

## *Apatheia* and *Metriopatheia* in Seneca's *Epistulae Morales*

The tradition of Greco-Roman moral philosophy includes two influential positions on the ideal relationship to the passions: *metriopatheia*, the moderation of the passions, and *apatheia*, the elimination of the passions. In Seneca's *Epistulae Morales*, passages can be found that support each view. Some scholars argue that this shows an inconsistency in Seneca's thinking (Fournier 2009: 211), or that his views diverge from "orthodox" Stoicism (Machek 2015: 524). Others argue that this tension simply reflects generic conventions (Konstan 2015: 182). In this paper, I will discuss the relevant passages and argue that there is no logical inconsistency between them. In light of Seneca's distinctions between the *proficiens* (progressor) and the *sapiens* (sage) on the one hand, and between impulses and passions on the other hand, the letters reflect a unified, coherent outlook on the proper relationship to the passions.

While warnings about the passions abound in the *Epistulae Morales*, two letters offer direct endorsements of *apatheia*: 85 and 116. In *Ep.* 85, Seneca argues that *metriopatheia* has the implication that the *sapiens* is only somewhat superior to those who are most affected by the passions; virtue differs from vice only by a matter of degree (85.4). Seneca then compares the passions to illnesses: one would never treat an illness by moderating it; rather, we heal people by eradicating the illness entirely. Similarly, the passions are an illness and should be eliminated, not embraced in a milder form. Likewise, Seneca argues that the tendency of the passions to intensify is a reason to reject them from the outset (116.4). Given that even a single passion can disrupt one's attempt at virtuous living, a multitude of passions would surely overwhelm the sage. Seneca therefore provides a strong endorsement of *apatheia* in *Ep.* 85 and 116. Despite the clarity of Seneca's defenses of *apatheia* in *Ep.* 85 and 116, other letters seem to support *metriopatheia*. The clearest of these is *Ep.* 63, in which Seneca consoles Lucilius after the death of a friend. According to Seneca, Lucilius should grieve for his friend, but he should also avoid excessive grief (63.1). This advice—that one should feel grief but restrain its excess—fits much

better with *metriopatheia* than *apatheia*. In addition to *Ep.* 63, there are other passages scattered throughout the *Epistulae Morales* that seem to support *metriopatheia*. For example, Seneca describes Socrates as “neither too cheerful nor too sad” (104.28), which depicts a sage with moderate passions. Moreover, there are several instances in which Seneca critiques “excessive” passions (e.g., 29.7, 59.4, 87.16, 89.15, 94.43, and 124.3), which seems to presuppose that *metriopatheia* is ideal.

To explain this tension, some scholars argue that Seneca simply contradicts himself on the question. Others suggest that it can be explained by the generic conventions of consolation. Both explanations assume that the advice in the passages above is logically inconsistent. However, there are two aspects of Seneca’s thinking that allow the apparent contradiction to be resolved. First, while reflection on the figure of the sage (σοφός or *sapiens*) is commonplace in Stoic ethics, a distinctive feature of Seneca’s ethical writings is his concept of the progressor (*proficiens*). Unlike the sage, the progressor is still working towards the idealized state of complete virtue. This distinction is assumed in 63.1, where Seneca argues that only the one who has been elevated above Fortune—namely, the sage—feels no grief after the death of a loved one. Seneca allows for the progressor to experience initial grief, but he upholds complete *apatheia* as the standard for the sage. Likewise, Seneca’s distinction between passions (*adfectus*), which require assent, and impulses (*impetus*), which are involuntary, helps resolve the apparent conflict. While impulses are automatic responses to stimuli, passions involve an act of judgment in which one endorses and prolongs the feeling brought about by an impulse. In the case of grief, an initial feeling of sadness is an involuntary impulse that only becomes a passion when one assents to it. This means that Seneca does not suggest that one should moderate a passion in 63.1; rather, he grants the legitimacy of an impulse and exhorts Lucilius to not let it become a passion. In light of Seneca’s concepts of the *proficiens* and *impetus*, there is no underlying logical inconsistency in his advice on the passions in the *Epistulae Morales*.

## Works Cited

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