

Ethics as self-mastery in Seneca's *Letters*

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Abstract

The paper discusses the conception of philosophy and ethics in Seneca's *Letters*, as well as in his other writings, which it sets in the broader context of ancient and modern thought. The introduction outlines the Socratic and Stoic foundations of Seneca's ethics. The next section focuses on the interpretation of passages from the *Letters* that remind us that the task of philosophy is to teach human to live an active life. The paper points out that, according to Seneca, philosophy resembles art more than knowledge, and Seneca adapts his language and the examples he uses to this effect. In the next section, the paper returns to delineating the relationship between theoretical and practical thought. The specificity of Seneca's position becomes visible in the background of Aristotle's problematization of this relationship. The last section asks how we should approach Seneca's conception of ethics and philosophy. The analyses outlined above show that Seneca's *Letters* fully express an approach to philosophy as an art of living, an approach that modern authors such as Nietzsche and Foucault consider determinative for the whole of ancient philosophy.

Key words: Seneca's *Letters*, Stoic ethics, Aristotle, theoretical and practical, philosophy as a way of living, Nietzsche, Foucault

Introduction

Seneca's life in many ways resembles that of Socrates. This is especially evident in their attitude towards death. Like Socrates in Plato's *Phaedo*, Seneca argues that a wise man learns throughout his life how to die (*tota vita descendum est mori*; *De brev. vit.* VII 3).² Seneca's death (even though it is the result of tumultuous political events) testifies that the philosopher speaks in accordance with the rules he sets for his life.³ In this sense, he is a true Stoic, that is, a follower of a philosophy that has many adherents even today in Western culture in the ranks of the "New Stoicism".

For Seneca, the Stoic sage represents the ideal of the philosopher he would like to be. But it is not an ideal that can be associated with a particular philosopher's name. His ideal is neither Socrates nor Zeno nor Chrysippus. At the same time, Seneca realizes that the fulfilment of this ideal is too difficult and hard to achieve.⁴ The life of a wise man must be free and peaceful in all its phases, that is, not only in times of joy, but also in times of sorrow, pain, and in moments when the most difficult obstacles are set before him. In this sense, dying is as important a phase of life as any other.

The Socratic motto, repeatedly echoed in Seneca's *Letters*, is expressed by the thesis: *imperare sibi maximum imperium est* ("the greatest empire is to be emperor of oneself").⁵ In earlier Socratic literature, this motif is associated with the political education of the young Alcibiades, who must first learn how to rule himself before he can become ruler of all the Greeks (cf. Ps.-Plat., *Alcib. I.* 127d-e). Likewise, Xenophon's Socrates regards self-control to

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² Seneca often reminds us of the need to learn how to understand death and face it bravely; cf. Sen., *Epist.* 26.9 (*egregia res est mortem condiscere*); 30.4; 30.18; 70.17; *Herc. Fur.* 1075-76, etc. For more details on Plato's portrayal of Socrates in the *Phaedo*, see (Suvák, 2021).

³ In a similar fashion sounds the argumentation of Socrates in Plato's *Crito* or in Xenophon's *Apology*.

⁴ Cf. *Epist.* 45.4: "But whatever the quality of my works may be, read them as if I were still seeking, and were not aware of, the truth, and were seeking it obstinately, too. For I have sold myself to no man; I bear the name of no master".

⁵ Cf. Sen., *Epist.* 113.30. Emily Wilson chose this sentence as the title of her intellectual biography of Seneca: *The Greatest Empire*. All quotations follow translation of Seneca by Richard M. Gummere, only in some passages the translation has been modified to reflect the interpretation.

be one of the most important virtues (cf. Xenoph., *Mem.* I.2.14; I.3.5-14; I.5.1; I.5.6; I.6.8; II.1; III.14; IV.5.9; IV.8.11; *Apol.* 16). When Seneca likens government to an “empire”, he uses a political vocabulary, but at the same time he gives it an ethical meaning. To rule oneself is a necessary condition for a philosopher if he wants to influence other people. The point of influence, however, is not to dominate a particular community politically, but to influence its members to become better beings.⁶

The *Letters to Lucilius* (*Epistulae morales ad Lucilium*) belong to Seneca’s late works. Their epistolary form gives them a personal character, which is complemented by frequent references to contemporary events and detailed descriptions of everyday life. The careful reader suspects, however, that anyone else can stand in for Lucilius. More accurately, the reader can substitute anyone who wants to lead a philosophical life and needs to be advised by someone more experienced. We do not find a self-portrait of Seneca in his *Letters* (as, for example, in Horatius’ *Epist.* 1), but the resemblance between Seneca and Lucilius, who might be described as his younger alter ego, is so striking that the author’s portrait should be sought in him.⁷ At the same time Seneca was working on a book dealing with nature entitled *Natural questions* (*Naturales quaestiones*). The two writings seem to deal with opposing issues, since *Letters* turn to life, while *Natural questions* examine natural processes. In fact, however, these writings refer to two aspects of human life that are closely related, for a good and blessed life must always be in harmony with nature. The interconnectedness of the two writings can also be seen in the common addressee, who is Lucilius. Another reason why Seneca focuses on questions of nature could be related to his attempt to transcend the narrow framework of political life in Rome (Wilson, 2014, pp. 163–214). Let us not forget that ethical themes in Seneca’s conception have not only a private but also a public impact. Seneca is simply a “philosopher in politics” (cf. Sen., *Fr.* I 1; Griffin, 1976).

Philosophy should teach actions

Seneca takes up the early Stoics’ thought that the aim of human life is peace of mind (*tranquillitas animi*) – the happy life consists in security and lasting tranquillity (*securitas et perpetua tranquillitas*; *Epist.* 92.3). More than accurately formulated ideas, what really matters are actions. This approach is very close to the Socratic tradition, where the most important thing is action or, rather, an attempt to find the correspondence between what the philosopher teaches and how he lives. Philosophy actually teaches us to act, not to speak or write (*Epist.* 20.3, 4).

In one of his letters, Seneca urges his disciple Lucilius to impress philosophy deep into his heart and to examine his progress not according to speeches or writings, which means in conformity with what he hears or reads, but according to how much his soul is strengthening and his passions diminishing (*Epist.* 20.2-3):

[P]hilosophy teaches us to act, not to speak; it exacts of every man that he should live according to his own standards, that his life should not be out of harmony with his words, and that, further, his inner life should be of one hue and not out of harmony with all his activities. This, I say, is the highest duty and the highest proof of wisdom, – that

⁶ Socrates acts with the same intention on Alcibiades in Aeschines’ *Alcibiades*: he wants to make him better through love; cf. fr. SSR VI A 53 [= Ael. Aristid. *de rhet.* I 61-64].

⁷ All we know of Lucilius comes from Seneca, so it is difficult to judge his historicity: Lucilius (a little younger than Seneca) is a procurator in Sicily. Seneca appears in both the *Letters* and the *Natural questions* as an advisor to Lucilius, who would like to make progress in philosophy and is considering leaving political life to do so; cf. *Epist.* 68.1-2; *NQ* IV, 1-13; IV, 21-2. It is this circumstance, referring to Seneca’s own life, that leads some historians to conclude that Lucilius is a fictional character behind whom Seneca himself must be sought. Lucilius’ name, which resembles Seneca’s: Lucius, would suggest this; cf. the linguistic formulation of the addressee at the beginning of each letter: *SENECA LVCILIO SVO SALVTEM* (“Seneca sends greetings to his Lucilius”); for more details see (Ker, 2011, p. xxxiii).

deed and word should be in accord, that a man should be equal to himself under all conditions, and always the same.

Philosophy should teach actions. But what sort of actions? Philosophy does not ask those who embraced a different way of life to follow generally valid principles or common rules, but it advises everybody to choose his own rules and then to keep to them. (*Epist.* 71.1) This is a very important observation, because philosophy does not deliver answers to our questions but teaches us how to look for them, whilst every individual can do it in a different manner and thus achieve different answers.

Seneca informs Lucilius that philosophy is no trick to attract the public (*populare artificium*); it is not meant for a show – its products are actions. And he continues: We do not practise philosophy in order to drive away boredom or to get some amusement. We practise it so that we take responsibility for own life (*Epist.* 16.3-4):

[Philosophy] moulds and constructs the soul; it orders our life, guides our conduct, shows us what we should do and what we should leave undone; it sits at the helm and directs our course as we waver amid uncertainties. Without it, no one can live fearlessly or in peace of mind. Countless things that happen every hour call for advice; and such advice is to be sought in philosophy.

The accidents on the turbulent seas of life that Seneca writes about are shocks imparted by the grim goddess Chance, which can turn our life upside down at any moment – it makes the rich poor, the healthy sick, the powerful helpless. Philosophy teaches how one should cope with all coming events and keep his life flowing serenely. The same as the followers of Socrates, Seneca too considers philosophy an art – the art of a good life – its product being a life that flows peacefully, with no abrupt swerves.

In many passages of his *Letters*, Seneca uses the metaphor of a pilot.⁸ It serves him to distinguish between those who learned philosophy as a kind of a marketable trade and those who make their words into actions. The false philosophers give prescriptions on how the others should live, but they themselves live otherwise. They prove to be examples of useless doctrine, similar to a pilot who got seasick during a storm (*Epist.* 108.36).

In *Letter* 75, Seneca shows his friend what kind of progress can be provided by philosophy and why it is the art of living (though not using the expression *ars vivendi*). Let us have a look at the overall argumentation, in which the author of the letter follows the early Stoics. What is noteworthy in the first place is Seneca's vocabulary. He puts philosophy in the role of a doctor and man, every single individual, in the role of a seriously ill patient.⁹ *Letter* 75 recalls the introductory passages of Plato's *Apology*: philosophy should not use a language that is too wordy and flowery – when the philosopher speaks, everybody has to feel that what he says is his conviction, that what he says he not only means but also loves. "[L]et us say what we feel, and feel what we say; let speech harmonize with life" (*Epist.* 75.4, 2-3). Philosophy is not based on a natural talent like other arts, but on the strength of the spirit. If someone is sick, he does not look for a doctor with remarkable eloquence, but a doctor good at healing. The philosopher heals an ancient and serious illness (Seneca says he has as much to do as a physician in the time of plague). The difference between him and others is in that he must not only know his art but also confirm it by action. Action that requires self-denial and immense inner strength. He who

⁸ See Sen., *Epist.* 14 (the wise man acts as a prudent pilot); *Epist.* 30; *Epist.* 95; etc.

⁹ See Sen., *Epist.* 95.29-30. Seneca points out how the people were before (stronger, hardy) and how they are now (sickly, weak). Then he confronts this with philosophy: "It was once more simple because men's sins were on a smaller scale, and could be cured with but slight trouble; in the face, however, of all this moral topsy-turvy men must leave no remedy untried. And would that this pest might so at last be overcome! We are mad, not only individually, but nationally".

wants to make progress must put away all the passions (violent movements of the soul that can provoke illnesses) and subdue the diseases of the soul, i.e. vices, such as greed, ambition or the fear of death (*Epist.* 71.37). By disease the Stoics mean the condition of the soul dwelling in vice – an excessive desire for what is not worth longing for, or attributing too much weight to what in fact has no value. Many of the proficient¹⁰ have already avoided the diseases, but they still have passions, and so they are not yet wise. Seneca mentions two other kinds of proficient who still have not attained the condition of wisdom. In the end, he describes the healthy condition of the soul without diseases and passions, when *the sage knows he knows*. It is a state of peaceful soul and total freedom when we do not fear the gods and perfectly rule over ourselves, because to be master of oneself is a priceless good.

In *Letter* 95, Seneca mentions the art of living directly (this time using the words *ars vitae*; *Epist.* 95.7-9). In the beginning, he writes to Lucilius that a learned philosophy is not enough to become wisdom. To attain the latter, one needs exercise. If we compare philosophy to the other arts, we shall see that philosophy's object is not the means of living, but life as a whole. Philosophy cannot be either theoretical or practical. It has to observe and act at the same time. It is not enough to have its doctrines; precepts (Gr. *dogmata*; Lat. *decreta*, or *scita*, or *placita*) are needed, too (*Epist.* 95.12): “[N]o man can duly perform right actions except one who has been entrusted with reason, which will enable him, in all cases, to fulfil all the categories of duty. These categories he cannot observe unless he receives precepts for every occasion, and not for the present alone”.

Precepts strengthen us and keep us secure and serene – they uphold the whole of life as well as the whole of nature. As an example of such a precept, Seneca offers Epicurus' advice to his friend Idomeneus that if he wants to make Pythocles rich, he need not give him more money but subtract from his desires (*Epist.* 21.7). The precept can be applied not only to riches, but to anything else – continues Seneca. If you want to make Pythocles honourable, do not add to his honours, but subtract from his desires. If you want Pythocles to experience a durable pleasure, do not add to his pleasures, but subtract from his desires. If you want him to fill his life to the full, do not add to his years, but subtract from his desires. This example with Pythocles needs, however, a further remark: precepts can be uttered as *advice*, but they are not really imposed on Pythocles by Idomeneus; we impose precepts on ourselves.

Seneca warns Lucilius against practising philosophy as a clever learnedness, which might teach us how to dispute, but not how to live. Precepts must become evident in every type of activity, in everyday behaviour, so that we free ourselves from false beliefs about things (which are the root of our ill condition). If we supplement precepts with doctrines, consolations and exhortations, the latter can have a certain impact, but without the former, they lack efficiency. Freedom is the precondition to everything; the individual has to know why he acts in the way he acts. “One who is good through mere chance will not give promise of retaining such a character for ever”. The act in itself is not praiseworthy, but the way we carry it out.¹¹

In one of his *Letters*, Seneca reflects on the necessity of quiet for studying philosophy (*Epist.* 56). Generally, it is thought that one can engage in thinking only when nothing disturbs him. Then Seneca describes his quarters: he lives directly above the *thermae* where noises come from everywhere. His account of the various sounds is so vivid, that it is as if we were there with him: strong men flourish their leaden weights, gasping and grunting; lazier ones get their massages done, the masseurs' hands pummeling their oily shoulders emitting slapping noises;

¹⁰ For the Stoics, a “proficient” (Gr. *prokoptōn*; Lat. *proficiens*) is a person who seeks to attain virtue, literally, the “one who makes progress” (Gr. *prokopē*).

¹¹ It must be noted that some ancient authors criticized Seneca because his actions did not correspond to his teaching; see, for instance, Publius Suillius in Tacitus (*Ann.* 13.42), who reproaches Seneca for his enormous riches, which he acquired while he educated young Nero, as well as his practicing usury. (However, Suillius' attacks may have had a political motivation).

some play ball, counting aloud the score; some plunge into the bathing tanks; some yell as the hair-plucker plucks their armpits. And you must add to this the shrill voices of sellers and peddlers. In such a racket, one should be made of iron or completely deaf, if he wants to study. But Seneca says the noise does not bother him at all:

For I force my mind to concentrate, and keep it from straying to things outside itself; all outdoors may be bedlam, provided that there is no disturbance within, provided that fear is not wrangling with desire in my breast, provided that meanness and lavishness are not at odds, one harassing the other. For of what benefit is a quiet neighbourhood, if our emotions are in an uproar?

The only pleasant thing is the tranquillity provided by reason. True peace can only be found in a good mind. For sure, even peace may prove troubling sometimes – in such case, one should engage in activity and apply oneself in a good art. True peace comes when nothing dissuades us, when no voice interrupts our thoughts. A strong mind does not wobble at random noises; it is not agitated in itself, because it has been enclosed in itself. Seneca explains to Lucilius that he will achieve a good education as soon as there is no voice that would divert him from himself, either by flattering or by threats. Reading this letter, we realize how weak we are when we complain that someone or something disturbs us. We feel ashamed and we make plans to change something in us so that outer circumstances will not upset us. But the end of the letter might surprise us. Seneca asks if it would not be more useful to free oneself from the everyday turmoil of the baths. And he admits it would – that is why he wants to quit this trial of himself and to move to another place.

Does this mean that his precepts are not strong enough? No. The wise man sets up precepts for his life in accordance with the circumstances in which he is deciding. These precepts are not given beforehand, but everybody creates them for himself in the view of the way of life he strives to live.

This active approach to life also determines Seneca's notion of the teacher – if he is a wise man he knows he must learn himself. In one of his letters, Seneca confides to Lucilius that he observes how he himself becomes not only a better, but also a different man (*Epist.* 6). Wisdom consists in the knowledge that there is always something in us that can be improved. "And indeed this very fact is proof that my spirit is altered into something better," writes Seneca, "that it can see its own faults, of which it was previously ignorant. In certain cases sick men are congratulated because they themselves have perceived that they are sick". A wise teacher improves the condition of his pupil as well as of himself. Every good thing ought to be shared with one's neighbours. And it cannot be done through books or letters. Philosophical preparation requires live dialogue from face to face. Seneca says: "[T]he way is long if one follows precepts, but short and helpful, if one follows patterns". A philosopher's exemplary life is more valuable than all his written doctrines. Cleanthes became a loyal disciple of Zeno because he lived with him and could observe his private life. He had an opportunity to see if he lived by his principles. Metrodorus, Hermarchus and Polyaeus did not become great figures because of Epicurus' doctrines, but by living with him. Plato, Aristotle and a multitude of wise men who took various directions were more inspired by Socrates' behaviour than by his words (*Epist.* 6.6). Seneca uses here the Latin word *mores*, which does not mean "manners" in the modern sense (as "proper social deportment"), but everyday behaviour, a way of life that reflects one's character.¹²

What is crucial for understanding Seneca's philosophical position is Nature. In Book VII of his *On Benefits*, we can read (Sen., *De benef.* 7):

¹² Seneca often recalls Socrates' or Cato's model behaviour (Lat. *exemplum*) in particular circumstances; see e.g. *Epist.* 104.7, 104.21, 104.27, 104.28, 104.29 etc.

Everything that will make us better or happier people is either out in the open or nearly so. If our mind has come to treat chance events with disdain; if it has risen above its fears and does not grasp with greedy ambition for what is boundless but instead has learned to seek riches from itself; if the mind has eliminated the fear of gods and men and knows that we have little to dread from humans and nothing from god; if it disdains everything that brings torment to our life while “enriching” it, and has reached the point of seeing that death is not the source of anything bad, but rather puts an end to many bad things; if he has dedicated his mind to virtue and thinks of any pathway to which virtue summons him as being smooth and level; if, being by nature a social animal and born for the common good, he looks upon the world as a common home for all and has opened up his private thoughts to the gods, living always as though under public scrutiny and more in fear of himself than of others – then this man has escaped the storms and taken a stand on firm ground under a clear sky; he has reached the summit of all useful and necessary knowledge. Everything else is but an amusement for his leisure. For once his mind has withdrawn to safety, then he can also have recourse to the studies that bring sophistication rather than strength to the intellect.

We might ask if the Stoic conception of Nature is an appropriate departure for philosophical decisions and actions. Why should we despise what is accidental and accept only what is necessary? Why do we have to devote our lives to virtue, meaning to excellence in every situation? The early Stoics claimed that knowledge of Nature, or, rather, the very essence of Nature that we disclose, entailed everything that obliged us to act well. To put it differently, at the beginning of our journey to ourselves we have to engage in the study of physics, which means a rather speculative, non-empirical account of physical entities based on procedures of deductive logic. But the character of Stoic inquiries in itself is not of much concern for us – more important is the question of the relation between theoretical knowledge and practical action, which is the only thing that can make a human individual into a philosophical person.

The early Stoics taught that everything, even the slightest events, happens in accordance with Nature (Gr. *phusis*) and its reason (*logos*; cf. Plutarch, *De Stoic. repugn.* 1050b [= S.V.F. II.937]). However, this apparently simple idea harbours many complex questions. First of all, even though the concepts of *phusis* and *logos* are known from the earlier philosophical tradition, we have to put them into the context of Stoic thought. *Phusis* (Lat. *natura*) was for the early Stoics the principle that forms and, at the same time, unites all things and thus conveys an overall consistency to the world. On one hand, *phusis* as “nature” causes growth and change, but, on the other hand, it provides for the stability of things, because it is also linked with *logos* (Lat. *ratio*), ensuring that things do not change by chance, but “with reason”, directing them to their own good. Since *phusis* is the creative principle of all things, we can call it a necessity. That is why the Stoics identify it with god, or destiny. The Greek word *phusis* means either the essence of a particular changeable thing or the totality of being. And since *logos* (“rationality”) is what belongs to every “nature”, the totality of being must be the supreme rationality, i.e. god.

The study of *phusis* (nature in particular and nature overall) is for the early Stoic a necessary step towards a concern with ethical questions. In one of his extant fragments, Chrysippus explains why this is so: “For one can find no other starting point or origin for justice except the one derived from Zeus and that derived from the common nature; for everything like this must take that as its starting point, if we are going to say anything at all about good and bad things”.¹³

It might sound curious, if we tried to persuade someone that the purpose of our inquiries into natural processes was not a deeper knowledge of nature, but better moral behaviour. Nonetheless, this was exactly what the Stoics meant. By now, we might be closer to understanding Seneca’s words that nature has put all that is needed for our being better and

¹³ Plutarch., *De Stoic. repugn.* 1035c (= S.V.F. III.58), English translation by B. Inwood and L. Gerson.

happier (in the ethical sense) right in front of us.¹⁴ The inquiry into *phusis*, which is the subject matter of physics, requires correct use of *logos*, which is the subject matter of logics. Without physics and logics, Stoic ethics would not be possible, because it forms a unity with both of them. But this is also true the other way around: only a good-acting man can achieve a deeper knowledge in the field of physics and ethics. The three parts of the Stoic philosophy fall into a well-interlocked whole, which can be compared to a living organism or a garden – logics being its fence, physics its soil and trees, ethics its fruits. The important point of this Stoic simile is the idea that none of those parts can be separated from the other two, because only in their unity do they make a meaningful and viable whole.¹⁵

Moreover, there is another important thing: even the best knowledge in physics, logics and ethics is not wisdom (Gr. *sophia*). Philosophy can be understood as an exercise in wisdom, or as training in the knowledge of what is useful. But there is only one useful art – the excellence of action.¹⁶ The thorough study of philosophy does not make us wise, but offers an opportunity for exercise in what is wise. And the wise thing is to live the best of all possible lives. And such art cannot be explained theoretically but can be realized actively. Philosophy is a kind of preparation, a practice (Gr. *askēsis*; Lat. *exercitatio*), a necessary step on the way towards a good life. Sometimes, the Stoics identify it with “life in agreement with nature” (Gr. *homologoumenōs tē phusei zēn*), other times with “life according to virtue” (Gr. *kat’ aretēn zēn*).¹⁷

The relation between theoretical and practical

In his dialogue *On Leisure* (unfortunately, we only possess fragments of it), Seneca explains how we should understand the relation between theoretical insight and practical activity (Sen., *De ot.* V): Nature conceived us so that we might observe; when we start to observe ourselves, we realize there is a desire in us to know unknown things. Some engage in long journeys to know unknown worlds, so far hidden and remote. The same yearning brings us to the theatre, or to peek through a slit into locked rooms, or to search for various secrets. Aware of its own arts and beauty, Nature made us viewers of the magnificent spectacle of the world. It set us in the middle of itself so that we might observe it. Though we do not see everything and what we see we do not perceive as splendid as it really is, our sight makes its way to follow the traces and thus lays the fundamentals for knowledge of the truth – through things that are more evident we proceed towards what is unclear and opaque. “Our thought bursts through the battlements of heaven and is not satisfied with knowing only what is shown to us”. Man gradually comes to awareness of the order around him and of the divine breath inside himself. But he who was born and will die does not have enough time to explore everything. Even if he jealously guarded his hours and if Chance did not rob him of anything Nature gave him, man is too mortal to know immortality. In the end of his reflection on the role of observation, Seneca writes: “I live according to Nature, therefore, if I give myself entirely up to her, and if I admire and reverence her. Nature, however, intended me to do both, to practise both contemplation and action: and I do both, because even contemplation is not devoid of action”.¹⁸

It may seem that Seneca asks us to enquire theoretically and thanks to a better knowledge of Nature to act in correspondence to what we have come to know (the order, arrangement of

¹⁴ Seneca is convinced that man has to strive for as deep a harmony with the provident order of universe as possible; see his seven books of *Quaestiones naturales*.

¹⁵ Diog. Laert. VII.40. Apparently, the Stoics joined the teaching of physics, logics and ethics, which means they were able to look at the same problems in the perspective of ethics, logics and physics.

¹⁶ Aetius, *Placita, Proemium*, 2 (= S.V.F. II.35). Aetius writes: “At the highest level there are three virtues: the one that deals with nature (*phusikē*), the one that deals with ethics (*ēthikē*), and the one that deals with discourse (*logikē*)”, translated by B. Inwood and L. Gerson.

¹⁷ SVF I.179; III.12 (Gr. *kat’ aretēn zēn*); S.V.F. I.179–184 (Gr. *homologoumenōs tē phusei zēn*).

¹⁸ Sen., *De ot.* V.8. Translated by Aubrey Stewart.

things). But at the end of his reflection, he says something different: We have to do both, attain insight *and* act, because there is no action without insight and no insight without action. It is clear now that the real objective of philosophy is the action that needs the insight. The insight, however, cannot be separated from the action but is motivated by it.

Next, Seneca recalls the doctrine of three types of life that earlier philosophers tried to order according to which of them were the best – one is of pleasure, the second of understanding, the third of activity (Sen., *De ot.* VII.1). There are passages in *Nicomachean* and *Eudemian Ethics* where a couple of centuries before Seneca, Aristotle defines the best possible life. Let us review them to point out that Seneca’s solution is, in a way, surprising.¹⁹

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle draws distinctions between the “three best possible lives”.²⁰ (1) The lowest is the life devoted to enjoyment (Gr. *apolautikos bios*) – most people choose this life, proper of cattle, because they tend to the pleasure accompanied by enjoyable feelings of the body. (2) A higher one is the political life (*politikos bios*), i.e. the life of citizens marked by praiseworthy activity based on moral excellence. (3) The highest one is the contemplative, theoretical life (*theōretikos bios*) based on the theoretical grasp of the truth. To put it briefly, the highest human output regarding one’s life is not ethical excellence, but theoretical wisdom. This conclusion of *Nicomachean Ethics* seems a little puzzling, because almost all the previous inquiry was about the happiness (*eudaimonia*) based on the practice of virtue (*aretē*). The statement that the philosophical quest for wisdom is more valuable than virtuous activity engenders many questions, for example: are there two types of happiness, one for common people and another for philosophers? If it is so, why does philosophical happiness have a higher value than the active one? Or can we integrate both these types of happiness into a one and only life? It appears from the overall argument of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that Aristotle’s intention could not be to put both types of happiness in conflict. More likely, he indicates there is a peculiar link between them. Philosophical activity is the closest to the happy life, because it is the most rational state of the soul. In a Diogenean anecdote we find Aristotle’s answer to the question of what benefit he has ever derived from philosophy: “[To] do without being ordered what some are forced to do by their fear of the law”.²¹ A good man cannot do wrong. And the philosopher who contemplates the real with his reason cannot be a bad man. In other words, if we claim that the philosophical life is better than the political one, it does not mean that the life of citizenship cannot lead to happiness. On the contrary, as Aristotle puts it, it is the “second-best life”, attributed mostly to politicians. Why does it hold the second place? Because the ethical decisions of everyday life cannot be exempt from troubles and suffering, like wars, which are waged in view of peace, but, nonetheless, killing cannot be avoided in them. Moreover, to be complete and perfect, the theoretical life requires “leisure” (Gr. *scholē*), which common people, absorbed by their labours, and politicians, immersed in their public service, lack (*Eth. Nic.* 1177b4-15). Theoretical wisdom is the highest intellectual virtue of human nature, which we share with the gods – through wisdom we are able to understand the order of the whole universe (*kosmos*).²² In this sense, theoretical wisdom is the only virtue that is a perfect equivalent to happiness – not a “means” to anything, but the supreme and ultimate “end” (*telos*).

Let us return to Seneca now. We might suppose that in his reflection on the ways of life, he would focus (as Aristotle had done) mostly on two types of life, the contemplative (Lat.

¹⁹ We will mostly follow the *Nicomachean Ethics*, since the *Eudemian Ethics* tends to a different solution for the life choice, which is a little ambiguous: the best life is probably a kind of mixture of the political and theoretical one.

²⁰ *Eth. Nic.* 1095b17-19, cf. *Eth. Eud.* 1215a35. A similar distinction can be found in Plato, see *Phil.* 67b; *Resp.* 586a; *Phd.* 60e.

²¹ Diog. Laert. V.20. Translated by Pamela Mensch.

²² *Eth. Eud.* 1249b16-21. The gods are thoroughly rational and beyond distinction of theoretical insight and practical activity.

contemplatio) and the active (*actio*), and that he would give preference to one of them. Nevertheless, Seneca proposes to prefer none of the three lives in as much they tend towards the same goal: he who favours pleasure needs theoretical insight, too; he who is devoted to contemplation feels pleasure at the same time; and he who lives actively also needs discernment. We can see that Seneca interlocks not only the theoretical and the active life, but also the pleasurable one. Because we can also choose a pleasure that is made durable by reason.²³ At the end of his reflection, Seneca says: With what purpose do I state this? To prove that all men are fond of contemplation. Some make it the object of their lives: to us it is an anchorage, but not a harbour.²⁴

Unlike Aristotle, Seneca appreciates the active life more than theoretical knowledge, even if he considers insight very important and, in a way, inseparable from action. In fact, the real objective of theoretical insight does not consist in knowledge, but in acting according to what we come to know. Moreover, insight itself is motivated by action. Cognition receives its value only thanks to activity.²⁵

Seneca sees decision-making and activity in a new light – he puts it higher than any theoretical knowledge and assigns it to first place in the philosophical life. If we compare Seneca’s approach with that of the earlier Stoics, we can see some slight, but important differences. The Stoics claimed that to possess one virtue, or excellence (Gr. *aretē*), was to possess all of them – because of the common insights (*theōremata*; Diog. Laert. VII.125). According to Chrysippus, the virtuous man has both theoretical knowledge and good action, inasmuch he has to make a decision and endure in what ought to be done. If he does something by rational choice, something by endurance and something by impartiality, he is wise, courageous and just. Every virtue is concerned with a specific type of activity, for instance, courage with what must be endured, practical wisdom with what has to be done and what has to be avoided, and so on (Diog. Laert. VII.125-126). Consequently, the earlier Stoics understood the relation between knowledge and action dialectically – theorizing intertwined with practical acting. Seneca gives preference to activity, which is the only criterion for judging what is right to think and do. Diogenes Laertius informs us that out of the three lives – theoretical, practical and rational – the early Stoics advised to choose the third, the rational one (Gr. *logikos*), because Nature intentionally created the rational animal so that he could understand theoretically and act practically. Seneca would probably say that the only rational life is to act correctly by means of an understanding intellect.

There is a fragment 17 from Seneca in Lactantius (*Divin. inst.* 3.15,1) that says: “Philosophy is nothing else than the right method of living, or the science of living honourably, or the art of passing a good life. We shall not err in saying that philosophy is the law of living well and honourably”.

The notion of philosophy as a method, or, as it were a “user’s guide”, does not mean that philosophy will teach us how to live. Philosophy can help us find the “right method of living” (Lat. *recta ratio vivendi*) but cannot live our lives in our stead. The expression “right method” (Lat. *recta ratio*) is a translation of the Greek term *orthos logos*, which is difficult to render. If we want to understand why, let us consider an earlier example: In accordance with the previous tradition, Aristotle conceived the virtuous acting as a “due mean” between two “extremes” (vices). For example, courageous action is a mean between cowardice (one extreme/vice) and

²³ At this point, Seneca recalls Epicurus’ doctrine: Even the Epicurean sage sometimes evades pleasure and chooses pain, if a lesser pain prevents a greater one. At the first sight, Aristotle’s argumentation follows the same line, but, in the end, the result is different (*Eth. Nic.* 1177a25): pleasures of unparalleled purity and durability are achieved by philosophy.

²⁴ Sen., *De ot.* VII.4. Translated by Aubrey Stewart.

²⁵ The specific Stoic approach to the theory-practice relationship leads some modern interpreters to believe that Stoicism is an ancient form of Pragmatism (cf. Lachs 2012, pp. 28–87; Skowroński, 2021, pp. 82–85).

recklessness (the other extreme/vice). In this perspective, virtuous action is a disposition of determined choice, observing the mean relative to us, which is determined by judgement, as the prudent man would determine it (*Eth. Nic.* 1107a1-2). To put it in simple words: the wise, virtuously acting man does everything in a “mean-observing”, i.e. in an “appropriate” way.²⁶ If one looks for the mean in his action, it is not that he is imitating the behaviour of the sage – everyone has to choose his way independently of others, but with regard to others. When we come to know what is appropriate for us, we gain the right judgement (*orthos logos*; *Eth. Nic.* 1103b31-34, 1114b29, 1138b20). Or, in other words, virtue is a disposition to act according to the right judgement. At the beginning of Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle says that his prior account of the mean needs elaboration, since it has not been sufficiently clear (*Eth. Nic.* 1138b18-34). Subsequently, he recalls the problem of the “right judgement” (*orthos logos*), which is indispensable for virtuous action (*Eth. Nic.* 1138b33-34). He proposes to define *orthos logos* more exactly, but in the end, he does not get to it. We might speculate why Aristotle eventually did not define such an important point in the ethical inquiry on virtues. Or we might note that the point is too difficult to explain, since *orthos logos* can be grasped neither in a theoretical way (which is what we do when we write treatises on ethics), nor in a practical way (because we always act in a particular situation and particular circumstances), nor by a combination of the theoretical and practical explanation. Aristotle’s claim that we should act as a prudent man (*phronimos*) would suggest that the prudent man’s behaviour cannot be generalized in such a manner that would allow its satisfactory explanation. The wise man is a model worth imitating – he is the example of a good and rationally acting person, but his practical wisdom itself (*phronēsis*) simply cannot be determined independently of the particular situation in which the prudent man makes his choice. For example, nobody approves suicide as a commendable act, but in certain circumstances, appropriately judged by a prudent person, it might prove acceptable.²⁷

The art of good living (Lat. *ars rectae vitae agenda*) should manifest itself, according to Seneca, both in everyday and limit situations. Perhaps the utmost trial of his philosophical preparation was the Emperor Nero’s order to commit voluntary suicide.²⁸ Tacitus writes how Seneca accepted the sentence issued by his former pupil without the slightest show of fear. When the centurion had notified him about the imminence of his death, the philosopher asked him for a tablet to write his testament, but the soldier denied it to him. Then Seneca turned to his friends and declared that since he could not thank them for their benefices in that way, he would leave them the only and most beautiful thing he had – the image of his life (*imaginem vitae suae*); as long as they remembered him, they would obtain a deep friendship as their reward. When his friends burst into tears, he urged them to man up and asked them why the rules of wisdom had got lost together with the principles, so many times thought through, which should have prepared them to face dangers.²⁹

Philosophy as the art of living

Seneca is dying recalling his happy life. He passes away with the thought that at the end of a good life is a good death. In anticipation of his inevitable death, Seneca leaves to his closest friends “the image of his life”. He does not give them a message, he does not give them advice,

²⁶ It is important to notice that Aristotle does not simply suggest a “golden middle way”, but insists on prudence, which is not equal for everybody, because different things are appropriate for each person.

²⁷ Let us notice that several early Stoics ended their lives with suicide, including the first two heads of the school, Zeno and Cleanthes; see S.V.F. I.288; I.474.

²⁸ Nero accused his teacher and educator Seneca of taking part in a plot attempting to overthrow the emperor. The uncovering of the conspirators provoked vast reprisals (among the sentenced was Seneca’s nephew, the poet Lucanus, and Seneca’s brother Novatus was forced to commit suicide, too). A detailed account of Seneca’s death can be found in Tacitus’ *Annals* XV.60-63.

²⁹ A similar scene is at the conclusion of Plato’s *Phaedo*, depicting the voluntary death of Socrates.

he does not leave them a teaching, but he wants them to remember how he lived his life.³⁰ Precisely in these simple words (*imaginem vitae suae*) we should look for the key to Seneca's understanding of philosophy. It should not be judged in terms of knowledge, but through the actions. With this simple sentence, Seneca follows the Socratic and Stoic tradition, for whom philosophy is primarily a style of life and a way of life. But how should we understand this? For the modern textbook definition of Stoicism speaks of a systematic philosophy that educates us in three areas, i.e., logic, physics, and ethics. Modern authors such as Nietzsche, Hadot, Foucault, who explain why we should not apply the same criteria to ancient philosophy as to modern philosophy, could help us to understand it better.

The art of living is characterised by the idea that the greatest work we make is our selves, or more precisely our lives. Although the Greeks almost did not use the expression *technē tou biou* ("the art of living"), they thought about way of life in the light of an overall attitude, which Foucault notably calls the "aesthetics of existence" (see Foucault, 2001; Foucault, 2009). These aesthetics as a particular style of life is a result of the requirement of "care of the self" (*epimeleia heautou*), the necessity of continual training (*askēsis*) exercised over oneself by oneself.³¹ The objective of such activity is to change one's life, i.e. to give it a particular ethical and aesthetical dimension that makes it a work worth imitating.

To put it simply, we can say that Foucault's concept of aesthetics of existence elaborates on one of Nietzsche's fragments preserved in his literary remnants – it says that the philosopher's product is his *life*, even before his *works* – life is the philosopher's work of art (Nietzsche, 1999, Vol. VII, p. 712). Following Nietzsche, Foucault too understands philosophy in strong connection with the pursuit of a *different* life *here and now*; this means in this world and in this moment (Foucault, 2009, pp. 227–228). Philosophy is not supposed to find a kind of ultimate, hidden purpose of being, but to realize a good life accompanied by simple joy – the joy of the things at hand. For Nietzsche and Foucault, philosophy represents practices of thought that are capable of changing our way of relating to ourselves, what our approach to life is, how we make it our own work. Philosophy's task is not to offer solace to the unhappy, anxious and troubled. The philosopher is a seeker of a truth that is a result of an existential choice to give to one's life a different direction. The philosopher looks for the truth about herself or himself, others and the world, a truth that often can be unpleasant and painful – such truth, however, is able to transform her or him. The question is whether a particular way of life is a precondition of this pursuit, because someone could say that it is the other way round, meaning that the truth the philosopher discovers changes his life.

What does Nietzsche say about this point? In one of his *Untimely Meditations*, we can read (Nietzsche, 1997, pp. 136–137): "I profit from a philosopher only insofar as he can be an example. [...] But this example must be supplied by his outward life and not merely in his books – in the way, that is, in which the philosophers of Greece taught, through their bearing, what they wore and ate, and their morals, rather than by what they said, let alone by what they wrote!"

Nietzsche thus questions the fundamental claim of academic philosophy about its own activity – the obligation of criticism (Nietzsche, 1997, p. 187): "The only critique of a philosophy that is possible and that proves something, namely trying to see whether one can live in accordance with it, has never been taught at universities: all that has ever been taught is a critique of words by means of other words".

³⁰ Seneca asked his wife Paulina not to yield to sorrow, but to get consolation from meditating on his well-spent life. She replied that she wanted to die voluntarily, too. After that, they both opened their veins with a knife. Seneca was dying very slowly, in extreme pain, but he did his best to keep his mind brave. He sent his wife next door, where the house slaves, at the emperor's command, stopped her bleeding and saved her (Tac., *Ann.* XV.63–64).

³¹ Foucault follows Pierre Hadot in this point (see Hadot, 1981; Hadot, 1995), but at the same time he develops a peculiar concept of the techniques of the self, i.e. the activities, with the help of which the subject creates his own self; see e.g. (Ucnik, 2018, pp. 63–79).

In the *Ecce Homo*, one of his last published books, he writes about the essential link between philosophy and life: “I turned my will to health, to *life*, into my philosophy” (Nietzsche 2007, 9). An example of the analogy between art and way of life, which has an ethical as well as aesthetic dimension, is offered in an aphorism from the *Gay Science* under the title *One thing is needful*. Nietzsche says that the effort to *give style* to one’s character is a great and precious art (Nietzsche, 2001, p. 163): “It is practised by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses that their nature has to offer and then fit them into an artistic plan until each appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye”.

The art of living requires long practice and everyday labour, in order to

attain satisfaction with himself – be it through this or that poetry or art; only then is a human being at all tolerable to behold! Whoever is dissatisfied with himself is continually prepared to avenge himself for this, and we others will be his victims if only by having to endure his sight. For the sight of something ugly makes one bad and gloomy (Nietzsche, 1999, Vol. III, pp. 530–531).

One could object that life conceived in that way would relativize ethics – it empties them of every consideration of universally valid moral principles. But let us voice a question: Why should we understand ethics only from the viewpoint of universally valid principles? The hallmark of the art of living is its individual character. Nevertheless, this does not mean that it advocates egoism or relativism. The only belief that accompanies the art of living is that there is not a one and only best life that should become a model for all other more or less perfect lives. The art of living has an important aesthetic aspect: every human being’s life is a unique work of art and, as such, it can assume a variety of forms. Art does not and cannot surmise that there is a one and only correct account of the world. The art of the novel, if we may use this one example, out of many, is, according to Milan Kundera, based on representing an event as manifold and multifarious, because every character experiences it in a different way and none of these ways should be given preference over the other (Kundera, 1986, pp. 13–32). In visual art and likewise in the art of living, what style we choose for what we want to create is up to us. The work made is just as important as its author, for whom it is equivalent to his or her life.³²

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³² For more on the idea that philosophy might be conceived as a guide to life, see (Sellars, 2017).

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