**Intoxication, Death, and the Escape from Dialectic in Seneca’s *EM***

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In this essay, I wish to return to a topic about which there has been a quiet but sustained discussion in the quiet but sustained field of Seneca scholarship, namely, Seneca’s criticism of dialectic in the *Epistulae Morales.* I will focus in particular on the critique as it is developed in *EM* 82, 83, and 87, as this is where Seneca presents his ideas on dialectic in their fullest and most developed version.

Seneca’s criticism of dialectic has not secured for him much admiration among contemporary commentators. Cooper, for instance, argues in line with Hadot (1969), that Seneca’s treatment of dialectic reflects a “preference for rhetorical appeals to a person’s feelings over solid reasons why the conclusions really are true” (2004, p. 320), in contrast to “the original Stoics, who were firm and clear about the far greater value of sound and solid reasoning for establishing such conclusions.” In a similar vein, Malcolm Schofield argues that Seneca’s critical approach to dialectic reflected his misunderstanding of the practice and concomitant underestimation of its philosophical fertility. (1983)

Inwood (2007) takes a more apologetic approach. Following Barnes (1997), he argues that Seneca’s criticism of dialectic is aimed “at its excesses, and not as the practice as such”. Inwood stresses that Seneca is an ironic author, and so we ought not to take his criticism of the practice at face value: after all, Seneca spends a lot of time discussing dialectical technicalities, which is surprising for an author who wishes to dismiss them: “silence would have been more effective”. (2005, p. 218) Furthermore, Inwood argues that in preferring vivid exemplification to formidable argument, Seneca is committing no greater philosophical sin than preferring Posidonius to Chrysippus, or than situating himself in line with the Aristonian idea that ethics is the only truly necessary branch of philosophy.

My purpose in this essay is to argue that Seneca’s target in *EM 82* and *EM 83* is not dialectic as such, but rather refutation, and that he raises valid and philosophically interesting concerns about the practice of refutation in philosophy, concerns that have a continuing relevance to how we ought to understand the relationship between thought experiments and argumentation in philosophy.

**Seneca’s Critique of Dialectic in EM 82 and 83**

Dialectic was one of the central argumentative practices of Plato’s academy, and continued to be an important aspect of the philosophical life both in the Lyceum and in the Stoa. The term *dialectic* is sometimes also used to mean an ability in such argumentative practices, but, as we will soon see, Seneca’s target is the practice itself, rather than the ability. (Kakkuri-Knuutilla, 2005) The practice of dialectic is recorded most vividly in Plato’s dialogues. At times, especially the *Gorgias,* the *Euthydemus,* and the *Sophist,* Plato was careful to differentiate the practice from sophistic and rhetoric. Dialectic is differentiated from rhetoric in that it involves a dialogue between two people, using short speeches and question and answer. Precisely what differentiates dialectic from sophistic is harder to say: nevertheless, Aristotle defines sophistic as dealing in merely apparent refutations, whereas dialectic is the art of real refutations. (*SE*, 164a20)

Aristotle’s *Topics* is a handbook for students to succeed in dialectical encounters, and it also stresses the interpersonal nature of dialectic. (Smith, 1997, 1991, Slomkowski, 1997) Dialectic, unlike philosophy, is necessarily carried out with another person; the method developed in the *Topics* is one of asking questions and answering them. (*Topics* 1.1.100a18-20, 8.1.155b1-15) The Stoics give two different definitions of dialectic: it is “the science of correct discussion in regard to discourses conducted by question and answer, so that they also define it as the science of what is true and false and neither.” (DL 7.41--4, Long and Sedley 31A, trans. Long and Sedley) Understood as the science of what is true, false, and neither, Stoic dialectic involved the development of a sophisticated propositional logic widely seen as an important advance over Aristotle’s syllogistic. However, the Stoics were also interested in the dynamic nature of dialectical arguments: one Stoic solution to the Sorites, for instance, involves strategically refusing to answer questions. (Williamson, 1994) For an extended and fascinating discussion, see Castagnoli’s “How Dialectical was Stoic Dialectic?” (2010)

There is a lot that might be said in favour of dialectic as a philosophical practice. Short questions and answers allow the answerer’s commitments to be tracked and negotiated in an ongoing way; the answerer can, and often would, disambiguate questions. Dialectical answerers are held accountable for the consistency of their commitments; a skilled questioner might lead an answerer into refutation, a distressing state which would reveal to the answerer a gap in their understanding. Dialectic, unlike rhetoric, minimises appeal to emotions, focusing on the logical connection between proposition and proposition. Nevertheless, as Plato’s interlocutors sometimes complained, dialectic was a *social* practice: Polus argued that Gorgias was refuted by Socrates because he was ashamed to say what he truly thought, (*Gorgias*, 461b-d) and Aristotle would later write that one must consider one’s reputation in making key decisions about what propositions to defend in dialectic. (*Topics,* VIII.9.22-9) The philosophical value of this social aspect of dialectic will certainly be more controversial: one might see philosophy as a practice of negotiating norms within a community, in which case the presence of social pressures in shaping argumentation will be a strength of the practice; (Duncombe and Dutilh Novaes, 2016) one might also see it as a practice of individual freedom against social norms, in which case these will be a shortcoming. In the *EM,* Seneca makes several sustained criticisms of dialectic as a social practice. In *EM* 45, for instance, Seneca takes aim at the practice of studying fallacies, a practice he sees as largely idle and useless for obtaining philosophical knowledge. The subject of this essay is his critique of dialectic in *EM* 82 and 83, where he will argue against the use of dialectic in turning people towards virtue, and in producing moral knowledge, which for a Stoic are, after all, ultimately the same.

Seneca’s targets in *EM* 82 and *EM* 83 are, more specifically, two syllogisms by Zeno of Citium. The first, in *EM* 82, is about death, and the second, in *EM* 83, about drunkenness. About drunkenness, Zeno argued: “No one entrusts a secret to one who is drunk. But one does entrust a secret to a good man. Therefore a good man will not be drunk”.[[1]](#footnote-2) About death, Zeno argued: “Nothing bad is glorious; but death is glorious; therefore death is not bad.” Seneca records a relatively adroit philosophical back-and-forth about these syllogisms: parallels, arguments with the same structure seeking to show their invalidity were propounded: you wouldn’t trust a secret to a sleeping person either, so by this logic the wise man doesn’t sleep; what is glorious is also not indifferent, so death is not an indifferent. As we will see, Seneca thinks that both arguments are flawed, but that in neither case does the parallel identify the core problem with the argument, and that the whole discussion of these parallels was a waste of time.

Seneca is more sympathetic to the argument about death than the argument about drunkenness, so we shall deal with that one first. Seneca thinks the person who created the parallel argument simply misunderstood the Stoic doctrine of the indifferents. As Seneca understands this doctrine, indifferents are sometimes good and sometimes bad, depending on whether they are associated with virtue or vice: “all such things are not in themselves either honorable or glorious, but any of them that virtue meets and handles is made honourable and glorious by it.” (*EM* 83.12) So indifferents are things that are sometimes good, and sometimes bad. Death is not glorious in itself, but it is sometimes glorious, and that is enough to show that it is not bad: truly bad things, such as vices, never become glorious because of being handled by virtue. So the parallel argument does not follow, because it is simply not true that what is glorious is not an indifferent.

It is worth stopping a moment here, as what Seneca says in these passages about preferred indifferents is rather striking. As contemporary commentators are aware, the Stoics certainly did see the indifferents as lacking value, and, among other arguments, followed Socrates’ reasoning that both good and bad use can be made of preferred and dispreferred indifferents. (Barney, 2003) Yet the Stoics, aside from Aristo, thought that being a preferred indifferent was, at least in normal cases, a *reason for action,* (Barney, 2003), and indeed Cicero, probably following Carneades, would use the claim that indifferents were reasons for action to argue that the Stoic position was ultimately untenable: if indifferents offer reasons for action, they must have value, and if they do not, they must not. (*De Finibus*, 4.17) Yet here Seneca is not only saying that indifferents do have value (albeit extrinsic value), but that this value changes so that at times it goes against the valence of the indifferent: preferred indifferents sometimes have negative value, and dispreferred indifferents sometimes have positive value. This makes it even more difficult to see how the valence of an indifferent can act as a criterion of action, for if I, as a virtuous person, select a dispreferred indifferent, it will become good in my hands: what possible reason can I have then for rejecting it? An already difficult point for the Stoics has become sharper.

Klein (2016) offers a neat solution. According to Klein’s reading, indifferents act as reasons for action, not because they have value, but as epistemic reasons. Providence inclines us towards preferred indifferents, and away from dispreferred indifferents, because in most cases this will lead us to actions in line with the divine plan. When a course of action is unclear, selecting preferred indifferents and avoiding dispreferred indifferents will then be a good way to proceed, in terms of doing the appropriate thing. However, this is *not* because the indifferents have value, but rather just because this is more likely to accord with the divine plan. On Klein’s reading, there is plenty of space for indifferents to change in value as they become united with virtue or with vice, as there is no need to accord them any value—be it quantitatively or qualitatively different from the value of virtue—in order to explain how they can be reasons for action.

Returning to the argument above: Seneca’s appraisal is that it is sound: it has true premises and a valid inference. Yet he still thinks that Stoics should not use this argument, certainly not in convincing people not to fear death: he thinks that it is important we “not reduce these matters to the rules of dialectic and those tired old conundrums of professional logicians”, that “all that sort of thing ought to be thrown out.” (*EM 82.10*) If Seneca‘s position were simply that the argument is insufficiently persuasive, then he would, at this point, have been ceasing to do what we now recognise as philosophy, and Cooper’s criticism, that he does not seem much concerned with the truth, would be quite a valid one. When we are practicing philosophy, we seek to offer people good reasons; while we may do our best also to be persuasive, ultimately a philosophical audience has responsibilities as well. If they stubbornly refuse to change their minds even after conceding that an argument is good, then we ought not to start offering them a marketing campaign.

Seneca does repeatedly complain that the argument is not persuasive, but his diagnosis of why it is unpersuasive is essential to understanding the philosophical interest in his criticism. (*EM* 82.9, 19, 21) The key point is that the interlocutor feels “cheated”, and will be “saying [things] different from what he actually believes”. (*EM 82.19)* Cooper takes this to mean that the interlocutor feels cheated only when the conclusion is drawn, that this would be the only point at which there is a mismatch between what the interlocutor says and what they believe. However, if we consider Seneca’s preferred therapy for the fear of death, we can see that he must have thought there was a serious issue with the premise “death is glorious.”

In *EM* 24, Seneca discusses how to deal with fear. The process he describes is that of *praemeditatio*, he asks his reader to: “take up each of these things in turn, and summon to mind those who have thought little of them” (*EM* 24.3) In the letter, he provides several examples, including that of Cato’s death. Closer to hand, in *EM* 82, we find the example of Cato again, and his glorious death, compared with that of the disgraceful death of Decimus Brutus. The point of providing these examples is ultimately to understand that death is an indifferent. (Armisen-Marchetti, 2008) The practice does this by offering reminders of the truth of the claim that death’s value changes, depending on whether it is associated with virtue or vice: Seneca thinks that we should focus our efforts on this. Finally, later in *EM* 82, we find Seneca recommending the approach of Leonidas and a Roman commander who offered themselves as examples of people who treated death lightly, and so gave an image of the greatness of spirit that Seneca sees as so appealing. (*EM* 82.21-22) These cases are aimed not only at strengthening conviction that death is not bad, but also at strengthening or bolstering conviction that some deaths are glorious.

Returning, then, to the problem of Zeno’s argument. The audience might assert that “death is glorious”, they might think it, but they lack conviction. The problem of the argument, then, is not simply that it is not persuasive, but that the argument is not from common ground. It may be going too far to say that the audience does not believe this statement, but their conviction in this claim is unlikely to be very deep. However, in a dialectical encounter, one has to say either yes or no, and there would be a social cost to denying that death was glorious, or even to expressing reservations about this claim. The sense of being trapped by Zeno’s argument, then, comes from the social pressure to publicly assert that death is glorious, even if one secretly doubts it. The interlocutor is then stuck in an uncomfortable position, where they want to find a way to assert both that death is glorious and avoid asserting that death is bad, and this leads them to look for logical loopholes, as with the parallel argument. (*EM* 82.19)

There is, on the basis of the evidence I have presented so far, still considerable room to doubt my analysis of Seneca’s discomfort with Zeno’s argument. Certainly, exploiting the gap between what one truly believes, what one thinks, and what one is willing to assert are important considerations for the evaluation of the argument from a dialectical point of view, and from the evidence I’ve presented Seneca probably did think these came apart in the case of Zeno’s argument. Further, Seneca is quite clear in pointing out that the problems with this argument relate to the feeling of being trapped and the social pressure of the practice of dialectic. Nonetheless, Seneca never explicitly says that the interlocutor doubts that death is glorious, and we may have expected him to be clearer.

The case for the argument about death is considerably bolstered if we consider Seneca’s diagnosis of the argument about drunkenness. Seneca’s analysis of the argument about drunkenness is different in several details from the argument about death, but he sees the problem as having the same basic cause: the use of dialectical pressure. And in the case of the argument about drunkenness, Seneca is quite clear that the dialectical pressure being exerted is on the interlocutors to accept a premise they don’t believe.

The premise in question is “no one entrusts a secret to one who is drunk.” Seneca is unimpressed with Posidonius’ attempt to save the argument from a parallel by arguing that Zeno’s meaning was that “you wouldn’t trust a secret to a drunkard”. Seneca’s response is simply to construct a list of trustworthy drunkards: Tillius Climber, entrusted with the plot to assassinate Caesar, Lucius Piso, a trusted advisor to Augustus and Tiberius, and Cossus, another trusted advisor of Tiberius. (*EM 83.12-13)* As Seneca says “each of us could name people who cannot be trusted with wine, but can be trusted with a secret.” (*EM* 82.13) Just as in the example above, however, there is a disconnect between what is said and what is thought or truly believed. Zeno’s argument is an effective dialectical weapon because people will avoid saying that they would trust alcoholics, or even people currently drunk, for fear of being thought foolish, or even simply out of habit – after all, Seneca does describe this is a platitude. The argument’s strength, then, depends on people’s willingness to assert things they do not truly believe.

We find, then, a philosophically robust criticism of both arguments in Seneca. The criticism is not on the level of truth and logic, but on another important philosophical level, the level of rational argumentation. For Seneca, the understanding of arguing from common ground in dialectic has serious shortcomings, and encourages arguments that connect with what people are willing to say rather than with what they really believe. A failure to argue from common ground is certainly a philosophical failure. Far from misunderstanding dialectic, Seneca understood the practice all too well.

**An Alternative to Refutation in Seneca’s 87th Letter**

In this section I will offer an analysis of the syllogisms in *EM* 87. EM87 is ostensibly about wealth, but in fact wealth is used to exemplify a number of Stoic syllogisms that can be used more generally to argue that an apparent good is not actually good. Barnes (1998), Inwood (2005) and Cooper (2004) all read Seneca’s attitude to the Stoic syllogisms in *EM* 87 as similar to his attitude to Zeno’s in *EM* 82 and 83, but I will argue that this is incorrect: Seneca actually thinks the syllogisms in *EM* 87 are good arguments, and uses *EM* 87 to illustrate a different approach to common ground.

Seneca's attitude towards the syllogisms in *EM* 87 is different from that of his attitude towards those in *EM* 82 and *EM* 83, although there are several features of the letter that suggest a similar attitude. These features are that the letter closes with a set of similar criticisms: Seneca calls for clearer and more direct argumentation, the same terms he used in *EM* 82 and *EM* 83, and points to a rhetorical context (that of making a speech to the senate) to highlight argumentative shortcomings, as he did by appealing to the rhetorical context of enouraging soldiers at EM 82.21-22. However, from what we saw earlier, Seneca’s attitude towards Zeno’s syllogisms was extremely negative: such syllogisms are dialectical traps and dishonest, and should therefore never be used. Yet, as Inwood (2007) notes, Seneca portrays the sage as deploying several of the syllogisms in *EM* 87 at *De Vita Beata* 24.5. We do not find the sage deploying Zeno’s syllogisms about death or drunkenness. Further, the structure of *EM* 87 suggests a more limited reading of the criticisms with which the letter closes: the final syllogism Seneca considers clearly involves a dialectical trap similar to those of Zeno’s, this time by playing on an ambiguity.

The final syllogism in the letter is as follows: wealth is made up of many poverties, what is composed of bad things is not good, so wealth is not good. Inwood (2007) mentions a suggestion in conversation by Irwin that this may be a fallacy of composition. My guess is that this is not quite right, but rather that in dialectic, one can secure the idea that wealth is made up of many poverties by asking whether having a small amount of money is poverty, and then asking whether wealth is having a small amount of money many times over. Then wealth is entirely made up of bad things. This wouldn’t be a fallacy of composition, precisely, because it does not infer generalising about the whole from one part: the issue is rather the incorrect definition of poverty. This is in line with the solution that Seneca alludes to: “the word poverty refers not to possession but to subtraction”. (*EM 87.39)* If we take the criticisms that *EM 87* closes with as only applying to this final syllogism, then *EM* 87 actually presents a contrast: the earlier syllogisms in *EM* 87 are syllogisms that Seneca sees as sagacious ways to argue, in contrast to the syllogisms in *EM* 82, 83, and the final syllogism in *EM* 87. If this is correct, then we need to develop an account of the features of the syllogisms in *EM* 87 that make them more appealing to Seneca, and that is what I will aim to do in this section, by offering an analysis of two of the syllogisms.

The first syllogism I will consider is the second of the letter, which I will set out and then discuss:

That which can belong to the vilest and most despicable kinds of people is not a good;

but wealth can belong to the pimp and the manager of gladiators.

Therefore, wealth is not a good. (*EM 87.15*)

The statement of the argument is clear. To prove that something is not good, we simply have to argue that it can be possessed by the worst people imaginable. At a glance, we can see that if this principle is accepted, then it will speak against the goodness of quite a wide range of things generally thought to be good: an excellent reputation, popularity, a family, being loved, pleasure, and of course wealth. We might further see that a Stoic will accept the major premise, because after all a Stoic already believes that virtue is the only good, and do not think that a bad person will have virtues. But, until we have become convinced of this doctrine, it seems unlikely that we will accept the major premise, as there are so many apparent counter-examples to the principle that the worst people cannot have any good things.

From a dialectical perspective, then, this syllogism is remarkably different from the syllogisms of Zeno discussed earlier. The Zeno’s syllogisms sought to argue from premises that interlocutors would find it difficult to disagree with. This syllogism takes a rather different, and from a dialectical perspective, much less powerful approach: it presents a premise that the interlocutor is certain to reject. Above, I wrote that Seneca was well aware of the need to argue from common ground, and indeed criticises Zeno for failing to do so adequately. When this syllogism is seen in isolation of Seneca’s discussion of it, however, it seems that Seneca has simply given up on any project of finding common ground from which to argue. Inwood (2007) points out that the syllogism has the structure of a Peripatetic syllogism – namely *Celarent -* and that this reflects an understanding of a need to engage with one’s interlocutors on their terms; be that as it may, there seems little point in using a Peripatetic form if one is going to argue from premises that no Peripatetic would accept. One thing we can say on considering this syllogism is that Seneca is staying true to his rejection of refutation.

Seneca has not, for this, turned his back on the idea that it is important to look for common ground. In his discussion, Seneca considers a Peripatetic rejoinder: “for in the teaching of literature, in medicine, and in navigation, we see that the relevant goods belong to the humblest kinds of people.” Here, as Inwood (2007) notes, the Peripatetics are developing the craft analogy: virtue is an excellence of living, and so we should expect its relationship to goods to be the same as those in other skills. In general, skills point towards an end, but are separable from the end, and the end can be held by people without the skill.

This is a natural thought, and Seneca uses it to begin an exercise in considering how virtue and vice are different from skill and ignorance, one that connects intimately with the syllogism he just presented, and which finds common ground with the Peripatetic. Seneca still does not give a refutation, of course, as he thinks refutation is counter-productive, but rather, as in *EM* 82 and 83, turns to something that is more akin to a thought experiment for which the syllogism can be considered a kind of blueprint.

First, Seneca makes a point about how virtuous people relate to the “things readily called good”, namely that they stand above these things, and that they are not objects of “any great desire or terror”. Put like this, it is a point that the Peripatetics will certainly agree with: after all, greatness of mind is, for Aristotle, the completion of virtue, and the great minded person does stand above such things as wealth and honour, seeing them as having little importance. This is an important point: both the Stoics and the Peripatetics are going to agree that the virtuous person’s use of wealth should be reasonable, and that the virtuous person will spend money thoughtfully and accurately. But they also both agree that the virtuous person is impressive and awe-inspiring precisely in attaching very little importance to money. Of course, this does not show that wealth has no value whatsoever, and Peripatetics will insist that it has some small value, and that this value is reflected in the care that the virtuous person takes in its administration. And here, Seneca is not in much of a position to develop a case from the perspective of the virtuous person: as we saw above, the indifferents become good in the hands of a virtuous person; it’s enough for us to note here that they become good in great part through being held in disdain.

What comes next is two examples of supposedly bad people who owned a lot of money. Seneca’s examples are rather irritatingly chosen: Chelidon, whose only fault seems to be that he was one of Cleopatra’s eunuchs, and Natalis, a person whose only fault seems to be that he gave oral sex to women. (*EM* 87.16) For the purposes of understanding this exercise, we ought to substitute our own examples of wealthy bad people: wealthy gladiator trainers, the owners of battery farms, cigarette company executives, Donald Trump, or whoever else you might think of as being awfully wealthy. Seneca invites us to make two observations about wealth in these cases.

The first point is contained in the question of whether bad people are defiled by wealth, or whether their wealth is defiled by them. (*EM 87.16)* He does not expand on this point much, but rather returns to the comparison with virtue: virtue does not care much for these things. (*EM* 87.17) Presumably, one of the things we are to see here is that bad rich people care too much about their money, so that they appear corrupted by it. In fact, Seneca has a different account of the causal relationship here: it is vice that gives money its corrupting force. Indeed, if we return to the examples given in the syllogism, that of pimps and of gladiator trainers, these are two classes of people who–at least in the ancient world–were willing to engage in profound forms of exploitation in order to increase their wealth. It is probably also important, and tied in with another Stoic argument strategy, that their wealth enables them to carry out their injustice on a greater scale: hiring more gladiators, or in the modern examples, expanding the battery farm, or paying bribes. The Peripatetic will certainly agree that money in these cases becomes both a motive for evil and an enabler of it, and that they would not want to have money *in that way.*

A natural thought to have at this point is that we would still rather like to take the wealthy person’s money and distribute it to the poor, or even to have it for ourselves. This is no doubt true, and Seneca would agree with the sentiment. But remember that, for Seneca, indifferents changes valence depending on whether they come into contact with vice or virtue. In the case of donating the money, it would be important for a Stoic not to see this is as a great act of charity, but simply as letting go of something with little value: when a wealthy person donates large quantities of money, the greatness in this is their recognition that they are actually not giving up anything particularly valuable in doing so. (*De Ben.* 12.3--14.3)The money that is dirty in the hands of the gladiator trainer becomes cleansed by its contact with virtue. Similarly, when we imagine having the money for ourselves, we presumably do not imagine having it greedily, or deploying it for some nefarious scheme; or if we do, then we are not the well-intentioned Peripatetics to which this argument is addressed.

Seneca has adroitly used commonalities between the Stoic and the Peripatetic conception of a virtuous person to develop something akin to a thought experiment about the value of wealth. The exercise is to alternatively imagine it in the hands of someone virtuous, and in the hands of someone vicious and to observe how its value appears to change; furthermore, we must observe how lightly the virtuous person holds it. Strikingly, this is precisely the same procedure we found in *EM* 82.12, where Seneca instructs us to compare Cato’s case with that of Decimus Brutus. And it is notable that the syllogism forms the blueprint for this exercise: filling out the syllogism requires us to think of bad people who have the good that we are considering. In this sense, the syllogism is not too different from Zeno’s syllogism about death; after all, Zeno’s syllogism makes for a fair blueprint for a thought experiment as well, namely, to consider glorious instances of a supposedly bad thing. However, in the act of refutation, a dialectician actively prevents the interlocutor from considering the thought experiment clearly, by leading their attention down the “miniscule and thorny paths” of how to escape refutation and while saving appearances. (*EM* 823.22) In the discussion of the syllogism from *EM* 87, Seneca shows us an alternative, and arguably more fruitful, way of finding and using common ground in an argumentative exchange.

Let us turn now to the second syllogism we will consider:

That which is good does not come of what is bad
But wealth comes of avarice
Therefore wealth is not good (*EM* 87.22)

Again, considered from a dialectical perspective, this syllogism is rather useless, which is probably why Inwood (2007) asks “why would Seneca advance such a weak argument?” For anyone who believes that wealth, pleasure, or even knowledge is good would reject the major premise as being clearly false. This is a premise that one might expect only an already committed Stoic to accept, and more as a corollary of the theory of the good than as a lemma on the way to its demonstration.

As Inwood (2007) noted, Seneca here seems to shift from his engagement with the Peripatetics to an engagement with the Epicureans. For the objection he considers analyses temple robbery as being overall bad: certainly, temple robbery produces profit, but it also produces “fear, anxiety, torments of mind and of body”. (*EM* 87.22) This looks like a fairly standard Epicurean analysis of the importance of justice: we need justice to live together peacefully, and we should avoid injustice for the consequences it has on our tranquillity, rather than because it is bad in and of itself.

Seneca’s discussion of this objection takes two parts. In the first part, he argues, very aptly, that this is simply psychologically implausible. He points out first, that many people are unashamed of stealing, and even go so far as to boast of adultery. (*EM* 87.23) His strongest point, however, is a political one of some contemporary relevance. He points out that great acts of temple robbery “are carried in a triumphal parade.” (*EM* 87.23) This is a strong point. Although private citizens are subject to the laws of the state, and can only very rarely act with complete certainty of avoiding punishment, powerful states often do act in violent and unjust ways without any real fear of reprisal, either against other states or against populations within their own state. If we rely on the psychological consequences of injustice to speak against it, it will be hard to see how to argue against such injustices. Because the psychological consequences of injustices are inconsistent, they cannot be what makes injustice bad, because it is consistently bad. Here Seneca is trying to build common ground through the use of appeals to experience; what we find is not a refutation of the Epicurean position from premises that they will accept, but observations that make the Epicurean position look less plausible.

Seneca's second point starts out as a fairly standard Stoic *reductio:* if temple robbery is good in some respect, then it will be honourable in some respect, and if honourable in some respect, then right in some respect. (*EM* 87.24) This is akin to the argument that Cicero would famously describe as a “leaden dagger” at *De Finibus* IV.18*,* where hecomplains that it is dialectically ineffective, as the Stoics’ opponents won’t accept the step from good to honourable. Again, we might be concerned that Seneca has forgotten the importance of arguing from common ground. However, he proceeds to present a thought experiment: if you were to excuse temple robbery from all punishments and guarantee it safety, then temple robbery would be good, but – surely the Peripatetics and Epicureans agree – temple robbery is never good. Here, the interlocutor is asked to consider a world in which temples can be safely robbed: it would still be wrong to rob the temples. In presenting such a thought experiment, Seneca is not, as Cooper complains, making an appeal to emotions or giving up philosophy in favour of pastoral care: he is searching for some common ground, not with a view to forming a refutation, but simply with a view to finding real common ground with his opponents.

The final move Seneca makes is to consider a different Stoic position that uses an analogy of a snake and a coin in a jar. I think the Stoic position here must be the move that the Peripatetics would make as well—Inwood (2007) describes it as a dialectical concession--because the Peripatetics would certainly accept that temple robbery was bad in and of itself. In the analogy, the jar is the temple robbery, the coin is the profit from the temple robbery, and the snake is the injustice of temple robbery. The coin, in this picture, is incidental and separable from the injustice of robbing the temple, and if one can somehow manage to take the coin without committing the evil, it will still be good. So the bad thing in the temple robbery is not the profit, but rather the injustice; the profit can still be a good thing, even if temple robbing is bad.

Seneca’s response is, I think, exactly right, but very brief. He argues that the cases are disanalogous. In the case of the jar the snake and the coin are separable. But in the case of the robbery of a temple, the profit one makes from robbing the temple is not separable from the injustice one commits. The injustice of my robbing the temple is, after all, partly constituted by the fact that I profit, and the community for which the temple is sacred loses. It is simply conceptually impossible that I should take the money without committing an injustice.

Seneca has used the syllogism to develop a series of philosophical investigations. If we are considering whether an apparent good is good, we should consider it when it has come from a bad source; we should consider how it would be if it were taken without any fear of bad consequences, and we should consider whether the apparent good is separable from the evil act. These observations have effectively the same effect as the previous ones: Seneca hopes that we will see that the valence of the item under consideration changes when it comes from an evil source, that we can see that indifferents are sometimes good–when they come from a good source--and sometimes bad, when they come from a bad source. Again, Seneca uses a combination of appeals to experience and thought experiments to establish common ground, rather than seeking common ground via the social pressures present in a dialectical exchange; further, Seneca seeks to provide exercises that will encourage contemplation of value, rather than syllogisms that will produce refutations.

**Thought Experiments and Argument**

I would like to close with a small remark about the relationship between thought experiments and argument in Seneca. For Seneca, refutation, understood as the practice of eliciting spoken commitments and driving an opponent to the desired conclusion, is an epistemically unsound way of arguing as it trades on mismatches between conviction and assertion, and perhaps even between what one thinks and what one believes. Common ground can be better found through shared experience or even through shared imaginative exercises in thought experiments. Seneca was looking to replace what is effectively an adversarial or competitive argumentative practice into a collaborative and inquisitive one. If this were the case, then we would expect converting thought experiments into refutations would hold a heavy philosophical cost.

A very famous example may be seen in a comparison of two statements of Singer’s arguments about action on poverty. Singer (1973) presents the argument as a refutation in writing. We must accept that people starving to death is bad. The next premise he wants the reader to accept is that “if it is in our power to prevent something morally bad from happening, without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it.” (231) Singer claims that this premise is “uncontroversial”, and it is certainly a difficult premise, dialectically, to reject. One does not want to appear to be a person who will let evil flourish by standing by. But I doubt Singer’s readers are, in general, thoroughly committed to this claim, although they may be prepared to assert or even think it. So, we might follow Seneca’s criticism of Zeno in questioning whether this is really arguing from common ground. In this presentation, the famous thought experiment about saving the drowning child appears as a rhetorical, or perhaps dialectical, flourish to try to encourage acceptance of this premise, but it is surely a long reach from the idea that we must get our clothes muddy to save a drowning child to the principle stated above. Singer (1973) is an article aimed at philosophers, and has spurred an enormous philosophical discussion that is strikingly reminiscent of the discussion of Zeno’s syllogisms: it is possible that many of Singer’s readers feel trapped by the argument, and feel forced, dialectically, to say that which they do not believe, and are therefore, rather than really thinking about poverty, looking for a way to escape refutation while saving face.

A presentation in *New Internationalist* takes a different approach. (Singer, 1997) This article is aimed at a general, rather than a philosophical audience. It does not aim at refuting them, but rather at developing the potency of the thought experiment on the drowning child, and pushing for consideration of what our obligations are to others given our increasing ability to know what is happening far away and our ability to act at a distance. Being aimed at a public audience, it is not a piece of professional philosophy like Singer (1973). Nevertheless, as philosophy it has one serious advantage: it argues from ground much more firmly held in common with the reader. After considering Seneca’s reflections on dialectic, I am inclined to think the later piece is not only a more rhetorically effective article, but also, contrary to appearances, philosophically sounder.

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1. Translations from Graver and Long (2015) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)