

Seneca on Stoic Walking
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The role of practical ethics in Stoic instruction has been problematic since antiquity; how does a philosophical system so committed to reducing everything to the health of the mind account for the importance of bodily demeanor and deportment? Does it matter, for instance, how a Stoic walks? The question is latent in many of Seneca’s works. On the one hand, he uses walking as a primary example of behavior that is “indifferent” with respect to virtue (*Ep.* 66.36), and he is dismissive of those who would only teach manners (including how to walk), since they focus on the body instead of the mind (*Ep.* 94.8). On the other hand, Seneca is clearly aware of the traditional emphasis in Roman culture on the role of a proper gait in the larger nexus of class and gender identity, so well explored by scholars such as Gleason (1995: *Making Men*), Corbeill (2004: *Nature Embodied*), and Fowler (2007: “Laocoon’s Point of View”). Walking, then, is a particularly useful lens through which to explore what Sherman (2005: “The Look and Feel of Virtue”) has called the Stoic “aesthetic of character.”

We can see these two traditions in conflict in Seneca’s *De tranquillitate animi*, the focus of this paper. Throughout the dialogue Seneca uses the recurring motif of walking to instruct his friend Serenus on the tranquility of both body and mind. Serenus’ body testifies to his failure to keep his mind on an even keel and to stay on the progressor’s path to virtue; inability to control the movement of the mind results in perpetual motion of the body. Seneca uses as a powerful example of those lacking tranquility the leisure-rich elites who cannot be satisfied with one place, but always seek some new adventure, traveling around Italy but unable to escape themselves. How much better to stay involved in public life even in the face of hostility; the aspiring sage can still teach others of the glories of the Stoic life by his example, even if he is not a leading politician. During the reign of the Thirty Tyrants, for example, “Socrates was still in the thick of things; he went around as a great example for those who were willing to emulate him when he walked freely in the midst of the thirty overlords” (5.2). Indeed, “the work of a good citizen is never useless: he benefits others just by being heard and seen, by his face, his nod, his quiet resistance, and by his very manner of walking” (4.6). Even if you cannot speak freely, your walk will be of service to the state. Serenus’ rushing around was not the cause of his problems, but a sure symptom, and by correcting his mind he will correct his body and provide an example to his fellow citizens, who “wander around without purpose looking for something to keep them busy” (12.3).

Yet, as this paper argues, Seneca is *not* suggesting that these citizens could straighten themselves out if they only changed their manner of walking; as the last word (and the title) of the dialogue emphasizes, their minds are slipping, not their bodies: none of Seneca’s advice matters, he tells Serenus, “unless intense and constant vigilance surrounds his erring mind” (17.12). Yet it is *only* from external signs that we can assess the health of the mind; thus a work on the tranquility of the mind refers throughout to the herky-jerky motion of the body. When you or I walk, there may be better or worse ways to do so, but it is an indifferent act with respect to virtue; the movements themselves are not virtuous. But the sage walks prudently, and even his walk testifies to his virtue. In fact, he can *only* walk moderately, “for nothing that rushes headlong is well-ordered” (*Ep.* 40.2). For us mere mortals, even walking like the *sapiens* will help us advance on the road to virtue.