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# Seneca: The Life of a Stoic

Veyne, Paul, 1930-, *Seneca : the life of a stoic*. New York and London: Routledge, 2003. 1 online resource. ISBN 9781135221041 \$45.00.

## Review by

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This book is the first 184 pp. of Paul Veyne's *Sénèque: Entretiens Lettres à Lucilius*<sup>1</sup> in translation by David Sullivan. Despite this English title, only one fourth of the book concerns Seneca's life; the bulk is devoted to a presentation of Seneca's Stoic philosophy. Indeed, one of Veyne's goals is to show that Seneca must be taken seriously as a philosopher (not simply a belletrist), and that despite occasional deviations from orthodoxy, his Stoicism is the authentic Stoicism of the Greeks.

Veyne's book is a valuable contribution to the trend of growing interest in Seneca<sup>2</sup> largely because of his skill at evoking the mood of certain aspects of the Stoic worldview and of Seneca's historical-political world. The reader comes away from the text with a persuasive set of general impressions. These are available to the non-scholar and the scholar alike; although the book contains notes with scholarly references, it is not primarily devoted to close textual analysis or to argumentation generated by secondary literature in philosophy. While this may at times frustrate the student of ancient philosophy, it has a certain appropriateness given that, as Veyne emphasizes, for the Stoics philosophy did not mean conventional scholarship or a career path, but rather a profession in the original sense of the word (a committed lifestyle exclusive of others).

Veyne's exceptional gift for painting an imaginative picture is perhaps most evident in his description of the Stoic account of providence (122-155 passim). The eloquence is striking even in translation, and his talent particularly effective: we actually see the wise, the divine plan, ineluctably gripping the individual, who is dragged along in conformity with the grand, objectively beautiful design. The smallness of a man or a woman, and the fittingness of submission to the whole, is brought out in all its ruthless reality.

In this case, as often in the book, Veyne's gloss on Senecan Stoicism introduces Freudian, or more generally modern, psychological categories: Stoic magnanimity is masochism and Seneca's assimilation of the Stoic theory of providence was at least partly the result of a strong aesthetic sense of the sublime (125-6). Elsewhere Veyne suspects that Seneca's argument that the sage has constant joy as a result of right reason is caused by "a hidden impulse: egoism, self-censure, sublimation" (87), and interprets Stoicism's attitude to the sage as follows: "The sage is only the object of an expectation . . . that in the end does not want to be fulfilled, for fear that, if it were, the ideal image would become trivialized and too real" (119).

Similarly, Kantian distinctions find their way into Veyne's interpretations. Thus the distinction between the sage and the rest of humanity is described as a distinction between pure rationality and empiricism (69). Elsewhere it is said that our passions are "not us" (47), which reminds the reader more of Kant's distinction between improper and proper self in the *Grounding* than it does of the Stoics, who contended instead that passions *are* our responsibility and part of our identity because they are caused by assent.<sup>3</sup>

The modern glosses can be instructive as comparisons between Stoicism and certain modern attitudes; and they are not misleading insofar as Veyne makes clear at the outset that he proffers not only a historical presentation but also a "contemporary application" inspired by Foucault's reinterpretation of Stoicism (ix-x). Thus forewarned, a reader who is concerned mainly with the views of the historical Seneca only need adopt a method of distinguishing Veyne's summaries of Seneca from the applications being offered.

In practice, however, it is sometimes difficult to apply such a method. That is because the book often lacks citations for the Senecan texts quoted or summarized. The situation sometimes becomes humorous. On page 82 we are told that "a few pages later" Seneca makes a claim; but we have not been told a few pages later from where. This impressionistic style is potentially an obstacle when (as is most often the case) Veyne describes or reports Seneca's views, rather than quoting him. Thus when interpolations are not flagged by the use of modern technical terms or by notes referencing modern authors, only a reader who is already familiar with Seneca will be able to distinguish genuine paraphrases from what some might classify as anachronistic projections (e.g. 108, 112).

The book could also be clearer and more conversant with secondary discussions of certain philosophical topics. Veyne's treatment of the προπάθειαι, the so-called "preliminary passions," is one such topic. These preconsensual, reflex-like affective responses described by e.g. Cicero, Seneca, and Epictetus have been the object of much recent analysis.<sup>4</sup> Granted that these discussions were not available to Veyne for his 1993 book of which this is a translation, his account could have benefited from earlier treatments,<sup>5</sup> and more generally from the critical approach to Seneca's texts that other authors writing on this topic have employed. As it stands, the account is confusing. At times preliminary passion is described as a purely physiological occurrence perhaps dependent upon particular physical constitution (52, 102, 106); elsewhere it "may be" an implicit judgment (53); elsewhere again it is unaccompanied by any judgment, but does include a representation of some sort in the imagination (102); later on Veyne says that "the pre-emotion ... was a single act, both premeditated and voluntary" (105). The reader is left wondering what the difference between pre-emotion and emotion is, on Veyne's view. The enigmatic assertion that, "if these pre-emotions did not exist, we would not be able to distinguish between desire and fear, only experiencing a vague sense of unease" (108, cf. 104) contributes to the uncertainty.

Other central themes in Stoic philosophy that could be more clearly presented include happiness and Nature. Happiness is alternately an attribution made by the sage's compatriots in the interest of society (37), and an interior state with virtue as its

sufficient condition (34). Nature is *a divine, providential power* that organized the earth (41), is *the activity* of a provident god (43), and also is itself said to have been created (42, 45).

The historical sections of the book are remarkable, thanks to Veyne's sensitivity to psychological and social factors. While sometimes less cautious about dating and less attentive to detail than was Griffin,<sup>6</sup> his account is more engrossing insofar as he gets "behind the scenes", e.g. piecing together Seneca's relations with Nero through a comparison of Seneca's texts rather than through Tacitus or other documents. Thus the fact that Seneca resorted to flattery in the *Natural Questions* but dropped it in the *Letters* indicates a significant shift in their relations, and allows us to pinpoint the commencement of an interior exile by Seneca to "around 63" (presumably Veyne is here distancing himself from those who would locate this in the year 62).<sup>7</sup>

Some words about translations. Sullivan's translation is occasionally grammatically awkward or misleading;<sup>8</sup> but this is not the norm. Veyne seems to understand Seneca's Epist. 76.28-9 to say that the sage will lose his joy if he doesn't do his duty ("under penalty of the loss of joy" (94); "sous peine d'être sans joie", *Entretiens* p. XCVI). In fact Seneca says that even when the morally upright person is already in a state of joy-deprivation (*sed ille quoque, cui hoc gaudium eripitur . . .*), he is content to do his duty anyway without hesitation (*nihil cunctatus . . . facere recte pieque contentus*).

Finally, the frequency of typos in the text is notable (e.g. 4, 7, 115, 120, 126, 136, 159, 168). These are especially distracting when they occur in the midst of philosophically substantive points.

In sum, this book is stimulating and informative reading. Though its impressionistic style may sometimes hinder precision, Veyne's elegance as a writer and his capacity to create the ambience of Seneca's world are generally well-preserved in Sullivan's translation, making it a valuable resource for English readers.

## Notes

**1.** Paris: Editions Robert Laffont, S.A., 1993. In addition to the material found in *Seneca: Life of a Stoic*, this book contains translations of the moral treatises and letters, revised and introduced by Veyne.

**2.** Perhaps Veyne has in mind not passions (*πάθη*) but pre-passions (*προπάθειαι*), though that is not clearly indicated. For more on *προπάθειαι*, see below.

**3.** See recently the **program** of the U. of Chicago conference, April 2003, as well as e.g. E. Asmis, "Seneca's 'On the Happy Life' and Stoic Individualism" (*Apeiron* 23(4): 1990, 219-255); P. Mitsis, "Seneca on Reason, Rules and Moral Development" in *Passions and Perceptions*, ed. M. Nussbaum and J. Brunschwig (Cambridge, 1993); B. Inwood, "Politics and Paradox in Seneca's 'De Beneficiis'" in *Justice and Generosity*, ed. A. Laks (Cambridge, 1995); C. Edwards, "Self-Scrutiny and Self-Transformation in Seneca's Letters" (*Greece and Rome* XLIV/1: 1997, 23-38); D. Baraz, "Seneca, Ethics and the Body: The Treatment of Cruelty in Medieval Thought" (*Journal of the History of Ideas* 59(2): 1998, 195-215); B. Inwood, "God and Human Knowledge in Seneca's Natural Questions" (*Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, 14: 1998, 23-43 and response by M. Graver, 44-54); B. Inwood, "The Will in Seneca the Younger" (*Classical*

Philology 95(1): 2000, 44-60); A.M. Ioppolo, “Decreta e Praecepta in Seneca” in *La Filosofia in eta Imperiale* (Naples: Bibliopolis, 2000). See next note for additional recent work. For earlier titles, see esp. Chaumartin, “Quarante ans de recherche sur les oeuvres philosophiques de Sénèque (Bibliographie 1945-1985)” (ANRW II 36.3, 1545-1605). The starting-point for Senecan biography is M. Griffin’s *Seneca: A Philosopher in Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976), building on W. Trillitzsch’s 1971 work.

4. See e.g. B. Inwood, “Seneca and Psychological Dualism” in *Passions and Perceptions*, ed. M. Nussbaum and J. Brunschwig (Cambridge, 1993), 150-183; M. Graver, “Philo of Alexandria and the Origins of the Stoic προπάθειαι” (Phronesis XLIV/4: 1999), 300-325; R. Sorabji, *Emotions and Peace of Mind* (Oxford, 2000); J. Stevens, “Preliminary Impulse in Stoic Psychology” (Ancient Phil. 20: 2000), 139-168; and S. Byers, “Augustine and the Cognitive Cause of Stoic ‘Preliminary Passions’ ( προπάθειαι)” (Journal of the History of Phil.: forthcoming, 2003).

5. E.g. B. Inwood, *Ethics and Human Actions in Early Stoicism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), with references to earlier works.

6. Compare e.g. Veyne 25 to Griffin (op. cit.) 396 and 399-400 (citing Abel (1961) and Hammond (1938)) as well as 93ff. Note that Veyne’s contention here that Seneca first resorted to flattery in the *Natural Questions* overlooks the earlier *Apocolocyntosis*; see Griffin 19 n. 2 and 396.

7. Veyne 25, apparently differing from Griffin (op. cit.) e.g. 396 and 93ff. (with discussion of Tacitus); but cf. Griffin 19 n. 2, and 360.

8. See p. 19 where Sullivan’s rendering of “Lors’que le régime impérial se cherche une légitimation . . . celui-ci consiste à . . .” (*Entretiens*, p. XXVI) is unclear about the antecedent of “it”: “When the imperial regime sought legitimation . . . it amounted to a reduction of politics”, etc. On p. 46 Sullivan’s “Nature exists and is indeed good” for “il existe une Nature bonne” (*Entretiens* p. LI) is misleading. Veyne’s point seems to be that Nature, which is good, exists and has organized everything to serve mankind (“il existe une Nature bonne qui leur a ménagé cette voie”); Sullivan’s emphasis on the goodness of Nature and the rest of his sentence (“is indeed good, having prepared this path for mankind . . .”) suggests that Veyne is asserting that Nature is good (or recognized as good) because it has ordered everything.