

## Both True and False: Senecan Paradox

Few scholars fail to note the prevalence of paradox in Seneca's writing. But only a few have seriously considered it. Those who have typically focus on paradox as a rhetorical or pedagogical tool (e.g. Moretti (1995), Inwood (1995), Williams (2006)). And within such a focus, many scholars consider only such claims' ability to unsettle readers and change their perspective (e.g. Graver (1996), Mader (1982), Stewart (1997)). This paper will turn to the nature of Stoic paradox itself and what it reveals about our minds. I will argue that paradox in Seneca's text reveals mankind's ignorance in the form of a contradictory worldview. For Seneca, resolving paradoxes forces us to integrate our fractured worldviews.

Seneca most clearly illustrates this in the *De Beneficiis* 2.34-35. There he argues that while the famous Stoic paradoxes – that only the sage is free, sane, and so on – may at first contradict our beliefs, if we recognize that we use the same word for many distinct ideas, we will recognize their truth (34.2.1-3). Thus, just as we use the word “foot” (*pes*) to refer to both a human foot, the foot of a chair, and a poetic foot (2.5-6), so too does a Stoic use two different senses of “benefit” (*beneficium*) when he acknowledges that the unwise can do favors but only the sage can truly provide a benefit (5.1-5). We fail to recognize the difference because we confuse two different concepts of *beneficium*. But Seneca also makes a more radical claim: if we pay attention, we will recognize that Stoic paradoxes in fact do not conflict with our worldview (35.1.1-2). Stoic paradoxes only seem at first to be inconsistent with our customary way of thinking (*consuetudo*), but ultimately and in a different way reveal themselves as consistent (2.1-2). That is, we have the necessary beliefs to justify acceptance of the Stoic paradoxes, but we at first reject

them because we have other, contrary beliefs, based on readily confusable concepts. Here, Seneca is like Socrates in the *Gorgias*, who tells Polus that, despite his objection, he actually agrees that it is worse to do injustice than suffer it (474b.2-5).

What justifies Seneca's claim? According to Stoicism, nature has endowed humans with the "seeds" of knowledge and virtue (cf. *Ep.* 117.6 and 120.4) in the form of a disposition to form accurate but unrefined conceptions (*προλήψεις* or *praesumptiones*) about various entities and qualities, like trees and goodness. So while we recklessly form many false beliefs about the objects of these conceptions, in part because of the ambiguity of our language (cf. *Ep.* 90.29), there are always true beliefs mixed in, due to the accuracy of the original conception. Thus Stoic paradoxes cohere with aspects of our worldview even as it flies in the face of others. Paradox is the result of the incoherency of our worldviews, a feature essential to Seneca's concept of ignorance (cf. *Ep.* 20, 120, *Tranq.* 12).

In light of this, full paradox resolution comes not only through recognizing the polysemy of certain words, but, more importantly, clarifying our understanding of the things (*res*) – the conceptions and their objects – behind our words (*verba*). We must not simply understand that *amicus* has different meanings, but also how such "friends" differ in essence and identification (*Ep.* 48, cf. 45). As Seneca writes: "Things deceive us: disambiguate [*discerne*] those. We embrace evil instead of good. We pray for the opposite of what we have prayed for. Our wishes conflict with [other] wishes, plans with [other] plans" (*Ep.* 45.6.2-5). Senecan paradox reveals our own paradoxicality in the form of our contradictory worldviews and the conflicting lives and realities they engender, and paradoxes only fully resolve upon our worldview's true integration.

## Bibliography

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