Counting out Time: Senecan Stoicism and Human Temporality

At the very beginning of his *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*, Seneca enjoins Lucilius by joining together both a moral commandment that his interlocutor to free and control himself as well as the beginnings of an excursus on time: "Make it thus, my Lucilius: lay claim to yourself for yourself, and gather up and protect that time which was as yet either carried away or stolen or fell away" (*Ep.* 1.1). At first glance the connection may only appear tenuous, a rhetorical ploy to encourage Lucilius (and us) to pay attention to what Seneca has to say about time. However, throughout the *Epistulae*, as well as in his *De Brevitate Vitae*, Seneca shows a much more profound connection between the (meta)physics of time and Stoic ethical life, and this paper seeks to argue that Seneca employs theory about the nature of time in service of an urgent moral mission present in both the form and content of his *Epistulae*.

To highlight this connection, I first synthesize the views of Seneca's Greek predecessors, as preserved by Stobaeus, to provide a contrast to Seneca's project. Borrowing from the work of Owen (1978) and Schofield (2000), I argue that Seneca breaks from his Greek forebears by focusing uniquely on the "retrenchability" of the present; for Seneca, the present is not merely a point on a number line, but a space that can be increased and decreased depending on the human subject in question. I turn next to Seneca's works themselves, following the suggestion of Inwood (2005) and Dressler (2016) that Seneca's Stoicism differs from his predecessors' in his appeal to and use of first person, phenomenological evidence and focalization to expound his theory. In particular, it is Seneca's connection of time in general with death, such as in *Ep.*1, 8, and 120, which opens the way towards a humanization of the earlier Stoics' metaphysical discussion. Seneca's employment of the trope of *cotidie mori* (Ker 2012) and the self's unique

possession of time above all else mirrors similar concern in the explicit phenomenology of Jean-Paul Sartre (1966), and through comparison with Sartre's understanding of the relationship of the self, death, freedom, and objecthood, I aim to show how Seneca's first-person emphasis reveals a strongly existential theory of temporally as well as his pressing moral concerns about "laying claim to oneself for oneself" in and through time. Thus, I suggest that Seneca's discussion of time is first and foremost ethical, and his ethics shapes how he transfers the Stoic physical theory of time into the sphere of human existence by combining this with a phenomenological concern with death and the past.

Further, as Michel Foucault (1983) notes, the very structure of Seneca's discourse, as a *cotidiana meditatio*, allows the reader to perform an exercise of *askesis* by expanding their present and employing their reason, "a gradual progression from theory to practice, form rehearsal to performance" (Ker 2012). This moral process averts the practitioners from becoming *occupati*, who lose themselves to worldly life because of their failure to expand their present and examine their past, and the sagely, who can increase their present to include all time (Viparelli-Santangelo 2000; Roller 2001). In his preoccupation with temporality, Seneca builds off of his Greek Stoic predecessors with a unique phenomenological take on temporality, and thus his *Epistulae Morales* change the metaphysical possibility of expanding the present into a moral imperative of self-care and self-presentation.

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