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Seneca’s Philosophy

Seneca is a major philosophical figure of the Roman Imperial Period. As a Stoic philosopher writing in Latin, Seneca makes a lasting contribution to Stoicism. He occupies a central place in the literature on Stoicism at the time, and shapes the understanding of Stoic thought that later generations were to have. Seneca's philosophical works played a large role in the revival of Stoic ideas in the Renaissance. Until today, many readers approach Stoic philosophy through Seneca, rather than through the more fragmentary evidence that we have for earlier Stoics. Seneca's writings are stunningly diverse in their generic range. More than that, Seneca develops further and shapes several philosophical genres, most important, the letter and so-called “consolations”; his essay On Mercy is considered the first example of what came to be known as the “mirror of the prince” literature.

After several centuries of relative neglect, Seneca's philosophy has been rediscovered in the last few decades, in what might be called a second revival of Senecan thought. In part, this renewed interest is the result of a general reappraisal of Roman culture. It is also fuelled by major progress that has been made in our understanding of Greek Hellenistic philosophy, and by recent developments in

contemporary ethics, such as a renewed interest in the theory of emotions, roles and relationships, and the fellowship of all human beings. And finally, some influential scholars have found, in the wake of Foucault's reading of Seneca, that Seneca speaks to some distinctively modern concerns.

Seneca’s provided a clear distinction valuable and good things in one of his works named Seneca's Letters. So-called preferred indifferents—health, wealth, and so on—have value (their opposites, dispreferred indifferents, have disvalue). But only virtue is good. Again and again, Seneca discusses how health and wealth do not contribute to our happiness. Seneca approaches this issue not as an academic puzzle, as if we needed to be compelled by intricate proof to accept this point. He speaks very directly to his readers, and his examples grip us moderns as much as they gripped his contemporaries. We tend to think that life would be better if only we did not have to travel for the lowest fare, but in a more comfortable fashion; we are disheartened when our provisions for dinner are no better than stale bread. By addressing these very concrete situations, Seneca keeps hammering home the core claim of Stoic ethics: that virtue alone is sufficient for happiness, and nothing else even makes a contribution. It is important to note that preferred indifferents have value though they are not good in the terminological sense of the Stoics. Scholars

sometimes suggest that, for Seneca, preferred indifferents are worthless and to be frowned upon (for example, Braund 2009). In doing so, they pick up on the metaphors and examples that Seneca employs. Seneca writes with an acute awareness of how difficult it is not to see things like health and wealth as good, and that is, as contributing to one's happiness. Accordingly, Seneca keeps giving vivid examples, aiming to help his audience become less attached to things of mere value. However, he does not suggest that things like health or wealth should be regarded dismissively, or not taken care of.

Seneca twice argues that the wise person (sapiens) outstrips or surpasses (antecedat) God. On its face, this claim seems both starkly impossible and rankly impious, the kind of thought antithetical to Stoic wisdom. However, a case may be made that the thought is a natural outgrowth of Stoicism's value theory and is part of the broader Stoic aspirational ethical program.

At two points in his works, Seneca states explicitly that in achieving Stoic virtue and attaining wisdom, a person may surpass God. In De providentia, after articulating the benefits of endurance in the face of life's many challenges, Seneca pauses to note the direction that perfecting one's soul takes. Alternately, in Letter

53 to Lucilius, Seneca notes that in achieving virtue and invulnerability, the sapiens has outstripped God.

Recall the concerns one may have with Seneca's claim that the wise person may outstrip God: that it is metaphysically impossible for human beings to stand before the gods, and it is deeply impious for human beings to think so or try to do so. In the spirit of the Stoic paradoxical tradition, my strategy has been to show that Seneca's outstripping thesis falls to neither objection when seen in light of the reasoning that yields it. That reasoning can be captured with the following core argument:

1. The imitation thesis: It is proper for human beings to try to make themselves alike to the divine in achieving virtue and perfecting their Rationality.
2. The equality thesis: In achieving virtue and perfecting their rationality, human beings draw equal with the gods.
3. The different natures thesis: The gods have their rationality and virtue by way of their nature whereas human beings have rationality and virtue by way of overcoming their weaknesses.

4. The greater credit principle: If two agents possess the same good, but one must overcome more than the other in achieving it (or the other does not overcome anything in possessing it), then the one that must overcome more deserves more credit for the achievement.
5. Therefore, human beings, in achieving virtue, deserve more credit for their virtue than the gods.

Given the conclusion here, we have the outstripping thesis that human beings, in achieving their virtue and perfecting their rationality, have the advantage over the Gods. Is such a thought metaphysically impossible? It does not seem so because the different natures thesis is one that shows that the human difference from the divine will always be absolute, necessary. But the comparative credit commitment is based precisely on the thought that contingency of achievement is itself consistent with but also a consequence of the Anselmian thought that the gods by their nature must be perfect. Thus, the gods are not ever absolutely outstripped. And is this thought that human beings deserve more credit for their virtue than the gods itself impious?

I think not. Human nature has its weaknesses, but we have a spark of the divine within us. It is not impious for us to kindle that spark and return it to its heights. And it is not impious to take ourselves to have outstripped God in such a return, as

our objective is not to reject the gods or hold them in contempt in such assessments, but to revel in communion with them (see Henry Barton [1909:365] for an account of what such a union would consist of). The outstripping thesis risks impiety, for sure. But when understood as the result of our proper aspiration to imitate the gods out of genuine piety, the risk dissipates. In this regard, Seneca's outstripping thesis is an extension of the tradition of Stoic paradoxes. In the same way that one is forced to reconceive 'freedom' and 'wealth' with the classic paradoxes that Only the wise are free and Only the wise have wealth (see Cicero, Paradoxa stoicorum, 33 and 42, for these paradoxes, respectively), Seneca's view that The wise surpass God demands a reconception of the relation of human and divine natures. Once seen rightly, what once appeared not only counterintuitive and hubristic now is uncontroversial and pious.