

## INTRODUCTION

against the duty of all men, whatever their station, to play their part in life well.

Despite its wide acceptance in educated circles, early Stoicism had a forbidding aspect which went far to explain its failure to influence the masses. There was something unreal or fictional about the *sapiens*, the wise man or philosopher. This ideal figure seemed, from the way the Stoic lecturers talked, to have somehow become perfect in some sudden transformation long ago; gradual self-improvement was hardly discussed. The target it set seemed too high for ordinary men. It stifled and repressed ordinary human emotions in striving after *apatheia*, immunity to feeling; Cato, the great Stoic saint, is reported to have expressed regret at having kissed his wife in a moment of danger. It held that in certain circumstances a man's self-respect might invite, as an act of supreme nobility, his suicide. In pursuing the ideal of *autarkeia*, self-sufficiency, it seemed to make the perfect man a person detached and aloof from his fellows, superior to the world he lived in. Altogether the impression it conveyed, for all its idealism and sincerity, could be cold, dogmatic and unrealistic. Seneca's contribution to ancient philosophy lay in the humanization of this creed, continuing a process begun long before in Rhodes and Rome by Panaetius and Posidonius.

Although Seneca wrote for a relatively narrow circle of educated persons (usually addressing his compositions to a particular friend or relative as if he were that person's special spiritual adviser) his letters and essays show a Stoicism more closely reconciled with the facts and frailty of human nature. The ideal of *apatheia* is much modified. Self-sufficient though he is, the *sapiens* can now have friends and can grieve, within limits, at the loss of one. It has become his duty to be kind and forgiving towards others, indeed to 'live for the other person'.<sup>33</sup> In his way of living he should avoid being ostentatiously different from those he tries to win from moral