as commanded by his predecessors to proceed in a certain direction. Seneca does not take himself to be entirely restricted to the methods or the arguments of his predecessors. If he discovers a new argument or method that moves to the truth by a

³ This point will be taken up in detail in Chapter 2.

route that makes a ‘shorter cut’ or that is ‘smoother to travel’, he will take it. Indeed, Seneca professes, at *de Otio* 1.3, that he is not even bound to any detail of Stoic theory merely because Zeno or Chrysippus taught it:

Hoc Stoicis quoque placere ostendam, non quia mihi legem dixerim nihil contra dictum Zenonis Chrysippive committere, sed quia res ipsa patitur me ire in illorum sententiam, quoniam si quis semper unius sequitur, non in curia sed in factione est. Utinam quidem iam tenerentur omnia et in aperto confessa veritas esset nihilque ex decretis mutaremus! Nunc veritatem cum eis ipsis quae docent quaerimus.

I will show that the Stoics also accept this, not because I have made it a rule not to say anything against the word of Zeno or Chrysippus, but because the matter itself allows me to accept their view; for if anyone always follows one person’s view, his place is not in the senate, but in a faction. Would that all things were now understood, that truth were uncovered and revealed, and that we never altered our mandates! As it is, we are in search of truth in company with the very men who teach it. (*de Otio* 1.3)⁴

Here Seneca echoes the earlier claim (*Ep.* 33.10-1) that his commitment is not to any individual’s words, but to the truth. These passages suggest that though Seneca is committed to Stoicism, he is not committed to any position *merely* because it is the Stoic position. This is an important corollary to the requirement that one produce something ‘from one’s own stock’. The passage from *de Otio* emphasizes the importance of doing one’s own work in coming to see the truth of philosophical principles instead of merely relying on the work – and words – of others. This passage also reinforces Seneca’s commitment to his own independence in working through the philosophical commitments of his school.

⁴ Translation from Basore (1990) with modifications.

It is my contention that Seneca is committed to these principles – his philosophical independence, the concern to make what one has learned ‘one’s own’, and his concern with the truth, rather than the provenance, of philosophical theses – throughout his philosophical works. Indeed, for his commitment to these, he has drawn criticism from interpreters like John Cooper who charge him with ignoring – or coming dangerously close to ignoring – central Stoic doctrines.⁵ The charge, however, is perhaps too quick for the following reason. The texts from *Ep.* 33 at least suggest that Seneca sees the two tasks of the philosopher as connected in an important way. The philosopher’s knowledge, which must go beyond mere note-book knowledge, necessarily requires understanding of Stoic principles. Without this knowledge, the philosopher is and will remain unable to perform the task Seneca encourages in his audience – that of making one’s own pronouncements of topics of philosophical concern. The call here should not be understood as one to simply say something different from Zeno or Cleanthes, but rather as a call to express the truths of Stoicism in a way that is ‘from one’s own stock’ – that is, in a way that makes sense of one’s own time, place, and role in the cosmos. This is how Seneca conceives the philosopher’s – and his own – task.

Seneca confirms this in *Ep.* 64:

Veneror itaque inventa sapientiae inventoresque; adire tamquam multorum hereditatem iuvat. Mihi ista acquisita, mihi laborata sunt. Sed agamus bonum patrem familiae, faciamus ampliora, qua accepimus. Maior ista hereditas a me ad posteros transeat. Multum adhuc restat operis multumque restabit, nec ulli nato post mille saecula praecludetur occasio aliquid adhuc adiciendi.

⁵ Cf. Cooper, 2004.

...I worship the discoveries of wisdom and their discoverers; to enter, as it were, into the inheritance of many predecessors is a delight. It was for me that they laid up this treasure; it was for me that they toiled. But we should play the part of a careful householder; we should increase what we have inherited. This inheritance shall pass from me to my descendants larger than before. Much still remains to do, and much will always remain, and he who shall be born a thousand ages hence will not be barred from his opportunity of adding something further. (*Ep.* 64.7).

In what follows Seneca considers what to do about the discoveries that have already been made. Even in these cases - e.g., cures for the eye and the passions of the soul - though some general cures are known, the task remains to the philosopher to sort out the means, time and manner of their application. "Our predecessors" Seneca says, "have worked much improvement, but have not worked out the problem" (*Ep.* 64.9).⁶

The inheritance language in *Ep.* 64 should be read as a compliment to the language of roads in *Ep.* 33. The inheritance that is received from the early Stoics is something to be preserved, but mere preservation would be a form of mismanagement. It is the philosopher's task to both make the inheritance his own and to improve upon it for future recipients.

I propose, on the basis of Seneca's remarks in the passages considered above, that many of Seneca's letters (and other works) are best read as philosophical texts in the sense I have been developing. In these texts, the author is committed to carrying out the tasks of the philosopher. With a robust store of principles and arguments in his inheritance, he proceeds about the twofold task of making that inheritance his own and of contributing to it. While Seneca's own contributions may be selective and more narrowly

⁶ *Multum egerunt, qui ante nos fuerunt, sed non peregerunt.*

focused on ethical topics, this should not be unexpected. Each recipient of Stoic teachings will add to it according to his own talents. The question that I am interested in here, then, is what Seneca's contribution to the inheritance is.

3. The Presentation of Philosophy

The contribution that is of interest here is neither his refinement of the psychology of action, nor his critique of Zeno's Stoic arguments, nor any other particular addition to or insight into a particular facet of Stoic doctrine. Rather, a Senecan contribution to Stoic theory crucial for understanding Seneca's philosophical project comes not in the form of an augmentation, but in what may be called his *presentation* of Stoic theory. To continue with the householder analogy, my claim is that the first thing that should be noticed about Seneca's contribution is not his addition to the household, but rather his arrangement of its initial contents. Seneca's ordering of Stoic theory, I argue, provides an important and revealing window into his philosophical thinking. His presentation of Stoic theory both reveals what projects Seneca thinks are worthwhile and provides some insight into the kind of methodology he thinks should be employed. A clear account of these is indispensable for evaluating Seneca's additions to his philosophical inheritance.

While Seneca has much to say about philosophy, his most explicit account of the structure of philosophy comes in *Ep.* 89. In the central section of this letter, Seneca considers the divisions and subdivisions of philosophy. He begins his division by following the standard Hellenistic division of philosophy into three parts – moral, natural, and rational - and argues for this division of the parts of philosophy by pointing to the

inadequacies of divisions tried by other schools (e.g., the Epicurean).⁷ Seneca's characterization of the three parts of philosophy is of some interest here. He conceives of the three parts as distinguished by their particular functions:

Primum conponit animum. Secunda rerum naturam scrutatur. Tertia proprietates verborum exigit et structuram et argumentationes, ne pro vero falsa subrepant.

The first [i.e., moral] keeps the soul in order; the second [i.e., natural] investigates the universe; the third [i.e., rational] works out the essential meanings of words, their combinations, and the proofs which keep falsehood from creeping in and displacing truth. (*Ep.* 89.9)

Seneca here gives some content to his understanding of Stoic theory on two points. First, the moral and rational parts are defined in terms of their ends – to keep the soul in order and to keep falsehood out. Second, in the case of the rational part of philosophy, we are given an account of the way in which it pursues its end – by working out an understanding of language. Seneca's brevity here on the end of the natural part of philosophy is a point of difficulty. We might conclude that the investigation of the universe simply is the end of this part. Seneca's position on this is complex given his attitude toward liberal studies. In some contexts, his eagerness to learn as much as possible about natural phenomena and their causes is apparent⁸, while in others he is highly critical of certain approaches to the study of nature. In *Ep.* 88, for example, Seneca is critical of those who “boast of their knowledge of the heavenly bodies” but who focus on the wrong features – on features the knowing of which benefits no one. His concern, consistently, is that one not be led by such studies away from the central task of

⁷ Cf. *Ep.*, 89.9-13.

⁸ Cf. *Ep.* 79, in which Seneca asks Lucilius to give accounts of Charybdis and Mt. Aetna.

philosophy as a whole. Only those investigations of nature that have some connection to one's ability to live well should be pursued.⁹ The end, then, of the natural part is not a final end, but rather an end in the service of living well – and this is the end of philosophy generally.

This last point deserves further comment, since it holds not merely for the natural part of philosophy, but for all parts. Seneca straightforwardly concedes (*Ep.* 89.2-8) that the three parts of philosophy are artificial constructions that are designed to serve as aids in the attainment of wisdom. Seneca is willing to go ahead with the division because of its usefulness for us “whose vision fails even for that which is near at hand” and who “cannot yet comprehend the universe” (89.2-3). Our situation is contrasted here with that of the wise person, whose mind “embraces the whole bulk of philosophy, surveying it with no less rapid glance than our mortal eyes survey the heavens” (89.2) Seneca continues this discussion by insisting that we bear in mind the distinction between wisdom and philosophy:

Sapientia perfectum bonum est mentis humane. Philosophia sapientiae amor est et adfectatio. Haec eo tendit, quo illa pervenit.

Wisdom is the perfect good of the human mind; philosophy is the love of wisdom, and the endeavor to attain it. The latter strives toward the goal which the former has already reached. (89.4)

One point here can be summarized as the claim that philosophy is an enterprise with a clear goal – a goal which is equivalent to the perfect good of the human mind. Another point, though, which I want to emphasize for the moment, is that the aim of philosophy

⁹ Cf. *Ep.*, 88 & 89.4-8

is, under this description, unitary: philosophy aims at wisdom. While philosophy may be considered under other, more useful descriptions – ethics, physics, logic - those descriptions must ultimately be recognized as artificial. Likewise, the philosophical tasks conceived within the parameters of philosophy as it appears under those descriptions must ultimately be recognized (though not rejected) as narrow construals of philosophy. Referring to these as ‘parts’ of philosophy is, of course, one way to emphasize this narrowness, though it may also give the impression that philosophical wisdom can be attained by independently mastering each of its parts. This view is to be rejected, and it is against this, I think, that Seneca guards in pointing out the artificial nature of divisions of philosophy. In studying each of the parts of philosophy, one must, on Seneca’s view, remain focused on the primary goal of philosophy. While knowledge of words and their meanings and of the nature of things are important, they are only genuinely important to the extent that they benefit. This is the general requirement Seneca articulates in *Ep.* 88 to distinguish philosophical from non-philosophical studies. The study of these things is only properly philosophical when it aims at wisdom – i.e., at the perfect condition of the human mind.

Seneca’s initial division of philosophy into the moral, natural and rational parts is the first stage of Seneca’s presentation of Stoic theory. While two of the parts – moral and rational – are assigned specific functions in the division, the natural part of philosophy is left, apparently, without one. Initially, this seems to be something of an oddity. The considerations above, however, suggest that ultimately the end at which the

natural part of philosophy aims is not different from the end at which the other parts aim – namely the perfect good of the human mind.¹⁰

Here it is worth mentioning an important connection between Seneca's account of the parts of philosophy and at least two debates ancient and modern about the status and role of such divisions in Stoic philosophy. First, Seneca sides with Zeno, Chrysippus and others in holding that the divisions or parts are not divisions of philosophy itself (ἡ φιλοσοφία), but are instead divisions of philosophical discourse (κατὰ φιλοσοφίαν λόγος).¹¹ This is consonant with Seneca's account of philosophy as that which aims at producing wisdom, which is a state of mind in which all that philosophy studies separately is unified. The wise person's perspective on the content of philosophical discourse is unified and whole, as Seneca indicates at *Ep.* 89.2., but for those who are not wise, the division of philosophical discourse aids progress. It is only because of its usefulness in this regard that Seneca thinks such a division is justified.

A second issue concerns how each of the three parts of philosophical discourse relate to one another. Recent work on the Stoic division of philosophy, especially that of Katerina Ierodiakonou, has made this issue much more tractable.¹² Ierodiakonou

¹⁰ The question remains, though, why Seneca does not specify the function of the natural part in more detail – or according to its function as a 'part'. One possibility is that forms of philosophical inquiry which investigate nature are too multiform to fall under the heading of a single 'function'. Only a closer look at Seneca's treatment of natural investigations could bear this claim out, and that falls outside the scope of this chapter.

¹¹ On the distinction between these, and the debate among early Stoics, cf. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* VII.39-41 & Ierodiakonou (1992) 57-8.

¹² Ierodiakonou (1992), cf. also, Annas (2007).

forcefully shows that early Stoics formed two positions on the status of the parts of philosophy. Some Stoics divide philosophical discourse, while others partition it. Those who divide philosophical discourse conceive of ethics, logic, and physics as species of the genus philosophy, while those who partition it conceive of these as parts or topics.¹³ Whether a Stoic thinks of the different areas of philosophical discourse as divisions into species or as partitions into parts or topics is, as Ierodiakou points out, partly a reflection of their view about the unity of philosophical discourse. Those who regard ethics, logic and physics as species tend to think of these as unified by their connection to the genus – with each species sharing common principles, but investigating from different standpoints – while those who regard these as parts or topics think of these as independent areas of inquiry – each focused on its own set of principles.

Seneca, although his terminology – *pars, partes* – is somewhat misleading, clearly thinks of the parts of philosophy not as independent and separable areas of inquiry, but as areas of inquiry which are unified by their connection to the overall aim of producing a sound mind. His attitude toward the division of philosophical discourse at *Ep.* 89.2-3 already shows that he thinks of division of philosophy as a crutch for those who are not wise. Such a division is useful, but artificial. Indeed, Seneca remarks that the method for determining the division is constrained by considerations of utility.¹⁴ Thus the content that falls under the separate parts of philosophy does not so fall because of some natural

¹³ Ierodiakonou (1992) 61-67.

¹⁴ *Ep.* 89.3. *quicquid in maius crevit, facilius agnoscitur, si discessit in partes, quas, ut dixi, innumerabiles esse et parvulas non oportet. Idem enim vitii habet nimia quod nulla divisio; simile confusio est, quidquid usque in pulverem sectum est.*

or necessary feature of wisdom or philosophy, but because its falling under one part is more useful for philosophical progress. An additional feature of Seneca's presentation of philosophy that shows he thinks of the parts as mutually supportive and integrated begins from taking seriously that for the sake of which the division is undertaken – namely, progress. The division into parts is undertaken because it will enable those who are not wise – who cannot yet look upon the full expanse of philosophy – to begin to make progress toward this goal. Seneca's concern for this is especially clear in his account of the subdivision of the parts of philosophy. These subdivisions reinforce the idea that the parts themselves are arbitrary but useful tools for acquiring the perspective of the Sage. Part of having this perspective, as is clear from the earliest remarks in *Ep.* 89, is being able to see the whole of philosophy – i.e., without having to divide it.

4. The Division of the Parts of Philosophy

The perspective of the Sage, though, is the end of philosophical inquiry and not the starting point. To aid the student, Seneca provides a further division of the parts themselves. This further division is illuminating on two levels. First, it demonstrates Seneca's commitment to the idea that any division of philosophy should above all be *useful* to those who are striving to make progress. Second, his division of the parts indicates how Seneca conceives the relations between the 'parts' of philosophy. My interest here will primarily be on Seneca's division of the 'moral part' of philosophy. It is clear, however, that on his conception the moral part of philosophy is not separable from the other two parts. Seneca's division is not a division into topics (e.g., passions,

the good, etc.), but rather a division into philosophical tasks which must be completed in order to achieve and sustain the goal of the moral part of philosophy.

The moral part of philosophy is divided into three parts. Seneca's account of these three parts proceeds in two phases. There is first a partial description of the parts – a description which points to the concerns (if only, in the case of two of the parts, by naming them) of each of the parts. Then there is a fuller description, not in terms of the 'parts', but rather in terms of the actions which must be undertaken. The second phase, then, delivers the philosophical tasks that are associated with the parts of moral philosophy. Seneca's account begins as follows:

Quam in tria rursus dividi placuit, ut prima esset inspectio suum cuique distribuens et aestamans quanto quidque dignum sit, maxime utilis. Quid enim est tam necessarium quam pretia rebus inponere? Secunda de impetu, de actionibus tertia.

It is agreed that this [the moral side of philosophy] should be divided into three parts. First, we have the speculative part, which assigns to each thing its particular function and weighs the worth of each; it is highest in point of utility. For what is so indispensable as giving to everything its proper value? The second has to do with impulse, the third with actions. (89.14)

Here, in the first phase of his account, Seneca's presentation of the three parts of moral philosophy is striking both in its own right and when compared with the divisions recorded in other sources of Stoic moral philosophy. In its own right, the division is striking in that it distinguishes two areas – impulse and action – that arguably should go together. Action is, on the Stoic view, the result of (certain kinds of) impulse.¹⁵

¹⁵ One might think that action is a separate category dealing with, for example, 'appropriate actions' and accounting for their appropriateness. The relation between

This initial characterization is perhaps more striking when compared with those found other Stoic sources. Diogenes Laertius reports that the Stoics – including Chrysippus, Archedemus, Zeno, Appolodorus, Diogenes of Babylon, Antipater and Posidonius – divided the moral part of philosophy into nine separate topics.¹⁶ Of these topics, two stand out above all as strangely absent in Seneca’s account – ‘on virtue’ and ‘on the passions’. There two reasons for Seneca’s omission of these two – and other – topics reported in Diogenes’ account. The first is, again, that Seneca is not interested in acquiring – or promoting – a note-book familiarity with philosophy. Setting forth these ‘topics’ as Diogenes does suggests that these are fields that can be studied independently of one another and, importantly, independently of the aim of moral philosophy.¹⁷ Second, such a division of Stoic ethics would not, on Seneca’s view, be useful for achieving the task of moral philosophy – and ultimately, of philosophy generally. Though Seneca agrees that philosophy has much to say about the items which are covered by these topics, his presentation here of the parts of moral philosophy is an instance of the

impulse and action is also more complex than my characterization suggests. I am, however, thinking primarily here of Seneca’s own account of the relation between impulse and action in *De Ira* II.3.4-5 where he implies that without impulse, there is no action.

¹⁶ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* VII.84. SVF III.1. The topics are (1) on impulse; (2) on good and bad things; (3) on passions; (4) on virtue; (5) on the goal; (6) on primary value; (7) on actions; (8) on appropriate actions; and (9) on encouragements and discouragements to actions.

¹⁷ I omit here a comparison between Seneca’s presentation of ethics and those found in Arius Didymus and Cicero *de Finibus* III. Both of these, along with that found in Diogenes differ from Seneca’s presentation in numerous ways, but all three differ in that their presentations lack or do not emphasize the aim of each of these parts. This is the crucial feature of Seneca’s presentation.

philosophical independence Seneca claims for himself. Whether this presentation is one that is in some sense a ‘shorter path’ or one that is ‘smoother to travel’ is unclear, but Seneca is clearly focused on providing an account of the parts of philosophical discourse that is useful for making progress.

A final note on the first phase of Seneca’s presentation of ethics is needed. Apart from the differences between his presentation and those found in our other sources, Seneca’s presentation of ethics appears not to have been, originally, a Stoic one. Stobaeus indicates that this particular three-fold division of ethics was proposed not by an early Stoic, but rather by an Academic – Eudorus.¹⁸ Seneca’s use of the Academic’s division is surprising – and perhaps alarming¹⁹ – but it illustrates that his commitment is to a division that is useful, rather than to one which is or might be thought to be commanded by earlier expositions of Stoic moral philosophy.

Seneca confirms his commitment to the usefulness of his division as he proceeds to the second phase of the division. Immediately following the text above, Seneca continues:

Primum enim est, ut quanti quidque sit iudices, secundum, ut impetum ad illa capias ordinatum temperatumque, tertium, ut inter impetum tuum actionemque conveniat, ut in omnibus istis tibi ipse consentias. Quicquid ex tribus defuit, turbat et cetera.

¹⁸ Stobaeus, *Eclogues*. II.47-48.

¹⁹ A. A. Long (1983) suggests that Arius Didymus also follows the Eudorian division in his presentation of Stoic ethics. This attempt, though somewhat successful, leaves Arius Didymus’ readers with an incomplete account of Stoic ethics – one on which the discussion of impulse is unreasonably marginalized and the topic of *oikeiōsis* is entirely absent.

For the first duty is to determine severally what things are worth; the second, to conceive with regard to them a regulated and ordered impulse; the third, to make your impulse and your actions harmonize, so that under all these conditions you may be consistent with yourself. If any of these three be defective, there is confusion in the rest also (89.14)

This further characterization shows once again that, for Seneca, the ‘parts’ of philosophy are not ‘topics’. The parts are characterized here as goals. By aiming at and eventually achieving these goals, one aims at the goal of moral philosophy – keeping one’s soul in order. Although, for example, the second part of moral philosophy is said, in the passage above, to be the one *about impulse (de impetu)*, what characterizes this part of moral philosophy is the aim of ‘conceiving a regulated and ordered impulse’ in relation to goods, evils and indifferents. Though success in this part of moral philosophy no doubt requires a thorough understanding of the nature of impulse, its relation to knowledge and action, and so on, Seneca’s point here is that the goal of this part of moral philosophy is developing well-ordered impulses.

5. Philosophical Progress

This last point might seem to indicate that, after all, Seneca is less concerned than other Stoics (and perhaps less than even he ought to be) with what should be taken as important points of Stoic theory. By dividing the parts of moral philosophy not by their theoretical contents but by their practical aims, Seneca seems, one could say, to stray from the Stoic (and his own) insistence that the aim of philosophy is ultimately a kind of

knowledge.²⁰ A number of responses to this worry are available. I shall consider two related responses here.

First, Seneca's division of philosophy into parts – and of the moral part into parts – is undertaken because he believes that it is useful. A division of philosophy into parts is useful, for Seneca, because it achieves two things. It organizes the material of philosophy in such a way that the 'huge bulk' of philosophy can be grasped in part by those who cannot yet grasp it all at once. Beyond this, though, a division of philosophy, in order to be useful, must enable and encourage progress toward wisdom. Indeed, *Ep.* 89 begins with the assertion that a division of philosophy into parts is *necessary* for one who hastens after wisdom (*ad sapientiam properanti necessariam*). The reason for this is that by studying the parts of philosophy, we are brought *more easily* (*facilius*) to an understanding of the whole.²¹

Given that the Sage's mind embraces the whole expanse of philosophy without the aid of the divisions, and given that the division of philosophy is supposed to be useful in bringing the non-wise around to this perspective, it should be expected that a successful division of philosophy into parts (and of the parts into further parts) would involve some mechanism(s) for integrating back into the whole expanse those glimpses of wisdom that are only made possible (at first) by dividing it. Seneca's division has just such mechanisms. Their presence provides the second response to the worry above.

²⁰ I take this to be a general worry, of which, e.g., John Cooper's (cf. Cooper, 2004) is a particular instance.

²¹ *Ep.* 89.1

Studying the parts of philosophy brings one more easily to an understanding of the whole because one simply cannot carry out the tasks of the one part without carrying out those of the others. This is perhaps no real surprise given the early Stoic emphasis on the interconnectedness of logic, physics and ethics. Whereas their accounts, however, are highly metaphorical²², Seneca's division of the parts of philosophy makes it possible to see more clearly how the parts are interconnected.

Seneca notes (*Ep.*89.14) that the tasks of the three parts of moral philosophy succeed or fail together. One cannot be deemed successful in appraising the value of each thing if one's impulses are not ordered, nor can one be said to have one's impulses ordered if one's actions do not harmonize with them.²³ In addition to these connections, Seneca's division suggests other ways in which the three parts of philosophy are connected. A brief consideration of the natural and rational parts of philosophy makes this clear. Seneca divides the natural side of philosophy into two parts which he calls the

²² Cf. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* VII.39-41 & Long & Sedley (1987), 26B, D. The Stoics variously describe the relation of ethics, physics, and logic metaphorically. "They compare philosophy to a living being, likening logic to bones and sinews, ethics to the fleshier parts, and physics to the soul. They make a further comparison to an egg: logic is the outside, ethics what comes next, and physics the innermost part; or to a fertile field: the surrounding wall corresponds to logic, its fruits to ethics, and its land or trees to physics; or to a city which is well fortified and governed according to reason."

²³ Cf. *Ep.* 89.15. This passage is very puzzling. In trying to show that all fail if one fails, Seneca asks, for example, whether having worked out the appraisals of each thing *benefits one* (*prodest*) if one does not have ordered impulses. Perhaps this is a way of expressing the idea that if one (incorrectly) supposes that all the appraisals are done correctly, and yet this person has disordered impulses, then the person does not benefit from having the appraisals done, because, in fact, one cannot have correctly appraised each thing if the impulses are still disordered. In other words, not achieving the goal in one part of moral philosophy effectively undermines the achievements one makes in the others, such that the 'successes' in the other parts are not genuine.

incorporeal and the corporeal parts.²⁴ The rational part is divided into rhetoric and dialectic. Rhetoric is concerned with continuous speech and deals with words, meaning and arrangement (*verba, sensus, ordinem*). Dialectic is concerned with speech broken between questioner and answerer and is divided into two parts. One part concerns words, and the other meanings – or, as Seneca puts it – one part with the things which are said, and another with the words in which things are said.²⁵

While much could be said about Seneca's divisions here, my concern now is to point to some ways in which these parts can be seen as directly related to the parts of moral philosophy. The importance of the rational part for the moral part of philosophy is straightforward. Determining the value of each thing – i.e., the task of the speculative part of moral philosophy - requires an understanding of the words and meanings of, among other things, terms like 'good', 'bad', 'to-be-chosen', 'to-be-selected', 'indifferent' and so on. Such an understanding is indispensable for assigning the proper value to each thing. Similarly, after declining to carry through with a full sub-division of the parts of dialectic, Seneca encourages Lucilius to always relate what he reads of this subject to conduct.²⁶

²⁴ *Ep.* 89.17

²⁵ *Ep.* 89.18

²⁶ *Ep.* 89.18 ...*ad mores statim referas.*

An instance of the connection between the moral and rational parts occurs in *Ep.* 106. Here, Seneca responds to the question of whether the good is corporeal. This is a question that has its answer on the basis of principles and arguments in Stoic physics.²⁷

This kind of interconnectedness among the parts of philosophy is a feature of Seneca's presentation of Stoic ethics (and Stoic theory generally) that makes it particularly useful. If, in order to determine the proper value of each thing, one must – eventually, if not at first – develop an understanding of the meanings associated with words and of the physical principles which support ethical claims, then one will be guided from one 'part' of philosophy to others continuously. The interconnectedness of the parts of philosophy is, on Seneca's presentation, an inevitable discovery for those who are making progress.

6. Conclusion

The texts considered in the chapter begin to show that Seneca is concerned with philosophical progress. Two aspects of this concern have emerged here. First, Seneca is concerned with philosophical progress in terms of his own philosophical tradition. Seneca is not content, and does not think any philosopher should be content, merely to receive the philosophical fruits of those who have come before. He holds that his philosophical predecessors have not solved all the philosophical problems. There is more work to be done. Second, Seneca's presentation of philosophy reveals a concern for progress of a different kind. Here, Seneca's division and sub-divisions of philosophical

²⁷ See also *Ep.* 113

discourse are guided by his conception of philosophy as aiming at wisdom. Though this might be taken as a commonplace in the ancient world, for Seneca the goal of philosophy is something in terms of which, and by reference to which, he conceives of the distinct philosophical tasks which make up the ethical, natural and rational parts of philosophy.

Seneca's concern with progress – both his own and that of his readers – and his conception of philosophy as aiming at wisdom are not idle topics in a few of his works. The following chapters will show that this concern dominates his philosophical approach in many ways. Though this concern perhaps falls short of providing the basis for general account of Seneca's philosophy, it nonetheless provides grounds for taking Seneca's texts seriously on their own terms.

A final point is worth emphasizing here, in light of its significance for one aspect of Seneca's concern with progress – namely, the role of philosophy in eliminating grief and other emotions. Seneca's conception of the interconnectedness of the parts of philosophy, apart from revealing his goal directed conception of philosophy, shows that Seneca does not discount the importance of the study of physics and logic. This calls for a major qualification to the common claim that Seneca's works are primarily concerned with ethics. Even though this is true, it is also true that progress in ethics requires progress in the other branches of philosophy. Even in texts where ethics is in the forefront – especially Seneca's works of consolation – Seneca draws heavily on accounts of nature and arguments which rely on these.

CHAPTER 2: SENECA ON MORAL PROGRESS

1. Introduction

No argument is needed for the claim that Seneca's work has a strong practical emphasis. Any reader of even a small group of *Epistles to Lucilius* (*Ep*), or one of his *Consolations* or other treatises will quickly realize that she is not *merely* being presented with an account of Stoicism or standard Stoic arguments for one or another Stoic conclusion. Seneca does these things in his works, but one cannot avoid the sense that Seneca aims to advise, exhort, encourage and teach his audience. In this chapter, I will make some progress toward a proper understanding of these features of Seneca's works. While it is clear that Seneca aims to have an effect on his audience, the ways in which he aims to do so are not well understood. The interpretation I offer stands in contrast to recent studies of Seneca's practical approach. These studies focus on Seneca's aim to promote moral progress – both in his audience and himself – but they ignore certain facts about the circumstances of Seneca's authorship. My contention here is that the unique and contingent circumstances in which he writes drive Seneca to develop a methodology for progress that is able to accommodate the diversity of his audience. Seneca faces the considerable task of promoting and encouraging rational improvement in an audience some of whom are neither philosophically trained nor in possession of those beliefs which form the core of his own Stoic philosophy. Seneca is well aware that some members of his audience are in fact quite wedded to exactly the wrong beliefs about, primarily, value. Seneca, as I will argue, is concerned to help the members of this group

as well. Our sources from the early Stoa do not attest to any concern of this kind among the early scholars, nor is any strategy for addressing it available in those sources. From our point of view, then, the methodology that Seneca develops counts as an addition to the Stoic theory. This should be seen as a welcome addition to the theory. In Seneca's work we have the richest source for a positive understanding of how a Stoic can conceive of moral improvement.

The concern for moral improvement is clearest and most urgent in Seneca's discussions of the role of the philosopher as a teacher. It is primarily on this aspect of Seneca's practice that I will focus in this chapter. In 2, I consider two accounts of the stages of moral progress that recent studies of Seneca have employed. While these accounts are inadequate for different reasons, both fail to connect Seneca's practice with his explicit discussions *about* his practice. I conclude this section with a brief overview of the account of progress that I argue for in the following sections. In the next two sections, I discuss some important passages in Seneca's work that, taken together, demonstrate Seneca's deep rooted concern to promote the moral progress of his readers (3) and reveal a carefully designed (and implemented) methodology for both teacher and student aimed at achieving moral progress (4). In the following sections, I consider two important results of the findings of 3-4. First (5) I propose an alternate account of moral progress that is on the one hand – and unlike those considered in (2) – consistent with and motivated by Seneca's texts, and on the other a more plausible and appealing account of moral progress in its own right. Then (6) I argue that while the methodology for teaching and learning discussed in (4) is in principle compatible with a number of philosophical

systems, we miss something crucial if we do not recognize that Seneca's prescriptions are aimed at himself (as teacher) and at *his* audience. What we miss is the fact that Seneca is himself guided by this methodology *and* he expects his audience to be guided by it as well.

2. Stages of Moral Progress

Two recent studies of Seneca's moral philosophy – specifically of his concern with the moral improvement of himself and his audience – have proceeded on the assumption that in order to understand and evaluate Seneca's philosophical and therapeutic achievement what is needed is an account of the relevant stages of moral development in terms of which progress can be understood. This is certainly a promising way of proceeding, but it is important that one proceed by identifying, rather than by imposing, the relevant stages of moral progress. Though neither of the recent accounts is careful about this, a brief look at their proposals will be helpful in preparing the way for a closer look at Seneca's account of moral progress and the means by which it is achieved.

In her influential book¹, Ilsetraut Hadot argues that the account of moral progress that Seneca employs or presupposes involves three stages. In the first stage, the one making progress must acquire the elements of a theory. That is, one must be made aware of or perhaps learn the core principles of the Stoic theory. Hadot claims that this stage is an “entirely intellectual process.”² Hadot here seems to have in mind simply the presentation to the student of basic Stoic principles – the *scientia rerum*. The second

¹ Hadot (1969).

² Hadot (1969), 105.

stage is that in which the student commits to these principles in such a way that they are reliably accessible in novel circumstances, and cannot be shaken by external factors. Finally the third stage is that in which the knowledge of the principles should be active in one's behavior.

It is clear that on Hadot's account of the stages of progress, the real developmental work is carried out in the second stage.³ It is within this stage of moral progress that she locates Seneca's primary concern. His concern is to serve as "spiritual guide" – as an authority and friend who aims to help others live a Stoic life. According to Hadot's account, Seneca promotes progress within the second (and third) stage primarily through rhetorical strategies aimed at fortifying one's commitment to the Stoic principles acquired in the first stage. On this view, Seneca's use of rhetorical figures and exhortations is primarily aimed at those who, having *already become acquainted with* Stoic principles, need further assistance in implementing them in living a Stoic life. On the face of it, this view is appealing because of the way it distinguishes the role of rhetoric (broadly construed as persuasive rather than explicitly argumentative discourse) from that of logic or philosophical inquiry. On Hadot's account, rigorous philosophical work, including the study and application of logic, can only take place during the first stage. Seneca, however, is focused primarily on assisting those in the later stages of progress, and so his widespread use of rhetorical strategies is in no way inconsistent with the general Stoic commitment to the importance of rigorous philosophical inquiry.

³ Or, at any rate, it is with this stage that Hadot is primarily concerned.

In a recent paper, John Cooper sketches an account of moral improvement which he contrasts with Hadot's account.⁴ Cooper argues that Hadot's account of the stages of moral progress – particularly her account of how progress is achieved in the second and third stages – is incompatible with what he identifies as a core commitment of the Stoic theory. Cooper argues that what both Hadot in her account of moral progress and Seneca in many of his works forget is that for a Stoic author “the ultimate goal (for himself as well as for his addressees) is to improve one's own philosophical understanding of the reasons why the truths of Stoicism really are true.”⁵

Though Cooper does not develop a full account of the stages of progress, it is clear that he is thinking of this in terms of at least two distinct stages. First one is introduced to – or perhaps already believes – some Stoic principles. Next the task is that of coming to see the reasons which support the truth of those principles. Suppose that one believes, for example, that the principle ‘Death is not an evil’ is true. In order to grasp this principle, one must come to appreciate the Stoic reasons *why* it is true. In order to have knowledge, one must have a systematic grasp of this and other principles and the relations among them. The transition, then, from believing that P is true to grasping P (and, later, having knowledge) will require working through the relevant philosophical arguments. In any case, on this view the key to moral development is coming to have an improved cognitive relationship to the principles one initially accepts as true.

⁴ Cooper (2004).

⁵ Cooper (2004), 313, n.8.

Cooper alleges that Seneca, because of his uneven practical focus – in the role of the spiritual guide – fails to appreciate the importance of this improved cognitive relationship. Seneca, in particular, fails to see the importance to moral development of coming to see *why* one's (Stoic) beliefs are true. There are many reasons for resisting Cooper's analysis of Seneca's position, but here I want to point to one quite general consideration. The very idea that one makes progress vis-à-vis one's belief in the truth of a moral principle by coming to appreciate the reasons for its being true presupposes an unsatisfactory view of moral progress in general. In particular, the view requires – in order for progress to be made – that one *already* believe the moral principles that are needed. On the view suggested by Cooper, it is difficult to say what would (or could) happen by way of progress for one who did not yet believe that the principle 'Death is not an evil' is true. It is not clear that the Stoic reasons – and still less that Zenonian syllogisms⁶ – would have any effect on this person.⁷ It seems rather that a necessary condition for one's being benefited from coming to see *why* a principle is true that one first come to believe *that* it is true.⁸ Comparatively the latter seems a much more difficult problem. This is particularly so for a Stoic, since many central Stoic principles are so radical as to be labeled – even by the Stoics themselves – as 'beyond belief' (*paradoxa*).

⁶ For a full account of the persuasive ineffectiveness of such syllogisms, cf. Schofield (1983).

⁷ Arguably, this is precisely Seneca's point in many of the letters Cooper discusses.

⁸ Seneca's consolations demonstrate this point clearly. He is concerned, e.g., in the *Consolation to Marcia*, to convince Marcia (and the audience) of the truth of the claim that death is not an evil. This is the goal, and he marshals every sort of consideration – physical, historical, personal – that he thinks will be of assistance.

On the one hand, Cooper's analysis of progress is promising as far as it goes. Acquiring a grasp of the reasons which support one's belief in the truth of P is certainly an important step. But clearly making progress will also require coming to believe that Q, which one did not previously believe to be so, is true. To be clear, Cooper's account does not rule this out, but in so far as it fails to account for the importance of the acquisition of new beliefs – which is surely part of making progress – to that extent it fails as a complete account of the stages of moral progress. On the other hand, Hadot's analysis – particularly for its partitioning of rhetorical and philosophical exercises into distinct stages of progress – is attractive as a charitable account of Seneca's widespread use of rhetorical devices. Hadot's attempt to understand Seneca's use of rhetorical devices by locating his works in the tradition of spiritual guidance literature, however, suffers from the attempt to impose upon Seneca a role – as a spiritual guide – that obscures or underrates the value of philosophical exercises and as a result misconstrues the role of Seneca's rhetoric.

Aside from these difficulties, it becomes clear when one considers those of Seneca's texts that are relevant to the topic of moral progress that Cooper and Hadot are thinking of the stages and methods of progress in a much narrower way than Seneca. In the following sections, I develop an account of moral progress on the basis of those texts where Seneca is addressing his and others' roles in effecting moral improvement. I argue that Seneca conceives of moral progress in a way that is both broader and more flexible than the analyses of Cooper and Hadot allow. Though Seneca allows that progress occurs in stages, he does not think of these stages as mutually exclusive in the way that

Cooper and Hadot's accounts suggest. Both of these views hold that there is something – e.g., learning or being presented with the Stoic principles - which occurs and is *completed* in one stage, and is then followed, in the next stage by a different sort of activity. Seneca's view, I argue, is more flexible. Seneca recognizes that one who is making progress may be relatively advanced in some respects and at the same time quite impeded in others. One may, for example, no longer fear death, and yet still be subject to other fears. Seneca is aware of this kind of condition and conceives of the dimensions of moral progress in a way that both accounts for this and provides a means of promoting improvement. Seneca's conception of moral progress, moreover, addresses not only those who already have the required beliefs but also those who do not. His concern for the latter is importantly connected with his conception of himself as a teacher and his understanding of the attendant obligations of this role, especially when occupied by a philosopher.

3. Moral Progress: Obstacles and Candidates

Seneca's *De Vita Beata* opens with the claim that “all people wish to live happily, but they are blinded from clearly seeing what it is that brings about the happy life.”⁹ Though Seneca cannot be certain that his audience is committed to Stoicism, he can be more confident that they all wish to be happy. This claim, as well as the accompanying diagnosis of people's failure to achieve happiness, could well be uttered by any philosopher in antiquity. Seneca - like Plato, Aristotle, and others before him – faces the two-fold task of first setting forth an account of the happy life and secondly seeking a

⁹ *De Vita Beata* I.1. My translation.

path by which it can be achieved.¹⁰ In *De Vita Beata* and other texts, Seneca has much to say about what happiness or the happy life is; but the overwhelming focus of his works is on the second question – how one achieves it.

Seneca's *Epistles* as a whole indicate that he is deeply concerned with progress – both his own and that of his readers. It is helpful to begin here with a discussion of *Ep.* 108, which is useful for framing Seneca's concerns about teaching and progress. The occasion for this letter is concern for Lucilius' progress – in particular, that his eagerness to learn be focused in such a way that it promotes, rather than hinders, his development. This provides the opening for an examination – by way of comparison – of both failures and successes in philosophical training.

At the beginning of the letter, Seneca passes on to Lucilius the advice he received from his teacher Attalus regarding the proper attitude toward study. This brief section (108.1-4) is illuminating but best discussed after the main argument has been considered. Here it is necessary only to mention one claim, attributed to Attalus, about the benefits of philosophical education. Seneca gives to Attalus the following words: “He who comes to a philosopher should every day take something good with him; he should return home healthier (*sanior*) or more able to be healed (*sanabilior*).¹¹ Lucilius is made to respond to this with a challenge to the idea that one is improved by associating with a philosopher. The challenge and Seneca's reply are here quoted at length.

¹⁰ Cf. *De Vita Beata* I.1.

¹¹ *Ep.* 108.4. Gummere (Loeb) attributes this line to Seneca rather than Attalus, but I see no reason to think this is so. This sentence, as well as the one following, has the same structure and theme as the one Gummere marks off as the words of Attalus.

“What then?” you say, “do we not know certain men who have sat for many years at the feet of a philosopher and yet have not acquired the slightest tinge of wisdom?” Of course I know such men. There are indeed persevering gentlemen who stick at it; I do not call them pupils of the wise, but merely “squatters” (*inquilinos*). Certain of them come to hear and not to learn, just as we are attracted to the theatre to satisfy the pleasures of the ear, whether by a speech, or by a song, or by a play. This class, as you will see, constitutes a large part of the listeners, - who regard the philosopher’s lecture-room merely as a sort of lounging-place for their leisure. They do not set about to lay aside any faults there, or to receive a rule of life, by which they may test their characters; they merely wish to enjoy to the full the delights of the ear. And yet some arrive even with notebooks, not to take down the matter (*res*), but only the words (*verba*), that they may presently repeat them to others with as little profit to these as they themselves received when they heard them. A certain number are stirred by high-sounding phrases, and adapt themselves to the emotions of the speaker with lively change of face and mind – just like the emasculated Phrygian priests who are wont to be roused by the sound of the flute and go mad to order. But the beauty of the matters (*rerum*) seizes and stimulates the true hearers, not the jingle of empty words.

When a bold word has been uttered in defiance of death, or a saucy fling in defiance of Fortune, we take delight in acting straightway upon that which we have heard. Men are impressed by such words, and become what they are bidden to be, should but the impression abide in the mind, and should the populace, who discourage honourable things, not immediately lie in wait to rob them of this noble impulse; only a few can carry home the mental attitude with which they were inspired. It is easy to rouse a listener so that he will crave righteousness; for Nature has laid the foundations and planted the seeds of virtue in us all. And we are all born to these general privileges; hence, when the stimulus is added, the good mind is stirred as if it were freed from bonds.¹²

This passage serves as an introduction to some themes that emerge both later in 108 and elsewhere that are relevant to Seneca’s thinking about education. It is significant first that Seneca’s response to the objection comes in the form of his own diagnosis of the failure of many who attend philosophy lectures to benefit from their attendance. The discussion that begins here and continues throughout the letter is clearly a topic with

¹² *Ep.* 108.5-7.

which Seneca is concerned. Though there are passing references to ethical principles throughout the letter, these principles are not the focus, nor are there any substantive philosophical arguments for them. The point of the letter is not to teach some special content, but to outline a successful pedagogy whereby both the student and the teacher are more likely to achieve their goals. This is significant because it shows that, beyond the concern with the Stoic principles themselves, Seneca has deliberated about factors which constrain teaching and learning those principles. Moreover, the variety of the cases of failure catalogued in the passage above, together with the detailed analysis of approaches to exegesis that follows later in the letter (108.24 ff.) suggest that Seneca's concern with pedagogy is deeply rooted.

The first part of this passage also introduces a general contrast between the correct and incorrect approaches to philosophy. The "squatters" fail to benefit from the lecture they attend because they are there for non-philosophical reasons. They are concerned simply to have their fill of pleasure, or else to gain some fame by reciting to others what they hear from the philosopher. These people are generally interested in the *verba* (words) rather than the *res* (matter). The true pupils, on the other hand, are there with the aim of laying aside their faults and acquiring a rule of life. These people attend to the *res*. In short, these people – the true pupils – have a philosophical approach. They are trying to become better in some sense that cannot be achieved merely by attending to the words. Their aims, then, are in harmony with the aim of philosophy.

Finally, the second part of this passage introduces two important parameters that are relevant to teaching and learning. First, we are introduced to a further constraint on

learning – the populace. The impression left on the minds of those who have heard a philosopher speak is not secured by the speeches in the lecture hall. The pupils' propensity for converting words into actions is at risk amid the masses, whose attitudes and advice are opposed to what is honorable. Though this theme is not systematically pursued in the remainder of letter, it is one that Seneca elsewhere and often considers.¹³ Second, we find in the second part of the passage and in the following sections (8-12) that despite the constraints set by the influence of the populace and the prevalence of misguided approaches to philosophy, it is within the philosopher's power to encourage *all* people toward progress. In these following sections, Seneca points out that certain principles naturally stir the native inclinations toward virtue. He claims, for example, that upon hearing verses disparaging greed the "meanest miser claps applause and rejoices to hear his own sins reviled." This discussion gives way (through 12) to a discussion of how poetry, when used by a philosopher, can be effective in motivating an audience. Then, from 108.13-23, Seneca reports how as a youth he was influenced by the arguments of Attalus, Sotion, Pythagoras and Sextius. He here attributes his brief vegetarianism and his life-long use of a hard pillow to the influence of these arguments.

This section of the letter closes with Seneca's summary of the general theme:

I have mentioned all this in order to show you how zealous neophytes are with regard to their first impulses towards the highest ideals, provided that someone does his part in exhorting them and in kindling their ardour. There are indeed mistakes made, through the fault of our advisors, who teach us how to debate and not how to live; there are also mistakes made by pupils, who come to their teachers to develop, not their souls, but their wits.¹⁴

¹³ E.g., *Ep.* 7, *De Vita Beata* I.2 ff. Cf. also Chapter 10 of Griffin (1976).

It is worth noting here that the mistakes that are specifically indicated in this passage receive attention in many other places in Seneca's texts. It is clear from these sources that this mistake – of teaching how to debate, rather than how to live – is one that Seneca is eager to avoid. Seneca's sometimes harsh denunciations of logic and, in particular, the study of Zenonian-style syllogisms can be understood, in light of this passage, as an exercise of caution. If so, then we have further confirmation of Seneca's sensitivity to the dangers and obligations associated with his role as a teacher. Aside from the mistakes, these passages from *Ep.* 108 provide some indication of the positive contribution that a teacher can make – especially for an audience that is not already properly attuned to philosophy. It is within the power of the philosopher (most of all) to employ a variety of strategies – e.g., the use of poetic expression – to stir the *natural inclinations* of all toward virtue. As for the pupils' mistakes, Seneca is equally concerned, especially in the letters, to dissuade his audience from the kinds of study that please rather than benefit, or that are not clearly connected with living well.¹⁵

Before considering the rest, including the last and longest section, of this letter, it is worth pausing to evaluate the achievement so far. I claimed earlier that the discussion has primarily pedagogical value, but this claim needs some clarification. So far, Seneca's discussion has focused on teaching and learning within the context of the 'lecture-room', but this context differs substantially from the one that characterizes Seneca and his relationship to his audience. Seneca is not himself a school-master, nor does he give

¹⁴ *Ep.* 108.23

¹⁵ Seneca's distaste with Zeno's syllogisms, for example, is often cast in these terms.

public or private lectures. Still, many of the difficulties of the lecture-room context carry over to the author-reader context. At the general level, Seneca's point, then, is that his audience remain focused on the goal of living well, of 'laying aside their faults'.¹⁶ But this advice can hardly be of assistance on its own. One can approach philosophical texts with this in mind and yet fail. There is still need of more substantive instruction if Seneca is serious about promoting progress in his readers.

This need is confirmed by the long passage (108.24-39) where Seneca discusses the different results that attend different approaches to reading. Even when reading the same text, the *philologus*, the *grammaticus*,¹⁷ and one who is devoted to philosophy will achieve different results. The contrasts between these approaches yield some more concrete advice for philosophical study. At 108.35, aside from the recommendation that philosophical reading should be directed toward living well, Seneca distinguishes as non-philosophical certain reading practices – specifically hunting for “archaic or far-fetched words and eccentric metaphors and figures of speech.” It is unlikely that these are central or defining tasks of the *grammaticus* or the *philologus*, but the point is that while they

¹⁶ The discussion that follows in *Ep.* 108 – as well as discussions elsewhere in the *Ep.* concerning the proper way to read, and deliver, philosophical texts – suggests that Seneca, beyond encouraging a properly philosophical attitude in his readers, is also offering more basic instruction on how to read philosophical texts. The issue of the proper ways of reading different kinds of texts was a topic of concern for Roman educators. Cf. Cavallo, Chartier. *Storia della lettura nel mondo occidentale*. Trans. Cochrane, Lydia. Polity Press, Oxford (1999).

¹⁷ These two terms – *grammaticus* (pl. *grammatici*) and *philologus* (pl. *philologi*) – refer to distinct kinds of instructors of literacy in Rome. The roles are not captured well by any available translations, and so are left un-translated. The obvious translations – grammarian and philologist – obscure certain facts about the roles of the *grammaticus* and the *philologus*.

may be germane to other approaches, they are not so to the philosophical approach. These serve as particularly clear examples of what one concerned to live well should not focus on while reading.¹⁸ More broadly, and more significant for what follows, Seneca is here drawing a distinction between different ways to approach a text. Seneca does not *here* deny that these other approaches have some value, but he insists that these are not the approaches Lucilius (and his audience in general) should have toward philosophical texts.

A final note on *Ep.* 108 will provide some further context to the discussions of teaching, learning and reading. In the short opening passage (108.1-4), Seneca carefully establishes the context which gives rise to the ensuing discussions we have seen. In particular, Seneca (1) confirms the earlier suggestion here that, despite the differences between the circumstances of his mentorship of Lucilius (and, by extension, us - his audience) and those of the lecture-room philosopher, the discussion of the latter is relevant to the former. In this passage Seneca also (2) provides an *exemplum* (illustration) of teacher-student relationships which (we can now see) embodies the properly philosophical approach. Seneca further clarifies this *exemplum* by (3) providing a formulation, which he attributes to Attalus, of the norm which governs a genuinely philosophical approach on the parts of both teacher and student.

¹⁸ This may seem a trivial and obvious point, but it is especially significant given that the kinds of activities Seneca here attributes to the *grammaticus* and *philologus* were precisely the kinds of things that young Romans were expected to do as part of their education from a relatively early stage and continuing through the latest stages.

Some comment on each of these items is needed since, together with the passages already considered from *Ep.* 108, they provide a clear way forward for understanding the normative principles – including the one here formulated – that Seneca develops to aid progress. The letter opens with the rejection of an unspecified request from Lucilius. The latter’s query apparently concerns a topic to be covered in Seneca’s forthcoming books on moral philosophy, which he promises to send immediately. *Ep.* 108, however, is to be sent first specifically so that, before Lucilius launches into the books on moral philosophy, he has some instruction on how to channel his eagerness to learn.¹⁹ These remarks *suggest* that aside from the general value of the following discussions on teaching, learning, and reading, these discussions are specifically aimed at Seneca’s own audience, represented by Lucilius, as instructions regarding the proper approach to his own philosophical writings.²⁰

This is further supported by the *exemplum* at 108.3. The model student in this *exemplum* is none other than Seneca himself as a youth. In reporting his experience as a pupil of Attalus, he describes himself as having “practically laid siege to his class-room, the first to arrive and the last to leave.” He claims further to have had the custom of

¹⁹ Cf. *Ep.* 108.1-2. Lucilius is warned (1) that he should not gather things at random; (2) that he should not greedily attack the whole; (2) that he should focus on the parts, in order to come to understand the whole; (4) that he should pursue what he has the strength to pursue; (5) that what he wishes to absorb may be greater than what he is (currently) able to; (6) that he must first acquire a good mind (*bonam mentem*) and that this will enable him to absorb all he wishes.

²⁰ Moreover, the lengthy discussion of poetical exegesis suggests a broader claim – that one who wishes to live well – i.e., one who approaches texts philosophically – should approach all texts, including (and, perhaps especially Seneca’s) poetry, in the ways the letter suggests.

challenging his teacher to various discussions. Meanwhile, Attalus is described as accommodating his pupil: “He not only kept himself accessible to his students, but met them half-way.” Two points are significant for clarifying the discussion that follows in 108. First, there is a careful mirroring of characters in these remarks. Seneca ascribes to his younger self the very same characteristics which Lucilius is portrayed as having throughout the letters and particularly in 108. Lucilius’ impatience, for example, for Seneca’s books on moral philosophy is mirrored by the young Seneca’s impatience to query his teacher (*the first to arrive, and last to leave*). Similarly, the young Seneca’s custom of challenging his instructor is mirrored in the portrayal of Lucilius throughout the letters. Lucilius’ challenge at the beginning of 108 – that not all who hear a philosopher are made better – is one example. Moreover, Seneca ascribes to his teacher Attalus characteristics which he portrays himself as having throughout his letters. In this letter, Seneca meets Lucilius half-way in that while he declines to address the unspecified topic for which Lucilius has requested a discussion, he nonetheless provides both the books on moral philosophy as well as this letter by way of instruction on how to approach those books.²¹ Second, this mirroring of characters creates an intimate teacher-learner atmosphere. Just as Attalus shared with his pupils his thoughts and advice regarding methodology, Seneca is here passing that advice on to his pupil(s).

Finally, and in the context described, Seneca passes on to his audience the advice given him by Attalus. Seneca, quoting Attalus, says that “The same purpose should

²¹ Clearer still is Seneca’s willingness, in the first 30 letters to accommodate Lucilius’ apparent fondness for Epicureanism.

possess both teacher and student – an ambition in the one case to promote, and in the other to progress.”²² This principle is clearly the main theme of *Letter* 108. It is perhaps useful to see this principle as the conclusion of an argument constructed partly from the passages we have seen. The argument can be summarized in the following way:

(P1) All people wish to live happily.

(P2) Wisdom is sufficient for happiness.

(P3) Philosophy aims at wisdom.

(P4) It is possible to approach the study of philosophy in a variety of ways.

(P5) Non-philosophical approaches do not result in wisdom.

Premises P1-P3 are background premises accepted by the Stoics and addressed elsewhere in Seneca’s work. The focus of *Ep.* 108 is P4 and P5. These premises support two conclusions. First (C1), the student of philosophy ought not approach philosophy in any other way than the philosophical approach. Second (C2), one who provides philosophical instruction ought to discourage the non-philosophical and encourage the philosophical approach. C1 and C2 together are simply reformulations of the Attalus’ principle.

It is significant that Seneca is occupied, in *Ep.* 108 and elsewhere, with P4 and P5. One would not be concerned with these considerations if one were simply working out a theory, or constructing an argument. These considerations enter in when one is concerned to aid others in making progress. More specifically, these considerations become especially relevant when one is deliberating about how to successfully *teach* philosophical principles. A teacher must be aware of the condition of her students if she

²² *Ep.* 108.3-4.

is going to have any chance of bringing about an improvement in their character. Moreover, the concern for P4 and P5 becomes an explicit topic of discussion for Seneca because his success in teaching – and so in promoting the progress of his pupils – cannot be achieved, as it might in a class-room, through interpersonal interaction. Seneca must communicate with his pupils solely through his writing.

4. Progress in Philosophy

The lessons from 108 are important but limited. The letter demonstrates Seneca's concern for his role as a teacher as well as his concern on the behalf of his audience that they come to have the proper approach to philosophy. It also gives some indication of how the audience should proceed – namely, with the 'ambition' of making progress toward living happily. Still, despite these results together with the specific prohibitions against reading as a *grammaticus* or *philologus* reads, the letter does not contain any substantive positive recommendations for approaching philosophical study. Seneca has provided a general principle about the correct attitude, but has provided little clear advice concerning the behaviors that are consistent with or required by this attitude. Yet this kind of advice would seem to be most needed for an audience like Seneca's who do not have the benefit of the opportunities afforded to those who frequent the 'lecture-rooms' of philosophers.

Though the discussion in *Ep.* 108 is limited, it provides a context within which we can make sense of the further guidance Seneca provides elsewhere in the form of more specific recommendations. In particular, Seneca's advice in other letters is often about

reading and writing. We can now see that this advice is not merely advice about reading and writing generally, but specific instruction on how to read and study philosophically. Secondly, though it is often clear in the passages themselves, *Ep.* 108 serves as a reminder that in the passages where Seneca is addressing his audience on proper reading practices he is addressing them as teacher to student, where this relation is governed by the norm – aiming for progress – formulated at 108.3.

Seneca's specific recommendations for proper study can be divided into prohibitions against certain kinds of pursuits and positive recommendations for how to approach those subjects of genuine philosophical value. I begin with the prohibitions. Seneca cautions against two kinds of mistakes in study. One of these has already appeared in *Ep.* 108. It is a mistake to invest one's time in the study of those things that do not contribute to living well. While *Ep.* 108 leaves open the possibility that the pursuits of the *philologus* and *grammaticus* are worthwhile, Seneca's claims elsewhere suggest otherwise. This is clearest in a passage in *Ep.* 88 where Seneca considers the merits of a particular *grammaticus* - Didymus. Seneca reports that he would pity Didymus if he had only read as many 'superfluous' (*supervacua*) volumes as he had written. Seneca reports that Didymus's books contained investigations of such minutiae as "Homer's birthplace, who was really the mother of Aeneas, whether Anacreon was more of a rake or more of a drunkard" none of whose results, if found, have any relevance to living well.²³ Aside from the rejection of these specific kinds of literary pursuits, Seneca cautions more generally against a course of study that is too varied. In

²³ *Ep.* 88.37-38.

Ep. 2, for example, Seneca warns Lucilius against the “reading of many authors and books of every sort.” This practice, Seneca claims, “may tend to make you discursive and unsteady” (2.2). Elsewhere, Seneca indicates that focusing on the quantity, rather than the quality of one’s reading promotes a wandering mind.²⁴

In cautioning against these practices, Seneca is drawing attention to the requirement that one’s study be (1) philosophical and (2) properly focused. Seneca typically approaches this topic by way of an analogy between the bodily nutrition, which is acquired through proper eating and digestion, and mental ‘nutrition’ which is acquired through proper study. The proscribed practices discussed above are likened to unsound eating practices. In response, for example, to one who wishes to “first dip into one book and then into another,” Seneca appeals to this analogy: “I tell you that it is the sign of an overnice appetite to toy with many dishes; for when they are manifold and varied, they cloy but do not nourish” (2.4). In another letter, the point is made clearer still by Seneca’s claim that the desire to learn a variety of topics is a kind of vice.²⁵ Seneca’s point in these passages is that one who wishes to acquire wisdom makes a mistake in thinking that it can be acquired by consuming all the available books. One’s reading, on the contrary, must be focused on a much narrower set of readings.

²⁴ Cf. *Ep.* 65.1.

²⁵ *Ep.* 88.36-7 – “This desire to know more than is sufficient is a kind of intemperance” (*intemperantiae genus*).

Seneca's positive recommendations bear this out. He cautions that in reading "it is quality, not quantity that matters."²⁶ In another letter – continuing with the nutrition metaphor - he makes this point more concretely when he advises that one "must linger among the limited number of master-thinkers, and digest their works."²⁷ Finally, he advises Lucilius:

You should always read standard authors; and when you crave a change, fall back upon those whom you read before. Each day acquire something that will fortify you against poverty, against death, indeed against other misfortunes as well; and after you have run over many thoughts, select one to be thoroughly digested that day. This is my own custom; from the many things which I have read, I claim some one part for myself.²⁸

These passages make clear that proper philosophical study requires a careful focus on the part of the student. This last passage, moreover, shows that reading philosophical texts is not to be undertaken without an aim connected to living well. The student's specific task is that of *acquiring something* that will aid her against poverty, death, and the misfortunes of life. This provides a suitable introduction to what Seneca sees as the most important lesson for one who wishes to live happily – namely, that one must take possession of, or 'make one's own', the objects of one's study. Though what Seneca means by the claim that one must make things 'one's own' may often seem obscure, in the context of advice for making progress – which is no doubt the most appropriate context – Seneca's point is

²⁶ *Ep.* 65.1

²⁷ *Ep.* 2.2

²⁸ *Ep.* 2.4

quite clear. To make something one's own is to come to understand it in a way that is not dependent on another.²⁹

Seneca's prescription, then, for his audience is that they regularly find something in what they read that will fortify them against those things which they are likely to think of as evils. His use of the metaphor of digestion suggests that the point is to internalize, by coming to understand, the precepts one encounters. The metaphor, however, breaks down when we consider the manner in which this 'digestion' occurs. In the case of normal digestion, the processes which transform food from its initial constitution into something that is useful for growth and nutrition are automatic, involuntary, and hidden. The most one can do is aid the process by eating only certain kinds and amounts of food. In the case of learning, however, matters are more complicated. One can restrict the items of one's attention, as Seneca recommends, by focusing carefully on a particular set of texts, but one's 'digestion' of these texts is not something that can be involuntary, automatic, or hidden. The injunction, then, that one make one's own something which will fortify one against death, poverty, and so on, is not sufficiently directive. There is need of further instruction concerning *how* to make what one reads one's own.

Though Seneca is concerned to impress upon his audience the importance of 'making one's own' those things that are needed for moral improvement, there are,

²⁹ This point, I think, is obscure in some places (e.g., *Ep.* 33.9) because Seneca is not careful in distinguishing the process 'making something one's own' and the result 'possessing something as one's own'. In 33.8 he claims, somewhat ambiguously, that "knowing *is* making everything one's own" (*scire est et sua quaeque facere*). In what follows, however, I argue that this is best understood as the claim that knowledge is the *result* of rational activity directed in a certain way toward the goal of living well.

necessarily, constraints on how much he can do to help. At the point when the injunction to ‘make things one’s own’ is relevant, the task primarily belongs to the one making progress rather than to the one aiding progress. Seneca’s advice concerning *how* one makes things one’s own is given primarily by way of metaphor. The clearest and most extensive discussion appears in *Ep.* 84. The letter opens with some advice about the kinds of activities – reading and writing – that are proper to philosophical study (84.1-2). The bulk of the letter (84.3-10) expands on this advice by discussing, though primarily through metaphors, how these activities are to be carried out. Finally, the concluding sections (84.11-13) summarize the main results and offer some encouragement to the reader.

The main theme of the letter begins to develop from a discussion of the relative merits of reading and writing. Neither of these alone is adequate for philosophical study:

We ought not confine ourselves either to writing or to reading; the one, continuous writing, will cast a gloom over our strength, and exhaust it; the other will make our strength flabby and watery. It is better to have recourse to them alternately, and to blend one with the other, so that the fruits of one’s reading may be reduced to concrete form by the pen.³⁰

This short passage introduces, if only by way of suggestion, two ideas that occupy Seneca for the rest of the letter. First, reading is not an activity that one pursues for its own sake. The claim that one must reduce the fruits of one’s reading by the pen is a specific case of a general point that Seneca urges throughout the letter – namely that philosophical study is not a passive enterprise. One must be active in assimilating what one reads in one’s own writing or more generally in one’s thinking. The second point is simply the

³⁰ *Ep.* 84.2

converse of this. One's writing or, more generally, one's theorizing should be guided in part by one's course of reading. One must gather precepts, ideas, and examples from what one reads and assimilate them in coherent way.

These claims are given more substance in the following passages. Seneca begins the metaphorical discussion of the main section of the letter with the claim that "we should follow the example of the bees, who flit about and cull the flowers that are suitable for producing honey, and then arrange and assort in their cells all that they have brought in"(84.3). After a brief digression on whether bees produce or merely gather honey, Seneca picks this thought up again at 84.5. We are to imitate the bees in sifting what we have gathered through reading. By sifting, we separate and so better preserve what we have read. After what has been gathered from reading has been separated, then "by applying the supervising care with which our nature has endowed us" we should "blend those several flavors into one delicious compound that, even though it betrays its origin, yet it nevertheless is clearly a different thing from that whence it came" (84.5). The idea that one's philosophical writing and thinking should be different in kind than its source is explored further by means of two distinct metaphors – digestion and choral singing. The point of the digestion metaphor is that unless we apply our reason to the things we have read, they will be – like undigested food – a burden. Seneca emphasizes that we must not allow what we have absorbed to remain unchanged: "We must digest it; otherwise it will merely enter the memory and not the reasoning power (*ingenium*)" (84.7).

It is clear from these passages that one result of progress through study is that one will come to actively possess philosophical principles in a way that does not rely on others. This principle undoubtedly has as one target the Epicurean practice in which students commit to memory the sayings of Epicurus. In insisting that one's philosophical writing and thinking be a *different thing* from its source, he is establishing a requirement that one come to understand the principles in such a way that they can be active in one's deliberations. This point – as well as the contrast with Epicurean practice – is made clear at 84.8:

This is what our mind should do: it should hide away all the materials by which it has been aided, and bring to light only what is made of them. Even if there shall appear in you a likeness to him who, by reason of your admiration, has left a deep impress upon you, I would have you resemble him as a child resembles his father, and not as a picture resembles its original; for a picture is a lifeless thing.

We are reminded here that for Seneca philosophy aims above all at living well. This cannot be achieved if we are merely memorizing what we have read (or heard).³¹ Progress requires each individual to assimilate all that she has learned into a coherent unit.³²

Seneca concludes the main section of the letter with a non-metaphorical restatement of the advice he has been communicating through metaphor. He says that a mind of the quality he would have is one that “should be equipped with many arts, many

³¹ Cf. *Ep.* 33.8. “Remembering is merely safeguarding something entrusted to the memory; knowing... means not depending upon the copy and not all the time glancing back at the master.”

³² This is the point the metaphor of choral singing. Out of many voices – men's voices, women's voices, flutes and other instruments – one harmonious voice arises. (84.9-10).

precepts and patterns of conduct taken from many epochs of history; but all should blend harmoniously into one” (84.10). This, he says, can only be achieved through “constant effort, and by doing nothing without the approval of reason” (84.11).

5. Seneca on Progress

Seneca’s attention to the proper approach to philosophical study – on the part of both teacher and student – provides some indications of how he conceives of progress. From the passages considered here, we can identify two distinct kinds of progress. One is the kind of progress that begins when a philosopher’s words stir a person’s natural inclinations toward virtue. Bringing a person around to this stage of progress is primarily the task of the philosopher, who through either writing or speaking must succeed in activating the native inclinations of the audience. The mere activation of these inclinations counts as progress, but it is progress that can easily be undone by, for example, the influence of the populace. A successful outcome of this stage – or its equivalent³³ - is a necessary condition for further progress. This stage, then, is *a* beginning stage of moral progress.

The other kind of progress Seneca addresses is the progress one makes by assimilating the arts, precepts, and patterns of conduct acquired through study into one’s reasoning power. One who is engaged in this pursuit is already guided by the norm of

³³ Seneca believes, as I point out below, that it is not necessary for every person to, as it were, go through this stage. It is at least possible that some (fortunate) people do not require external aid in activating their native inclinations toward virtue.

aiming for progress, and so has already – at least to some extent – secured the natural inclinations toward virtue. Though the teacher has a role to play in aiding the student (e.g., in directing her attention to certain texts, proscribing certain reading habits, and so on), progress in this stage is primarily in the hands of the one making progress. The student, through reading and writing, and perhaps other activities (e.g., conversation, reflection) must develop her understanding of philosophical principles in such a way that they become ‘her own’. By synthesizing the arts, precepts, and patterns, the successful student comes to know them in a way that does not rely on another’s authority and thus in a way that can play an active role in her action and deliberation.

Though Seneca clearly recognizes these two kinds of progress as distinct, he does not think of moral progress as requiring the total and exhaustive completion of one stage before the work of the next stage can be taken up. These kinds of progress, rather, demarcate distinct activities (of both teacher and learner) that are involved in progress. Though it is natural to see the stage in which one’s inclinations are stirred as the first stage, there are some reasons for doubting that this stage is meant to be *the* first stage. That is, it is not reasonable to think that one must exhaustively complete one stage before one can advance to the other activities that are part of making progress. Seneca recognizes that moral progress can vary (1) from person to person as well as (2) within a single individual with respect to particular vices, passions, or mistaken beliefs.³⁴

³⁴ Cf. especially *Ep.* 52 & 75. At 52.3, Seneca allows that there are some people who are capable of “working out their own way to the truth without anyone’s assistance, carving out their own passage.” Such fortunate people would not need to be subject to the activity involved in the first stage. At 75.14, Seneca says that there is a class of people making progress who are “beyond the reach of many of the vices and particularly of the

The account of moral progress that I have developed here, aside from the support it gains from Seneca's texts, also better accounts for both his practice and his philosophical aims than the accounts given by Hadot and Cooper. One advantage of Hadot's account is that it provides a way of situating Seneca's use of rhetorical devices within the broader context of aiding progress. On Hadot's account, Seneca can be a Stoic and a spiritual guide, since the business of the spiritual guide comes later – at the stage when one needs assistance in implementing philosophical principles in one's life. Despite its appeal, however, it is now clear – given the texts here presented – that this is an unsatisfactory account. The texts show that Seneca thinks of himself as a teacher – that is, as a philosopher who is under obligation to aid others in making progress. To do this, however, is not, as Hadot suggests, merely to serve as a friendly authority who provides insightful advice concerning action. What we find Seneca doing is providing *instructions* for those who are making progress about how they should improve *themselves*. Success in this endeavor – that is, in the more advanced activities leading one toward virtue – is entirely up to the one making progress. One cannot achieve virtue by *following* advice. One must internalize the principles, precepts, rules and advice one gets, and make them one's own. That one must do *this* for oneself is quite clear. Seneca recognizes this and conducts himself – in his writing – accordingly.

The account that I have given is nonetheless able to preserve the appeal of Hadot's account. Rhetorical devices are tools the philosopher uses in discharging his

great vices, but not beyond the reach of all. They have escaped avarice, for example, but still feel anger; they no longer are troubled by lust, but are still troubled by ambition; they no longer have desire, but they still have fear.” Progress for an individual in this group would require engagement with both activities that distinguish the two stages of progress.

obligation to promote progress in others. Rhetorical techniques are consistent with the first kind of activity aimed at progress. The philosopher *qua* teacher must bring students around to the properly philosophical approach to philosophy by stirring their natural inclinations toward virtue. For this, rhetorical strategies are likely to be highly effective. This activity, however, is on my account a preliminary and preparatory one. It must be followed up by the student's dedicated efforts. Finally, on my account, the philosopher's use of rhetoric need not be understood as restricted to any period of time. A student who is making considerable progress may have need of help in the form of high-flung praises of virtue at various times in her moral development. Such a person, though she will have made progress in some respects (e.g., she is no longer subject to desire, ambition, etc.), will not have done so in all respects. In those areas where her natural inclinations are unstable, it is the responsibility of the philosopher to assist her in stirring them.

The interpretation I have given here also makes it clear that Seneca is not, as Cooper alleges, ignoring the importance of coming to see the reasons *why* the Stoic principles are true. The texts show that Seneca emphasizes the importance for progress of coming to understand *for oneself* the truth of the philosophical principles one encounters. This is entirely consistent with coming to see the reasons why the Stoic principles are true. Seneca insists only that one remain focused on the goal of philosophy: the perfection of one's soul. This activity is not, however, at odds with the use of rhetoric in stirring the natural inclinations of students. Rhetoric is not a replacement for philosophical argument, but a tool to redirect the audience's attention – toward virtue – in a way that makes philosophical work (and so, progress) possible. In

order to make further progress, one must come to understand philosophical principles in a way that does not rely on another person's assistance. The kind of work that is required for this need not be at odds with – indeed, it will require – careful attention to philosophical argument.

This last point raises a much more general issue that is important here. Cooper is in part worried about the *kind of Stoicism* one finds in Seneca. Since, on his view, Seneca is not as serious as a Stoic should be about the importance for moral progress of coming to see the reasons why the Stoic principles are true, Seneca's Stoicism is a weaker or less rigorous version of the theory. The account of Seneca's practice that I have developed here suggests that this analysis is mistaken. When we look at Seneca's methodology in light of his own claims about it, we see that there is no real evidence that he holds a less rigorous version of the Stoic theory; nor is there decisive evidence that he is less serious than a Stoic should be about the importance of philosophical argumentation. Seneca is committed to the principle that what is needed for progress – especially in the more advanced case, where one progresses through one's course of study – is the constant effort of the one who is making progress.

6. Conclusion

In working out Seneca's account of moral progress, I have focused primarily on passages where Seneca seems to be addressing either (or both) of two classes of people – those who are making progress (i.e., pupils) and those who are aiding progress (i.e., teachers). These passages provide the materials from which I have developed an account of progress that encompasses two distinct kinds of activities. While these two activities do not fall neatly into two distinct 'stages' of the kind that, for example, Hadot aims to describe, they nonetheless serve to establish guidelines which will aid both teachers and pupils in pursuing the good. Moreover, the account establishes a crude and very general division of labor according to which the burden of effort lies at some times with the teacher and at others with the pupil.

It should be emphasized here that the account that I have set out is one that Seneca himself explicitly sets out in the very passages we have seen. It is important to see that the account I have set out, then, is an expression of *the way Seneca thinks of progress*. He thinks of himself as a philosopher and a teacher. In the latter capacity he is concerned with progress in a way that is sensitive to the constraints faced by his pupils. He recognizes, for example, that not all of his readers will have the right approach to reading his letters and other works. As a philosopher, he has an obligation to stir the inclinations toward virtue in these people. Aside from this, Seneca also recognizes the limitations that accompany his own endeavor to aid progress of those who are further along. Further progress for those who are already advanced requires that, in an important sense, they go it alone. Seneca helps these people by providing arguments, *exempla*,

exhortations, and other kinds of discussions, but it is up to the readers to select something of these and make them their own.

This has important implications for how *we* should approach Seneca's texts. Seneca sees himself as a teacher. As part of this, he is bound by certain norms – e.g., promote progress, develop pupils' souls, not their wits. Seneca also sees himself as a philosopher. As part of this, the scope and method of his instruction is constrained. He cannot force a pupil to internalize what she has read. He can only provide general instructions (as a teacher should) and substantive philosophical arguments, precepts, and patterns (as a philosopher should) which provide the pupil with a rich resource from which she must gather materials to make her own.

These considerations suggest that a proper account of practical emphasis of Seneca's works requires the recognition that he is working under these self-imposed constraints. Though I have focused primarily on the teacher-pupil relationship, this is but one instance of the relationship between the philosopher and everyone else. The constraints that Seneca recognizes are not removed when the philosopher is writing for someone other than a pupil. What the philosopher is able to do, and must do, for those who are, say, in distress is not different in kind from the activities that are typical of the philosopher's engagement with pupils. So, although I have focused primarily on his letters, we should expect that Seneca will not abandon, in other works, the methodological principles that structure his approach in the letters.

CHAPTER 3: SENECA'S USE OF RHETORIC

1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I argued for a general scheme according to which Seneca's use of rhetorical devices can be understood not to be in conflict with the philosophical (including pedagogical) aims of his letters and other works. According to this scheme Seneca's use of rhetoric is understood as supplementary to, and not in competition with, rigorous philosophical endeavors. I argued there that rhetorical devices, when employed by the philosopher, can serve the important function of 'stirring up' true beliefs which can then be cultivated and developed by ordinary philosophical methods. Still, there remain some difficulties regarding Seneca's use of rhetoric. These difficulties arise on the one hand because of a tension between the common conceptions of rhetoric and certain core commitments of Stoicism and on the other because of a tension between Seneca's injunction that one remain focused on the *res* (matter) rather than the *verba* (words) and Seneca's highly rhetorical practice.

I begin this chapter with a discussion of the antithesis between philosophy and rhetoric. In section 2, I identify three points of tension between rhetoric and philosophy. I argue that while two of these are only apparent, a third – the tension between the appeal of rhetoric to the emotions and the Stoic commitment that emotions are false judgments – poses a serious challenge to the legitimacy of Seneca's use of rhetoric. In section 3, I examine some of Seneca's texts in order to give this challenge its strongest form. In the following sections, I argue that Seneca's use of rhetoric, understood in light of the

educational goals he avows, can rest (with some qualifications) comfortably with his philosophical commitments. In section 4, I consider a recent account of Seneca's use of rhetoric which goes some way toward justifying the philosophical use of rhetorical modes of discourse. In section 5, I argue that Seneca's conception of the effects of certain kinds of rhetorical devices turns out to be crucial not only for justifying their presence in his work but also for understanding how he thinks moral reasoning progresses. I argue that though Seneca sometimes slips into what he should recognize as unjustified uses of rhetoric, he nonetheless employs rhetorical devices in a carefully controlled and calculated way that aims to promote a sound mind.

2. The Antithesis of Philosophy and Rhetoric

It was an assumption of the previous chapter that rhetoric stands, in some important respects, in opposition to philosophical argumentation. This conception of the relationship between philosophy and rhetoric extends back at least to Plato. In the *Gorgias*, Plato offers two related criticisms of the practice of rhetoric. First, rhetoric aims to persuade but not to teach. Plato considers two kinds of persuasion – that which produces conviction without knowledge and that which produces conviction with knowledge (*Gorg.* 454e). On this analysis, rhetoric stands in opposition to any kind of expertise it is pitted against. The orator, for example, is a competitor with the physician in persuading a patient to undergo treatment (456ac). Rhetoric thus stands in opposition to whatever expertise, craft or practice it addresses. The opposition stems from the difference in *aims* between rhetoric and these other fields. While the latter aim at truth,

or the good, or knowledge, rhetoric aims only to persuade. A second criticism of rhetoric is that the means by which it achieves conviction without knowledge are themselves suspect. Plato gives some indication of this when he argues that rhetoric is a kind of flattery (*Gorg.* 464a-466a). The orator achieves his aims by *pleasing*, rather than by teaching.

Each of these requires some comment. First, the criticisms of the *Gorgias* are not directly criticisms of what we might identify as the art of rhetoric. An important aim of the dialogue is to reveal that those who claim to have such an art – e.g., Gorgias - do not in fact have it. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato allows that there are true rhetoricians (for example, Pericles), whose skill is founded upon an understanding gained through “endless talk and ethereal speculation about nature” (*Phaedrus*, 269e ff)¹. The argument of the *Phaedrus* establishes that the true art of rhetoric – which is conceived as skill in speaking – is one that requires (1) knowledge of nature, which includes and is required for (2) knowledge of the soul, to which speech (i.e., the output of the art) is directed, and (3) knowledge of the truth of whatever matter the speech is about. These are required in order that the rhetorician may bring the audience to (or as close as possible to) the truth. On this view, the aims of true rhetoric do not differ from the aims of philosophy. Both aim at truth. This suggests that the first point of tension between rhetoric and philosophy – a tension between the aims of each – is merely apparent. There is not necessarily a tension

¹ All translated passages of the *Phaedrus* are from Nehamas & Woodruff, in Cooper & Hutchison (1997).

between the two. Though those who claim to be rhetoricians do aim to secure conviction without knowledge, they are not true rhetoricians.

This conception of the consonance of the aims of rhetoric and philosophy is shared by Roman authors both before and after Seneca. Cicero (before) and Quintilian (after) assert that the true rhetorician must also be philosophical.² Cicero's sketch of the history of the relation between philosophy and oratory is informative. He claims that Socrates' having left no writings of his own, and yet having "various and diverse discussions ranging in all directions" are the source of the "absurd and unprofitable and reprehensible severance between the tongue and the brain."³ Quintilian also holds that philosophy, especially moral philosophy, and rhetoric naturally go together. He claims that "the definition which best suits its real character is that which makes rhetoric the *science of speaking well*. For this definition includes all the virtues of oratory and the character of the orator as well, since no man can speak well who is not good himself."⁴

The second kind of opposition expressed in the *Gorgias* – that rhetoric achieves its end primarily through pleasure, rather than reason – is potentially more problematic. While the charge in the *Gorgias* focuses only on pleasure, Plato elsewhere recognizes that the rhetorician's tools of persuasion include appeals to other non-rational motivations – e.g., pity.⁵ Aristotle's treatise on rhetoric, moreover, relies heavily on the effectiveness

² Cf. e.g., Cicero, *De Oratore* III.xv.56 ff. ; and Quintilian, *Institutio* II.15.33 ff.

³ Cicero, *De Oratore* III.xvi.61. *Trans.* Rackham

⁴ Quintilian, *Institutio*. II.15.34. *Trans.* Butler

of the rhetorician's appeal to non-rational aspects of human psychology – i.e., the emotions. The successful speaker is one who is able to rouse anger, fear, pity and so on and direct the audience through these emotions to whatever course of action the speaker favors.⁶

Whether this feature of rhetoric puts it at odds with philosophy depends on two things. First, if the rhetorician's emotional manipulation is not in the service of aiming for the truth or the good, then rhetoric and philosophy will be at odds. The criticism, in the *Gorgias*, of rhetoric on the grounds that it is a kind of flattery is an attack on the use of emotional manipulation (pleasure) *in the absence of* considerations of truth. In the *Phaedrus*, on the other hand, the true rhetorician's use of such manipulation (e.g., appeal to pity, *Phdr.* 272a) is not objectionable. So, one condition on the appropriateness of the kinds of emotional manipulation through which rhetoric works is that such manipulation be in the service of the aims accepted by the true rhetorician. Secondly, since the true rhetorician is said to be in possession of certain kinds of knowledge – including, especially, knowledge of the nature of the soul – the use of speech which manipulates the emotions must be informed by this knowledge.⁷

⁵ Cf. *Phaedrus* 272a.

⁶ Cf. Aristotle, *Rhetoric* II

⁷ Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus* 271b. One who is in possession of the true art of rhetoric will “classify the kinds of speech and of soul there are, as well as the various ways in which they are affected, and explain what causes each. He will then coordinate each kind of soul with the kind of speech appropriate to it. And he will give instructions concerning the reasons why one kind of soul is necessarily convinced by one kind of speech while another necessarily remains unconvinced.”

This last point raises the central worry of this chapter. Although both Plato and Aristotle can reconcile their philosophy with some (perhaps idealized) form of rhetoric that includes the use of emotional manipulation, a Stoic cannot. Both Plato and Aristotle hold that there are in-eliminable non-rational components of the soul. It is, on their views, to these parts of the soul that the emotional manipulation of rhetoric addresses itself. Knowledge of these parts of the soul allows the true rhetorician to pull the right strings to bring an audience around to the correct opinion. According to the Stoic conception of the soul, however, there are no in-eliminable non-rational parts. The soul, on the Stoic view, is entirely rational. Moreover, emotions (e.g., fear, anger, pity, pleasure, etc.) are, on the Stoic view, irrational states of the soul. These features of Stoic psychology rule out the kind of scenario that Plato (in the *Phaedrus*) finds unobjectionable. A Stoic cannot consistently hold that philosophy and rhetoric have consonant aims and at the same time endorse emotional manipulation as a tool for securing conviction. A Stoic must either hold that the aims of philosophy and rhetoric are divergent (and the latter are not worthwhile) or that emotional manipulation is not generally a part of rhetoric.⁸

⁸ I say ‘generally’ because of the Stoic claim that the Sage (the perfect moral agent) will sometimes feign anger to rouse a crowd. Cf. Seneca, *De Ira* II.14.1 ff., and Cicero, *Tusculan Disputation*, 4.43. The fact, however, that the Sage will do X does not, on the Stoic view, give me, or Seneca, a reason to do X. What the Sage does she does for the reasons and on the basis of knowledge that only she has. Whatever she does, she does well. It does not follow, however, that the Sage’s having done X is an indication that doing X is generally something to be done.

3. Seneca's Use of Rhetoric

In this section I turn to a consideration of some of Seneca's texts that most strongly suggest Seneca is relying on emotional manipulation. I focus here on Seneca's use of a particular kind of rhetorical device – an *exemplum*. I begin with four passages from Seneca which are in some ways the most striking for their evocative imagery.⁹ The first two passages (D1-D2) are from a letter on the topic of suicide. In these Seneca provides examples to show that even the lowliest people (slaves slated to die in gladiatorial combat) retain control over the manner of their death, if they are only willing. The last two passages (A1-A2) are from Seneca's *On Anger*. The men in these passages are exemplary for the restraint of their anger under harsh circumstances.

D1 nuper in ludo bestiariorum unus e Germanis, cum ad matutina spectacula pararetur, secessit ad exonerandum corpus; nullum aliud illi dabatur sine custode secretum. Ibi lignum id, quod ad emundanda obscena adhaerente spongia positum est, totum in gulam farsit et interclusis faucibus spiritum elisit.

“[T]here was lately in a training-school for wild-beast gladiators a German, who was making ready for the morning exhibition; he withdrew in order to relieve himself, - the only thing which he was allowed to do in secret and without the presence of a guard. While so engaged, he seized the stick of wood, tipped with a sponge, which was devoted to the vilest uses, and stuffed it, just as it was, down his throat; thus he blocked up his windpipe, and choked his breath from his body” (*Ep.* 70.20).

D2 Cum adveheretur nuper inter custodias quidam ad matutinum spectaculum missus, tamquam somno premente nutaret, caput useque eo demisit donec radiss insereret, et tamdiu se in sedili suo tenuit, donec

⁹ The passages I discuss here are dealt with in great detail by Olberding (2008).

cervicem circumactu rotae frangeret. Eodem vehiculo, quo ad poenam ferebatur, effugit.

“Lately a gladiator, who had been sent forth to the morning exhibition, was being conveyed in a cart along with the other prisoners; nodding as if he were heavy with sleep, he let his head fall over so far that it was caught in the spokes; then he kept his body in position long enough to break his neck by the revolution of the wheel. So he made his escape by means of the very wagon which was carrying him to his punishment” (*Ep.* 70.23).

- A1 Cambysen regem nimis deditum vino Praexaspes unus ex carissimis monebat, ut parcius biberet, turpem esse dicens ebrietatem in rege, quem omnium oculi auresque sequerentur. Ad haec ille: “Ut scias,” inquit, “quemadmodum numquam excidam mihi, adprobabo iam et oculos post vinum in officio esse et manus.” Bibit deinde liberalius quam alias capacioribus scyphis et iam gravis ac vinolentus obiurgatoris sui filium procedere ultra limen iubet adlevataque super caput sinistra manu stare. Tunc intendit arcum et ipsum cor adulescentis, id enim petere se dixerat, figit rescissoque pectore haerens in ipso corde spiculum ostendit ac respiciens patrem interrogavit, satisne certam haberet manum. At ille negavit Apollinem potuisse certius mittere.

“Since Cambyses was too much addicted to wine, Praexaspes, one of his dearest friends, urged him to drink more sparingly, declaring that drunkenness is disgraceful for a king, towards whom all eyes and ears are turned. To this Cambyses replied: “To convince you that I never lose command of myself, I shall proceed to prove to you that my eyes and my hands perform their duty in spite of wine.” Thereupon taking larger cups he drank more recklessly than ever, and when at length he was heavy and besotted with wine, he ordered the son of his critic to proceed beyond the threshold and stand there with his hand lifted above his head. Then he drew his bow and shot the youth through the very heart – he had mentioned this as his mark – and cutting open the breast of the victim he showed the arrow-head sticking in the heart itself, and then turning toward the father he inquired whether he had a sufficiently steady hand. But he replied that Apollo himself could not have made a more unerring shot” (*On Anger* 3.14.1-2).

- A2 Non dubito quin Harpagus quoque tale aliquid regi suo Persarumque suaserit, quo offensus liberos illi epulandos adposuit et subinde quaesivit, an placeret conditura; deinde ut satis illum plenum malis suis vidit, adferri capita illorum iussit et quomodo esset acceptus interrogavit. Non

defuerent misero verba, non os concurrat: “Apud regem” inquit, “omnis cena iucunda est.”

“I doubt not that Harpagus also gave some such advice to his king, the king of the Persians, who, taking offence thereat, caused the flesh of Harpagus’s own children to be set before him as a course in the banquet, and kept inquiring whether he liked the cooking; then when he saw him sated with his own ill, he ordered the heads of the children to be brought in, and inquired what he thought of his entertainment. The poor wretch did not lack words, his lips were not sealed. “At the king’s board,” he said, “any kind of food is delightful” (*On Anger* 3.15.1).

It is typical of Seneca to offer illustrations, or *exempla*, which support and give concrete form to the philosophical point under discussion. Each of these passages is offered as an illustration. D1 and D2 are illustrations of the point that even in the direst circumstances there is often a way to steal oneself away from fortune. If fortune threatens to take one’s life in an objectionable way, and the will to die on one’s own terms, rather than those of fortune, is present, then an instrument can easily be found. The point (or points) which A1 and A2 are meant to illustrate is complex and will be discussed in detail below. The important question here is why Seneca uses these violent and horrific illustrations. Moreover, why does he use so many? As Amy Olberding notes, “we have not one, but two dead gladiators; not one, but several murdered children.”¹⁰

It is difficult to avoid the sense that these passages are designed to elicit emotional reactions. Whether one’s reaction to the gladiators’ deaths is one of pity, disgust, pleasure or something else, the kind of reaction that seems natural is an emotional, rather than a rational one. Similarly, despite the lesson that is illustrated in A1 and A2, the

¹⁰ Olberding (2008), 132.

natural reaction to the Persian kings' behavior seems to be anger. In characterizing these figures and their circumstances as he does, Seneca seems at risk of undermining the very lessons which he aims to convey. If Seneca is guilty of this charge, it would perhaps be an instance of a common charge against him – namely that his actions (in this case his mode of writing) do not harmonize with his philosophical commitments. His rhetoric, in other words, seems to be at odds with his philosophical message.

4. Olberding: Seneca's Violent Imagery as Death Erotica

It is clear from the passages above that Seneca's use of the *exemplum* is sometimes aimed, as Marcus Wilson notes¹¹, at "provocation, shock, and surprise." More than this, though, any plausible interpretation of the above passages must concede that one clear effect of them on a reader is an emotional reaction. If this is so, then any account of Seneca's use of rhetoric which purports to show it to be consistent with his Stoic principles must allow that sometimes – as in these passages – Seneca fails. It does not follow from this, however, that his use of *exempla* and other rhetorical devices is generally at odds with his philosophical principles. The main question here is not just whether Seneca exhibits inconsistency in thought and exposition, but rather what role passages like those above can be thought to play in Seneca's works. Even if Seneca sometimes goes too far in his use of rhetoric as he seems to in the passages above, it is still reasonable to ask what other roles such passages might be taken to play in Seneca's text.

¹¹ Wilson (2007), 431.

Olberding proposes that Seneca's use of rhetoric – particularly of the violent imagery in the four passages above – plays an important role in his philosophical project. According to her, Seneca's use of violent imagery is best understood in contrast to the presentations of violence to which all Romans of the time were accustomed. For Olberding, the important question is whether Seneca's violent imagery is simply catering to the Roman desire for “more of the same” – i.e., more scenes, this time in literature, like those familiar from gladiatorial contests and other public displays of death.¹² To distinguish Seneca's violent imagery from other displays of the time, Olberding draws on work about Death Pornography and argues that the common presentation of death in Rome was in the relevant sense pornographic. Romans were ‘prudish’ about death – unable to talk about it, admit fearing it, and so on – and this adds to Romans' enjoyment of the gladiatorial games. Public displays of death – especially of violent and fantastic scenes – distance the spectator from death. “The more fantastical it is, the less compelled the spectator will be to identify his own fate in it, for he achieves distance in his power as witness, as the one for whose pleasure death occurs.”¹³

Olberding argues that Seneca's use of violent imagery is best understood as ‘Death Erotica’. The relevant difference here is that while death pornography discourages discussion and reflection, death erotica does not: “A death erotica is not the enemy of reflection, but its spur, stimulating the imaginative powers of the reader in the

¹² Cf. Olberding (2008) 135-6. Olberding points out that displays of death in Seneca's Rome were not limited to gladiatorial contests, but included public criminal executions, portrayals of death in publicly displayed artwork, and even in certain foods.

¹³ Olberding (2008) 137.

direction of her own end by requiring her close regard of the body and its acute fragility.”¹⁴ To support this, Olberding draws on a number of passages where Seneca discusses not violent death, but death from decay, illness and age. In all of these, as in the depictions of the gladiators, Seneca’s depiction of bodily decay and death are detailed. Olberding contends that the “cumulative effect [of these depictions] is to subvert any simple pleasure in regarding death.”¹⁵ Such depictions subvert simple pleasure because they force one’s attention away from the death itself to the dying person’s attitudes and actions. On Olberding’s view, one is meant to recoil from the death of the gladiator in D1, for instance, and this reaction is partly explained by one’s reflection on the gladiators narrative – particularly on his response to the impending death.

While Olberding’s thesis provides a way of distinguishing the portrayals of violence in Seneca from the displays of his time, it is not clear that her view resolves the tension I have identified between Seneca’s philosophical commitments and his rhetoric. On the one hand, Olberding’s assessment of the violent imagery shows convincingly that Seneca does not simply aim to produce more of the same kind of violent spectacle common in Rome. He is not, then, simply aiming to produce the pleasure associated with viewing death. On the other hand, though, Olberding allows that Seneca does aim to elicit a different kind of emotional response. Seneca, on her view, aims “to evoke the

¹⁴ Olberding (2008) 139.

¹⁵ Olberding (2008) 141.

despair from which is born the courage to *choose* such an act [i.e., the gladiators' deaths]."¹⁶

5. Senecan *exempla* and Moral Reasoning

In this section I begin to develop an account of Seneca's use of rhetoric. The first step toward this is to determine what methodology should be employed. Olberding's strategy seems misguided as a way of determining – at a very general level – what Seneca aims to achieve through his use of rhetoric – in particular, through his use of *exempla* (illustrations).¹⁷ She focuses only on what seem to be the hard cases. These, of course, need to be understood and explained, but they are all too similar to each other and too different from many other *exempla* to justify developing an account of Seneca's use of *exempla* solely on their basis. An examination of Seneca's use of *exempla* which have different content from those considered above will be helpful in determining what his aims might be. I begin with one case study here – taken from Seneca's *Consolation to Marcia (ad Marciam)*. An account of these *exempla* in their contexts provides a preliminary account of Seneca's use of such *exempla*. This preliminary account also provides the resources for taking a closer look at the passages (A1-2, D1-2) above. In the next section, I turn to Seneca's claims about proper philosophical exposition to show that the preliminary account here is not without strong support.

¹⁶ Olberding (2008) 142.

¹⁷ It should be noted that Olberding nowhere claims to be providing such a general account.

In the *ad Marciam*, Seneca aims to relieve Marcia of her grief for the death of her only remaining son. After some preliminary remarks, Seneca gives two *exempla* of famous Roman women – Octavia and Livia – each of whom also lost a son.

Octavia Marcellum...nullum finem per omne vitae suae tempus flendi gemendique fecit nec ullas admisit voces salutare aliquid adferentis; ne avocari quidem se passa est, intenta in unam rem et toto animo adfixa. Talis per omnem vitam fuit, qualis in funere, non dico non ausa consurgere, sed adlevare recusans, secundam orbitatem iudicans lacrimas amittere. Nullam habere imaginem filii carissimi voluit, nullam sibi de illo fieri mentionem. Oderat omnes matres et in Liviam maxime furebat, quia videbatur ad illius filium transisse sibi promissa felicitas. Tenebris et solitudini familiarissima, ne ad fratrem quidem respiciens, carmina celebrandae Marcellie memoriae composita aliosque studiorum honores reiecit et aures suas adversus omne solacium clusit. A sollemnibus officiis seducta et ipsam magnitudinis fraternae nimis circumlucentem fortunam exosa defodit se et abdidit. Absidentibus liberis, nepotibus lugubrem vestem non deposuit, non sine contumelia omnium suorum, quibus salvis orba sibi videbatur.

Octavia lost Marcellus...Through all the rest of her life Octavia set no bounds to her tears and moans, and closed her ears to all words that offered wholesome advice; with her whole mind fixed and centered upon one single thing, she did not allow herself even to relax. Such she remained during her whole life as she was at the funeral – I do not say lacking the courage to rise, but refusing to be uplifted, counting any loss of tears a second bereavement. Not a single portrait would she have of her darling son, not one mention of his name in her hearing. She hated all mothers, and was inflamed most of all against Livia, because it seemed that the happiness which had once been held out to herself had passed to the other woman's son. Companioned ever by darkness and solitude, giving no thought even to her brother, she spurned the poems that were written to glorify the memory of Marcellus and all other literary honours, and closed her ears to every form of consolation. Withdrawing from all her accustomed duties and hating even the good fortune that her brother's greatness shed all too brightly around her, she buried herself in deep seclusion. Surrounded by children and grandchildren, she would not lay aside her garb of mourning, and, putting a slight on all her nearest, accounted herself utterly bereft though they still lived. (*ad Marciam* 2.3-4).

Livia amiserat filium Drusum...non licuerat matri ultima filii oscula gratumque extremi sermonem oris haurire. Longo itinere reliquias Drusi sui prosecuta tot per omnem Italiam ardentibus rogis, quasi totiens illum amitteret, irritata, ut primum tamen intulit tumulo, simul et illum et dolorem

suum posuit, nec plus doluit quam aut honestum erat Caesare aut aequom Tiberio salvo. Non desiit denique Drusi sui celebrare nomen, ubique illum sibi privatim publiceque repraesentare, libentissime de illo loqui, de illo audire: cum memoria illius vixit; quam nemo potest retinere et frequentare, quae illam tristem sibi reddidit.

And Livia lost her son Drusus...His mother had not been permitted to receive her son's last kisses and drink in the fond words of his dying lips. On the long journey through which she accompanied the remains of her dear Drusus, her heart was harrowed by the countless pyres that flamed throughout all Italy – for on each she seemed to be losing her son afresh – yet as soon as she had placed him in the tomb, along with her son she laid away her sorrow, and grieved no more than was respectful to Caesar or fair to Tiberius, seeing that they were alive. And lastly, she never ceased from proclaiming the name of her dear Drusus. She had him pictured everywhere, in private and in public places, and it was her greatest pleasure to talk about him and to listen to the talk of others – she lived with his memory. (*ad Marciam* 3.1-2).

Though much could be said about these two *exempla*, two features are relevant here. First, these *exempla* differ from those above in that these do not seem designed to elicit emotion. Despite the fact that both of these passages are concerned with it, there are no shocking images of death. Marcia is, in any case, already overcome with emotion. These passages are best read as directed toward Marcia's reasoning about *her* situation. Marcia, though, is not facing her death, but is dealing with the death of another. Secondly, these passages appeal to Marcia's reasoning by providing clear alternative examples of conduct. Seneca uses Octavia and Livia to reveal to Marcia that she has a choice about how to conduct herself upon the death of her son. Immediately following the account of Livia, Seneca forces a decision upon Marcia: "Choose, therefore, which of these two examples you think more laudable" (*ad Marciam* 3.1). Seneca does not think there is a real choice. Having reminded Marcia of her conduct upon the death of her own father (who had been unjustly persecuted by Sejanus), when she bore her loss in much the way

Livia is said to have borne the loss of Drusus, Seneca expects that given her character¹⁸, Marcia will think Livia's behavior is more laudable. This admission, however, will force her to confront the fact that despite what she reasons about these cases, she is behaving more like Octavia. Marcia will be forced to face the fact that she is not acting in accordance with the reasons which have guided her conduct on similar occasions.

These passages suggest a more benign interpretation of the rhetorical use of *exempla*. Seneca is here appealing to illustrations which are not aimed at emotional manipulation, but rather serve as an aid to reason. They serve as an aid, I think, primarily because of the fact that they present and force a choice between alternate (and incompatible) possibilities – whether to mourn as Livia or as Octavia mourned. Seneca, in his preface to the two *exempla*, noted that Marcia's case called for a revision of the standard practice of admonition, which ordinarily proceeds from precepts (*praecepta*) to illustrations (*exempla*). Seneca's reason for altering this practice in Marcia's case is given by way of a general principle that “some are guided by reason, some must be confronted with famous names and an authority that does not leave a man's mind free, dazzled as he is by showy deeds” (*ad Marciam*. 2.1). Seneca's claim here supports the idea that the intended effect of the *exempla*, since they do not leave the mind free, is to force a choice. Nevertheless the standard pairing of *exempla* and *praecepta* suggests that

¹⁸ The goodness of Marcia's character is a premise from which Seneca's consolation to her begins. At 1.1, Seneca notes that unless her character were such that it “was looked upon as a model of ancient virtue” (*et mores tuos velut aliquod antiquum exemplar aspici*), he would not “dare to assail” her grief.

despite their differences, both techniques play a role in admonition. Both aim to alter one's state of mind by improving one's reasoning.

I want to briefly consider here how the preliminary analysis of these passages from the *ad Marciam* might be helpful in understanding Seneca's use of *exempla* generally. It is helpful to notice first that the most obvious feature of the earlier passages (D1-2, A1-2) seemed to be their appeal to emotions. This is lacking in the passages now under consideration. This suggests that even if Seneca aims to evoke the emotions in the former passages, such an aim cannot be a necessary part of his use of *exempla*. The brief account of *exempla* of Livia and Octavia, on the other hand, reveals a feature of their use that is also present in, for example, the *Letter* from which D1 and D2 are taken. I argued above that these two *exempla* present alternatives which are meant to guide Marcia's reasoning. Seneca's use of gladiators' suicides plays a similar role in *Ep.* 70. I turn now to some details of this letter which bear this claim out.

The topic of *Ep.* 70 is suicide. Though Seneca holds that "no general statement can be made...with regard to the question whether, when a power beyond our control threatens us with death, we should anticipate death, or await it" (70.11), he is nonetheless concerned to expose certain kinds of reasons in favor of awaiting rather than anticipating death as unjustified. In particular, he argues that it is mistaken to think that it is simply too difficult to take one's own life and that only the greatest of people – e.g., Cato¹⁹ – are capable of such a feat. Cato's suicide is apparently in the background of Seneca's

¹⁹ Cato is regarded by both Stoics and Romans generally as a kind of legendary figure.

discussion of the ease with which one can, if one is determined, take one's own life.²⁰ He briefly recounts Cato's death before the gladiatorial *exempla*: "you need not believe that this cannot be done except by a Cato – Cato, who with his hand dragged forth the spirit which he had not succeeded in freeing by the sword" (70.19). By contrasting the actions of Cato – whom Romans regarded highly – with those of the gladiatorial slaves – whom the Romans regarded, if at all, as the most wretched individuals²¹ – Seneca is here also forcing his audience to reason in a specific way. While I may have thought that taking my own life was beyond my capabilities on the grounds that only someone of great moral strength is so capable, I am now confronted with the fact that even those whom I regard as the lowest sort of people are able to summon the strength for that which I find myself lacking. I find, then, that what I took to be reasons for avoiding thoughts about the manner and means of my own death are not reasons at all.

The *exempla* of Cato's death and the deaths of the gladiators seem to serve much the same role as the *exempla* of Livia and Octavia. In both cases, Seneca's use of *exempla* aims to serve as an aid to reasoning by structuring the alternatives in concrete and specific ways. The result of this is that one's reasoning is guided to oneself. The alternate possibilities are such that one cannot distance oneself from the facts that are revealed by them. Marcia cannot avoid confronting her own behavior given that she

²⁰ Cato's death is also recounted elsewhere by Seneca (cf. *Ep.* 24.6-8; 67.13). After an unsuccessful suicide attempt with his sword, Cato is reported to have finished the job by attacking the wound with his hands.

²¹ This is perhaps too strong. What matters here is that Romans would have regarded gladiatorial slaves as, in the relevant sense, 'beneath' them – in much the way that they would have regarded Cato as 'above' them.

denounces (we assume) Octavia's and praises Livia's. Similarly, we cannot avoid confronting thoughts about our own death. We cannot, in particular, dismiss or neglect thoughts of our own death on the assumption that this is only possible for those whom we regard as great people.

The passages (A1-2) from *On Anger* share with all of these the common concern with guiding one's reasoning. A closer look at these passages and their context shows that Seneca aims to illustrate and encourage proper reasoning about two points. First, Seneca aims to show the dangers of anger in powerful people. This is especially relevant to the addressee of *On Anger* – Seneca's brother Novatus – who was pursuing, if not already holding, public office at the time of Seneca's writing.²² Second, Seneca aims to show that anger can be restrained even by those who have, like Praexaspes and Harpagus, suffered horribly at the hands of another.

I begin with the second point. The role of these *exempla* in making this point is straightforward. The behavior of Praexaspes and Harpurgus is simply evidence to support the claim that one can control one's anger even under the very worst circumstances. It should be noted that neither of these two *exempla* (A1-2) are Seneca's creation. Both accounts can be found, with some differences, in Herodotus.²³ This perhaps explains both the violent imagery and Seneca's careful attention in the sections following each of these *exempla* to the point he is making. Seneca emphasizes that he is

²² Cf. Cooper & Procopé (1996), Introduction.

²³ Cf. Herodotus, *Histories* III.34 for A1; and I.109-18 for A2.

not concerned, for the moment, with what these two should have done in response to their respective kings' behavior, but only with the fact that outward anger can be restrained.²⁴

Seneca's concern with the dangers of anger in the powerful is arguably his main concern. While Seneca takes the two *exempla* (from III.14-5) above to have shown that anger can be controlled, he continues with other *exempla* through III.21. Here Seneca's use of *exempla* shares the important features common to those from *Ep. 70* and the *ad Marciam*. Seneca first continues to illustrate the evils associated with the anger of the kings Darius (16.2) and Xerxes (16.4). From here, responding to an objection that barbarian kings are more savage because of their lack of education, Seneca recounts the atrocious acts of Alexander (17.1-4). Next, blocking an objection that Romans are not so cruel as Greeks and Persians, Seneca considers the actions of Sulla, Cataline, and Calligula (18.1-3).

At this point, Seneca's *exempla* seem on the one hand merely to be illustrations. He has shown that the anger of powerful men has had disastrous consequences. Indeed, at 20.5, Seneca remarks that his point is not to describe a particular person's savagery (here, Calligula's) but rather the savagery of anger itself. Another aim, however, of these *exempla* can be gleaned from their progression. Seneca's transition from Persian to Greek, and then to Roman leaders forces one to consider that the atrocities brought on by anger are not owing to cultural differences.

These considerations go some way toward mitigating the gruesome depictions of violence in some of these *exempla* to the extent that they reveal a clearer point of such

²⁴ Cf. *On Anger* III.14.3.4 & III.15.1-2

passages, but more than this can be said. Having put aside the *exempla* of destructive effects of anger in rulers, Seneca turns, at III.22 and following, to examples of anger in powerful leaders that has been restrained. Referring to the earlier *exempla*, he remarks that “you should think of these as examples of what to avoid. Here, on the other hand, are examples to follow, examples of moderation and gentleness on the part of people who had both cause to be angry and power to exact retribution.”²⁵ In what follows, Seneca tells of Antigonus, Philip, and Augustus. Seneca’s concluding remarks on this topic begin with the following lines:

Dicat itaque sibi quisque, quotiens lacesitur: “Numquid potentior sum Philippo? Illi tamen impune male dictum est. Numquid in domo mea plus possum quam toto orbe terrarum divus Augustus potuit? Ille tamen contentus fuit a convicatore suo secedere.

And so everyone should say to himself, whenever he comes under provocation: ‘Am I more powerful than Philip? Yet he let abuse go unpunished. Have I really more power in my own home than our deified Augustus had in the whole world? He was content merely to part company with the man who abused him.

Though this differs in some details, Seneca’s advice here bears important resemblance to the mechanism both in the *ad Marciam* and in *Ep. 70*. The *exempla* he has appealed to are found here to be in the service of a larger philosophical goal of thinking about oneself and one’s actions. For this, the *exempla* are useful because of the role they play in structuring one’s alternatives. The accounts of both bad and good behaviors on the parts of powerful men are designed on the one hand to give clear alternatives. On the on other hand, these *exempla* are designed in such a way as to forestall certain kinds of objections

²⁵ *On Anger* III.22.1 – Trans. Cooper & Procopé.

to the claim that one should check one's anger. In particular, Seneca is concerned to block objections which rest on claiming some kind of exemption from the rule. One who thinks, for instance, that *they* do not need to worry about anger since they are not Persian, is shown to be mistaken. In this then, Seneca goes some distance toward making a larger claim about the nature of anger - i.e., that it – and its destructive nature - is the same among all people.

6. Reading and Re-reading *exempla*: A Two-level Approach

I have argued above that one role that the *exempla* play in Seneca's writings is that of presenting alternatives which force or structure a reader's thinking both toward himself and toward the relevant correct beliefs. This feature of Seneca's use of *exempla* is clear from the passages considered above. It is important, however, to consider whether this is the only use of *exempla*. Many passages in Seneca's works suggest that the *exempla* have a role to play not only in the case of those who need to be 'dazzled' by illustrations, but also in the reasoning of those who are already in possession of reason. Seneca's claim (*ad Marciam* 2.1) above suggests that even those whom reason guides, though their admonition begins with precepts, are nonetheless to be subjected to *exempla*. This raises a question about the role of *exempla* in the study of this group. If the only use for such exercises is to dazzle the mind, then what purpose could they possibly serve in the thinking of those who are already able to take on precepts?

The answer to this question is complex and requires attention to three features of Seneca's thinking about how moral improvement happens: (1) his conception of reading

– and in particular, the role of re-reading - as a mode of learning; (2) his insistence that philosophical study focus on the *res* rather than the *verba*; and finally (3) his experimental approach to ethical improvement. Though (1) and (2) have been discussed in some detail in Chapter 2, the role of *exempla* in the reasoning of those who already have the correct beliefs to which the *exempla* are meant to direct them requires a further look at each.

I begin here with Seneca's conception of the role of reading – and re-reading – as a mode of learning. In Chapter 2, I noted Seneca's insistence that one's course of reading should not be too varied and should include re-reading standard texts. The aim of such an exercise is for the reader to select something to 'make her own'. If, as I argued in Chapter 2, Seneca thinks that his works are to be treated in much the same way, then it should be the case that the *exempla* which he includes in his work should have something to offer upon the second reading. His texts, moreover, ought to be such that they reward *active* reading – where the reader's exercise is aimed at achieving something beyond memorization. This raises the question of what purpose re-reading the *exempla* might serve. These are, after all, passages the intent of which I have argued is relatively clear when one sees that they are directed at people whose susceptibility to precepts is compromised.

Some help for answering this question comes in the form of Seneca's account of his own experience in reading the work of another author: Lucilius. In *Ep.* 46, Seneca describes one such experience.²⁶ He reports that he picked up Lucilius' book with the

intention of simply glancing over it but was “carried along by its charm” and read the whole work – ignoring hunger, nightfall, and the business of the day.²⁷ After praising the book for its forceful style and sweetness, Seneca postpones a full discussion until he has had a chance for a “second perusal” (*cum retractavero*). He explains to Lucilius: *nunc parum mihi sedet iudicium, tamquam audierim illa, non legerim* (Now my judgment is too little secure, as though I heard these things, rather than read them).

Seneca’s reaction to Lucilius’ book can be understood in terms of the second feature noted above – his insistence on maintaining focus on the content (*res*) rather than the form (*verba*) of philosophical texts. Seneca’s report of his experience, and in particular his reluctance to discuss it further before a second reading, suggests that he was *dazzled* by the work. Seneca nonetheless thinks that a second reading of the text will be different. The implication of his commitment to comment on the book after a second reading is that re-reading the text will enable him to focus on the content without being swayed or distracted by the style.

These two features indicate that there is some room for thinking that the *exempla* aim to provide some benefit upon a second reading, and so there is some reason for thinking that these passages can be read on a different level. But what would such a reading accomplish? Part of the answer, it seems, is that such a reading is one that focuses on the *content* rather than the *style* – the *res* rather than the *verba*. This raises a

²⁶ For a full discussion of *Ep.* 46, see Graver (1996), Chapter 2. I am much influenced here by Graver’s account of this letter.

²⁷ *Ep.* 46.1

worry, however, about the role of *exempla* in the reasoning of those who already are in possession of the relevant precepts. If one has truly grasped the precepts in question, then *exempla* would seem to be superfluous. On the other hand, if one has not fully grasped the precepts, then the *exempla* are likely functioning in the same way as before – by dazzling the reader into assenting to the correct beliefs.

The dilemma is resolved by Seneca's attention to the difference between those who accept a precept and those who make it their own. One who accepts, for example, that death is not an evil because one is dazzled by bold statements or an authority's claim to that effect is in possession of the correct belief, but can easily lose it. What such a person requires is help in integrating this belief. In other words, though one may accept that death is not an evil, one may still be inclined to grieve at the death of a loved one. This is explained by the person's other beliefs about, e.g., the naturalness of grief, or the evil of loss. One role that *exempla* play, when read at a higher level – i.e., when read with the relevant belief already on hand – is in forging connections between concepts. If this is so, then it should be possible to determine what conceptual connections each of the *exempla* are making.

The role of the *exempla* of Livia and Octavia will be discussed in the following chapter. The *exempla* from *Ep. 70*, aside from their role at the basic level of structuring one's thinking about one's own death, also provide material for sorting out for oneself a difficult question about whether and when suicide is acceptable. Though Seneca himself declines to offer a general statement about the appropriate circumstances for committing suicide, the *exempla* of the gladiators and others help to isolate certain considerations that

are relevant to the question. First, there is the matter of the will or desire to end one's life. Second, these *exempla* are all cases where one can await one's fate or freely meet it. Finally, they raise questions about the manner in which a life is lived. The gladiators' deaths, though gruesome in certain ways, are deaths which they chose instead of enduring a death chosen by others. For someone, who, for example already accepts that suicide is sometimes appropriate, these *exempla* provide materials for thinking more carefully about why it is or is not appropriate under certain circumstances.

A similar, and somewhat simpler, account can be given in the case of the *exempla* from *On Anger*. There, as has been noted, Seneca takes pains to say what point he is making. The role of Praexaspes and Harpurgus in the *exempla* is that of showing that anger can be restrained. Beyond this, though, the behavior of these two is perhaps only useful in raising further questions – i.e., about what they should have done – which Seneca here puts aside. For the reader who already accepts that anger should be checked, the *exempla* of the Persian kings and others provide further material for study.

This feature of Seneca's use of *exempla* is further supported by Seneca's emphasis on the importance of *training* the mind.²⁸ An important part of this training involves learning to focus on the *res* rather than the *verba*. In *Ep.* 75, the contrast between these two is put in terms familiar from Plato's discussions of oratory above. Seneca advises that a philosopher's words should aim not to please, but to help.²⁹ Words

²⁸ Cf. also *Ep.* 15.2 ff., 75.7, 50.5 ff., 80.1-5.

²⁹ *Ep.* 75.5. *Non delectent verba nostra, sed prosint.*

succeed in doing this when they display facts rather than themselves.³⁰ These remarks about the proper use of words can also be understood as advice about how best to read words. The focus, in one's reading, should be always on the *res*. Any cleverness that may be attached to the *verba*, though it is not in itself unwelcome³¹, should not be the focus of one's attention.

A final, and somewhat speculative, aspect of the higher level reading of *exempla* involves a feature of Seneca's portrayal of his own practice. Seneca portrays himself in his works – particularly in the letters – as someone who has an experimental spirit. In the famous letter in which Seneca takes up residence above a bath-house (*Ep* 56), Seneca explains that the point of so doing was that he might train and test himself (*experiri et exercere me volui*) (*Ep*. 56.15). Here the particular belief in terms of which Seneca tests himself is that silence is necessary for study. The various kinds of noise which plague Seneca during his stay above the bath house pose a significant challenge to this belief. Similarly, one might regard *exempla* as functioning in a similar way in Seneca's texts for certain readers. That is, *exempla* can play a role in bringing readers who do not have it around to a certain belief. Particularly vivid *exempla* can do this forcefully. For those who already accept a belief, *exempla* can be helpful in forging conceptual links among the belief in question and other beliefs. Finally, for those who are perhaps familiar with a

³⁰ *Ep*. 75.5. *Sit talis, ut res potius quam se ostendat.*

³¹ Cf. *Ep* 75.3. *Non mehercules iuieuna esse et arida volo, quae de rebus tam magnis dicentur; neque enim philosophia ingenio renuntiat.*

proposition – e.g., that silence is required for study – but who do not believe it, working through the *exempla* can be a way of testing and exercising their beliefs.

7. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown that Seneca's employment of the *exempla* is not in conflict with this philosophical aims. Despite the fact that some of Seneca's *exempla* do have – and perhaps are intended to have – as effects certain emotional reactions, it is nonetheless clear that Seneca's primary objectives in employing these devices are consistent with this philosophical principles. Aside from this, a close look at those objectives shows that Seneca's employs *exempla* in a careful and principled way. The principles which guide his practice are drawn from his understanding of the how readers interact with texts and in particular how reading can play a role in self-improvement.

Seneca's implementation of a rhetorical device – the *exemplum* – aside from being on the whole consistent with his Stoic principles, shows yet again that Seneca philosophical texts are dominated by his concern with progress. The account of Seneca's use of *exempla* here shows that Seneca is concerned to help not only those of his audience who need first to be persuaded of the truth of Stoic positions, but also those who already accept Stoic principles. Seneca's use of *exempla*, moreover, shows that Seneca's thinking about moral progress is both subtle and appealing. Different strategies are needed for those who are without the correct beliefs and for those who have them but do not yet fully understand them. While it should be granted that Seneca's style sometimes goes too far – and that less violent, less sensational *exempla* could have been chosen – it

nonetheless remains that Seneca's incorporation of one rhetorical tool constitutes an important achievement. The real achievement is not the general one of integrating philosophy and rhetoric, but rather than of employing a rhetorical device in such a way as to promote a philosophical goal. Seneca's use of *exempla*, then, is a remarkable and resourceful achievement for a philosopher who aims to advance the philosophical progress of others through his writing alone.

CHAPTER 4: PHILOSOPHY AS THERAPY

1. Introduction

In his review of Martha Nussbaum's *Therapy of Desire*, Bernard Williams asks whether we can "really believe that philosophy, properly understood in terms of rigorous philosophical argument, could be so directly related to curing real human misery, the kind of suffering that priests and doctors and – indeed - therapists address?"¹ I argue here that, properly understood, Seneca's account of how philosophy is therapeutic gives some plausibility to the thesis Williams rejects. Much depends, I argue, on how philosophy and therapy are to be properly understood. Williams relies on the account of philosophical therapy developed by Nussbaum, according to which the Stoic account prevails among its Hellenistic rivals. This account, however, is plagued by an ambiguity about the nature of Stoic therapy. The ambiguity – which has to do with whether Stoic philosophy in some way *contributes* to therapy or instead *is* therapy – can, in fact, be traced to some of the sources from which Nussbaum's account is constructed. These sometimes fragmentary sources do not fully determine the Stoic conception of therapy. Seneca, on the other hand, articulates an account of philosophical therapy that avoids the ambiguity. Thus, Seneca provides an answer not only to Williams' question, but also - because Seneca gives a clear and consistent account of the Stoic conception of therapy – to the more general question about the nature of Stoic therapy.

¹ Williams (1994), 26.

I begin with a brief survey of passages which are taken to reflect the Stoic view of therapy (2). These passages – taken from sources other than Seneca - forge an analogy between a philosophical method for curing the mind and the medical method for curing the body. I then consider some additional passages which I argue raise worries about how informative the medical analogy is (3). I conclude that these passages raise but do not answer crucial questions about the nature of Stoic therapy, and turn (4 & 5) to a new appraisal of Stoic therapy drawn from the texts of Seneca. On the basis of Seneca’s texts, I argue (6) that the confusion about the status of therapeutic arguments that undermines the force of the medical analogy is not present in Seneca’s conception – or implementation – of therapeutic arguments. For Seneca, philosophy just is therapy, and philosophical arguments are therapeutic because they bring one closer to the truth.

2. Philosophy and Therapy: The Medical Analogy

The two most important sources – apart from Seneca - for our understanding of the Stoic account of therapy are Chrysippus’ *On Emotions* and Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations*. While Cicero’s text is in good condition and survives in full, the text of *On Emotions* survives in the form of a series of quotations. The majority of these quotations are found in books 4 and 5 of Galen’s polemical treatise *On the Doctrines of Hippocrates and Plato (PHP)*. Aside from Galen’s treatise, Origen’s *Against Celsus* contains a short quotation from *On Emotions* which must be included in any discussion of Stoic therapy. While these sources are not the only remaining evidence for the Stoic understanding of

therapy, they nonetheless provide the core materials for the view. It is, moreover, to these texts that scholars have turned in reconstructing and evaluating Stoic therapy. I turn now to some passages from these works that have been the focal points of scholarly attention.

(1) Chrysippus *On Emotions* Book 4

οὔτε γὰρ περὶ τὸ νοσοῦν σῶμα ἐστὶ τις τέχνη ἢν προσαγορεύομεν ἰατρικὴν, οὐχὶ δὲ καὶ περὶ τὴν νοσοῦσαν ψυχὴν ἐστὶ τις τέχνη οὔτ' ἐν τῇ κατὰ μέρος θεωρία τε καὶ θεραπεία δεῖ λείπεσθαι ταύτην ἐκείνης. διὸ καὶ καθάπερ τῶν περὶ τὰ σώματα ἰατρῶν καθήκει τῶν τε συμβαινόντων αὐτοῖς παθῶν ἐντὸς εἶναι, ὡς εἰώθασιν τοῦτο λέγειν, καὶ τῆς ἐκάστῳ οἰκείας θεραπείας, οὕτω καὶ τῶν τῆς ψυχῆς ἰατρῶν ἐπιβάλλει ἀμφοτέρων τούτων ἐντὸς εἶναι ὡς ἐνὶ ἄριστα. καὶ ὅτι οὕτως ἔχει μάθοι ἂν τις τῆς πρὸς ταῦτ' ἀναλογίας παρατεθείσης ἀπ' ἀρχῆς. ἢ γὰρ πρὸς ταῦτα ἀντιπαρατείνουσα οἰκειότης παραστήσει, ὡς οἴομαι, καὶ τὴν τῶν θεραπειῶν ὁμοιότητα καὶ ἔτι τὴν ἀμφοτέρων τῶν ἰατρειῶν πρὸς ἀλλήλας ἀναλογίαν.

It is not the case that there is a method (*technē*), which we call 'medical', concerned with the diseased body, but no method for the diseased mind. Nor does the latter method fall short of the former, either in item-by-item theory or in treatment. Therefore, just as it is appropriate for the doctor concerned with bodies to be, as they say, 'inside' the sicknesses (*pathē*) which befall them and the proper cure for each, so also it falls to the doctor of the mind to be 'inside' both these things in the best way he can. And one can learn that this is so even from the analogy with these things that I set forth at the beginning. For the fitness of the analogy will suggest, I think, that there is also a similarity of therapies, that is, an analogy between the methods of cure for each. (Galen, *PHP* 5.2.22-24=SVF 471, trans. Graver)

In (1), Chrysippus asserts a strong multi-leveled analogy between medicine or the medical *technē* and the method for curing the mind. The points of analogy here are many: each method is equally effective in treating its proper object; practitioners of each method must be, in some sense, 'inside' the sicknesses they are addressing; and finally,

² Text from Galen, *PHP*, De Lacy (1984).

there is some similarity between methods of cure. While (1) clearly establishes Chrysippus' view that there is an analogy between medicine and the 'method' for curing the mind, there is some disagreement about the importance of the analogy for the Stoics. Nussbaum (1994) argues that the medical analogy provides a framework within which and in terms of which the Hellenistic schools framed their debates. For her, the medical analogy is "not simply a decorative metaphor; it is a tool both of discovery and of justification" (14). Cicero, on the other hand, is impatient with Chrysippus' use of the analogy. Though Cicero is in agreement with the substantive claim there is a method for curing the mind, as there is one for the body, he is unimpressed by the extended use of the analogy.³ In describing the Stoic account of certain unhealthy conditions of the mind, Cicero remarks that "the Stoics, especially Chrysippus, expend a great deal of effort working out the analogy between the sicknesses of the body and those of the mind. But all that talk is not really necessary. Let us pass it by and devote our detailed discussion to the essentials of the matter" (*TD*, 4.23).⁴ Though Cicero's impatience with the analogy is not itself an argument against Nussbaum's view, as it says nothing conclusive about what role Chrysippus took the analogy to be playing in his argument⁵, it does show that the analogy – at least in detailed form – could be and was taken to be, if not merely a

³ Cf. Cicero, *TD*, III.5-6.

⁴ For more on Cicero's dissatisfaction with Chrysippus' use of the medical analogy, cf. Tieleman p.143 ff.

⁵ Arguably, Cicero's dissatisfaction with the analogy attests to its widespread use in Chrysippus' texts, and this may provide some evidence that he took the analogy very seriously as an argumentative and justificatory tool. Cicero that is, may be confusing a substantive point for a rhetorical device. Cf. Tieleman, Ch. 4.

decorative metaphor, at least something less than a central tool for justification and investigation. The conception of therapy outlined below on the basis of Seneca's texts makes no appeal to the medical analogy that is not best interpreted as rhetorical or decorative.

The question here, however, is what the medical analogy can tell us about the nature of Stoic therapy. The task of answering this question presents a number of difficulties. There is first a difficulty concerning how tightly Chrysippus conceives of the patient-analogues. That is, are the diseases of the body and mind thought to be analogous only in the sense that they are both unhealthy conditions or are these conditions analogous in some deeper way? Nussbaum holds that “[p]hilosophy heals human diseases, diseases produced by false beliefs. Its arguments are to the soul as the doctor’s remedies are to the body” (14). On this view the relation between the diseases of mind and body is understood weakly. The real force of the medical analogy – its primary analogue – lies in the curing agents, i.e., the arguments, rather than in the targets of these cures. Tieleman (2004), on the other hand, argues that the analogy between unhealthy conditions of body and of mind is crucial for understanding Chrysippus’ view. Tieleman’s argument relies on passages like (2) below.

(2) Chrysippus, *On Emotions*

καθάπερ γὰρ καὶ ἐπὶ τοῦ σώματος θεωρεῖται ἰσχύς τε καὶ ἀσθένεια, εὐτονία καὶ ἀτονία [καὶ τόνοσ], πρὸς δὲ τούτοις ὑγίειά τε καὶ νόσος, καὶ εὐεξία τε καὶ καχεξία...κατὰ τὸν αὐτὸν τρόπον ἀνάλογόν τινα πᾶσι τούτοις καὶ ἐν ψυχῇ λογικῇ συνίσταται τε καὶ ὀνομάζεται. ὡς οἶμαι, ἀπὸ τῆς τοιαύτης ἀναλογίας τε καὶ ὁμοιότητος καὶ τῆς ἐν αὐτοῖς συνωνυμίας γεγεννημένης. καὶ γὰρ καὶ κατὰ ψυχὴν τινὰς λέγομεν ἰσχύειν καὶ ἀσθενεῖν καὶ εὐτόνους καὶ ἀτόνους εἶναι καὶ ἔτι

νοσεῖν καὶ ὑγιαίνειν, οὕτω πως καὶ τοῦ πάθους καὶ τοῦ κατ' αὐτὴν ἀρρωστημάτων λεγομένου καὶ τῶν τούτοις παραπλησίων.⁶

For just as one can observe in the body both strength and weakness, good tension and lack of tension, and also health and sickness, good condition and bad condition, so also there are certain states in the rational mind which are analogous to all of these in composition and in name. It is, I think, the similarity and analogy between them which is responsible for their having the same name. For we do also say in reference to the mind that some people are strong or weak or have good tension or lack tension, and also that they are sick or healthy, and it is also in the same way that we speak of sickness (*pathos*) and infirmity and things like that in the mind. (Galen *PHP* 5.2.26-27=SVF 3.471, trans. Graver)

In this passage and others like it⁷, Chrysippus is establishing, Tieleman argues, “the natural basis of the analogy” (146). The crucial point is that “the analogy is based on the fact that soul is corporeal like the body” (146). Thus Tieleman stresses – and argues that Chrysippus stresses - the shared physical attributes of diseases of the mind and the body. It is on the basis of their shared physical attributes that the diseases and their treatments can be usefully compared.⁸

A second difficulty surrounding the question of Chrysippus’ conception of the medical analogy concerns another analogue – that between the ordinary medical method and the method for curing the mind. In the surviving passages from *On Emotions*, Chrysippus does not explicitly identify the latter method with philosophy. Chrysippus

⁶ Text from Galen, *PHP*. De Lacy (1984)

⁷ Cf. Tieleman (2004), 143 ff.

⁸ An important implication of this view of the relation between mental and bodily diseases is that therapy need not be thought to consist entirely in argument. Tieleman argues, for instance, that the Stoics were serious about non-argumentative courses of therapy – including, especially, regimen. Cf. Tieleman (2004), chapter 4.

does not seem to insist that philosophy as a whole is the method. It is possible that the method analogous to medicine is some part of philosophy – perhaps ethics or applied ethics.⁹ The fact that the fourth book of *On Emotions* had a separate title gives some extra plausibility to this view, since it suggests that the fourth book was read without the more general analysis of the nature of the emotions contained in the first three books. In any case, there is an important question here which Chrysippus’ texts do not fully answer for us. We do not know what is required in order for therapy to work. One possibility is that one can only be cured, on Chrysippus’ view, by becoming a Stoic. This would involve revising one’s beliefs accordingly, working through Stoic arguments, and so on. Another possibility is that a cure can be achieved without full conversion. Perhaps some part of philosophy is able to achieve this end without the patient having to take on the whole philosophical system. On this point, the medical analogy itself is not decisive. Both possibilities are consistent with the analogy.

3. Philosophy and Therapy: The Breakdown of the Medical Analogy

That both of these alternatives are consistent with the medical analogy presents a problem for interpreters. Recent work, for instance, that has sought to determine whether Stoic therapy is effective by looking to the Stoic appeal to the medical analogy faces a problem of indeterminacy in accounting for the nature of Stoic therapy and therapeutic arguments.¹⁰ That is, if the Stoic view, or Chrysippus’ view, is that one can only be

⁹ This is Tieleman’s suggestion. Cf. Tieleman (2004), 143.

genuinely cured by full conversion to the Stoic position, then asking what the Stoic can say to help cure a non-Stoic of certain psychological ills seems a misguided question. To the extent, then, that we are concerned to evaluate the Stoic position on the nature and efficacy of therapy, we must first be confident what that view is. Focus on the medical analogy, however, is simply not sufficient for this task.

This indeterminacy is, in fact, made worse by some other passages which provide some further details, by appeal to the medical analogy, of the nature of therapy. These passages show that not only is the medical analogy consistent with both of the two options - that philosophy just is therapy, and that therapy is only a part of philosophy – but that there are in fact indications in the texts from Chrysippus and Cicero that the Stoics made both kinds of claims. The first possibility is suggested by Cicero. In a passage from the *Tusculan Disputations*, he articulates the central idea of what I will call the broad notion therapy.

(3) Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*

qui vero probari potest ut sibi mederi animus non possit, cum ipsam medicinam corporis animus invenerit, cumque ad corporum sanationem multum ipsa corpora et natura valeat nec omnes, quae curare se passi sint, continuo etiam convalescant, animi autem quae se sanari voluerint praeceptisque sapientium paruerint, sine ulla dubitatione sanentur? est profecto animi medicina, philosophia; cuius auxilium non ut in corporis morbis petendum est foris, omnibusque opibus viribus, ut nosmet ipsi mederi possimus, elaborandum est.

But surely we must admit that the mind is capable of healing itself. After all, it was the mind that invented the science of medicine for the body. And while

¹⁰ This is the approach favored by Nussbaum (1994). Sorabji (1997) &(2000) also seems to accept the general principle that the medical analogy provides a useful tool for determining the nature Stoic therapy.

bodily healings are largely dependent on the nature of the bodies themselves, so that not all those who submit to treatment show any immediate improvement, of the mind there can be no doubt; once it is willing to be healed, and heeds the precepts of the wise, it does indeed find healing. A medical science for the mind (*animi medicina*) does exist: it is philosophy. And unlike medicine for the body, the help of philosophy is something we need not look to others to gain. Instead, we should make every possible effort to become capable physicians for ourselves. (Cicero, *TD* III.5-6, trans. Graver)

Here Cicero largely echoes Chrysippus' claims about the existence and efficacy of therapy, but also adds the clarification that the medical method is philosophy itself. He confirms this in the following paragraph when, before turning to his report of the third day's discussion at Tusculum, he reminds the reader that he has already (sufficiently) discussed the value of philosophy as a whole (*universa philosophia*).¹¹

Cicero's claim here that philosophy *is* the treatment of the mind suggests that Stoic therapy is a matter of something like philosophical education. On this view, one becomes better (i.e., has fewer and fewer psychological ills) through progressing in philosophical training – in this case, in Stoicism.¹² This (broad) model of therapy is both consistent with and further suggested by Cicero's claim that the cure for the mind is something which we must do ourselves. Being cured is not, on this model, something that can be brought about externally. It is through one's own efforts that the healthy condition of the mind is achieved.

¹¹ Cicero refers here to his lost *Hortensius*.

¹² While it should be noted that Cicero – the man – was not a Stoic, Cicero – the speaker of the *Tusculan Disputations* – is articulating and defending the Stoic position.

This model, however, is called into question by another set of texts from Chrysippus and Cicero. I begin with Chrysippus.

(4) – Chrysippus, *On Emotions*

κἂν γὰρ τρία, φησίν, ἦ γένος τῶν ἀγαθῶν, καὶ οὕτω θεραπευτέον τὰ πάθη· οὐ περιεργαζόμενον ἐν τῷ καιρῷ τῆς φλεγμονῆς τῶν παθῶν τὸ προκαταλαβὸν δόγμα τὸν ὑπὸ τοῦ πάθους ἐνοχλούμενον· μὴ πως τῇ ἀκαίρῳ περὶ τὴν ἀνατροπὴν τῶν προκαταλαβόντων τὴν ψυχὴν δογμάτων σχολῇ ἢ ἐγχωρούσα θεραπεία παραπόληται. κἂν ἡδονὴ ἢ τὸ ἀγαθὸν καὶ τοῦτο φρονῇ ὁ ὑπὸ τοῦ πάθους κρατούμενος· οὐδὲν ἦττον αὐτῷ βοηθητέον καὶ παραδεικτέον, ὅτι καὶ τοῖς ἡδονὴν τὰγαθὸν καὶ τέλος τιθεμένοις ἀνομολογούμενόν ἐστι πᾶν πάθος.¹³

For even if it should be that there are three classes of goods, even so one should work to cure the emotions. But during the critical period (ἐν τῷ καιρῷ) of the inflammation one should not waste one's efforts over the belief that preoccupies the person stirred by emotion, lest we ruin the cure which is opportune by lingering at the wrong moment over the refutation of the beliefs which preoccupy the mind. And even if pleasure is the good and this is the view of the person who is overcome by the emotion, one should nonetheless assist him and demonstrate that every emotion is inconsistent (i.e., with their doctrine) even for those who assume that pleasure is the good and is the goal. (Origen, *Contra Celsum* VIII 51 = SVF 3.474)

This passage from Origen introduces a new level of specificity that has not shown up in the earlier passages concerned with the medical analogy. Here, Chrysippus makes reference to the Stoic view of the emotions. The relevant details here are that, for the Stoics, an emotion consists in a complex of beliefs or judgments. Chrysippus here indicates two such beliefs. The first type (Type 1) is “the belief that preoccupies the person stirred by emotion.” Chrysippus advises against addressing this belief when one is in the grips of emotion. The second (Type 2) belief is a belief whose content – cast in

¹³ Text from von Arnim, 3.474

general terms – is that emotion is consistent with one's other beliefs.¹⁴ This belief, Chrysippus claims, is one that can be defeated by appealing to a kind of inconsistency in the patient's beliefs.

Though this passage introduces the important distinction between two different types of judgments, Chrysippus does not tell us here what Type 1 and Type 2 judgments really are. Chrysippus' account is filled out by a corresponding passage from Cicero.

(5) – Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*

sunt qui unum officium consolantis putent malum illud omnino non esse, ut Cleanthi placet; sunt qui non magnum malum, ut Peripatetici; sunt qui abducant a malis ad bona, ut Epicurus; sunt qui satis putent ostendere nihil inopinati accidisse...Chrysippus autem caput esse censet in consolando detrahere illam opinionem maerentis, qua se officio fungi putet iusto atque debito.

Some hold that the comforter has only one responsibility: to teach the sufferer that what happened is not an evil at all. This is the view of Cleanthes. Others, including the Peripatetics, would teach that it is not a great evil. Still others, for instance Epicurus, would draw attention away from evils and toward good things, and there are yet others who think it is sufficient to show that nothing has happened contrary to expectation. And the list goes on. Chrysippus, for his part, holds that the key to consolation is to get rid of the person's belief that mourning is something he ought to do, something just and appropriate. (*Tusculan Disputations*.III.76, trans. Graver)

What can be seen more clearly from Cicero's catalogue of approaches to consolation in (5) is the content of each of the two types of belief. First, the content of a Type 1 belief is made clear. Whereas Chrysippus identifies this, in (4), only as the belief that preoccupies the mind of the person in the grips of emotion, we see, in (5), that this is a belief about good or evil. Since Cicero is here concerned with grief specifically, the specific belief

¹⁴ Here I follow Graver in distinguishing Type 1 and Type 2 beliefs. Cf. Graver (2007), 35 ff.

that preoccupies the grieving person's mind is that what has happened – e.g., the loss of a loved one – is an evil.¹⁵ Second, the content of the Type 2 belief is here made more concrete. In (4), Chrysippus claims that it can be shown to the person experiencing emotion that their experience is in some way inconsistent with their doctrine. Here, we can begin to see something of why that is so. Type 2 beliefs are of the form 'It is appropriate for me to react emotionally'.¹⁶ Chrysippus recommends a strategy of showing to the grieving (or otherwise emotionally compromised) person that the belief that it is appropriate to grieve is somehow undermined by their doctrine – either that pleasure is the good, or that there are three classes of goods.¹⁷

¹⁵ Though Cicero focuses on grief, the picture can be generalized according to the Stoic classification of emotions. According to this classification, the general beliefs which give rise to emotions are false beliefs that something good or evil is either present now or looming in the future. Grief falls under the classification of a present evil, since it involves the belief that the current state of affairs is evil. For accounts of the Stoic classificatory system, cf. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* VII.110 ff., Arius Didymus, *Epitome of Stoic Ethics*, 10 ff. Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 3.24 – 25. Cf. also Long & Sedley, (§ 65).

¹⁶ 'React emotionally' is simply a way of describing – at the level of type – the content of a Type 2 belief. In the case of a particular emotion, the behavior or experience that is identified with 'reacting emotionally' will differ. The Stoics often classify the different reactions in terms of a kind of contracting, sinking, or elation of the psyche. This kind of characterization captures the phenomenology of emotion. Cf., e.g., Arius Didymus, 10b: 'Pain is the contraction of the soul'. The Stoics, also, however, often speak of intentional objects or typical behavior associated with emotion. Cf., e.g., Arius Didymus, 10c: 'Anger is the desire to take revenge on someone...'

¹⁷ It should be noted that the interpretation of this passage is controversial. Nussbaum (1994, p. 318) takes this passage as a central piece of evidence for the pliability of Stoic therapeutic arguments. Tieleman (2003, p. 166 ff.) rejects Nussbaum's account and argues that Chrysippus is in these passages 'having a bit of fun' with the Aristotelian position and treating the Epicurean view with irony.

Two emerging features of Chrysippus' view – the distinction between Type 1 and 2 beliefs and the claim that the most effective therapy involves addressing Type 2 beliefs – generate some uncertainty about what Stoic therapy is. In the last two passages, the concern is with helping a person who is experiencing emotion to cease experiencing it. To accomplish this, Chrysippus recommends addressing one of the two false beliefs which together contribute to the emotion. If this is therapy, then it seems to fall short of what is promised in the earlier passages – (1), (2) and (3). If we suppose that this course of treatment is successful, the result will be only a temporary relief from emotional disturbance. It is temporary because the Type 1 belief remains. But the Type 1 belief is, for a Stoic, a false belief, and as such it stands in the way of one's being completely 'cured'. This is especially so since it is a false belief about value.

This problem can perhaps be resolved by adopting the hypothesis that the Stoic method for curing the mind is complex. Part of the method – the part addressed in (4) and (5) - is concerned with helping those who are emotionally compromised at the very time when they are compromised. Another part of the method, however, must be concerned with a cure that is more stable and more enduring. This part, in order to bring about a complete cure, must not address itself selectively to some false beliefs. It must aim to eliminate all such beliefs – including the Type 1 beliefs that are partly constitutive of emotions.

This hypothesis is, I will argue below, confirmed by Seneca. Seneca distinguishes between a broad and a narrow notion of therapy. Narrowly, therapy is simply what can be done to help one who is in the grips of emotion. In this narrow sense,

therapy is no more than a part of philosophy, if even this much can be said of it. According to the broad notion, though, therapy is what can be done to genuinely cure the mind – to bring about a sound mind and a tranquil life. In this sense, therapy is identified with philosophy – and specifically, by Seneca, with Stoic philosophy.

4. Seneca's Conception of Therapy

In this and the following sections, I consider anew the question of the Stoic conception of therapy in light of Seneca's philosophical works. I begin, in this section, with a look first at Seneca's commitment to advancing the improvement of his audience. Seneca's primary conception of the therapy is what I have called the broad notion. That is, Seneca is concerned to improve his audience – or, perhaps better – is concerned that his audience be improved in all of the ways philosophy is able to improve one's life. What these ways are, and how Seneca sets about to achieve these improvements is the topic of the current section. In what follows, I consider the implications of this view of therapy for the narrow notion of therapy – what can be done for someone in the grips of an emotion. Finally, in the last section, I consider the implications of Seneca's conception of philosophy, therapy and the relation between the two for assessing so-called 'therapeutic arguments'.

4.1. Preliminaries: The Benefits of Philosophy

Some results from Chapter 1 – 3 concerning Seneca’s philosophical writing are worth remembering here, as they bear directly on Seneca’s conception of philosophical therapy. First, Seneca differs from Chrysippus and other Stoics before (and after) him in that his written work is his primary mode of philosophical communication. Seneca was not a school head nor did he give public or private lectures to fellow or would-be Stoics.¹⁸ To the extent that Seneca wishes to contribute to the philosophical tradition in which he is working, he must do so entirely through his writing. It is, moreover, entirely clear that he does wish to contribute. In one letter, he remarks that “philosophy is both theoretical and practical.”¹⁹ For Seneca, it is part of the aim of philosophy that it achieve something at both of these levels. Secondly, Seneca’s conception of philosophy is one according to which both its theoretical and practical aspects contribute to promoting the aim of philosophy as a whole. This, Seneca claims, is nothing other than wisdom, which is the perfect condition of the human mind.²⁰ Philosophy is not, for Seneca, some inert body of theory that is available for consumption. Philosophy is necessary for achieving a life that is happy. A final preliminary point is that for Seneca, contributing to the tradition by committing his thoughts to writing is more than simply something he wishes

¹⁸ The notable exception to this claim is his tutorship of the young Emperor Nero. Though the nature of Seneca’s education of Nero is uncertain, it is somewhat certain that it went beyond the scope of philosophy. (Cf. Griffin (1976), ch. 3). In this respect then, Seneca was not Nero’s philosophy instructor or philosophical mentor *simpliciter*.

¹⁹ *Ep.* 95.10

²⁰ Cf. *Ep.* 89.4.

to do. Seneca sees it as his obligation to advance his philosophical tradition. He sees this as his most important work.²¹ These considerations begin to show that Seneca is an author who aims to achieve something through his writing that transcends mere cataloguing of ideas or settling scholarly debates. Seneca's primary aim in his philosophical writing is to produce an effect in his audience that is not only cognitive or theoretical, but also practical.

If these passages show that Seneca is concerned with the ways in which philosophy can be therapeutic, they do not show precisely how he conceives of its therapeutic power. For this we must consider those passages where Seneca aims to help in more specific or concrete ways. There are many passages both in Seneca's letters and in other works which can rightly be characterized as aiming at helping. Here I draw attention to selection of such passages from which we can begin to get a sense of Seneca's conception of philosophical therapy.

One important kind of help that Seneca aims to provide is simple exhortation to philosophy. His praise of philosophy takes many forms. Seneca claims that philosophy helps not only those who study it, but even those who merely encounter it.²² It helps in a number of ways. It frees people from fear.²³ It is through philosophy that people are

²¹ Cf. eg., *Natural Questions* II.59.2. The overriding aim of all philosophical investigation – whether of human or divine things – is to produce something helpful: *aliquid salutare miscendum est.*

²² Cf. *Ep.* 108.4.

²³ *Ep.* 16.3, 27.6, 29.12.

made noble.²⁴ It is only through philosophy that people can become virtuous.²⁵ Seneca often pits philosophy against the difficulties that are brought upon people by fortune. Only through philosophy can fortune be conquered.²⁶ And finally philosophy is the pursuit of wisdom, which is, according to Seneca, the *perfectum bonum* (complete good) of the human soul.²⁷

These and other praises of philosophy serve at least two roles in Seneca's texts. They aim to encourage the non-philosopher to turn to philosophy.²⁸ To this end Seneca reminds his audience that the benefits of philosophy are given to none, but available to all.²⁹ These praises also aim to encourage those who are already pursuing philosophy to continue. Seneca's conception of the task of taking up philosophy is one according to which success requires 'constant effort' (*adsidua intentione*).³⁰ It is, moreover, one to which one must devote oneself above all else.³¹ Although Seneca scarcely distinguishes

²⁴ *Ep.* 44.2-3

²⁵ *Ep.* 111.2-4, 89.8, 90.3

²⁶ *Ep.* 53.12, 82.5-6, cf. also *De Constantia Sapientiae* I.1

²⁷ *Ep.* 89.4

²⁸ Cf. especially, *Ep.* 53.8. "Let us, therefore, rouse ourselves, that we may be able to correct our mistakes. Philosophy, however, is the only power that can stir us, the only power that can shake off our deep slumber."

²⁹ Cf. *Ep.* 90. Of Philosophy: "Cuius scientiam nulli dederunt, facultatem omnibus" (Knowledge of which they [sc. the gods] have given to none, but capacity for which they have given to all).

³⁰ *Ep.* 84.11

himself from other thinkers merely by producing exhortations to philosophy, these exhortations have a special significance in Seneca's texts given his commitment to the idea that what one ultimately gains from philosophy is what one must take for oneself.³² The effort to turn one to philosophy is importantly an effort to get the reader to begin healing herself.

In addition to these exhortations and encouragements that appear in his philosophical works, Seneca concerns himself with more substantive topics. The highly general character of the exhortations is balanced by the wide range of specific topics which occupy Seneca's attention. Though there is not space here to survey the wide range of topics – both ethical and otherwise – on which Seneca focuses in his philosophical works, it is nonetheless worth considering if only in a somewhat schematic way the kinds of substantive assistance Seneca aims to provide through his writing. What emerges from this consideration is a sense of the character of therapeutic arguments.

4.2. Therapy of the Passions

I turn now to texts where Seneca's concern is with the eradication of emotions. I focus here primarily on grief, which is a central topic in both the *Consolations* to Marcia

³¹ Cf. *Ep.* 17.5-10, 29.12, 53.8-10, 59.10, 72.3-4, 75.16. In this respect Seneca differs from Cicero's conception of the proper place for philosophy in the life of a Roman statesman – or any Roman.

³² Cf. *Ep.* 2, 84, *et al.*...in which Seneca makes it clear that the goal of philosophical study is to take something for oneself.

(*ad Marciam*), Helvia (*ad Helv.*), and Polybius (*ad Polyb.*) and in some of Seneca's letters. Here I draw attention to some features of these works that illustrate Seneca's understanding of therapy. These texts above all aim to help the reader – and, in the case of the *Consolations*, the addressee as well – by offering arguments which have as their conclusion that the emotions in question – here, grief – are to be extirpated. As we will see, this conclusion can be taken either as a theoretical proposition or as a practical injunction. How this claim is to be understood can vary depending on the context. This variability, moreover, must be incorporated into an account of how Senecan Stoic therapy is thought to work.

What is striking in works like the *Consolations* and *On Anger* is the variety of argumentative strategies. This variety is partly explained by Seneca's sensitivity to the differences in his audience, but this sensitivity does not explain the specific forms of argument that are employed in these texts. To do this, we must consider the arguments themselves. The arguments are quite different in character and this has implications, which I will consider in the next section, for how we are to interpret the intended scope of the arguments and also for how we are to evaluate their efficacy.

The first kind of argument, which is especially prominent in both in the *Consolations* and in the *Letters* which have consolation as their aim³³, takes as its starting point some apparently specific feature of the named addressee. These arguments require

³³ Cf. *Ep.* 63 – a letter of consolation to Lucilius on the death of his friend Flaccus, & *Ep.* 99 – a copied letter of consolation to Marullus.

the assumption that the addressee is more or less virtuous³⁴. With these arguments, Seneca seems to stick to his dictum that *aliter enim cum alio agendum est* (“Different people must be handled differently”).³⁵ This is certainly an important aspect of Seneca’s approach to consolation and to therapy more generally, though it will be important to ask in the end just how central the variability of therapeutic arguments is even for Seneca, in light of the other arguments he puts forward. In any case, it is worth considering here two examples which illustrate the apparently personal nature of Seneca’s therapeutic approach.

First, in his *Consolation to Marcia*, Seneca’s therapy of Marcia, who is grieving for her lost son, begins with a praise of Marcia’s character.

(6) *Consolation to Marcia*

Nisi te, Marcia, scirem tam longe ab infirmitate muliebris animi quam a ceteris vitiis recessisse et mores tuos velut aliquod antiquum exemplar aspici, non auderem obviam ire dolori tuo, cui viri quoque libenter haerent et incubant, nec spem concepissem tam iniquo tempore, tam inimico iudice, tam invidioso crimine posse me efficere, ut fortunam tuam absolveres. Fiduciam mihi dedit exploratum iam robur animi et magno experimento approbata virtus tua.

If I did not know, Marcia, that you were as far removed from womanish weakness of mind as from all other vices, and that your character was looked upon as a model of ancient virtue, I should not dare to assail your grief – the grief that even men are prone to nurse and brood upon – nor should I have conceived the hope of being able to induce you to acquit Fortune of your

³⁴ Strictly speaking, neither Seneca nor any of his addressees are to be regarded as virtuous. Only the Sage can be so regarded. Seneca nonetheless readily allows that he and his addressees are *progredientes* (making progress). It is on the assumption of a certain amount of progress made that the first kind of argument here proceeds. I will follow Seneca’s practice of referring to their ‘virtues’.

³⁵ *Ad Marciam*. 2.1

complaint, at a time so unfavorable, with her judge so hostile, after a charge so hateful. But your strength of mind has been already so tested and your courage, after a severe trial, so approved that they have given me confidence (*ad Marciam*. 1.1)

I will return to this passage below to consider Seneca's conception of the limitations of philosophical therapy, but here I want point out the significance of these opening remarks. In the following sections of the *ad Marciam*, Seneca proceeds to argue that Marcia, in her current bout with grief at the loss of her son, is behaving in ways that are inconsistent both with the past behaviors in virtue of which she can rightly be said to be courageous and strong of mind and also with her own conception of correct behavior. The argument proceeds in two stages. Seneca begins by reminding Marcia of the loss of her father who was forced to an early death by the machinations of Sejanus. One of Seneca's aims here is to remind Marcia of how she herself bore a misfortune that was, for her, no less severe than her current loss. The account of her grief and recovery at the loss of her father, moreover, provides further evidence, Seneca claims, that Marcia is now a candidate for consolation. Seneca's claim in (6) that he would not dare to assail her grief did he not know of her strength of character is echoed in a later passage (1.5) where he claims that the way she managed the loss of her father has given Seneca hope that she can be helped by his words.

Though the remarks concerning Marcia's father do not, by themselves, constitute an argument, they nonetheless provide – both for Marcia and for the reader – the relevant background against which the first argument is set. In the following sections (2.3 – 3.4), Seneca remarks that, given the well-worn character of her current grief (which is now in its third year), it is best to proceed by first confronting Marcia with *exempla*

(illustrations) and then with *praecepta* (precepts). This strategy is apparently needed because Marcia needs to be shocked out of her current state before reason can take hold. The shock, in Marcia's case, is achieved by presenting to her two examples of famous Roman women – Octavia and Livia³⁶ - who have suffered similar misfortunes (both lost sons), but have endured them in different ways. Octavia is portrayed as having given herself over to grief for the rest of her life, shutting herself off to all advice, and even condemning the mention of her son by another in her presence (2.4). Livia, on the other hand, after a certain period of customary mourning, is said to have celebrated her son's life, and to have cherished his memory (3.2). After the initial accounts of Livia and Octavia, Seneca tells Marcia to *choose* (*elige*) which she thinks is more laudable (*probabilius*). At this point, Seneca twice repeats his earlier praise of Marcia's character. He stresses that choosing to follow Octavia's example would be “most disgraceful and foreign (*alienissimum*) to [her] character, which is conspicuous (*noto*) for leaning toward the better course” (3.3). Finally, Seneca concludes that Marcia will exhibit in this matter – i.e., in choosing Livia as the more laudable – “that correctness in character and self-restraint [she has] maintained her whole life” (3.4).

Seneca takes a similar approach – though more condensed – in *Ep.* 99, which includes a letter of consolation to Marullus. Here, Seneca has, in accordance with his opening remarks to Marullus, rebuked rather than consoled his friend.³⁷ Near the end of

³⁶ For these texts, see Ch. 3, Section 5.

³⁷ Cf. *Ep.* 99.3. *Solacia expectas? Convicia accipe.* (You are looking for solace? Let me give you a scolding instead.)

the letter, Seneca explains his approach: “These words I have written to you...with the idea that I should rebuke you even for the slight delay during which you lapsed from your true self (*a te recessisti*), and should encourage you for the future, to rouse your mind against Fortune and to be on watch for her missiles, not as if they might possibly come, but as if they were bound to come” (99.32).³⁸

These passages suggest that, for Seneca, therapy can proceed from individual features of a person to a conclusion about the kind of behavior that the person should or, as in these cases, should not be exhibiting. The argumentative strategy here is simple: first, remind the addressee of the character she either has or recognizes as praiseworthy; second, point out – perhaps doing so vividly by employing a ‘shocking’ illustration – that the addressee is behaving in a way that is inconsistent with her own appraisal of appropriate conduct. Arguably, the conclusion of such an argument is meant to be a change in the addressee’s behavior – or perhaps, more weakly, a change in the addressee’s thinking about her behavior. Whether this kind of argument could be successful in either of these ways is, I think, not determinable in our texts. For reasons that I discuss below, Seneca is quite pessimistic about what can be done for someone who is experiencing grief *at the time when* they are experiencing it.

³⁸ The argumentative strategy exhibited here is repeated elsewhere. Cf. *Ep.* 63.7 – *Fac ergo, me Lucili, quod aequitatem tuam decet, desine beneficium fortunae male interpretari.* (Therefore, Lucilius, act as befits your serenity of mind, and cease to put a wrong interpretation on the gifts of Fortune); *ad Helviam* XVI.5 – *non potes itaque ad obtinendum dolorem muliebri nomen praetendere, ex quo te virtutes tuae seduxerunt.* (Nor can you allege your womanhood as an excuse for persistent grief, for your very virtues set you apart.).

What then can be made of this kind of argument that is so prominent in Seneca's texts? The answer requires taking seriously the earlier claim that Seneca's texts are texts *for publication*. Whatever effect the argument might be taken to have on the named addressee, there is a distinct question what effect the argument – even one crafted especially for a certain individual – can have on a reader who is, while perhaps in *some* ways like Marcia or other addressees, in very different circumstances.³⁹ This reader can, perhaps upon reflection, come to see that the real force in the argument lies not in its being tailored to the named individual, but rather in the conceptual connections it draws between 'correctness of character' and facing misfortune in a praiseworthy way. In this way, the opening sections of the *Consolation to Marcia* itself serve, for the reader, as an illustration not of an urgent practical choice, but rather of a theoretical point about the relation between mental states and behaviors. Marcia's case illustrates that virtue is incompatible with excessive grief.

Read in this way, however, the opening passages from the *ad Marciam*, far from containing an argument, seem to contain something with rather the ring of a suggestion – that virtue and grief are incompatible. The reader can reasonably ask why this should be accepted. The reader, moreover, can reasonably raise objections grounded in the intuitive view – both in the ancient world and now - that grief is a natural reaction, and that Marcia's grief – despite the implication that she is behaving in ways that are inconsistent with her character – is very much *in character*. The reader, that is, requires an argument

³⁹ That Seneca intends his *Consolations* to be read in this way is supported most clearly and incontrovertibly by his inclusion of his letter of consolation to Marullus in a letter (*Ep.* 99) to Lucilius.

that goes beyond the case of Marcia and that addresses these worries. It is, in fact, to such arguments that Seneca turns his attention in the remainder of the *ad Marciam*.

I will focus here only on one such argument that I take to be the dominant therapeutic argument in the *Consolation to Marcia*. The aim here is simply to bring out the character of the argument. The argument begins from the question at *ad Marciam* 9.1. Seneca has just argued that excessive grief is not natural, and considers here the following objection: “Why then...do we all so persist in lamenting what was ours, if it is not Nature’s will that we should?”⁴⁰ Seneca’s response to this dominates the discussion for much of the treatise, culminating in a long rhetorical passage (*ad Marciam* 17.2-18.1) which illustrates the main claims of the argument. The preliminary response is that we all mistakenly suppose – because of a kind of failure of imagination - that we are exempt from the troubles that afflict others.⁴¹ The mistake here is that we fail to heed nature’s teaching. If we properly understood nature, Seneca claims, we would not “so persist in lamenting” precisely because we would know that the object of lamentation was never really “ours”.

Thus it is along these two lines – roughly epistemological and metaphysical – that the arguments of the *ad Marciam* progress. The force of the metaphysical line of argument is to contrast what is truly ‘ours’ and what is not. The nature of the external world – the world that stands apart from what is ‘ours’ – is such that it is outside our

⁴⁰ *Ad Marciam*. 9.1 – *unde ergo tanta nobis pertinacia in deploratione nostri, si id non fit naturae iussu?*

⁴¹ *Ad Marciam*. 9.1 ff.

control. The force of the epistemological line of argument is simply that by understanding this state of affairs correctly, we can avoid mistakenly thinking that what is not in our power is. These two strands of argument culminate in a passage beginning at *ad Marc.* 17.2: “Suppose” Seneca says, “that someone says to a man setting out for Syracuse: ‘First inform yourself of all the disagreeable and all the pleasurable features of your future journey, and then set sail’.” Seneca proceeds to catalogue all of the possible delights and terrors that might accompany such a voyage. These warnings about the voyage to Syracuse are likened to the content of what Nature teaches us. Seneca’s arguments in the intervening pages have served as parallels to the warnings offered to the would-be Syracusan visitor in that they have provided this content.

This cursory account of some of the main lines of argument in the *ad Marciam* reveals two important features of the character of therapeutic arguments. It is clear, first, that Seneca thinks that different argumentative strategies can be employed. At one level, the praises of Marcia’s character, and similar praises in other works of consolation, force into her consciousness some considerations about correct behavior which serve as the basis for therapeutic argument. At another level, though, from the perspective of the reader, these considerations serve as an illustrative account of the relation between virtuous states of mind and correct behavior. At both levels the introductory remarks concerning Marcia’s character provide a foundation from which philosophical arguments can be put forward. In Marcia’s case, the initial argument involving the *exempla* of Livia and Octavia has, if successful, ‘shocked’ her mind so that she is now receptive to rational discourse. In the case of the reader, the connections that are claimed to exist between

virtuous character and appropriate emotional responses provide the initial claims which have to be supported by further philosophical argumentation.

The goal condition for both Marcia and the reader, then, is one in which each is primed for philosophical argument. This feature of Seneca's understanding of philosophical therapy should be stressed. Despite the variability that appears to be so central to his approach, the main lines of argument in a work with the express aim (internal to the text) of helping eliminate grief are not tailored to the individual. Seneca devotes his attention, instead, to arguments which rely on Stoic physical and ethical principles. A central lesson, in fact, of the *Consolation*, is that in terms of our relation to the world around us (i.e., to Nature) we are all of us in exactly the same condition. This lesson requires not special attention to an individual's needs, but rather attention to the fact that despite the apparent differences among individuals, human beings are all similarly situated in relation to Fortune.

Thus, in the main line of argument in the *ad Marciam*, Seneca neither argues to Marcia or to the reader on the basis of any individual characteristics which may distinguish them nor does he argue to these as people who are emotionally distressed at the moment. On the contrary, the bulk of the argument in the treatise is an argument that would be well suited in a text on Stoic natural or moral philosophy. This is no accident. This brief consideration of the *ad Marciam* shows that, for Seneca, therapeutic arguments are indistinct from philosophical arguments generally.

5. Immediate Relief

I have argued that Seneca's primary conception of therapeutic argument is one according to which therapy and philosophy are indistinct. Philosophy is therapeutic, Seneca thinks, just insofar as one understands or 'makes one's own' the true principles of Stoic philosophy. This conception of therapy, however, is one whose arguments are directed at someone who is not at the time suffering from the ailments – e.g., emotions – which the therapeutic arguments aim to eliminate. Here I consider briefly what Seneca thinks can be done for one who is in the grips of grief, anger, or other emotions. Seneca's views on what can be achieved in these circumstances provide additional evidence for the view of therapy that I have argued Seneca holds.

Seneca's position on this question is both straightforward and consistently handled in his texts. Someone who is experiencing an emotion is, for Seneca, beyond the reach of reason, and so reasoning – and, in particular, putting forward the kinds of arguments we have seen above – will have no effect. Seneca remarks, in the opening passage of the *Consolation to Helvia* that consolation only works once the grief is no longer fresh. "I know that I ought not to intrude upon your grief while its violence was fresh, lest my condolences should irritate and inflame it" (*ad Helv.* 1.2.). This view is anticipated in Seneca's early work *On Anger*. When, near the end of the treatise, Seneca turns to a consideration of how to cure the anger of others, he remarks that "we should not venture to soothe a person's anger with words, since it is deaf and mindless. We should give it time" (*de Ira* III.39.2). This is, in fact, Seneca's primary advice for helping

those who are experiencing anger or grief.⁴² Aside from the mere passing of time, Seneca thinks there is very little that can be done for someone who is experiencing an emotion. Though he argues that a person's anger can be checked when there is a greater object of fear or shame to displace the anger⁴³, it is not clear whether Seneca thinks this point generalizes to other emotions as well.

I have briefly drawn attention to Seneca's remarks about helping those who are angry or grieving at the time of their emotional distress in order to contrast this with the approach that we have now seen at work in therapeutic texts like the *Consolations*. The most important point to be stressed here is that for the grieving, angry, or otherwise emotionally troubled individual philosophical arguments are not the appropriate treatment. Far from helping, offering arguments to such a person, Seneca thinks, is likely to worsen their condition.

6. Therapeutic Arguments

I have provided in the last two sections some details of Seneca's conception of philosophical therapy from which it is possible to develop a more general account of Stoic therapy. Two features of this conception stand out as important both for clarifying

⁴² cf. *Ep.* 63.12 – *finem dolendi etiam quia consilio non fecerat, tempore invenit* (A man ends his grief by the mere passing of time, even if he has not ended it of his own accord); *Ad Marciam.* 1.6 – *illud ipsum naturale remedium temporis, quod maximas quoque aerumnas componit, in te una vim suam perdidit* (Even time, Nature's great healer, that allays even our most grievous sorrows, in your case only has lost its power.). Cf. also *Ad Marciam.* 8.1-3; *De Ira* III.12.4; *De Ira* III.27.5

⁴³ Cf. *De Ira* III.39.4 ff. & 40.2 where Seneca allows that a person of importance – that is, of greater importance than the angry person – is able to check one's anger by using fear.

the Stoic view of therapy and, more specifically, for understanding the status of therapeutic arguments.

First, it is clear that Seneca is doubtful about the efficacy of what I have called the narrow notion of therapy. While it is reasonably clear that Chrysippus thinks that the philosopher can help someone for whom an emotion is fresh – through discourse directed toward the Type 2 belief – Seneca is doubtful about such an approach. The best course of therapy in this kind of case, Seneca thinks, is simply to wait.

The second, and central, contribution of Seneca's texts concerns what I have variously referred to as the 'status', 'character', or 'conception' of therapeutic arguments. The meaning of these terms can now be made clear by contrasting different therapeutic models. Consider first the kind of therapy involved in the narrow notion of therapy. On this view of therapy, there are certain things that the philosopher *qua* therapist could say to someone to improve their psychological condition. Whatever it might be thought the philosopher could say, this view assumes a certain model of therapy. It is a model according to which – to borrow from the medical analogy – some treatment (i.e., some argument) is imposed upon the ailing party from the outside. I have argued that Seneca rejects the idea that this kind of therapy can be effective. We can now see a further reason Seneca has for rejecting this model of therapy. Such a course of therapy could only be effective if the very moral psychological and epistemological principles which Seneca endorses were false. For Seneca, one improves one's psychological states and one's character by coming to see the truth of philosophical principles for oneself, not by simply taking on what someone else says.

For similar reasons, Seneca must also reject a notion of therapy – associated in some ways with the narrow notion of therapy – according to which a central component of therapy is a sensitivity to the individual personality of the ailing party. As we have seen, the apparent differences to which Seneca is sensitive are ultimately differences in character. Seneca’s individual attention to Marcia is attention to her self-restraint and strength of mind, and not to any other interests or concerns that may distinguish Marcia from others. Even here, though, Seneca’s attention to Marcia’s character serves not as a central component of her therapy, but merely as a way of preparing her (and the reader) for the philosophical arguments that dominate her *Consolation*.

Seneca, then, rejects not only the narrow notion of therapy, but also the model of therapeutic arguments which this notion requires. Just the opposite point can be made concerning the broad notion of therapy. It is clear that Seneca endorses this account of therapy – according to which individuals are helped insofar as they have made progress in their understanding of philosophical principles. On this view, therapeutic arguments must be understood on the model of philosophical arguments. There is, in fact, no distinction between the two for Seneca. The sense in which philosophy is therapeutic is just the sense in which philosophy aims at improving the condition of the mind. But this is not some distinct or separable feature of philosophy. This is just what philosophy is.

7. Conclusion

A final consideration confirms Seneca’s understanding of therapeutic function of philosophy. If the main arguments of his *Consolations* are simply philosophical

arguments, then they must be thought to help, in the end, by contributing to an understanding of moral or natural philosophical principles. Indeed, a full account of the arguments from, e.g., the *Consolation to Marcia*, would confirm that Seneca's dominant aim is provide the reader with ways of thinking about these philosophical principles – about, for instance, the relation between nature and what is 'ours' – that facilitate understanding. These arguments, in other words, aim at the truth which natural and moral philosophy investigates. Here it is important to note Seneca's dictum *veritatis una vis, una facies est* ("Of truth there is one force, one appearance.")⁴⁴. Thus, the way in which philosophical arguments are therapeutic – in aiming at and revealing the truth – is a way in which they serve to help all who encounter them, regardless of individual differences.

It is with this conception of the power of philosophy that Seneca asks Marcia (and the reader) to consider that once one has come to understand the truths that philosophy investigates and teaches one is equipped to approach life as a whole in much the same manner as the fully informed would – be Syracusan visitor.⁴⁵ Seneca's point here is clear. If having the correct attitude toward a voyage to Syracuse is made possible by knowing the dangers and joys that are likely to accompany such a voyage, then having the right attitude toward your life as a whole is made possible by knowing what things naturally happen, what things can be avoided, what things are up to us, and so on. In short, one achieves the right attitude – a healthy mind – by coming to understand the truth which

⁴⁴ *Ep. 102.13*

⁴⁵ Cf. *Ad Marciam*. 18.1-8.

philosophy teaches. If this is how philosophy is to be properly understood – not merely as a collection or source of rigorous arguments – but rather as a collection of arguments which aim at the truth, then we can begin to see how, *pace* Williams, philosophy can cure real human misery. It does so by requiring its adherents to transform their lives in much the way that priests and doctors and – indeed – therapists do.

CHAPTER 5: THE THERAPY OF GRIEF: THERAPY IN THE *CONSOLATION TO*
MARCIA

1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I argued that Seneca's conception of therapy is one according to which philosophy as a whole is therapeutic. According to this conception, a fully rational mind – a mind free from emotional disturbance and other ills – can be the result only of rigorous philosophical inquiry. The result of such an inquiry – if successful – is meant to be a correct understanding of oneself, one's actions, and nature. It is helpful to keep in mind that this result is an ideal toward which all philosophical study is ultimately directed. Only philosophical inquiry at a very high level – the level at which one does the intellectual work for oneself – can realize the ideal of wisdom Seneca upholds. Still, given that few begin philosophical inquiry at this high level, and given that philosophy is, on Seneca's view, the only route to happiness, there are (as there must be) other starting points. Thus, on the one hand, there is an important theoretical point from Chapter 4 that only careful study and advanced progress can 'cure' the mind. That is, it is only as the result of very advanced philosophical progress – the attainment of which one must do for oneself – that a person can become wise, and thus happy and free from emotion. On the other hand, though, few individuals – if any – have achieved such a high level of philosophical progress. These individuals, if there are any, are in any case beyond the need for any assistance Seneca might hope to provide. Seneca's attention, as often, is primarily directed not to these advanced philosophers, but to those who are in

the initial stages of progress. These are the people who stand to benefit from what another can say to them. This, it turns out, is especially so in Seneca's *Consolations*, where the issue of concern is emotion. Those who are experiencing emotion, or those who are prone to experience emotion, are people who, to varying degrees, fall short of advanced philosophical progress.¹

I focus here primarily on Seneca's effort to help such an audience as it is carried out in the *Consolation to Marcia (ad Marciam)*. Though I will occasionally draw on other texts, I do so sparingly and only in cases where clear parallels are illuminating. The reason for this is simple. I have emphasized repeatedly the importance of taking into account the fact that Seneca's texts are his only mode of philosophical communication. Whether Seneca succeeds, then, in a particular philosophical project is inextricably linked to the text or texts in which that project is carried out. Thus whether Seneca's conception and implementation of Stoic therapy are successful is closely tied to whether the *ad Marciam* succeeds.

I begin (section 2) by highlighting some features of the *ad Marciam* that are important to bear in mind. If the success of Seneca's project is linked to the text in which he carries this project out, then some care should be taken in determining just what the project is in any given text. In sections 3-5, I turn to an account of the main lines of argument in the *ad Marciam*. The progression of argument in what I regard as the philosophical core of the text is, although not entirely straightforward, one that is unified by concern for improving Marcia's (and the reader's) epistemic state. In 6, I clarify

¹ Cf. *Ep.* 75.8 ff.

Seneca's therapeutic goals in light of the arguments considered in the earlier sections and argue that the *ad Marciam* is successful. Seneca's aim, however, is modest. Seneca cannot and does not hope by his words alone to render Marcia or the reader wise. He aims, instead, to make an important beginning – that of influencing one's thinking about grief, loss, and the human condition in a way that is conducive to and preparatory for further philosophical inquiry. Finally, I conclude by contrasting the conception of philosophy as therapy with the therapeutic aims in a text like the *ad Marciam*. This contrast, I argue, sustains the characterization of Seneca as one who is on the one hand both philosophically serious and subtle in his approach and on the other hand as one who remains cautious and guarded about his own moral progress and what he can offer to others.

2. The Aim of the *ad Marciam*

On the one hand, the aim of the *ad Marciam* would seem to be both obvious and largely uninformative. Seneca aims, as he claims at I.1, to assail Marcia's grief (*obviam ire dolore tuo*). There is nothing surprising about this in a work of consolation and while it is possible to show that the work is unified around this general goal, such an exercise misses an important feature of the work as a whole – namely Marcia. Marcia represents an important group of people – i.e., nearly everyone - who stand to benefit from Seneca's arguments in this text. I argued in the previous chapter that Seneca's account of therapy is one according to which one truly benefits and (if all goes well) becomes wise only through philosophy as a whole. It is also one according to which one who is grieving

cannot, while grieving, benefit from philosophical intervention of any kind. Marcia, though, is someone who – by the time Seneca begins putting forward philosophical arguments – is at the moment neither grieving nor in possession of philosophy as a whole. Marcia is ready to begin philosophy.

These features of Marcia's condition complicate how best to understand Seneca's goal. If *obviam ire* refers to simply stopping Marcia's grief, then, in my view, the goal is achieved early on by the rhetorical section discussed in the last chapter.² In any case, this would not be the proper aim for a philosophical text on Seneca's view³. On the other hand, it is clear that Seneca cannot aim in this text to render Marcia or the reader wise. Aside from Seneca's commitment to the idea that one must ultimately do the work oneself to become wise, there is much that a Stoic would need to say and argue to achieve such a result that simply does not appear in the *ad Marciam*. Seneca's aim, then, must fall somewhere between these two options. The *ad Marciam*, like any text, cannot aim to produce a sage, and yet as a philosophical text it must aim to benefit in some way. As I will argue below, the text aims to benefit its readers by putting forward a number of arguments which aim to change the reader's perspective. These changes in perspective are important first steps.

² *Ad Marc.* 2.1-3.4

³ Cf. Ch. 4, Section 5.

3. The First Dialectical Section: *natura* and *opinio*: *ad Marciam* 7.1 – 8.3

Following Seneca's attempt to restore Marcia's state of mind to one from which she can begin to engage in rational discourse, the style of the *ad Marciam* changes. Seneca employs a style common in many of his treatises in which he anticipates and responds to questions and objections. These questions and objections together with their responses move the discussion along. Here I begin with the first of three such dialectical sections – from 7.1 to 8.3 – in which Seneca argues against the view that there is a natural role for grief in human life.

The first objection and initial response come at 7.1:

“At enim natura desiderium suorum est.” Quis negat, quam diu modicum est? Nam discessu, non solum amissione carissimorum necessarius morsus est et firmissimorum quoque animorum contractio. Sed plus est quod opinio adicit quam quod natura imperavit.

“But the longing for one's loved ones is natural.” Who denies it, so long as it is moderate. For not only at the passing of one dearest, but even at their parting there is an unavoidable sting and a shrinking of even the stoutest mind. But an opinion adds more than what nature commands.

These first remarks establish a contrast that will be the focus of the first two dialectical sections. The contrast is roughly that between nature (*natura*) and belief or opinion (*opinio*). The first dialectical section (7.1-8.3) aims to establish that what happens by nature and what happens as the result of opinion differ. Seneca begins by pointing to the behavior of animals who have lost their offspring. Partly perhaps, Seneca wishes to concede that some measure of grief – or at least some display of grief – is natural. He points to the behavior of dumb animals, cows, wild beasts, and birds. All of these,

Seneca observes, give over to displays of grief – outcries, fits of rage – which quickly subside. Seneca compares the behavior to these groups of animals to human behavior: ‘nor does any creature sorrow long for its offspring except man – he nurses his grief, and the measure of his affliction is not what he feels, but what he decides (*quantum constituit*) to feel” (7.2). This first argument, then, establishes that while it is possible that some reaction (in the form of *desiderium*) to loss is natural, the human experience of grief is lengthened because of an opinion.

This contrast itself, however, does not show that grief is not natural. At most it shows that while animals who lack reason display grief uniformly, human beings display grief in different ways. Even if it is granted that human opinion contributes to grief so as to prolong it, this is no good reason for claiming that grief is not natural. The obvious response is simply that as human beings are rational and capable of forming more and more complex opinions and other representations about the world, so their reactions become more and more complex. Thus instances of grief, since they arise partly because of opinion in human beings, vary among humans in ways that they do not among lower animals. If this is so, then the mere fact that human grief lasts longer than that of animals does very little to show that it is not natural. What is needed, then, is something to cast doubt upon the quality of the opinion which prolongs human grief.

Seneca’s answer to this comes in two parts. He first emphasizes not the prolonged experience of human grief but its variability. Seneca contrasts the grief experienced by different groups of people – men and women, civilized and uncivilized people, educated and uneducated people. Seneca’s aim in contrasting these groups is to

point out that grief differs because of the difference in the *opinion*. Again, this is contrasted with things which have their power from nature. Seneca gives two examples. The power of fire to burn and the cutting force of steel are powers that these things have naturally. These powers do not vary depending on gender, nationality, or education. Thus Seneca claims that “those things which have their power from nature treat all alike; thus it is clear that what varies is not natural” (7.3). While it is not clear how general Seneca means this principle to be, the point at least in the cases of fire and steel is clear. The capability of fire and steel to affect other things is determined by their natures or their natural properties. These properties enable them to produce effects in other objects largely independently of the other objects’ properties. Obviously there are limits even here, but Seneca’s concern is with the power that external things – e.g., fire and steel – have to affect human beings. The question is whether the effect produced by the loss of a loved one is natural. Seneca is concerned to show that the power that such a loss has to affect a person is not a power that it has from nature (*naturale*), but rather is a power that it gains as the result of opinion. Seneca concludes this section by noting that the power of fire and steel is a power from nature which “makes no distinction of persons” (7.4). Grief, however, is experienced “differently by different people according as their minds are coloured by habit, and a false presumption, which arouses fear of things that are not to be feared, makes a man weak and unresisting” (7.4). Habit or influence of false beliefs are responsible for the variability of grief between men and women, educated and uneducated, and civilized and uncivilized. These are not, on Seneca’s view, naturally

distinct groups⁴. Rather, these groups differ in terms of the beliefs they each have about what kinds of actions or beliefs are appropriate, and these beliefs have come to take their place as the result of certain (varying) kinds of social education.

The second part of Seneca's argument against the claim that grief is natural again focuses on the properties of natural phenomena. Seneca claims that "what is natural does not decrease by the passing of time, whereas a length of time destroys grief" (8.1).⁵ The second claim here – that grief will dissipate in time – is in keeping with Seneca's view about the role of time in ridding the mind of emotions. He notes in the following lines that Marcia's grief, despite the tight hold she has been keeping on it, will eventually dissipate on its own. He remarks that "when you are doing something else, your mind will be relieved" (8.2). The contrast, however, which Seneca draws here between grief and what is natural is tenuous. It is not clear what he has in mind as an instance of *what is natural*. If he is still here thinking about fire, then he might mean that the capacity of fire to burn is not diminished by the *mere* passing of time, though presumably it is diminished by, for example, the loss of fuel. In this way, though, fire is more like grief than unlike it. For grief itself does not seem to diminish through the *mere* passing of time, but rather as the result of one's engagement in actions and thoughts which pull the mind away from the object of grief. The contrast here is perhaps made more clearly if we think of "what is natural" as a general description at the level of types of the things that populate the world. If, for example, "human being" is an instance of what is natural, we

⁴ Cf. eg., *ad Marciam* 16.1 ff.

⁵ *Deinde quod naturale est non decrescit mora; dolorem dies longa consumit.*

can see Seneca's point more clearly. For the passing of time does not diminish a human being's nature *qua* human being in any way. Nor does this nature diminish through time as the result of other factors in the way that fire's capacity to burn is diminished by the loss of fuel. In this way, grief is simply not the kind of thing that endures. A third alternative, suggested by Manning⁶, is that the contrast between 'what is natural' and what diminishes with time is in fact a contrast between two classes of opinion. On this view, certain opinions (Manning notes the belief in the existence of the gods) persist without dissipating through time – both through a person's life and through generations – while others dissipate.

Some comments are needed here about the achievement of the first dialectical section. It is noteworthy, first, that while Seneca's topic here is one for which he might have drawn extensively and explicitly from other sources, he does not do so. He could have strengthened the support for his claims by introducing and defending a number of Stoic principles – e.g., the Stoic accounts of the mind, of human cognition, of nature. The argument could have been greatly improved by clear accounts of nature and 'what is natural', yet Seneca is here content to let this, and other concepts, have their everyday significance. The reason for this is that his attention is directed toward a certain kind of mind – a mind like Marcia's – which, although it is receptive to rational discourse, is not prepared for philosophical principles at a very high level. Even if, by Seneca's own account, a full understanding of these principles is required for achieving happiness, it is still the case that these are principles which have to be worked out for oneself. Still,

⁶ Manning (1981), 57-58

Seneca can aim to provide for his readers some starting points. In these first arguments, Seneca mainly provides evidence against a common view about grief – that it is natural.

At best, though, these arguments are incomplete. The best interpretation of the arguments is that they are (1) providing common sense evidence against the widely held view that grief is natural and they are (2) successful mainly as initial challenges to this view. No fully worked out positive alternative is given here. All of this is in keeping with the view that Seneca's aim is to help the reader begin to make the transformation that philosophical study requires. Seneca is even willing here, as elsewhere⁷, to make allowances for certain non-Stoic beliefs. Seneca does not here attack the belief that grief is natural directly. Instead, he challenges the belief that excessive grief is natural. Seneca is content here to impress upon Marcia and the reader the point that opinion plays a role in the human experience of grief. Additional Stoic doctrines – e.g., that the opinion involved in grief is voluntary, false, and contrary to nature – go unmentioned. This suggests that Seneca's aim is not here to convert Marcia or anyone else to Stoicism, but to encourage philosophical thinking – that is, in particular, to encourage a level of scrutiny of one's beliefs that can be a catalyst for reforming them.

4. The Second Dialectical Section: *Praemeditatio Futurorum Malorum & rerum natura: ad Marciam* 9.1-11.5

The arguments of the first dialectical section aim to expose common errors involved in people's presumption to know what nature commands. It is from the recognition of these errors that the discussion picks up in the second dialectical section

⁷ Cf. *ad Marciam* 12.1 & Section 5 below.

beginning at 9.1. The question raised here is “why do we all persist with such tenacity in lamenting what was ours, if this does not happen by nature’s command?” (9.1).⁸ This objection has some force in light of the earlier discussion of the persistence through time of the *opinio* which partly causes grief. Even if one grants that this opinion, unlike perhaps the belief in the existence of the gods, is not everlasting, still its considerable durability seems widely attested by real human experience. In addition to this consideration, the question given to Marcia here points the way toward an important step in the argument which has otherwise been left alone. In the first arguments, Seneca has pointed out that opinion, rather than nature, is the primary cause of human grief, and by contrasting the two has taken some initial steps to show that the opinion is one that is opposed to nature. These initial steps, however, do very little to aid understanding of the specific mistakes which one might be making in holding such an opinion. In other words, Seneca’s analysis of what is natural has shown that the opinion involved in grief is mistaken only by appeal to certain kinds of extrinsic considerations – by contrasting the properties of this opinion with those of ‘what is natural’. To answer Marcia’s question at 9.1, however, Seneca must begin to examine the opinion in a new way. He must isolate the kinds of direct and indirect considerations which give such an opinion its sway in human thinking.

Seneca’s initial response, then, is that human persistence in grief is explained by ignorance of at least two kinds:

⁸ *Unde ergo tanta nobis pertinacia in deploratione nostri, si id not fit naturae iussu?*

Quod nihil nobis mali, antequam eveniat, proponimus, sed ut immunes ipsi et aliis pacatius ingressi iter alienis non admonemur casibus illos esse communes (9.1)

Because we never consider any evil before it happens, but, as though we ourselves are immune and making our way more securely than others, we fail to be persuaded by the misfortunes of others that they are common to all.

Seneca here exposes two distinct kinds of ignorance which prevent human beings from acting appropriately. There is first ignorance about oneself. The human experience of grief is explained partly because individuals mistakenly suppose that they are immune to the misfortunes that plague the lives of others. This supposition is simply false, and Seneca devotes a good deal of effort to exposing it as such. The second ignorance, which results partly from the first, concerns nature. Having an accurate understanding of nature and thus of what happens by nature is confounded by one's thinking oneself exempt from its workings. Thus, one who has a mistaken view about themselves is prone to have an incorrect view of what happens by nature. These two kinds of ignorance leave a person in an unwelcome psychological state on such occasions as those which give rise to grief. In these cases, we are, as Seneca says, "struck, as it were, off our guard" (9.2). If, however, we have the correct view, we will not be so struck, since "blows that are foreseen fall less violently" (9.2-3).⁹

Seneca's initial advice in the remainder of 9.3 is in line with the philosophical practice of *praemeditatio futurorum malorum* (pre-rehearsal of future ills), according to which the sting of misfortune is blunted by its having been foreseen. A person who

⁹ *Necesse est itaque magis corruamus: quasi ex inopinato ferimur; quae multo ante provisae sunt, languidius.*

engages in this practice is said to be better equipped psychologically to face misfortune when it arises. The Stoic adoption and the consequent Senecan use of this practice is complex, and deserves some attention here. Two points are especially important given what follows in the *ad Marciam*. First, the practice of *praemeditatio* has, already by Seneca's time, a long history. The earliest philosopher to have adopted the practice seems to have been Anaxagoras, who is reported to have said, upon hearing of his son's death, "I knew my child was mortal."¹⁰ Aside from philosophers, the practice gets attention in the work of Ennius and Euripides. Later, the practice was taken up by both the Stoics and the Cyrenaics. But here the point and justification for pre-rehearsal diverges. For the Cyrenaics the practice is understood as the pre-rehearsal of future *evils*. What one rehearses is the likely future occurrence of genuine evils. The Stoics, though, seem to have adopted the practice because of the plausibility of the claim that what is foreseen strikes with less force than what is unforeseen.¹¹ Chrysippus accepts the Cyrenaic practice of *praemeditatio* because he accepts this much, but the Stoic cannot accept that the content of one's 'pre-rehearsal' is future evil. This becomes clear, in Seneca's case, from what comes in the following sections.

Before turning to this, though, a second feature of the *praemeditatio* deserves some attention. This practice can take both specific and general forms. One can strive to alleviate the distress that arises from a specific event by pre-rehearsing *that* event or one can proceed more generally by considering, beforehand, all that can happen. Seneca

¹⁰ Cf. Cicero, *TD* III.30

¹¹ Cf. Cicero, *TD* III.52 ff.

tends to advise the latter, more general, approach. In *Ep.* 91, he advises thinking about and firming the mind against all that can happen (*ea, quae possunt evenire*). Though he lists here a number of specific misfortunes – exile, disease, shipwreck, and others – he emphasizes not the specific misfortunes, but rather the importance of understanding fortune fully.¹²

Both of these features have a role to play in Seneca’s approach here. On the one hand he agrees with Chrysippus that it is useful to reflect beforehand on misfortunes that may arise. This, as Seneca says, has the effect of “firming” the mind against such misfortunes.¹³ On the other hand, though, while Seneca does not say anything to suggest he condemns a specific form of *praemeditatio*, he nonetheless focuses his own efforts on a broader form. This does not take as its object any specific misfortune that is likely or possible. Instead the form of thinking Seneca recommends involves thorough reflection on and study of nature. Addressing someone who complains that she did not think some misfortune would happen, Seneca responds: “Do you think there is anything that will not happen, when you know that it is possible to happen, when you see that it has already happened to many?” (9.5). Seneca insists that “such is the delusion that deceives and weakens us while we suffer misfortunes which we never foresaw that we ourselves could possibly suffer. He robs present ills of their power who has foreseen their coming” (9.5).¹⁴

¹² *Ep.* 91.8. *in plenum cogitanda fortuna est.*

¹³ Cf. *Ep.* 91.7-8

In the following to sections (10-11), rather than advise Marcia of the value of pre-rehearsal of specific evils, Seneca turns to a broader discussion of human nature and the relation between oneself and nature. Here he argues that the appropriate attitude for one to have toward “whatever brightens our lives externally” - including children, honors, wealth, property, and generally whatever depends on chance - (10.1) is not that of ownership or possession. Instead, one should regard such things as borrowed and as such not really one’s own. Seneca clarifies this later when he says that “the use and enjoyment [i.e., of such things] is ours, but the dispenser of the gift determines the length of our tenure” (10.2). Thus the common list of external ‘goods’ is populated by things over which human beings do not and cannot have absolute authority. Seneca’s support for this claim comes mainly in the form of examples which he has given in the preceding section. There he points to the frequency of funerals, untimely deaths, and sudden falls from wealth to poverty (9.2). One fails to see the significance to oneself of the regular occurrence of these things because one has the wrong view of oneself – i.e., that one is exempt from such misfortunes. What one fails to see is that these are things which fall outside the domain of human control. Thinking oneself exempt from the misfortunes that plague others, then, is an especially grave mistake, since it results in a failure to understand a basic truth about nature – namely, that her gifts are temporary.

While it is clear that the Stoic theory of value is in the background here, Seneca does not directly appeal to it. Instead, he argues in a way that Marcia and the reader can accept without first requiring a lesson in Stoic terminology. So, rather than flesh out the

¹⁴ *Error decipit hic, effeminat, dum patimur quae numquam pati nos posse providimus. Aufert vim praesentibus malis qui futura prospexit.*

difference between what is good and what is worth selecting, what is bad and what is dispreferred, and so on, Seneca instead appeals to considerations which can at least begin to make the same point in a more straightforward way. Seneca's concern is to highlight that while certain things are up to us – e.g., the use and enjoyment of the gifts of fortune – others are outside our control.

After these initial steps aimed at clarifying the status of nature's gifts in section 10, Seneca turns to the central point of the first two argumentative sections – the importance of knowing what is one's own and what is not. Seneca's focus shifts from an account of the external gifts of fortune to an account of one's own lot – particularly the status of one's body. He first raises the issue rhetorically, casting doubt on one line of thinking that likely sustains grief:

Quae diende ista suae publicaeque condicionis oblivio est? Mortalis nata es, mortales peperisti. Putre ipsa fluidumque corpus et causis morborum repetita sperasti tam imbecilla materia solida et aeterna gestasse?

Why then is there forgetfulness of your own and the common condition? You are born mortal, and to mortals have you given birth. You who are a crumbling and perishable body and often assailed by the agents of disease – can you have hoped from such frail matter you gave birth to anything durable and imperishable? (11.2-3)

In these lines, Seneca continues to scrutinize the belief that external things are one's own. Here, though, he approaches the issue by examining the status of oneself – especially of one's body. If Marcia recognizes her own mortality and all that this implies – that she, too, is subject to death, disease, and so on – then she must see that her children are, like her, mortal. Thus this argument about the status of external things begins from

scrutinizing the status of one's own body – an external 'good' that is in some ways more intimately connected with oneself.

Seneca has begun in sections 9 -11 to attack the *opinio* (or rather, the *opiniones*) which has given her grief its power. Since the beliefs that (1) that what has happened is a genuine evil and (2) that grief is the appropriate reaction to such an evil are, from the Stoic point of view, both false beliefs attributable to ignorance of nature, Seneca begins here to attack these beliefs. Still, it is important to notice that what Seneca has given is only a beginning. He has refrained from introducing theoretical discussion even in places where this might have seemed natural. The reason for this is now familiar. Seneca is addressing someone on whom such a discussion – at least at the moment – would have little effect. Seneca's immediate goal is not that Marcia be an expert in Stoic doctrine. Instead, his attention is devoted to changing Marcia's perspective. He's done this in a way that is informed by Stoic doctrine, and in a way that points to the need of further justification (from, e.g., the Stoic theory of value), but he has done all of this in such a way as to engage Marcia and the reader in a way that speaks more directly to the question of whether grief should be deep and unending (4.1). Indeed, the rapid pace of the discussion in the sections so far considered suggests that Seneca – aside from correcting Marcia's mistaken beliefs – aims also simply to encourage thinking – any thinking – about those things that are relevant to her situation. Seneca is concerned to draw her mind away from the continuous thoughts of loss and pain to which she has devoted her energy for so long.

5. The Third Dialectical Section: *ad Marciam* 12.1-19.4

In the third dialectical section, Seneca proceeds in much the same way as before. Here the object of inquiry, however, shifts from attention to Marcia's thinking about herself or nature to an investigation of the object of her grief. Seneca asks whether Marcia's grief has in view her own misfortune or that of her lost loved one.¹⁵ He begins with a long discussion of the first possibility – that Marcia's grief is for her loss rather than him who has been lost. Seneca considers a number of possible responses that might be given to such a question and argues that none of them offer a justification for grief. He asks whether the thought that stirs her grief is that Marcia has had no pleasures from her son's life or that she might have had greater pleasure had he lived longer. Seneca quickly sets aside the first possibility by claiming that had she experienced no pleasures from her son's life, his loss would be more bearable. On the other hand, Seneca proposes that if Marcia has experienced 'great' pleasures from her son's life, then she should be grateful (12.1). Seneca gives little support here for these claims. Still, the options, as Seneca presents them, encourage reflection on one's grief in a new way. That is to say that despite these perhaps unsatisfactory remarks, the division which Seneca employs here for analyzing the object of one's grief is useful. This division plays a central role in the argumentation of the remainder of the *ad Marciam*.

¹⁵ Dolor tuus...utrum sua spectat incommoda an eius qui decessit. *ad Marciam* 12.1

It is useful to quickly outline this argumentation. The first division is between the two options which open this section of the text – namely whether the object of grief is Marcia’s own misfortune or that of her son. I am primarily interested here in the first of these as this half of the main division occupies Seneca’s attention for much of the remaining text (through 19.4)¹⁶. Here the possible justifications are considered in turn – that Marcia did not enjoy her son (12.1-2) and that she might have experienced greater pleasures had he lived longer. The discussion of the second reason for grief is clearly of more concern to Seneca and continues through 19.4. In all of this section, however, the goal seems to be the same: to transform Marcia’s perspective. Having dealt with the errors about nature and the self and the consequences of these errors in somewhat general terms in the sections considered above (7.1-10.6), Seneca now turns to a somewhat more specific and directed look at what is clearly an important issue both for Marcia and for many others besides. The issue is that Marcia’s grief is not simply grief for a loved one – but for a child. Thus this is an important and – at least in terms of common sense – special case. Even if Seneca’s general arguments so far can be accepted, and it can be allowed that one’s ordinary non-philosophical or non-Stoic appraisals of nature and oneself are mistaken in the ways we have seen Seneca thinks, it is nonetheless reasonable to think that in a case like Marcia’s there are genuine grounds for grief. It is reasonable because this is a case of death that is out of the ordinary. Whether one begins from a kind of common sense view of nature or begins from a philosophical account like Aristotle’s,

¹⁶ At *ad Marciam* 20.1, Seneca returns to the second part of the main division – whether grief is for the misfortune of the lost loved one.

one can provide some grounds for thinking that the death of a child is an occasion for grief precisely because it is one where the natural order of things has failed to hold. Seneca takes this thought seriously. Though he is in agreement with his school about the proper attitude toward the (pre-mature) death of a loved one, he nonetheless recognizes that gaining the agreement of Marcia or the reader will require more than a simple argument. Coming to see the truth of the Stoic view – that grief is not natural (and so not justified) – requires a change in perspective. The difficulty with grief as with other emotions, however, is that it tends to focus narrowly on its object.¹⁷ Seneca’s approach in this section of text involves an effort to broaden the perspective of the reader.

This approach is clearest when Seneca considers the second possible reason for Marcia’s grief. At 12.3, Seneca addresses the possibility that grief is directed at one’s own loss because the benefits of one’s lost loved one “could have been longer (*longior*), and greater (*maior*).” To understand Seneca’s response to this, it is helpful to consider the state of mind which gives rise to this objection. Marcia is presumably comparing the current state of affairs – having lost her son – with a state of affairs in which her son has not died. The second state of affairs is thought to be better in some way (*longior, maior*). Importantly, these are the only states of affairs that enter into her thinking about the matter. The actual state of affairs is thus thought to be a genuine cause for grief partly because it falls short of the alternative. This is admittedly speculative as an analysis of Marcia’s state of mind. It is more than mere speculation though, as such thoughts (i.e., about what might have been) often weigh heavily on the minds of those who have

¹⁷ Cf. *de Clementia* II.v.5 – vi.1. *maeror contundit mentes, abicit, contrahit...* (Grief blunts minds, dissipates them, hampers them...).

experienced a loss. In any case, it is this that Seneca sees as a kind of thinking that needs attention. Seneca begins, perhaps somewhat harshly, by attacking the state of mind that I have attributed to Marcia. He does this by allowing that her enjoyment of her son could have lasted longer and been greater, but aims to break the force of this objection by pointing out that it could have been worse as well. “True, but you have been better dealt with than if you had never had a son” (12.3). This, and the remarks following in 12.3 seem to have two effects. First, Seneca’s remark here suggests that counterfactual reasons for grief like the one Marcia gives here must be balanced against opposing reasons. The more one considers the variety of states of affairs that could have obtained, the less judging one’s current situation against some favored state of affairs seems justified. At the very least, the force of Marcia’s initial objection seems to be blunted somewhat by this consideration. Second, the introduction of further alternative states of affairs, which continues through 12.3, has the more basic effect of forcing Marcia to re-evaluate her grief. It is worth noting that Seneca is not trying to win an argument here. His aim is to encourage thinking. One concrete illustration of this aim comes in Seneca’s appraisals of Marcia’s son. Just as it would be worse for Marcia never to have had a son, Seneca proposes that it would also have been worse for her to have had a son who was worse. As it is, however, her son was, by Seneca’s estimation, a good man. Though he could have been a scoundrel and a disgrace, he was not. Thus, by approaching the objection that her enjoyment of her son might have lasted longer in this way, Seneca has forced into the open some considerations which serve to guide Marcia’s thinking about her own misfortune. Though her son has died, he seems to have lived well. Though she

has lost a son, she had a good son. These are facts which Seneca will later make use of in advising Marcia.¹⁸

6. Grief and Philosophy

Though more could be said about these and other arguments in the *ad Marciam*, these sections suffice to show more clearly Seneca's aim in this text. First, it is now clear that Seneca cannot aim in this text to genuinely 'cure' either Marcia or the reader of any grief. He does, I think, aim early on to shock Marcia from her present grief but this is something only directed at Marcia. But such a shock is not necessarily permanent and in any case does not really get to the source of the grief. Aside from this, Seneca does not present the arguments here in full. Though the line of argumentation he pursues in the sections I have considered is largely Stoic and is clearly informed by Stoic principles, Seneca has not given these in any detail. Moreover, where Seneca's arguments could have been strengthened by an appeal to technical details of Stoic theory, he resists such an appeal and instead relies on often more mundane considerations which push Marcia toward the Stoic view. In this section, I reconsider Seneca's aims in the *ad Marciam* in light of what has been gleaned from the arguments above.

It is helpful here to return to Seneca's words. Seneca describes his effort in the *ad Marciam* as an effort to *obviam ire dolori tuo*. I propose that we can understand Seneca's aim more clearly if we translate these words quite literally as "get in the way of your grief" or perhaps "challenge your grief." The arguments that we have seen here are

¹⁸ Seneca returns to this, and uses it in a different context at *ad Marciam* 23.3 ff.

arguments that aim to do just these things. First Seneca challenges the view that grief is natural. He then articulates and challenges a kind of first-person perspective from which one holds oneself exempt from the common lot. Finally, he puts forward considerations which aim to undermine a problematic way of appraising one's situation. All of this is aimed at helping, but none of what Seneca has said in the *ad Marciam* is sufficient for curing Marcia or the reader. Instead, Seneca has aimed – more modestly – to begin to help by putting forward arguments which aim at challenging the kind of perspective from which grief seems justified. This perspective includes false beliefs about oneself, about nature, and is prone to bad reasoning. Thus, Seneca's efforts in the sections of the *ad Marciam* covered here are directed at attacking these false beliefs and encouraging more careful thinking. For this, Seneca need not give arguments which can withstand the scrutiny of philosophical opponents, nor does he need to articulate the Stoic position in full. Instead, by forcing Marcia and the reader to confront their own appraisals of themselves and nature, and by challenging them to reconsider how they think about these things, Seneca directs the arguments at the appropriate level. He is arguing not against a philosophical opponent, but to someone who is in need of help.

In the previous chapter I noted that the main lines of argumentation in the *ad Marciam* are indistinct from philosophical argumentation generally. A closer look at the argumentation here reveals that this is only true with some qualification. The arguments, as they are presented in the text, are often only partial. Though Seneca could have shown much more clearly how, for example, the opinion that prolongs grief for humans is at odds with nature, he does not do so. Doing so would have required lengthy exposition

and defense of Stoic principles ranging from physics to ethics. Indeed, a full defense of Stoic philosophy would be needed. Still, the arguments Seneca gives are philosophical. They aim to help Marcia by challenging her evaluation of things, by altering her actions, and, when the whole of the text is considered, by encouraging consistency – i.e., between evaluation and action. These are just the aims of moral philosophy.¹⁹

Still, given the quality of the arguments Seneca gives, it is clear that the achievement of the *ad Marciam* is one of turning one to philosophy and perhaps making a few preliminary steps toward the goal. For this, Seneca's arguments are adequate, given that they are directed at a certain state of mind. It is important to remember that the goal of philosophy is not simply a body of knowledge, but a state of mind. The transformation from not being wise to being wise requires not just a change in a particular belief – e.g., that what has happened is an evil – but a change in a host of beliefs and attitudes on which this particular belief and others like it are grounded. So, while Seneca could have argued that Marcia should not grieve since nothing bad has happened, he resists doing so because acceptance of this can only come once one understands, among other things, nature and oneself.

7. Conclusion

While it is common to note that Seneca – along with other Roman Stoics – is concerned primarily with practical, rather than theoretical, aspects of Stoicism, such an appraisal is often misleading. It suggests that Seneca either does not take the details of

¹⁹ Cf. *Ep.* 89.14-5

Stoic theory seriously or that he does not fully understand them.²⁰ I have argued above that Seneca does not hold theory to be unimportant or dispensable.²¹ While it can be admitted that Seneca's texts are, excepting perhaps the *Natural Questions*, primarily concerned with ethics and that the attention to ethics often falls within the paraenetic branch of philosophy, which focuses on advice and particulars, none of this shows that Seneca is unconcerned with theory. What is perhaps most misleading about such an appraisal of Seneca's philosophical work is that it points one away from asking what turns out to be a very revealing question about Seneca. Given that Seneca does recognize the real importance of theory, why are so many of his texts devoted to practical questions and particular cases?

The answer to this, aside from its general significance, has important implications for how best to understand Seneca's aim in his *Consolations*. The answer is this: Seneca holds the following to be true: (1) philosophy can only succeed in making one wise when one does the work oneself; (2) one cannot make another person wise by writing a treatise; (3) the kind of work one must do to achieve understanding of nature, oneself, etc., requires a significant cognitive transformation. One is not simply learning more, one is transforming oneself – becoming better – as one makes progress in philosophy. Aside from these, it is also clear that (4) Seneca wants to help any whom he is able to help through his writing. Seneca is a teacher, as I have argued, but his subject is one which cannot really be taught in the normal way. It has to be learned for oneself.

²⁰ Cf. esp. Cooper (2004) and Barnes (1997)

²¹ Cf. especially Chs. 2 & 4.

These facts help to bring into focus some important and little noticed features of Seneca's philosophical work. On the one hand, Seneca is committed to the claim that the therapy which philosophy provides is one that has to be achieved for oneself. On the other hand, though, Seneca recognizes that one begins or can begin to make progress with the aid of another. The course of therapy that is carried out in the *ad Marciam* is one that applies only to the very earliest stages of philosophical progress. The arguments and *exempla* are aimed at exposing and challenging important but fundamental errors in thinking that people are prone to commit.

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