Therapeutic writing cannot help but delve into theoretical psychology. Any effort to influence a reader’s behavioral dispositions will depend on certain working assumptions about how motivation works and how it interacts with belief. This is particularly true if a major concern of the therapeutic enterprise is to manage or eliminate the emotions of common experience. It was likely the practical exigencies of composing discourses to combat anger, grief, and fear that stirred Seneca’s interest in the psychological underpinnings of ethically significant action and emotion. That interest remained strong throughout his career as a prose writer and can be traced in explicit assertions that he makes in his own voice in a number of different works.

These assertions are of two kinds: 1) descriptive claims about how we come to initiate different kinds of behavior, how our actions connect to our beliefs about what is best for us, and why our emotions often seem to override our better judgement; and 2) normative claims about behavior and inner experience within that idealized version of human existence which is the goal of personal development. These two philosophical agendas are linked by an integrated conception of human nature. Seneca assumes as a rule that a benevolent Nature has designed the human psyche to function in a rational way. While it is true that in our present state that rational nature is imperfect and subject to grave error, we are also capable of self-correction, and for that reason we can aspire to fulfill our human potential in lives of virtue and wisdom.

In nearly every case Seneca indicates that his positions are not of his own devising but are those of the Stoic school, Stoici nostri or just nostri. These statements should be assessed with care, both to improve our knowledge of the history of the school and to understand Seneca’s own working methods. We need to be able to compare what we find in his works with the Stoic positions that were already in existence, ones that he might have learned from his teachers in philosophy or studied in treatises available at Rome. Only on the basis of such comparisons can we make any informed judgment about his relation to the ethical psychology of Chrysippus and other major Stoic philosophers—whether he is a deeply knowledgeable and orthodox exponent of early Stoic thought, an independent-minded innovator who
molds school doctrine to his own taste, or an eclectic who combines Stoic ideas with elements of other philosophical traditions.

Unfortunately, the surviving evidence does not permit us to recover all of what was written and said by Stoic philosophers in the Hellenistic period. We do not have even one of the early treatises in anything like its original form, and we often cannot say with any certainty which author developed a particular line of argumentation and when. We do, however, have sufficient information from quoted fragments and from reliable doxographies to identify at least the major psychological assertions of the most influential Stoic founders. Also, we can draw upon the philosophical writings of Cicero for evidence of the reception of Greek ideas at Rome, whether or not we think that Cicero is likely to have been Seneca’s immediate source.¹

That is what I propose to do here. I will first offer a brief summary account of Stoic ethical psychology in the period before Seneca, drawing on the types of material just named and considering first the springs of action generally and then the emotions and other affective responses.² Once that account is in place, I will proceed to examine Seneca’s own handling of those same points, again beginning with the theory of non-emotive action and proceeding to his views on anger and other emotions. It is, I think, in observing the way he handles the existing doctrine, his characteristic emphases and manner of presentation, that we come closest to identifying a specifically Senecan set of views on these important topics.

THE STOIC BACKGROUND: THOUGHT, BELIEF, AND ACTION

A minimum requirement for a workable theory of action is that the animate being should have some way of registering facts or potential facts about the

¹ For fuller information on these portions of Stoic doctrine and guidance through much of the surviving evidence, consult Inwood 1985, Long and Sedley 1987, Inwood and Donini 1999, Long 1999, Brennan 2003 and 2005. In what follows I cite source materials by their numbers in Long and Sedley (LS) wherever possible; the translations, however, are my own throughout. I also supply fuller details on most points covered in this chapter in Graver 2007, with additional pointers to the secondary literature.

² Our word “emotion” is the nearest match in contemporary English usage for Seneca’s term adfectus (representing Greek πάθος). I do not use the older term “passion,” still favored by some interpreters, because that might be taken to imply that these Stoic theories were concerned only with the most intense and damaging emotions. In fact, they addressed all levels of emotional behavior, though as we shall see, other affective phenomena were also mentioned, both involuntary feelings and the “eupathic” responses of the wise.