

The Suffering of Seneca: Philosophy as a Cure for Pain in the *Epistulae*

Stoicism is a philosophy of restraint and control in a world where little is under our control, particularly in times of political turmoil and tyrannical leadership. The Stoic practitioner seeks to acquire the ability to overcome his daily struggles with impotence by bringing into submission those things he can control — his reactions, emotions, and thoughts — in contrast to things out of our control — war, political turmoil, and, to be addressed specifically herein, physical pain and suffering. By examining Seneca’s discussions of his personal pain and his depictions of pain in his *Epistulae*, this presentation will argue that his experiences of chronic pain in his young life drew him to the philosophy of Stoicism, and colored his discussions of pain in his correspondence with Lucilius.

Stoic beliefs about the body and the mind changed through time, though in general, Stoics share the central idea that “all *psyche* is *soma*, but not all *soma* is *psyche*”—that is, the soul exists in and because of the body, and does not exist apart from it, but the body does have domains that are not included in the concept of the soul (von Staden 2002: 79). Stoics do believe in interaction between the two, though the specific nature of the interaction varies. Included in this realm is the physical body’s influence on the mind (von Staden 2002). Seneca mentions his personal struggles with physical suffering in several of his letters to Lucilius, and in these letters (this study focuses on *Epistulae* 7, 14, 54, 67, 77, 78, and 104) he discusses how Stoic philosophy can enable one to endure physical pain virtuously, and by the very experience of chronic illness, one can become a better Stoic. Seneca frequently uses pain, whether through sickness or physical suffering inflicted by war or torture, as an analogy for mental weakness. (Edwards 1999: 257) My discussion will delve further into Seneca’s depictions of his chronic pain (*morbos contumaciter*, Letter 78) and seek to resolve the question whether Seneca turned to

Stoicism because of his chronic pain, and how this may have influenced his philosophy more broadly. The analogy is often made between the philosopher and the physician, one who aims to cure moral ills, while the other aims to cure the physical. Was Seneca pursuing philosophy as a cure for his physical pain, and attempting to heal himself? For instance, he turns to vegetarianism in a Stoic effort to curb luxury and delicacy in appetite: perhaps he was also trying to treat his chronic pain through philosophy. This study will address these issues by first going through instances where Seneca uses medicine as a metaphor for philosophy, then how he incorporates Stoic meditation as a treatment for ills of the mind and the body. Finally, I will examine how Seneca's focus on suicide as a legitimate means of ending a painful existence could, along with the evidence previously discussed, point to his personal struggle with chronic pain.

Bibliography

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