

Senecan Materialism(s): Stoic Physics or the Agency of Matter  
in the Writings of Seneca the Younger

Popular and scholarly interest in the Stoic tradition has perhaps never been greater. Through the work of Pierre Hadot and more recently through the various efforts of Christopher Gill (2015), Donald Robertson (2010), and Massimo Pigliucci (2015), among others, Stoic ethical thought has undergone a popular revival. Stoic physical theory, however, has been less consistently integrated within the perspective developed by those considering Stoicism as a model way of life. Similarly, Stoicism has largely been neglected among those working in the “New Materialism” (Deleuze, 1986; Bennett, 2009; Connolly, 2013) even though it is arguably the most influential of ancient materialist philosophical systems. To open an exchange between the contemporary paradigms of the “New Stoicism” (Becker, 1998) and the “New Materialism” (Coole and Frost, 2010), through an engagement with the materialism of Stoicism’s physics, this panel organizes several papers exploring the subtle physics of Seneca the Younger’s prose and dramatic works.

Among the questions this panel will address are: is material interaction a rational process for Seneca? How do agency and passivity define material objects against one another, and how do the four immaterials (time, place, void, and sayable) inform the analysis of material events in Senecan texts? In what ways do Seneca’s texts involve a broader scheme of sympathetic physics, and what are the limits of analyzing Senecan works as representative of a materialist *sympatheia*? To what extent does one find coherence in Senecan materialism(s) across the disparate array of texts and genres in which he wrote? By focusing the conversation on how philosophical theory goes into practice in Seneca’s texts, specific analyses may introduce larger questions about the limitations of a purely Stoic conception of the materialism in Seneca’s texts.

Some papers turn to the paradigms of affect theory and new materialism in order to resolve the apparent contradictions in Seneca's uses of Stoic physics, while others discover consistency between Seneca's philosophy and his literary enterprises.

Paper one, "The Effects of Place in Senecan Tragedy," considers the agency of specific places in Seneca's *Oedipus* and *Hercules Furens*. This presenter argues that, contrary to the immaterial (and therefore neither passive nor active) status of place in Stoic physics, in both tragedies their respective places actively contribute to the inevitability of the tragic outcome.

Paper two, "Writing to Realization: Seneca's 30<sup>th</sup> *Epistle*," attends to Seneca's shifting position on the rhetorical authority conferred by proximity to death. Seneca manipulates the rhetoric of the speeches in order to confuse their chronology with respect to the temporality of his own commentary in the letter. The disordered chronology reflects a Stoic metaphysical conception of present time's eternity, according to which Seneca can situate himself equally near to death and assume the authority he assigns to Bassus.

Paper three, "Visualization, Emotions, and Understanding in Senecan *Exempla*," establishes a typology of Seneca's *exempla* in the letters to Lucilius to clarify how sensations inform perceptions, emotions, and ethical judgments. By defining these *exempla* according to their positive or negative value as well as their degree of embedded visualization, the presenter clarifies how Stoic pedagogy's use of emotions coheres with their ideal of sagacious *apatheia*.

Paper four, "The Materiality of the Voice in Stoic Thought and Seneca's Personae of Claudius," examines Seneca's use of prosopopoeia. Arguing from a Stoic theory of voice, this presenter shows that Seneca deployed different literary styles for Claudius' speeches to project an image of his divinity in the *Ad Polybium* and his bestial nature in the *Apocolocyntosis*. The

adaptation of this persona to consolatory and satirical contexts demonstrates how the aesthetic and affective registers of different literary genres inform Seneca's use of Stoic physics.

Each fifteen-minute presentation will be followed by five minutes of questions, coming to eighty minutes. The panel presider, a specialist in Senecan drama, will provide five minutes of opening and concluding remarks respectively, situating the panel against the background of the New Stoicism. The duration of the panel should be no more than ninety-five minutes.

### Bibliography

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Coole, Diana and Frost, Samantha, eds. 2010. *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. Durham.

Deleuze, Gilles. 1986. *Spinoza et le problème de l'expression*. Paris.

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<https://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/stoicismtoday/2015/11/21/what-is-stoic-virtue-by-chris-gill/#comments>.

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Robertson, Donald. 2010. *The Philosophy of Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT): Stoic Philosophy as Rational and Cognitive Psychotherapy*. London.

Pigliucci, Massimo. "How to Be a Stoic." *The New York Times, Opinion Pages, Opinionator, The Stone*, February 2015, [http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/02/02/how-to-be-a-stoic/?\\_r=0](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/02/02/how-to-be-a-stoic/?_r=0).