

One Must Tend One's Garden: Care, Plants, and Humans in Seneca's *Moral Letters*

In this paper, I seek to highlight the importance of “care” (*cura*) for Seneca's Stoic moral pedagogy in the *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium* (*EM*) as a concept which draws on agricultural imagery to fashion a unique conception of the human being emphasizing vegetal qualities. Seneca invokes the *scala natura* in the final extant letter of the *EM*, *Ep.* 124, to distinguish human beings from god, speechless animals, and plants:

Quattuor hae naturae sunt, arboris, animalis, hominis, dei; haec duo, quae rationalia sunt, eandem naturam habent, illo diversa sunt, quod alterum immortale, alterum mortale est. Ex his ergo unius bonum natura perficit, dei scilicet, alterius cura, hominis. (*Ep.* 124.14)

As discussed by Wildberger (2008), the juxtaposition of humans and the divine is common in Stoic thought, but Seneca innovates through the introduction of care into this discussion. Seneca says that humans and god “have the same nature,” and so accordingly, Seneca sets up a proportionality in this passage: what immortal god achieves through Nature is the same as what mortal humans achieve through care. The connection between care and the Good is foreshadowed at the beginning of this same letter, as Seneca opens with an epigraph excerpted from Virgil's *Georgics*:

Possum multa tibi veterum praecepta referre,
Ni refugis tenuisque piget cognoscere curas. (I.176–7)

This quotation emphasizes the importance of care as it appears later in the letter while also foregrounding the *scala natura*, but here it highlights the relation of humans to plants rather than to god.

The analogy of plant life to humanity is key for Seneca's conception of the Good and achieving it, and in this paper I demonstrate how care functions for Seneca by combining elements of the divine and the plantlike. The importance of care as such has been downplayed in favor of discussing particular practices in relation to the self, owing largely to Foucault's (1986) discussion of the care of the self. Subsequent critiques of his position exemplified by Gill (2006) and Bartsch (2006) do much to clarify what "the self" is for Seneca, but I refocus on care as a faculty, given the critical importance Seneca assigns it in *Ep.* 124, particularly given the schemata of the work provided by Setaioli (2000) and Schafer (2009). Further, as Henderson (2004) explains, Seneca's self-conscious Latinity is a marked difference from the Stoic texts in Greek which survive, and his continuous appeal to the *Georgics*, catalogued by Mazzoli (1970), shapes his philosophical project in terms of agriculture.

In this paper, I discuss the metaphors of plants in *Epp.* 121 & 124, building off Armisen-Marchetti (1989). In light of Vergil's *Georgics*, I show how Senecan care builds plantlike qualities into human development. I demonstrate how the morbidity of Seneca's philosophy, noted by Griffin (1976) and Perelli (1994), is rooted in this conception of human development. Seneca's plant metaphors figure a conception of human moral development based on self-actualization over time, from the seed to thresher. Seneca builds off a specific Latin literary and didactic tradition, advocating for the philosophical student to care for their own garden and thus harvest their own lives at the proper time in order to approximate through care the activity that Nature accomplishes for god.

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