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KSENIJA ATANASIJEVIĆ ON SENECA'S CONSISTENCY

Abstract: The aim of this chapter is to examine how consistent Seneca was in his Stoic philosophy and in what sense his teaching is “free from the strict regulations of older Stoicism”, as Ksenija Atanasijević writes. To do so, we are going to compare Seneca’s philosophical teaching with historical facts about his political activity and everyday life. Following Seneca’s inner path, we are going to emphasize self-scrutiny as the key to his evolution into a Stoic sage and “the best connoisseur of psychology among the Stoics”, as Atanasijević describes him. Ultimately, we will examine how this pioneer of non-radical Stoicism completed his evolution by achieving ultimate harmony with his inner ideal at the moment and in the famous scene of his death. We will try to deepen Ksenija Atanasijević’s conclusions on similar topics and, based on that, improve our understanding of Seneca and his place within the Stoic school of philosophy.

Keywords: Seneca, wealth, consistency, self-scrutiny, non-radical Stoicism

Introduction

The life of Lucius Annaeus Seneca, one of the most significant representatives of the late Stoa, is widely considered to be inconsistent with his own philosophical beliefs.¹ In this chapter, we will examine the alleged discrepancy between Seneca’s teachings on moral philosophy and his everyday political actions, in order to see to what extent Seneca was consistent with his own Stoic thought. According to Griffin “The life of the moral philosopher, especially if he offered one doctrine as the means to salvation and did not merely describe different views, was expected to conform to

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what he wrote” (1992, p. 8). Seneca himself stood for the practical application of learning, which we can see from his advice to “let our thoughts be in harmony with life” (Sen. *Ep.* 75. 4). The first question that we will try to answer is – did Seneca violate any of the Stoic rules for a happy life? And if so, we will examine to what extent is the aforementioned discrepancy between Seneca as a philosopher and Seneca as a politician responsible for the potential ‘violation of Stoic rules’. This will improve our understanding of Seneca and his place within the Stoic school of philosophy, as well as ancient philosophy in general.

In order to engage in such an analysis of Seneca as a whole (both as a philosopher and as a politician) we must first examine the historical facts about Seneca and his everyday life. Based on an external source, primarily Tacitus, who is considered the most relevant historiographer of the period of Roman history in which our interest lies, we can formulate a partial picture of the historical context in which Seneca’s political life unfolded. Engaging in politics resulted in Seneca’s exile, but also becoming a senator, an imperial adviser and finally, one of the most powerful people in Rome.

Seneca: A Historical Overview

As Tacitus noted, Seneca was expelled from Rome in 41 AD during the reign of emperor Claudius, allegedly at the instigation of Claudius’ third wife Messalina, and because of accusations of adultery with Julia, sister of Caligula. He returns to Rome in 49 AD thanks to Agrippina, Claudius’ fourth wife, who interceded for him. Agrippina was confident that the people would be pleased with such a move, considering Seneca’s fame as a writer. Also, as reported by Tacitus, she believed that Seneca would help realize her imperious hopes with advice, while at the same time remaining loyal to her out of gratitude and hating Claudius because of the injustice the emperor had done to him. Particular attention should be paid to this part about the gratitude that Seneca owed (or should have owed) to Agrippina, as it will later be important for our understanding of their relationship. Agrippina finally hired Seneca as the tutor of her son from her first marriage, Nero, the future emperor of Rome (Tac. *Ann.* 12. 8). That is when Seneca’s political rise and alleged philosophical decline begin.

Agrippina, confirming her “imperious hopes”, attributed to her by Tacitus, kills emperor Claudius with poison. Nero succeeds Claudius on the throne, instead of Britannicus, the son of Claudius and Messalina. From then on, Seneca was not only the teacher of the young Nero but also his adviser in the exercise of power. However, this function, as stated by Griffin, was not official (1992, p. 67). The official adviser to the emperor

was Burrus, a man of great military experience, with whom Seneca got along well (Tac. *Ann.* 13. 2). It is not completely clear what Seneca's powers were, and to what extent he participated in the government (there are different views on this²). We should emphasize what Griffin notes: "Seneca must have been aware that if Nero's good deeds were attributed to him, Nero's bad deeds would also be attributed to him" (1992, p. 68), which we can conclude from the fact that Tacitus reports that one of the reasons why Seneca later asked to be dismissed from Nero's service is to "avoid the stain" (Tac. *Ann.* 15. 45). We will not deal any further with the extent of Seneca's influence, because there are no conclusive arguments for any of the positions. At the same time, the degree of influence of the ruler's advisers is not known even in today's political world, so that question remains open, and the degree of Seneca's responsibility for Nero's actions is certainly questionable. However, as we will see, the period of Seneca's cooperation with Nero will be considered the period in which Seneca particularly moved away from Stoic ethical teaching. As Atanasijević notes: "Engaging in politics damaged the reputation and cost the life of this eminent moralist..." (2017, p. 9).

Wealth

Tacitus conveys the opinion about Seneca that existed in Rome at the time, from which we can see that people primarily resented his enormous wealth and were not sure "by what kind of wisdom or maxims of philosophy had Seneca within four years of royal favor amassed three hundred million sesterces" (Tac. *Ann.* 13. 42). Embracing many historical sources, Griffin paints a picture of that wealth: "Undeniably, Seneca was very rich. He inherited a respectable fortune from his father, and he received from Nero estates in Egypt, capital that earned him interest, and money to buy at least one extra villa" (2008, pp. 54–55). Before we try to find an answer to Tacitus' caustic question of how Seneca came by his wealth, we will address the question of the relationship between wealth in general and Stoic ethics – does Stoic teaching generally prohibit material wealth or perhaps consider it undesirable?

Although his answer would be negative, Arthur Schopenhauer would also probably add that Stoicism *should* consider wealth undesirable, which we conclude from his, as Ksenija Atanasijević (2007) considers, unfavorable criticism of Stoicism. He argued that Stoicism unnaturally modified the teachings of Cynicism, from which it arose. The Cynics believed that a

2 See Griffin (1992)

person would achieve a painless existence only by completely renouncing earthly goods, while the Stoic is aware of the transience of material goods and will therefore be indifferent to their loss – their indifference allowing them to leave everything behind at any moment. What makes this kind of modification unnatural, according to Schopenhauer, is the fact that everything a person gets used to becomes a need and cannot be abandoned without mourning. Ksenija Atanasijević does not agree with Schopenhauer on this issue. She believes that the eminence of stoicism lies precisely in the fact that it “allows a person to be happy”, in contrast to cynicism, which “grossly simplified life” (2007, pp. 351–352). Therefore, the Stoic teaching has nothing against the possession of material wealth, provided that we are aware of the transience of this wealth and are ready to give it up at any moment without losing our happiness.

In one part of his work *De vita beata*, Seneca speaks in defense of wealth and presents himself as indifferent to it. He claims that his wealth, even when it disappears, “will not take away anything but itself” (Sen. *Vit. Beat.* 22). At the same time, he believes that a Stoic can have wealth and that it can be useful, but he emphasizes that it is not good – because then it would also make others good. Money should not be prohibited for philosophers, because “no one has yet condemned wisdom to poverty” (Sen. *Vit. Beat.* 23). Seneca’s point is that there is nothing wrong with possessing wealth, but also that the way we view wealth is important.

This, however, is Seneca’s theoretical teaching on wealth. As far as the practical application of Stoic teaching is concerned, it is, as Mann notes, reflected in everyday life, and even in every aspect of life: “the difference between the fool and the wise person will manifest itself in virtually every aspect of their lives, as part of all of their everyday behavior” (2006, p. 120). For Seneca, as we have already mentioned, the practical application of ethical teaching is much more important than mere theorizing – in Seneca’s opinion, we choose those who teach with their lives and when they say what should be done, they prove it. He advises us to choose one whom we will admire upon seeing him in action, not while we listen to him (Sen. *Ep.* 52. 8).

The next step in examining Seneca’s consistency will be to consider, with the help of external sources, whether and to what extent Seneca practically applied the rules that can be found in his books. In the context of everything previously said about Seneca’s theoretical teaching on wealth, we will address the question of whether Seneca was aware of the transience of his wealth and was ready to give it up at any moment.

Tacitus noted: after Burrus, Nero’s second adviser, died in 62 AD, Seneca’s influence on Nero weakened significantly, and the emperor “falls

under the influence of the worst" (Tac. *Ann.* 14. 52). They attack Seneca, attributing to him various moral failures, most of all that of accumulating wealth with which he wants to surpass the emperor himself. Seneca, hearing of these accusations, seeks an audience with Nero during which he asks to be dismissed from the imperial service and utters the following words:

It has been fourteen years, Caesar, since I was called to prepare you for what was then only a hope, it has been eight years since you became an emperor; during that time, you showered me with so many honors and wealth that my happiness lacks only one thing: measure in it. (Tac. *Ann.* 14. 53)

In this very important (almost apologetic) part of the *Annals*, we see that Seneca himself questions the conformity of his daily life with his Stoic principles and realizes that his life is not fully devoted to them: "Where now is that spirit satisfied with the little" (Tac. *Ann.* 14. 53) asks Seneca? Tacitus believes that Seneca's words were sincere and that he honestly saw the discrepancy between his own life and what his theoretical teaching about life advocated.

Nero refused to release Seneca. He explained his decision by saying that the people will not see Seneca's modesty in Seneca's retirement from service, but the fear of Nero's cruelty, and it would not serve the philosopher's honor to gain fame by bringing his friend into disrepute (Tac. *Ann.* 14. 56). Although he did not officially leave the service, Seneca withdrew into himself and rarely left the house after that, under the excuse of ill health and philosophical research. Thus, Nero preserved his reputation, or what was left of it, at the expense of Seneca's.

The answer to the question of Seneca's practical application of his own teaching on wealth is that, even if Seneca's consistency was not at the highest level at every moment of his ministry, he eventually managed to spot the inconsistency and correct it, both for himself and in the eyes of citizens of Rome. The moment of admitting his inconsistency before the emperor and asking to be dismissed from service is an example *par excellence* of rational self-criticism, freed from any despondency and self-love, which we will discuss in more detail in the next section.

Self-scrutiny

Admitting one's own mistakes and self-criticism is not foreign to Seneca, as we see. "Teaching through one's own life" advocated by Seneca and (increasingly popular) "philosophy as a way of life", as formulated by Fitch, "leads to an interest in those exercises or techniques designed to

transform the self by repeated training; one such exercise is the daily self-scrutiny” (2008, p. 9). Such daily self-criticism does not mean a constant pathological dissatisfaction with oneself and one’s behavior, but rather a regular review of one’s actions and their conformity with what a Stoic philosopher should be – “you should delve into yourself, and observe” (Sen. *Ep.* 16. 2), but also be the plaintiff and defendant towards yourself (Sen. *Ep.* 28. 10). In Seneca’s letters we can find an example of this kind of self-criticism which tell us our eyes should not be dry at the loss of a friend, but tears must not flow in streams – we should cry, not sob. At the same time, Seneca remembers that he mourned his dear friend Aeneas so excessively, that against his will he served as an example to those overcome by grief. But at the time of writing *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*, he condemns his action realizing that he was so sad above all because he had never thought before that his friend could die before him (Sen. *Ep.* 63).

In some parts of his *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*, Seneca writes as if thinking out loud. Seneca was aware that he was not always consistent, and he honestly admits it, to quote Ksenija Atanasijević (2007): “I speak of virtue, not of myself, and when I stand up against vice, I first have my own in mind...” (p. 345–346). He does not present himself to us as an ideal Stoic, following ‘the rulebook’ perfectly, but as an ordinary man who is genuinely trying to improve all those aspects of his life that he thinks can be better, and more consistent with what he would like to become. As Catherine Edwards states, referring to Foucault: “The object of this minute self-scrutiny, as Foucault has emphasized, is not punishment, nor is there much emphasis on cultivating feelings of guilt. Rather the goal is self-transformation” (2008, p. 92). We could transfer this understanding of self-scrutiny to Seneca’s original thoughts on this topic: he writes that not only is he getting better, but that he is simply changing. An exact sign of improvement in a person lies in them seeing mistakes they were not aware of until then (Sen. *Ep.* 6.1).

Seneca praises Lucilius because, leaving all else aside, he concentrates only on making himself a better man every day (Sen. *Ep.* 5. 1). A Stoic should not compare themselves with others, but with the person they would like to become. In this sense, man is the product of hard work [on themselves] – made, not given (Sen. *Ep.* 52). We can approach this problem in the following way: when a parent teaches their child to insert toys of a certain shape (triangle, circle, square) into the openings of the corresponding shape, the parent can do that on the first try and without error and then leave the child to repeat the same. Unless the child has followed the process very carefully, it is unlikely that they will be able to repeat it without error. A child will likely try to insert, for example, a triangle-

shaped toy into a circle-shaped opening. When they fail to do what the parent did just a few seconds ago and realize that something is not right, they will remain confused and probably think that the parent has some kind of superpower doing what, from the child's perspective, is impossible. Now let us imagine a different scenario: the parent understands the level of the child's abilities and, accordingly, tries to insert a triangle-shaped toy into a circle-shaped opening. When it is clear to the child that this attempt by the parent is not successful, the parent tries to insert the same toy in every opening. When the parent finally manages to find the right shape, he repeats the process with all the toys. We can almost certainly expect that the child will not get confused later when they fail to insert the toy into the right opening on the first try. Taught by the mistakes of their parent, they will try to correct their own attempts and modify them to reach the desired goal.

A moral philosopher offering their doctrine may, similar to what the parent did in the first scenario, do so by reciting their version of the "rules for the good life," and leave the reader to follow that list as if commandments. However, Seneca chooses to show his "children" his fallible side. In a way, Seneca sacrifices the picture of himself as a moral exemplar, which is unreflexively and without good reason often attributed to moral philosophers, in order to make his moral lessons more effective. The reader of Seneca's works realizes that Seneca is an ordinary man who makes mistakes. Therefore, the reader becomes more inclined to do as his moral teacher transform themselves into what they want to become. A philosopher who only presents a list of rules to the readers creates an image of themselves as a superman whose footsteps would be impossible to follow: if it is impossible to live in complete harmony with the moral principles that this philosopher advocates, then why should one even try? With Seneca, there is no false aura that distances the moral teacher from his students.

This analogy, however, can be objected to as follows: a parent who puts toys in the wrong openings does so on purpose, while Seneca cannot be said to have deliberately made mistakes in life so he could teach his students more efficiently, because it is obvious that he regrets those mistakes. Seneca indeed regrets the mistakes and inconsistencies he made, and that is why we cannot say that he made them intentionally. However, he did deliberately write his texts. If Seneca had so wished, the readers of his works, especially those who did not know him personally, could have lived under the delusion that Seneca was an ideal Stoic of impeccable virtue – it would have been enough if Seneca had chosen to present himself as such in his works. However, as we have seen, he places the importance

that his works, as they are today, can have for readers above his reputation: “Our words should not entertain but be useful. (...) The patient does not seek an eloquent doctor”, as he puts it (Sen. *Ep.* 75. 5–6.). By his (deliberate) portrayal of himself as imperfect, Seneca chooses to seem more like a parent who purposely puts toys into the wrong openings than a parent who has superpowers. As Griffin puts it, he prefers to be a “healer of souls” rather than a “model of virtue” (2008, p. 58). This is the reason why Atanasijević is fascinated by Seneca’s life, which she believes was imbued with his ethical principles, and even addresses him as “the teacher of an unshakeable and saving morality” (2007, p. 356).

Political controversies

Some events in Seneca’s life could be used as an argument against the claim that Seneca’s morality was so unshakeable. Namely, it is not only the amount of Seneca’s wealth that caused damage to his reputation in Rome, but also who he got the wealth from and, finally, what Tacitus questions in general – whether Seneca deserved it. The biggest blemish on the career of Nero’s advisor is the lack of reaction to Nero’s murder of his half-brother Britannicus, son of Claudius, and Nero’s mother Agrippina, all during an unscrupulous struggle for power.

It cannot be said that Nero’s reign was just a continuous series of cruel and evil moves. Just before the above-mentioned fatal events took place, Nero showed gentleness in his demeanor – from small nice gestures to pardoning former senators exiled for adultery (Tac. *Ann.* 13. 11). It seems that Seneca’s lessons were manifested in Nero’s nobility. However, Nero’s love for a freedwoman named Acte greatly angered his mother Agrippina, who, out of fear that she might be replaced, began to threaten the emperor – Britannicus was the true and, in Agrippina’s opinion, worthy heir to his father’s throne, now occupied by Nero, the insidious adoptee, and from which he abuses his own mother (Tac. *Ann.* 13. 14). Agrippina no longer even hid the love of power that Tacitus hinted at earlier.

As for Britannicus, Nero first seriously considered him a pretender to the throne when Britannicus, during the Saturnalia festival, sang to a drunken audience a song that alluded to him being deposed from his father’s throne. The intoxicated audience reacted, as Tacitus reports, with compassion towards the would-be emperor. The already mentioned outbursts of his mother, as well as Britannicus’ temper flare-ups reinforced Nero’s paranoia, which, after the events of Saturnalia, “erupted into hatred” (Tac. *Ann.* 13. 15). That is why Nero ordered the poisoning of Britannicus. The absence of a reaction from his advisors, Burrus and Seneca,

can perhaps be attributed to the rich gifts that, as reported by Tacitus, Nero gave his closest friends, who “hastily plundered the palaces and land” (Tac. *Ann.* 13. 18). The only question that remains is whether Tacitus considered Seneca and Burrus Nero’s “closest friends”.

After the murder of Britannicus, Agrippina allegedly began gathering allies from the Roman army and the city itself, hoping to overthrow Nero because, as Tacitus reports, she knew that, after Britannicus, “it was her turn” (Tac. *Ann.* 13. 16). Agrippina secretly attempted on several occasions to regain power in Rome, which was harming Nero’s already damaged reputation, whereupon Nero decides to murder her as well (Tac. *Ann.* 14. 2–3). A freedman named Anicetus suggests a plan for the murder of Agrippina: a ship is to be prepared for Agrippina which, at some point during the voyage, would sink – this would certainly look like an accident at sea and no one would blame Nero for her death. However, this plot was unsuccessful because it was not executed well, and Agrippina survives. Nero, hearing that Agrippina is alive, is terrified of the possibility that she might take revenge on him. Both Burrus and Seneca were quiet for a while, before Seneca asked if Burrus should give the order to kill Agrippina. Burrus replies that the praetorians were bound by an oath to the entire imperial family, which is why the murder should be carried out by Anicetus (Tac. *Ann.* 14. 5–7), the freedman whose original plan failed. Meanwhile, Agrippina realizes that Nero tried to kill her by shipwreck, and decides to flee Rome to save herself. She sends a message to Nero and gets ready. Anicetus uses the arrival of Agrippina’s messenger to carry out his plan: accusing the messenger of seeking to kill Nero in revenge, Anicetus has Agrippina’s villa surrounded and then kills her, while disseminating the story that Agrippina attempted to kill her son and then has taken her own life out of shame. (Tac. *Ann.* 14. 8).

We have given the whole story of the death of Agrippina and Britannicus in order to understand probably the biggest stain on Seneca’s political life. The murder was indeed ordered by Burrus, at the suggestion of Seneca, and therefore it must be said that Seneca is in some way guilty of the death of the woman to whom he was in-debted. If we wanted to defend Seneca, we could do so by saying that, as adviser to the emperor, he ‘only’ brought up the possibility that Agrippina be killed, which Burrus accepted. But Burrus, and especially Nero, could always decline this possibility.

However, this defense of Seneca seems far-fetched, so Ksenija Atanasijević defends Seneca in a different and probably more effective way, referring to the power that Nero had: “although many crimes were committed before Seneca’s eyes, it is certain that he was not able to pre-

vent them” (2007, p. 344). Indeed, Seneca might even have not suggested the murder of Agrippina, but he could hardly have opposed it. In playing Seneca’s lawyers, we can also refer to the Stoic principle that we should concentrate on what we can do, while we should be indifferent to what we cannot influence. After all, what would stop an emperor who kills his own family from killing one of his advisors?

Death

Which is exactly what Nero did when Seneca was accused of plotting against him. As in the cases of Britannicus and Agrippina, he reacted violently and unscrupulously – he sent a centurion to convey to Seneca his death sentence. Burrus had already died, as Tacitus notes, which also broke Seneca’s power (Tac. *Ann.* 14. 52.). At that time, Seneca lived on his estate near Rome, where he was spending his ‘unofficial’ retirement. Upon the arrival of the centurion, Seneca received the verdict with dignity. He asked for a testament, and when it was refused, he bequeathed to his friends “an example of his life” (Griffin 2008, pp 58–59). The centurion cut Seneca’s veins. Even with death slowly coming, Seneca kept calm and composed. He was taken to a steam bath to end the torture.

In his works, Seneca says that a person who has learned to die has learned to be free. For that person, death is nothing more than the last place of retreat. The dungeon, the guard, and the lock on the door are not a concern for him – he [always] has a way out (Sen. *Ep.* 26. 10). When we compare Seneca’s practical actions during the pronouncement of the death sentence and the occurrence of death itself with his theoretical teaching about death, we can conclude that Seneca was indeed, as Fitch says, “doing philosophy” (2008, p. 3) in his last moments. Not only in the sense of the practical realization of the Stoic ideal but also of bequeathing the “example of his life” to the friends present. Seneca takes a completely indifferent attitude towards death, as an impending and inevitable fate. Such behavior at his dying hour, besides being admirable, is more importantly the Stoic ideal to which Seneca aspires in his works. All mistakes and deviations from his teaching, as well as their correction through the act of self-criticism, led Seneca to perfect his practical action to be fully harmonized with his teaching. He writes:

Man is constantly different, and, in my opinion, it is the most shameful thing if he is not always equal to himself. Consider it something big to represent only one personality. But besides the philosopher, no one else represents only one man, all the rest are constantly changing. (Sen. *Ep.* 120. 22)

He reaches the desired harmony only at the moment of death, when he achieves the Stoic ideal, as Edwards formulates it: "harmony with one-self" (2008, p. 98). That is why Seneca's death is much more than a good example of calmness and composure – it is the moment when Seneca becomes one with himself, i.e., when Seneca– the– man becomes identical with Seneca– the– Stoic– ideal, to which he aspires in all his works.

Conclusion

The fact is that Seneca was an extraordinary Stoic. Claims that he was "never a man of rigid principles" (Griffin, 1992, p. 135), and that, as an advisor to one of the worst emperors in the history of Rome, he often had to make, as Griffin calls it, "compromise with evil" or even become an "instructor in tyranny" (*tyrannodidaskalos*) (2008, p. 54) are not unfounded. As we have seen, Seneca owes part of such inconsistency to his political involvement. In the balancing act between politics and philosophy, Seneca's death represents the tipping of the scale in favor of his adherence to Stoic philosophy, nicely summarized by Atanasijević (2017):

Engaging in politics damaged the reputation and cost the eminent moralist his life. But Seneca's death threw a clear light on the essence of his character and redeemed all his earlier wanderings and inconsistencies in Stoic philosophy. Because Seneca died as a true Stoic sage (...). Seneca's death is decisive proof of the authenticity of his Stoicism and dispels all doubts about the correctness of his character and all accusations that he was vain, avaricious, and pliable to tyrants. (p. 9)

At the same time, Tacitus, as reported by Griffin, was 'fascinated' (2008, p. 39) by Seneca's combination of talent and flexibility in situations that required balancing between philosophy and politics. Such flexibility is an indicator of how Seneca fits in with the rest of the Stoic school. Ksenija Atanasijević believed that Seneca's ethical teaching is free from the strict regulations of older Stoicism (2007, p. 345), concluding that Seneca's doctrine also took human nature into account. Instead of putting a person's behavior into the matrix of strict Stoic doctrine, it should be possible to tailor Stoicism to the individual, to achieve the positive effects of Stoicism, as easily and painlessly as possible. The grace and understanding shown by Seneca are the reasons Atanasijević emphasized his excellent knowledge of human psychology. Such free-thinking is unique within the Stoic school, and at the same time represents the main characteristic of self-styled moderate Stoicism, of which Seneca was, without a doubt, a

pioneer. These conclusions give us a new perspective when it comes to the relationship of Seneca's philosophy to Stoic and ancient philosophy in general. The unexpected combination of strict Stoic rules and receptivity that Seneca offers, opens the door to a greater spread of the Stoic doctrine, which has indeed experienced a sudden revitalization in recent years.

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