In Seneca’s prose writings the concepts “wisdom,” “virtue,” and related ideas are negotiated in a complex system of many coordinates. There are, for example, the debates within the inner circle of philosophy: Seneca and other Stoics defend their views against Epicureans, Peripatetics, Cynics, Academics, Sceptics, and Platonists—or against their fellow Stoics with differing positions.¹

If we regard Stoicism as a practical enterprise, there is the tension between the ideals of a philosophical theory and the real life of ordinary people. This tension pervades Seneca’s œuvre and is one of the driving forces behind its dialogical, epistolary, and hortatory form and its focus on friendship, the self, and exemplarity.²

When we look at Seneca as a Roman philosopher, we observe a tension between Stoic conceptions of complete agreement and absolute human perfection, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the Roman discourse of manliness, embodied in the hallowed moral examples of old.³ Yet we also encounter new ideas about a man’s excellence that had been developing since the late Republic. During the Neronian period, in particular, male members of the Roman elite found ample encouragement to strive for aesthetic, cultural, or intellectual refinement.⁴ Seneca opposes tendencies to seek status and

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¹ This article was submitted for publication in December 2008. When the author received the proofs in April 2013, only a partial and fragmentary bibliographical update was possible.


³ See, e.g., Cancik 1967, Hadot 1969, Inwood 1995 and 1999, Hengelbrock 2000, Setaioli, supra, pp. 239–256. I fully agree with Setaioli, who insists that Seneca does not break with orthodox Stoic conceptions, and hope to show more clearly below why the Stoic conception of the good does not admit of an eclectic compromise. All the same, there is a tension between ideal and practice—if only the tension that the ideal may never be fulfilled (Sen. epist. 42.1, Brouwer 2002).

⁴ On moral exempla in Seneca, see, in particular epist. 24 and 120 and Mayer 1991. I use the word “manliness” and not “masculinity” to capture both connotations of Latin virtus: that one is a real man and that one is brave and manly.

advancement through conspicuous consumption and pastimes that were associated with femininity and softness. However, he, too, promotes an innovative model of the active political life a Stoic should lead. Paradoxically, Seneca's Stoic life unfolds in private retreat, in exchanges with friends and readers, outside the traditional spheres for practicing Roman virtues.

It is obvious that not all of these coordinates can be explored within a short chapter. Therefore, I intend to focus on two aspects that I believe to be best suited for fleshing out the peculiarities of Seneca's approach. First, I will try to outline his theoretical stance, both against the backdrop of the Stoic discourse in general and with regard to his engagement with Epicureanism. Second, I will point out how Seneca uses traditional ideals of manliness and also raise the question to what extent this may be more than just a veneer to attract a compatriot audience.

1. The Physics of Virtue

For a Stoic, speaking about wisdom and virtue means speaking about happiness ($\varepsilon\nu\delta\sigma\mu\omicron\nu\alpha\iota\varsigma$), which in Seneca's and Cicero's translation becomes a happy life (vita beata). In this context, Greek Stoics distinguish between the highest good (σκόπους) and the end (τέλος) “for the sake of which everything is done, but which is not itself done for the sake of anything.” The end is “to obtain happiness, which is the same as being happy.” It is an incorporeal predicate (κατηγόρημα), an effect caused by the highest good, which is a three-dimensional body.

Seneca is well aware of this difference (e.g., epist. 117.1–17) but prefers not to take explicit account of it. He uses the expression “the highest good”

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5 See, e.g., nat. 7.32 and dial. 10 (= brev.).12.
7 Ganss (1952) and Wyszomirski (1993) offer comprehensive overviews that can be used as supplements to the selective presentation of key elements given in this chapter.
8 Görler 1996: 163. The change was due to aesthetic reasons (Cic. nat. 1.95, Quint. inst. 8.3.32), but it reflects well the particular Stoic quality of happiness. It is the good life and thus an activity (see, e.g., Sen. epist. 67.7), not just a desirable emotion or a state like Epicurean freedom from pain. Although the Stoics too ascribed a set of special “affective responses” to their sage (see M. Graver, supra, pp. 257–275), they regarded these not as essential features of happiness, but only as a concomitant positive effect of it (compare epist. 59.16).
10 In this letter, Seneca presents a complex analysis of the difference between sapere and sapientia. Detailed discussions are to be found in Cooper 2004: 324–332, Wildberger 2006: 161–178, Inwood 2007a: 288–301; see also Wyszomirski 1991.