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IN ANCIENT THOUGHT

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INDICE

Stefano Maso

'QUARUNDAM RERUM INITIA IN NOSTRA POTESTATE SUNT': SENECA ON DECISION MAKING, FATE, AND RESPONSIBILITY

Abstract
Does the Stoic school really, accepting fate, reject free will? It would seem so, mainly if we read the evidences of Zeno or Chrysippus. But the difficulty for us is to understand in detail the meaning of 'deciding something' independently and by oneself. Thus, we may discover that the issue of subjective responsibility not only affects us today, but is also directly and immediately involved in the 'free will problem'. The Stoic Seneca is central to this particular theoretical inquiry, which hinges on the concepts of causality, of determinism and – indeed – responsibility. Seneca lays the groundwork for two different strategies: on the one hand there is a 'defensive strategy' which attempts to provide a remedy for the individual and protection from fortune and from the behavior of others (as it will be according to Epictetus); on the other hand there is a 'provocative strategy', which arrives at interpreting human autonomy and responsibility as a *culpa*. However, in these terms man is exposed to the risk of social and existential failure (so it will be according to Augustine and, more in general, to the medieval Christian thought).

Keywords: Determinism, Fate, Fault, Free Will, Responsibility, Risk.

The doctrine of the ancient Stoa asserts, first of all, the deterministic structure of the universe. Consequently man, who belongs to the universe, lives, decides and acts in accordance with sequences of events and with the cause/effect relationships that define them. The key question is the following: How do man's constituent qualities conform to this general structure?

Man in fact seems to be provided with free will, *i.e.* the capacity to decide something freely. Chrysippus, one of the fathers of the ancient Stoa, deemed that free will and the free choice[1] find expression at the moment of reasoning, when a decision is called for whether a certain perception of reality should be deemed true or false. In that case, the "ruling faculty of the mind" (*hēgemonikon*) determines *sunkatathesis*,

[1] The Greek idiom to indicate 'what depends on us', at the moment of free choice, is τὸ ἐφ' ἡμῖν. It is likely but not certain, that even the ancient Stoics, especially Chrysippus, used this terminology. See Bobzien 1998, 280; Gourinat 2012, 143-50.

that is, the assent expressed by the individual subject.[2] In any case it appears that the very act which ensues from assent, being dependent on that assent, ends up being dependent on the free choice of the subject.[3] In simplified form, the complex mechanism may be expressed as a sequence: *perception – phantasia* (*i.e.* the mental representation of what is perceived) – *free choice – assent – action*. Obviously, this sequence relies on the following set of logical inferences: *action* ⊃ *assent* ⊃ *free choice* ⊃ *phantasia* ⊃ *perception*.[4] Well, this sequence is problematic. How can something which was not predetermined (the outcome of *free choice*) be placed within a wholly deterministic structure?

Cicero in his *De fato* had clearly drawn attention to this difficulty, which was present in Chrysippus' doctrine, given that the latter still intended to admit the existence of natural, prior causes (§ 9: *causas naturalis et antecedentes*) for any event and equally for any emotion and desire. Specifically, according to Cicero, Chrysippus seems to vacillate when, given the need for a premise, he finds himself forced to deduce the inevitability of the consequence in every circumstance, not only in relation to the past or what is observed in the present but also in relation to the future (*fat.* 14-16).[5] *If he did so* (that is, if he affirmed determinism always and absolutely), Chrysippus would deny the real «possibility of doing or not doing something.» He would settle upon the same position as Diodorus Cronus, for whom only what is true or will be true is possible. Unfortunately, in this way the 'possibility' is in fact removed.[6] *If he did not do so* (that is, if he relinquished his claim of determinism al-

[2] Cf. Aët. 4.21 (= SVF 2.836): «It is *hēgemonikon* which produces representations, assents, sensations and impulses (τὸ ἡγημονικόν, τὸ ποιοῦν τὰς φαντασίας καὶ συγκαταθέσεις καὶ αἰσθήσεις καὶ ὁρμάς).» All translations are my own.

[3] With regard to this implication, which seems completely evident to us today (cf. Goulet-Cazé 2011a, 94), the earliest Stoic texts that have come down to us are laconic. In a later era, in order to explain the connection between the gnoseological moment and the practical moment, the concept of *impulse* (ὁρμή) was exploited; cf. Ar. Did., *in Stob.* 2.7.9[a], vol. 2, 86, 17-19 Wachsmuth (*SVF* 3.169) and 9[b], 88, 1-6 Wachsmuth (*SVF* 3.171). Cicero, however, seems in no doubt that this connection dates back to the ancient Stoa (*Luc.* 39). Regarding these texts and the presumed equivalence, for Arius, between *impulse* and *assent*, see Goulet-Cazé 2011a, 96-121. Seneca too, in *ep.* 113.18, appears to confirm this line of explanation: «No rational animal acts unless it has first been stimulated by some external impression; then the impulse, and then the assent confirms this impulse. I shall now say what assent is. I must walk: I shall walk only when I have said it to myself and have approved this idea of mine» (*Omne rationale animal nihil agit, nisi primum specie alicuius rei inritatum est, deinde impetum cepit, deinde adsensio confirmavit hunc impetum, Quid sit adsensio dicam. Oportet me ambulare: tunc demum ambulo, cum hoc mihi dixi et adprobavi hanc opinionem meam*). On the role of impulse, see Inwood 1985, 205-42; Brennan 2003, 265-69.

[4] Setting aside *impulse*, as in my view it is the leader to the whole series of implications set out herein. It constitutes a sort of condition that is present in different phases: at the moment of the *free choice*, of the *assent*, and of the *action*.

[5] The issue is very subtle because it concerns the question of truth or falsity of an assertion regarding the possibility that it will be confirmed or not in the future. The principles of bivalence and of non-contradiction are involved. Cf. Sedley 2005, 241-54, and Cavini 2007, 130-39.

[6] Cic., *fat.* 13: «For he [= Diodorus] says that only what either is true or will be true can happen. And he says that what will be true must necessarily happen, and *he denies that what will not be true can*

ways and absolutely), Chrysippus would affirm the existence of 'possibility,' yet he would inevitably compromise the role of necessity and, in the end would find himself forced to deny the necessity of fate.

Nevertheless, Cicero seems willing to grant Chrysippus a sort of middle position between those who considered that everything occurs according to the will of fate (*omnia ita fato fieri*) and those who thought that there are voluntary motions of the soul free from necessity (*sine ullo fato esse animorum motus voluntarii*):

> *Chrysippus* [sc. *mihi videtur*] *tamquam arbiter honorarius medium ferire voluisse, sed adplicat se ad eos potius, qui necessitate motus animorum liberatos volunt.*
>
> Chrysippus, like an esteemed arbitrator, seems to have wanted to strike a balance, but in fact inclines rather to those who want the movements of the mind to be free from necessity (*fat.* 39).

According to what Cicero tells us, Chrysippus effectively relinquished a radically coherent concept of 'necessity';[7] he came to this conclusion by distinguishing between various types of cause (not only *causae perfectae et principales*, but also *adiuvantes et proximae*)[8] and concluding that at least 'assenting' ought to be within our power (§ 43: *adsensio nostra erit in potestate*).[9] In other words, according to Cicero, the question of some form of decision free of fate had been posed already by Chrysippus, and thus in the ancient Stoa.

We know that Seneca openly declared himself to be an adherent of the Stoic doctrine, yet we are also familiar with his equally explicit assertions of personal autonomy and his claims that it is possible to follow one's own path of reasoning. Here we are not interested in analyzing the orthodoxy of Seneca's Stoic beliefs. Rather, it is important to note that, on the one hand, he inevitably aligns himself with the *soft* interpretation of Stoic determinism, which heralds a veritable form of compatibilism between the determined structure of the universe and the exercise of autonomy by

happen», *ille enim id solum fieri posse dicit, quod aut sit verum aut futurum sit verum, et quicquid futurum sit, id dicit fieri necesse esse, et quicquid non sit futurum, id negat fieri posse* (emphasis mine).

[7] Salles 2005, 69-89, closely examines 'Chrysippean fatalism', recognizing in all of its possible variations a confirmation of the compatibilist approach to the doctrine of action.

[8] On the Stoic doctrine of causality see Ioppolo 1994, 4491-545. Specifically regarding the distinction between the various types of cause, on the terminology adopted by Cicero and the issues raised by it see Ioppolo 1994, 4505-23 and Schallenberg 2008, 240-51. Bobzien (1999, 196-242) is convinced that Chrysippus – in contrast to what Cicero claims – limits himself to «some conceptual distinctions» aimed at «explaining particular features of certain causes» (197).

[9] Compare the example of the cylinder in *fat.* 43: «Therefore whoever pushed the cylinder», Chrysippus continues, «has set it in motion (*principium motionis*), but has not given its rotary motion (*volubilitatem*); similarly, representation (*visum*), when it presents itself, will be impressed and in a certain sense will stamp its image on the mind; but assenting will be within our power and, once it has been struck from the outside in the same way as was said in the case of cylinder, will continue to move by its own force and nature.» Cf. Schallenberg 2008, 252-61.

man, and that, on the other, he consciously presupposes an association between free will and responsibility.[10]

The responsible man is the one who is able to *respondere* at first hand to what happens or what he has caused to happen. The commonly accepted meaning of the Latin term refers to the language of law, and so a situation comparable to the one evoked by the Greek term *hupeuthunon* should be imagined: in other words, an individual has accomplished a certain action and therefore finds him- or herself «called upon» to «answer for it»:[11]

> *Trepidant enim* [sc. *inpotentes*] *cum fecerunt, haerent; conscientia aliud agere non patitur ac subinde respondere expectat.*
>
> Those who lack self-control tremble and are insecure as a result of the behavior they have displayed; their conscience does not allow them to occupy themselves with anything else and expects them to stand before its court to answer for it (*ep.* 105.7).

Yet the nuance connected with the Greek *aition* (the 'cause') is also unquestionably present: a man is responsible insofar as he is the 'cause' of something.[12] And indeed Seneca writes:

> *Quarundam rerum initia in nostra potestate sunt, ulteriora nos vi sua rapiunt nec regressum relinquunt.*
>
> Of certain things the initial moment is within our power; once set in motion, with their force they seize us and do not leave the possibility of going back (*de ira* 1.7.4).

The beginning (*initium*) of some specific event depends directly upon ourselves. Then other factors come into play. What are they? Inevitably Chrysippus' celebrated example, to which Cicero alludes, comes to mind: the cylinder moves because

[10] A first introduction to this point, with particular attention to the problem of suicide, is the essay *Seneca on Freedom and Autonomy*, in Inwood 2005, 302-21.

[11] There is no Latin equivalent **responsabilitas* to the modern word 'responsibility'. Seneca's metaphor is not referring to an ordinary term in moral discourse. The reference is clearly to uses of the word in a legal context, similar to the use of the Greek term. In Aristoph., *Eq.* 259, ὑπεύθυνοι are the magistrates who account for economic activity; in *V.* 102, they are those who are called to account for their wealth. The term occurs frequently in the oratory of Demosthenes and Aeschines. With regard to the philosophers, Aristotle, *Pol.* 1272a36-40, considers that the *irresponsibility* accorded to judges is too great and dangerous a prerogative for society; according to Epicurus, *Men.* 133, necessity (ἀνάγκη) is to be considered *irresponsible* (ἀνυπεύθυνον), in the sense that it "does not have to answer" to anybody. Posidonius, *fr.* 194/b.9 uses the adverbial neuter to indicate something that is "out of control". In any case, Aesop, *sent.* 40.1, assures that "Everybody is responsible (ὑπεύθυνον) for his poor work."

[12] Here a reference to Arist., *E.N.* 1113b23-24 will suffice, where mention is made of the work of legislators who ensure that the sentence is duly served by those who are «not in the condition of not being responsible (μὴ αὐτοὶ αἴτιοι) for their actions as a result of coercion or ignorance.» Cf. Natali 2000, 481-509, and Destrée 2011, 278-311.

somebody or something has imparted motion to it (Cic., *fat.* 43: *qui protrusit cylindrum dedit ei principium motionis*); this however has not in itself caused the rotary motion, which instead belongs to the cylinder by its very nature. Chrysippus considers that, once it has received the impulse from the outside, «for the rest it is by their own nature that the cylinder rolls and the spinning-top spins.»[13] The cylinder's *natura* (or the spinning-top's *natura*) has the opportunity to manifest itself until external causes intervene to oppose it. Similarly, this time in a psychological and moral context, Seneca believes that the angry man goes downwards (*ad imum agat*), just as a falling body which loses all power over itself and is not able either to arrest or slow its fall. This happens because the irrevocable fall (*i.e.* the metaphorical *praecipitatio* of the angry man) has removed any possibility of deciding or of changing one's mind,[14] a decision or change of mind that was clearly possible at the moment in which the motion was about to occur (*initia*) but had not yet begun (*ulteriora*).

According to both Cicero and Seneca two types of cause are active: there are the principal causes which are essentially *properties* of a certain thing (rolling for the cylinder or falling through the air for a body with weight or plunging down a slope for a vicious man) and which therefore contain their own completeness in and of themselves. They are those which Clement of Alexandria classifies as *ta synektika*. Alongside but separate from them are causes which interact, perhaps setting in motion what then produces its effect and which Clement calls *ta synerga*: synergistic causes (*Strom.* 8.9 = *SVF* 2.351).[15]

Nevertheless, Seneca, in *Letter* 65*,* appears to wish to simplify the situation, by reducing all types of cause (and thus also preliminary causes, *ta prokatarktika*, and concomitant causes, *ta synaitia*) to one category of efficient cause: the Stoics believe in one cause only, that which makes.[16] Naturally Seneca can proceed in this direction by virtue of the materialism that characterizes Stoic physics: rolling or having weight are intimately constitutive of matter; any occasional causes (§ 14: *causae supervenientes*) are but mere corollaries. Consequently only that which enables the nature of the object to manifest itself remains *as efficient cause*, something, that is, which *performs and intervenes* by interrupting a given chain of events and which moreover – and this is a fundamental fact – might not have intervened: in this case,

[13] Cic., *fat*. 42: *suapte natura, quod superest, et cylindrum volvi et versari turbinem putat*. Cf. also Gel. 7.2.11. It is enough here to refer to the close analysis by Bobzien 1998, 258-71. A review of the Ciceronian text in comparison with that of Gellius is found in Eliasson 2008, 87-95. With regard to Seneca see Graver 2007, 61-70; Wildberger 2006, 346-48.

[14] *De ira* 1.7.4: […] *ut in praeceps datis corporibus nullum sui arbitrium est nec resistere morarive deiecta potuerunt* […] *consilium omne et paenitentiam inrevocabilis praecipitatio abscidit*.

[15] Clement of Alexandria was a Christian theologian of the second and third centuries A.D., fond of Plato and the Stoics. Unfortunately, Clement's distinction between *synektika* and *synerga* causes is not expressly characterized as Stoic and it is disputed whether it is Stoic at all (Ioppolo 1994, 4538-45).

[16] *Ep*. 65.4: *Stoicis placet unam causam esse, id quod facit*. Cf. Frede 1980, 221-49. On 228, Frede states that Seneca «claims that there is just one kind of cause, the active cause, and that if the opponents assume more kinds of causes it is because they think that the effect would not obtain if it were not the presence of certain other kinds of items in addition to an active cause.»

naturally, it would not have produced the change in the causal chain or in the constituent matter. We must assume that most probably according to Seneca the efficient cause coincides with what, in humans, are the 'beginnings' of events (*de ira* 1.4.7: *quarundam rerum initia*).

In *ep.* 14.16, too, Seneca maintains the same thesis, yet also states something else because, more directly, the theory of action is at issue:

> *Denique consilium rerum omnium sapiens, non exitum spectat; initia in potestate nostra sunt, de eventu fortuna iudicat, cui de me sententiam non do.*
>
> The wise man looks at the intention behind very action, not the outcome; the initial moment depends on us, while it is fortune that decides the result, and I do not accord to it the right to judge me.[17]

Once again he refers to the initial moment. Yet this time his attention is turned not to the ineluctable occurrence of events, as in *De ira* 1.7.4, but to the one (in this case the wise man) who has the intention (*consilium*) of doing something. So, it is he, the wise man, who is the efficient cause, responsible for his decisions within the set sequence of events that destiny puts forward; everything that follows, however, is independent of his will. For that, he is no longer responsible. It is in fact *fortune,* which comes into play and determines the outcome of the process which the wise man has set in motion. And fortune is not entitled to judge the goodness and the validity of the intention on the basis of which the wise man has decided something. Yet what is *fortuna* for Seneca?

1. Fortuna *and subjective responsibility*

Fortuna is frequently evoked in Seneca's works. In his tragedies, in particular, it is also represented as a deity;[18] more generally it appears as the expression of something that is independent of man's will. From this point of view it would appear to be characterized by the same autonomy that typifies *fatum*, except that fate is characterized by its coherent and cogent way of imposing itself and developing, while *fortuna*, in contrast, depends on chance: its will is absolute, in the sense that it does not obey any norms and does not admit any predictability. Thus, while in *fatum* it is possible to discern a goal (*i.e.* a destiny), in *fortuna* this is not possible.

[17] The opposition in Seneca between what 'depends on us' (*i.e.* which is *in nostra potestate*) and fortune (*i.e.* the power of chance) is addressed by Eliasson 2008, 97-106.

[18] In particular, cf. *Herc. F.* 524; *Tro.* 259, 269, 275, 711, 735; *Phoen.* 82, 212, 398, 386, 452; *Med.* 159, 176, 287; *Phaed.* 979, 1124, 1143; *Oed.* 11, 86, 786; 934; *Ag.* 28, 57, 72, 101, 248, 594; *Thy.* 618; *Herc. O.* 358, 697. Asmis 2009, 115-38, studies Seneca's ideal of the virtuous Roman as a fighter against fortune. She asserts that «by recasting Stoic fate as an antagonistic fortune, Seneca lays the foundations for a morality of resistance» (115).

In one of the *consolationes* Seneca explains to his friend Marcia that there is no point in grieving over the death of her son Metilius, given that death is announced at the moment of birth and that such a fate accompanied her son from when he was in her womb.[19] Like that of *fatum*, also the 'dominion' of *fortuna* is harsh and invincible (*regnum fortunae durum et invictum*), the difference being that what happens during the period in which one is alive is not the result of order but of arbitrariness. *Fortuna* is «a fickle, capricious mistress, caring little for her slaves.»[20] It can take advantage of each man in an abusive, cruel manner, it can punish or heal, propose things that are worthy of doing or unworthy of being borne.[21] Thus both *fatum* and *fortuna* oppose man's free will; however, as has already been said, they do so, in a diametrically opposite fashion: the former, indifferent to what the individual chooses or decides, proposes a system in which the succession of events follows a pre-established order within which each person finds him- or herself placed. The latter, while equally indifferent, is the concrete expression of the randomness of becoming, that is, of what seems to escape a certain order. In this sense, literally:

> *Non minus saepe fortuna in nos incurrit quam nos in illam.*
> Fortune runs into us as often as we run into it (*ep.* 37.5).

While *fatum* proceeds independently of us and is bound up with the order which it itself produces, *fortuna* in contrast is so unconstrained by everything that it may equally well come to us as wait for us to encounter it.

But there is another interesting aspect of the problem: Seneca seeks to distinguish between a rational and an emotional side of the matter. Reflection, decision and free will belong to the rational side, which is presented as the sphere in which wisdom can be displayed and where the sage expresses his capacity for control and resistance.

> *Sapiens autem nihil perdere potest; omnia in se reposuit, nihil fortunae credit, bona sua in solido habet contentus virtute, quae fortuitis non indiget ideoque nec augeri nec minui potest; nam et in summum perducta incrementi non habent locum et nihil eripit fortuna nisi quod dedit; virtutem autem non dat, ideo nec detrahit: libera est,*

[19] *Marc.* 10.5: «If you grieve because your son is dead, the accusation regards the time at which he was born: his death was announced at the moment of his birth. He was given to you so that he would adapt to this law (*in hanc legem datus*): this fate (*hoc ... fatum*) accompanied him right from your womb.»

[20] *Marc.* 10.6: *varia et libidinosa mancipiorumque suorum neglegens domina.*

[21] *Marc.* 10.6: «In the kingdom of fortune (*in regnum fortunae*), which is harsh and invincible (*et quidem durum atque invictum*), we have come, through his will, to bear worthy and unworthy things (*illius arbitrio digna atque indigna passuri*). It will take advantage of our bodies unrestrainedly, abusively, cruelly: some it will burn, the flames being applied as punishment or as remedy: some it will place in chains (and this may happen first to the enemy and then to our fellow citizen). Fortuna will toss others naked about on uncertain seas, and after they have struggled with the waves, it will not even thrust them out noisily onto the sand or onto a beach, but after sending them down into the belly of some immense beast, will bury them there. Still others, being emaciated with various kinds of disease, it will keep long uncertain between life and death.»

> *inviolabilis, inmota, inconcussa, sic contra casus indurata ut ne inclinari quidem, nedum vinci possit.*
>
> The wise man cannot lose anything because he has everything securely within himself. He entrusts nothing *to fortune*, his goods he has in a safe place, content with virtue, which certainly has no need *of fortune* and which therefore can neither be increased nor decreased (indeed, that which has reached the apex, has no room for growth, and *fortune* cannot take away anything except that which it has given itself. And since it does not give virtue, it does not take it away either). Virtue is free, inviolable, immovable, it does not suffer turmoil, and is so inured that it can neither be subdued nor defeated (*const.* 5.4, emphasis mine).

As is well known, the Stoic sage is the man who has attained wisdom and, together with it, perfection. He resembles a god who lacks nothing.[22] The virtue that marks him out, belongs to him totally and for this reason cannot be snatched from him, not even partially. This virtue depends only on him and thus is free from *fortuna*. In this sense virtue is deemed 'free' (*libera*). In *De constantia sapientis* Seneca even claims that the adversities that the sage must face, serve to test his virtue. It is not worth even attempting to select, from among the various events, those which are most tolerable and those which are least so. No matter how or where, he is able to face the situation. Indeed, he is aware that *fortuna* overwhelms us if we do not oppose it in its entirety: *vincit nos fortuna, nisi tota vincitur* (*const.* 15.3).[23]

With regard to the emotional side, the question becomes more complex.[24] In theory the authentic sage is capable of controlling his feelings and psychic motion; he knows how to stay away from the passions, but the fact that usually these develop, coming to impose themselves independently of his will – and this happens because they are the consequence of external factors – may give rise to critical situations. The experience of mental pain is emblematic:

[22] Cf. for example *ep.* 73.12-15. Wildberger 2006 dedicates the third part of her Seneca book to the dialogue between god and the wise man, concluding thus (351): «Kein anderer Stoiker hat in solchem Maße wie Seneca die *Gott*-Gleichheit des *vollkommenen* Menschen und die Verwandtschaft zwischen *Gott* und Mensch herausgestellt. Sobald der *vollkommene* Mensch die *Vollkommenheit Gottes* erkennt, erkennt er auch sein eigene Göttlichkeit.»

[23] In order to live happily, not simply to live, the wise man only needs a sound and upright soul, heedless of what fortune holds in store for him (*ep.* 9.13: *ad illud tantum animo sano et erecto et despiciente fortunam*). He will not be «fortunae subiectum» (*ep.* 9.15) unless he directs his attention disproportionately outwards. No external factor that arises will break him down: *sapientis vero contexitur gaudium, nulla causa rumpitur, nulla fortuna, semper et ubique tranquillus est* (*ep.* 72.4). Wisdom does not dwell amid that which fortune administers (*ep.* 90.2: *inter fortuita non esse*); rather, it is the wise man who overcomes fortune, and does so through virtue: *sapiens quidem vincit virtute fortunam* (*ep.* 71.30).

[24] Cf. Graver 2007, 85-108. The scholar stresses the importance of the dialogue *De ira* in order to understand to what extent not only reason, but also the emotions and the «preliminaries to emotion» (98, 99, 101) belong to human nature. With regard to the Stoic doctrine, «the view that feelings sometimes occur in the absence of assent is developed to its fullest extent in the works of Seneca» (93).

> *Scio rem non esse in nostra potestate nec ullum adfectum servire, minime vero eum qui ex dolore nascitur.*
>
> I am aware that this is a matter which *is not in our power*, and that no passion is useful, least of all one arising from pain (*Helv.* 17.1, emphasis mine).

Seneca's mother Helvia is unable to control her pain because affection, and passions in general, do not allow themselves to be subordinated. Obviously Helvia is not a perfect sage: she is like a *proficiens*, like one who is on the way towards wisdom and still learning how to resist the passions.[25] However, on several occasions Seneca reaffirms the difficulty of conquering 'what does not depend on us.'[26] If one is not vigilant, it may happen that a series of involuntary reactions on our part will follow what has arisen by chance and what we have allowed to interfere with our capacity to judge and decide. It is a physiological fact: goose pimples because of the cold, blushing out of shame, hair standing on end on the announcement of unexpected news, the giddiness of the person who looks down from the top of a precipice: «Because none of these things lies within our power, no reasoning can keep them from happening.»[27]

In these situations there may be a subjective responsibility on man's part in any case. According to Seneca, this is found right at the beginning, at the point when *fortuna* and 'what does not depend on us' have been allowed to come forward for the first time.

> *Deinde, si das aliquid iuris tristitiae, timori, cupiditati, ceteris motibus pravis, non erunt in nostra potestate. Quare? quia extra nos sunt quibus inritantur; itaque crescent prout magnas habuerint minoresve causas quibus concitentur. Maior erit timor, si plus quo exterreatur aut propius aspexerit, acrior cupiditas quo illam aplioris rei spes evocaverit. Si in nostra potestate non est an sint adfectus, ne illud quidem est, quanti sint: si ipsis permisisti incipere, cum causis suis crescent tantique erunt quanti fient. Adice nunc quod ista, quamvis exigua sint, in maius excedunt; numquam perniciosa servant modum; quamvis levia initia morborum serpunt et aegra corpora minima interdum mergit accessio. Illud vero cuius dementiae est, credere quarum rerum extra nostrum arbitrium posita principia sunt, earum nostri esse arbitrî terminos!*
>
> Furthermore, if we acknowledge any right to sadness, fear, desire and other perverse motions, they will no longer be under our control (*in nostra potestate*). Why? Because what stimulates them is outside of ourselves (*extra nos*), and therefore they will grow according to whether more or less powerful causes (*causas*) have provoked them. The longer or more closely we look at what frightens us, the greater our fear

[25] This evidence comes from *consolationes*. We can note that a certain acknowledgement of the bereaved person's emotions is part of the standard *topoi* of this genre. In this context, Seneca does not examine the behavior of a wise man but the behavior of someone (male or female) who may become it.
[26] Regarding *to eph'hēmin* in Stoicism in general see Gourinat 2007, 143-49; regarding *par'hēmas* see Hourcade 2006, 125-31; with regard to Cicero, see Maso (forthcoming).
[27] *De ira* 2.2.1: *quorum quia nihil in nostra potestate est, nulla quo minus fiant ratio persuadebit.*

> will be; similarly, desire will be more acute if the hope for a greater gain provokes it. If it is not in our power (*in nostra potestate*) to prevent passions from arising, then neither will be the ability to control their intensity. If you have allowed them to arise, they will grow by virtue of their very causes (*causis suis*) and their intensity will be equal to their development. Add then that the passions, even though they are moderate, always tend to grow; what is harmful never maintains the right proportions. However mild illnesses may be at the beginning, they nevertheless worm their way in, and sometimes it happens that the slightest bout destroys a weakened body. What madness to delude oneself that it is possible to put an end, through our will (*nostri esse arbitrî*), to those passions whose beginnings (*principia*) are placed outside our power of control (*extra nostrum arbitrium*)! (*ep.* 85.11-13)

This is a key passage. It is not only the subtlety of the psychological analysis and analysis of the mechanics of the emotions studied by Seneca that should be noted, the conclusion, too, is decisive in excluding the possibility of bringing within the scope of the human subject's decision-making capacity (*arbitrium*) what has its roots and its starting moment (*initia* or *principia*) outside it. Allowing what occasionally stands before us (and what is not *in nostra potestate*) to enter our sphere of decision-making and action means arbitrarily setting off a new chain of effects which have their own internal consistency but over which we (our *hēgemonikon* or *principale*, *ep.* 92.1) have lost control.[28] Man is thus responsible for having relinquished his capacity to be, in fact, 'responsible.' It is pure illusion (*dementia*) to believe that it is not so and to think that it is still possible to remedy this!

2. *Defensive strategy*

Between a) the moment in which the *representation* of what is perceived is formed and b) *assent* to it (that is, the adherence to what the representation shows), «comes the *decision*», that is to say, the act through which the *hēgemonikon* comes directly into play. I'm not sure that this decision of the *hēgemonikon* must lead us to postulate a tangible additional step between representation and assent. In *ep.* 113.18 this seems like a possibility (see above n. 3). But we can also think that, ultimately, the moment of decision and the moment of assent are coincident: in this case the assent would be a form of decision. Decision is the original manifestation of the will, an *abstract will* which, moreover, necessarily demands to be made concrete: that is, to be translated into assent or dissent, the decision to act or not to act. Probably more than to reason (and therefore to the direct connection between representation and assent) this volition is due to the impulse (*hormē*) that man feels deep down within himself. And, in fact, Seneca says to Lucilius:

[28] Note that even what the Stoics call *indifferentia* is external to man. In reference to the *indifferentia*, each of us may decide from time to time to maintain control or to abandon it. In the second case, what we decide will be in our power only apparently.

> *Neminem mihi dabis qui sciat quomodo quod vult coeperit velle: non consilio adductus illo sed impetu inpactus est.*
>
> You cannot show me anybody who knows how he began to want what he wants: he did not get there through a conscious decision but it happened to him following an impulse (*ep.* 37.5).[29]

What is at issue is that volition (*voluntas*) which not only is crucial with respect to what is wished or not wished for, but for which we also «want it to seem that we want a series of things which we actually do not want»:[30] especially that volition which combines with *consistency* in giving or not giving assent and, in general, in the conduct of life.[31]

The objective which Seneca sets himself consists in reconciling what fate (*fatum*) has reserved for every man with what every man, day by day, circumstance after circumstance, must decide. In a condition of progressive *oikeiōsis*,[32] that is, of the progressive taking on of one's own identity within the identity of the Whole, a man becomes wise, in other words he becomes one who «always wants or does not always want the same thing.»[33] While the will that is expressed in the decision to assent and therefore to act is the starting point for the honest man,[34] it is nevertheless necessary for the result of this decision to be correct. In other words, the consistency between assenting and acting must be based a) *on truth*, that is, on the rational validity of what is insisted on:

> *Si vis eadem semper velle, vera oportet velis.*
>
> If you would always desire the same things, you must desire the truth (*ep.* 95.58).

and b) *on the conviction* according to which

[29] This passage is immediately followed by the consideration quoted above: *non minus saepe fortuna in nos incurrit quam nos in illam.*

[30] *Ep.* 95.2: *Multa videri volumus velle, sed nolumus*. In *ep.* 20.6 Seneca cautions: «Men do not know what they want (*nesciunt ... quid velint*) except at the moment they actually want it (*in illo momento quo volunt*); nobody has decided once and for all what he wants or does not want (*in totum nulli velle aut nolle decretum est*).»

[31] Cf. *ep.* 20.5-6. On conceptions of 'will' in Seneca see Voelke 1973, 174-79; Zöller 2003, 108-15; Inwood 2005, 133-56.

[32] Of the thinkers belonging to the Stoic school, Seneca is the one who more than any other enables us to understand what οἰκείωσις is: Seneca interprets it as *conciliatio* and thus as *appropriation*. Cf. in particular *ep.* 121, and the comments by Bees 2004, 16-74, and Inwood 2007, 332-46. More generally, Engberg-Pedersen 1986, 145-83; Radice 2000, 183-234; Reydams-Schils 2005, 53-82. The latter writes (53) that οἰκείωσις is: «the ability to be aware of one's nature and needs and to adjust one's choices accordingly.»

[33] *Ep*. 20.5: *semper idem velle atque idem nolle.* What can the wise man offer other wise men? Exactly that «he always desires and always refuses the same things (*idem velle atque idem nolle*)» (*ep.* 109.16).

[34] *Ep*. 80.4: «What do you need in order to become good? To wish it (*quid tibi opus est ut sis bonus? velle*).»

Quod vult habet qui velle quod satis est potest

He who is able to desire what is enough for him has what he desires (*ep.* 108.11).[35]

In this attitude of the wise man, the deeper and more general sense of the ethical strategy of ancient Stoicism is immediately recognizable. Through it, the man who defends his identity from the crowd and from the 'vices' (*vitia*) that surround him, who builds his own *autarkeia*,[36] is placed at the centre. It is an attitude that evokes the moral and psychological strength of one who *puts up resistance*, of one who «remains upright, bearing any weight»:

Da mihi adulescentem incorruptum et ingenio vegetum: dicet fortunatiorem sibi videri qui omnia rerum adversarum onera rigida cervice sustollat, qui supra fortunam extet. Non est mirum in tranquillitate non concuti: illud mirare, ibi extolli aliquem ubi omnes deprimuntur, ibi stare ubi omnes iacent. Quid est in tormentis, quid est in aliis quae adversa appellamus mali? hoc, ut opinor, succidere mentem et incurvari et subcumbere. Quorum nihil sapienti viro potest evenire: stat rectus sub quolibet pondere.

Let us consider a youth who is not yet corrupted and of keen intelligence: he will say that whoever bears the entire burden of adversity with head held high, whoever lifts himself above fortune, seems more fortunate to him. There is nothing surprising about not being troubled when the situation is tranquil; yet it must surprise you if someone is upright when everyone also falls, standing when others lie prostrate, when he remains standing while the others lie prone on the ground. What is so terrible in our torments and in what we call adversities? This, in my view, that the spirit allows itself to be crushed, that it bends and ends up succumbing. And yet none of any of this can happen to the sage: he remains erect, bearing any weight (*ep.* 71.25-26).[37]

It is the same attitude that is found in the defensive strategy of Epitectus and Marcus Aurelius, who are both committed to defining the vital space within which the subject may continue to recognize his own identity and own fortitude when confronted with *fortuna*. The wise Stoic evoked by Epitectus is able to distinguish completely between *what is in our power* and *what is not in our power* and thus «does not depend on us.» Internalizing this value is needed for the attainment of true autarchy and inner freedom. In fact, since «what belongs to me» is not outside me but is exclusively «within me», it is clear that also the very moral choice (*proairesis*) for which «I» do one thing rather than its opposite «belongs to me», just because it excludes interference from what is outside me.[38] Thus both the decision and the action that the agent performs belong to him, which is why the greatest attention must be

[35] Perhaps this maxim is attributable to Publilius Syrus, cf. *sent. q*. 74 (Meyer).
[36] Cf. Maso 2006a, 136-47.
[37] Regarding the capacity of resistance of the sage and of the hero that the wise man embodies, cf. Maso 2006a, 32-39; one may recall the hyperbolic image of Hercules who withstands, *immotus* and *inconcussus*, the fire that burns him, *Her. O.* 1740-1744.
[38] Cf. Sorabji 2007, 87-98.

given to the decision-making capacity of the *hēgemonikon*, so that it is possible to arrive at a correct identification of that to which we must give our assent and for which we are truly responsible, a veritable control of desire[39] and – lastly – a reliable assessment of what our duty is.[40]

Already before Epictetus, Seneca had fallen back on a defensive strategy of this type. And in this, his sage even aspired to compete with god, as has been highlighted. He rightly claims:

> *Non servio deo, sed assentior. Ex animo illum, non quia necesse est, sequor.*
>
> I do not merely obey god, but I agree with his decisions. I follow him because my soul wills it, and not because I must (*ep.* 96.2).[41]

The above statement is a clear assertion of our capacity freely to accept what we cannot change, to acknowledge that we are not exempt from the laws of nature. It is in this sense that the sage makes his own fate by accepting that the fate of the cosmos lies in god's hands. And this is exactly what is inferred from the concluding verse of Cleanthes' famous prayer to Zeus, a verse which only Seneca conserves for us: «Fate leads the willing; the unwilling she drags (*ducunt volentem fata, nolentem trahunt*)», *ep.* 117.11.[42]

3. *Provocative strategy*

With this typically 'defensive' Stoic attitude which in certain respects aims to reduce difficulties to a minimum and, at the same time, «deproblematize» the wise man's conception of life, Seneca combines another type of strategy, which is at once constructive and combative and thus underlies an undeniably provocative approach. In other words, Seneca does not intend to forgo pursuing one's path in an *original* way. Not only are there references to the independence in one's study and the self-proclaimed quest of the philosopher, as this evidence assures:

> *Quid ergo? non ibo per priorum vestigia? ego vero utar via vetere, sed si propiorem planioremque invenero, hanc muniam. Qui ante nos ista moverunt non domini nostri*

[39] Nussbaum 1996, 484-510.

[40] Arr., *Epict.* 2.5.4-5; Epict., *ench.* 1.1-3; *ench.* 5-11; *ench.* 30-45. With regard to the distinction between the control of assent, of desire and of action in both Epitectus and Marcus Aurelius, cf. Hadot 1992.

[41] Cf. *prov.* 5.6: «I am not compelled at all, I bear nothing against my will, I am not a servant of divinity but I give my assent: all the more so because I know that each event takes place according to a law that is given and established for ever (*nihil cogor, nihil patior invitus nec servio deo sed assentior, eo quidem magis, quod scio omnia certa et in aeternum dicta lege decurrere*).»

[42] Cf. Bobzien 1998, 346-51; Sharples 2005, 197-214. It has been argued, plausibly to my mind, that the line is Seneca's addition: Dahlmann 1977, 342-51.

> *sed duces sunt. Patet omnibus veritas; nondum est occupata; multum ex illa etiam futuris relictum est.*
>
> What then? Shall I not follow in the footsteps of those who came before me? Of course I can follow the old road, but if I find a faster, more level one, I will make it passable. Those who before us have devoted their energies to these problems are not our masters but out guides. The truth is open to everybody, nobody has taken possession of it yet; most of it has been left to our descendants (*ep.* 33.11).

What takes a central position is a moral and psychological need, by virtue of which each individual is placed before his own future and the choice he must make, projecting himself beyond acquired experience or reason, in which one usually trusts. It is as if Seneca wished to sound out the borderland between the rational system (*ratio*) that governs the universe and the *impetus* that pushes in the direction of uncontrolled action.[43] The fact of asserting a decision that is totally *in nostra potestate*[44] implies, as a consequence, abandoning the certainty that rationality purports to guarantee; it is accompanied by *risk* of an adventure that might have dramatic consequences. One thinks of the adventure of Phaëton, son of the Sun, who, against his father's judgment and against every kind of wise caution in the face of danger, decided to tackle fortune just like a sailor who holds the tiller steady (*prov.* 5.9: *contra fortunam illi tenendus est cursus*). The decision is explicit and conscious:

> *Haec cum audisset ille generosus adulescens, "Placet" inquit "via, escendo. Est tanti per ista ire casuro"* […] *Post haec ait: "Iunge datos currus; his quibus deterreri me putas, incitor. Libet illic stare ubi ipse Sol trepidat." Humilis et inertis est tuta sectari: per alta virtus it.*
>
> Upon hearing these words, that generous youth said: «I like this path: I shall ascend. It is worth traveling these regions, even though there is the risk of falling down» […] He then added: «Harness the horses that you have given me to the chariot: What you thought you would frighten me with excites me instead. I like to stand upright, where even the Sun trembles.» It befits a person of low, cowardly status to follow the safe path: Virtue moves through lofty regions (*prov.* 5.10).[45]

[43] Cf. the crucial evidence quoted above (*de ira* 1.7.4): *Quarundam rerum initia in nostra potestate sunt, ulteriora nos vi sua rapiunt nec regressum relinquunt*. It should be remembered that, unlike Zeno, Seneca thought that not only the *impetus* but also the emotions are not *immediately* controllable by the agent.

[44] Whereas Dihle (1982, 123-44) thought he had found in Augustine the effective «inventor of our notion of will» (144), Frede (2011, 66-88) suggested that it was Epictetus. In my view, the modern concept of free will (*i.e.* the free will accompanied by the acquisition of responsibility for the agent) is already active in Seneca.

[45] I have returned to this passage also on another occasion: Maso 2011, 16-18 and, in a more general study of the philosophical category of 'risk,' Maso 2006b, 39-44.

On the one hand, these decisions are due to the presence of external and internal tensions capable of deceiving or forcing the rational capacity to engage in action; on the other, they allow space for emotions and, in this way, stretch beyond the allowed limit. In a positive light, this assertion of freedom in deciding appears to translate the spiritual need of the soul to free itself from the slavery of the body.

> *Corpora obnoxia sunt et adscripta dominis, mens quidem sui iuris, quae adeo libera et vaga est, ut ne ab hoc quidem carcere cui inclusa est teneri queat quo minus inpetu suo utatur et ingentia agat et in infinitum comes caelestibus exeat.*
>
> Bodies are vulnerable and assigned to their masters; but the mind is autonomous, so free and independent that even the prison in which it is confined cannot prevent it from making use of its own power to plan great deeds and from departing for the infinite as a companion of the celestial bodies (*ben.* 3.20.1).

In this passage Seneca refers to the mind (*i.e.* the *rational* aspect of the soul) as free and independent as self-governing (*sui iuris*). This latter term denotes the legal autonomy of the adult free man, in contrast with the subjection of the slave or the minor under legal domination or tutelage. It is a mind that is ready to act according to its own will, perhaps listening to the emotions, and yet once again able to *respondere* to itself.

It is possible also to envisage a negative perspective (or at least one that is more difficult to connect with positive moral values). Seneca commits himself strongly to exploring it, doing so above all in his tragedies. Indeed, in them it is precisely the play between a) the inner urges and emotions, b) the *suspension* of the rational capacity that is able to control them, and c) its *re-establishment* which constitutes the inner dynamic of the tragic action. Consider, for instance, the story of *Phaedra*. The heroine is aware of what happens to her, but she is even more aware of not being able to take «sane decisions (*sana consilia*)» (180) once «she by dalliance nourished the sweet torment.»[46] Phaedra asks herself: «What power can reason have? It is violent passion that wins and dominates.»[47] She is aware that her Nurse's admonitions are sincere, but exclaims: «Violent passion forces me to follow evil. My soul runs away headlong and in vain it seeks to return in quest of sane decisions.»[48] Nevertheless, with regard to the pressure of the irrational impulse of amorous passion, there is a moment in which Phaedra realizes that it is up to her, and no one else, to decide what to do, thus establishing the 'beginning' (*initium*) of a new process. The appeals

[46] *Phaed.* 134: *blandiendo dulce nutrivit malum*.

[47] *Phaed.* 184: *quid ratio possit? vicit ac regnat furor*.

[48] *Phaed.* 178-180: *sed furor cogit sequi / peiora, vadit animus in praeceps sciens / remeatque frustra sana consilia appetens*. Cf. the passage already quoted from *de ira* 1.7.4 in which Seneca mentions the heavy body which, like Chrysippus's cylinder, falls without control.

to marital fidelity and family honor are to no avail: Phaedra decides[49] to give her assent to amorous passion and to carry her fate consistently to extreme consequences.

Aude, anime, tempta, perage mandatum tuum.
Intrepida constent verba: qui timide rogat
docet negare. Magna pars sceleris mei
olim peracta est, serus est nobis pudor:
amavimus nefanda.

Take courage, my soul, try it, carry through your task.
May your words be courageous and firm: whoever makes timid request,
produces a denial. Most of my crime
was put into action long before; for us, it is too late for shame.
We have fallen in love with something nefarious (*Phaed.* 592-596).

The tragic *crescendo* is accentuated chiefly at the moment when Phaedra decides, consciously, to pursue her criminal intent and also to throw unjust suspicion for the incestuous love back on her step-son Hippolytus, after he has rejected her advances and fled, scandalized by the revelation of her ill-omened passion to him. At this point Seneca, through the chorus, comments: «In a disorderly fashion (*ordine nullo*) Fortune, who scatters her gift with a blind eye, favoring the worst, rules human vicissitudes. Dire lust prevails against honest people, deceit (*fraus*) reigns within the halls of the palace» (978-982). There is no doubt that the responsibility for the terrible lie is Phaedra's. She admits as much herself during her final confrontation with Theseus:

Falsa memoravi et nefas,
quod ipsa demens pectore insano hauseram,
mentita finxi.

I have lied to you, and the crime
which I, mad, conceived in my own sick breast,
I falsely invented (*Phaed.* 1192-1194).

In these three marvelous lines, not only does Phaedra assert that she told a lie, but also that she has reconstructed – in an imaginary fashion, by lying – her behavior: she had been herself, mad, who had conceived the crime in her own sick heart.

The acknowledgment of responsibility at the rational level occurs when also the irrational side of human action is *rationally* and definitively claimed by the agent.

[49] The question of subjective decision and the role of the causal chain in the Stoic doctrine remain a problem within the corpus of Senecan tragedies. A recent analysis of this matter is that of Wiener 2006, particularly in the first chapter *Senecas Tragödien im Einflußbereich von stoischer Affekttheorie und hellenistischer Aggressionstherapie* (19-80). I am indebted to Jula Wildberger for this reference. Here I want to thank Jula and Marcia Colish for valuable comments on my paper.

At this point responsibility is transformed immediately into guilt (*culpa*). The Nurse had already disclosed this to Phaedra: «The wrongdoing has been discovered.»[50] It is the guilt, for a nefarious crime, that ought to have «remained secret»; indeed the Nurse and Phaedra remark: «Whether it was us (*i.e.* the Nurse and Phaedra) who were the first to attempt (*ausae*) the nefarious crime, or whether we suffered it, what witness will know if it remains secret?»[51] The verb *audere* reveals what happens: Phaedra and the Nurse dare (*ausae*, 723). Similarly Phaedra alone dares (*aude*, 992), in the same way that Medea dares or Oedipus demands of himself «to do something worthy of [his] crimes.»[52] So it is for Agamemnon, too, for Thyestes, who belongs to a family capable of «daring the undarable», and for Atreus.[53] They dare by opposing themselves to fate exactly as it happens in the case of Phaëton, who has the courage to board his father's chariot, aware that he must keep his course against fortune: *contra fortunam illi tenendus est cursus*, *prov.* 5.9.

It is now clear that, both in the event of a positive and of a negative choice, the claim for autonomy of the agent is presented according to the second part of the scheme set out at the beginning: … free choice – assent – action. And it is significant, as has been highlighted, the fact that *responsibility*, which is implicit in the decision to 'assent' to performing an ill-omened action, is immediately interpreted as *culpa*.[54] The same would apply to a virtuous choice. Either way, the outcome seems to depend less on destiny or *fatum* than on our capacity to judge and to act on our moral options, and to accept the consequence of those choices. The Stoic norm of life in accordance with nature (ὁμολογουμένως τῇ φύσει ζῆν)[55] thus remains a double-edged sword in Seneca's hands. It is proactive as well as defensive,[56] responsible as well as ready to retort «to people, but even to fortune.»[57] The Stoic paradox remains, and Seneca is the philosopher who best articulates its conditions.

[50] *Phaed.* 719: *deprensa culpa est*.
[51] *Phaed.* 723-724: *Ausae priores simus an passae nefas / secreta cum sit culpa, quis testis sciet?*
[52] *Med.* 566: *Nunc aude, incipe!*; *Oed*. 879: *Aliquid aude sceleribus dignum tuis*. Note that I move from a discussion of Phaedra's behavior to observing a feature present in all Senecan tragedies.
[53] *Ag*. 609: *Audetque vita ponere finem*; *Thy*. 20: *inausa audeat*; *Thy*. 284: *audendum est*.
[54] Naturally *culpa* is entailed in the sense of something that one might be called to *respondere* before the judges, in accordance with the meaning of ὑπεύθυνος.
[55] See the Senecan exclamation: «What is the task of a good man? To offer himself to fate. It is a great consolation to be swept away together with the universe.» – *Quid est boni uiri? praebere se fato. Grande solacium est cum universo rapi* (*prov.* 5.8). It is perfectly consistent with the maxims of the early Stoa (*SVF* 3.5).
[56] *Prov.* 5.9: «It should be stronger than fate (*fortiore fato opus est*).»
[57] *De ira* 3.25.4: *nec homini tantum sed ipsi fortunae respondet.* What does the wise man *respond* to fortune? As required by his Stoic philosophy, he retorts: «(Fortune), you can do everything, but you are too small to tarnish my serenity.» – *Omnia licet facias, minor es quam ut serenitatem meam obducas* (*ibid.*).

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