The Last Judgment: Seneca, Old Age, and Death

In his article, “Moral Judgement in Seneca,” Brad Inwood deftly characterizes Seneca’s elaborate use of of the metaphor of legal decision-making with respect to ethics. Most important for this paper is Inwood’s distinction between Seneca’s “easy-going judge” (*facilior iudex*), who practices “epistemic humility and pragmatism…where certainty is not attainable” (Inwood 2005, 217), and the more austere *rigidus iudex*, “unbending judge,” whose assessment in moral matters is inflexible to (in some instances) the point of obduracy. An interesting passage Inwood foregoes in his discussion but would, I believe, further buttress his argument is *Ep*. 26.5-6.

In letter 26, Seneca pessimistically raises the possibility that he may be beyond old age and already among the *decrepitos* (*Ep.* 26.1). His mind, he allows, is nevertheless still strong (26.2). This permits him to keep constant vigil over himself. He does so, he says, by continually asking himself what sort of progress he has made in philosophy. This demands a certain kind of judgment. But who is to judge? Seneca first insists that it is death who will determine what progress he has made (*quid profecerim morti crediturus sum*, 26.5). In the next sentence, however, he claims that it is he himself who will pass judgment on himself in these matters (*de me iudicaturus sum*). Two sentences later, he appears to back up and argue once again that it is death that will utter the final decision (*mors de te pronuntiatura est*, 26.6).

One might argue that, at the liminal point of late old age and death, Seneca’s first person “I” and *mors* have been conflated and merely represent Seneca’s personal judgment at the time immediately preceding death. My paper will argue, rather, that Seneca is here extending the judicial metaphor he has used elsewhere to demonstrate philosophical ambivalence with regards to the judgment of his own life and his “progress”: the “I” of *Ep*. 26.5-6is akin to the *facilior iudex*, whereas *mors* is the more inexorable voice of the *rigidus iudex*.

Works Cited

Inwood, Brad. “Moral Judgement in Seneca.” In *Reading Seneca: Stoic Philosophy at Rome*, 201-23. Clarendon Press: Oxford, 2005. Originally published in *Stoicism: Traditions and Transformations*, edited by Steven K. Strange and Jack Zupko, 76-94.Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.