

Seneca's *Epistulæ Morales*

And Stoic Ideas of the Divine in the Human

A Senior Studies Report

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I. Introduction

Seneca has had a great influence over many people throughout the last two thousand years. A man with such an influence needs to be studied to discover what it is about him or his teaching that makes him so interesting to so many people.

Many Christian ideas present themselves throughout his works with this being especially true in his *Epistulæ Morales*. It is amazing that so many ideas that are "good" came from one who had little contact with Christianity yet nonetheless expressed many of its practical morals. What further stupefies the imagination is why he and his philosophy-religion were stopped and condemned a heretic and heresy by men such as St. Augustine when the ideas expressed were inherently in sync with the Church.

After some reading, it was discovered that the metaphysical ideals held by Seneca and the Stoics in many ways contradicted the ideas of the soul and divine in Christianity. In the *Epistulæ Morales* and specifically in Epistle XLI, Seneca talks about this subject. With this and insight from Stoicism and the other Epistles, one may begin to comprehend Seneca's idea of the "God within us."

II. Life and Works

To students of antiquity, he is known as Seneca the Younger. However, his name to the Empire, when he was born in Cordova, Spain, around the year four B.C., was Lucius Annæus Seneca. To contemporary man, he is referred to as simply, "Seneca."

His father's name was Marcus Annæus Seneca, but he himself having been a well-known rhetorician earned the name of "the Rhetor." [One source claims that this is false.¹] Because of his fame in Roman history, he is distinguished from his son by the further name of Seneca the Elder. Helvia was his mother. She is characterized as ". . . a woman of intellect - well trained in philosophy and the liberal arts."² Seneca's interest in rhetoric and philosophy early in his childhood is most likely linked to his parent's education and interests.

Seneca was the second of three sons. His older brother, Novatus, was later known as Iunius Gallio receiving his new name from adoption, a common practice in Rome. Reference to him is made in the Bible as the governor of Achæa during apostolic times. Mela was the name of his younger brother. While he did nothing overtly noteworthy, he did father Lucan, the Roman poet.

Beyond these few facts and the following, much is unknown of Seneca's early life. Some say that his immediate family moved to Rome while he still an infant; others say his aunt - whose husband was the governor in Egypt for Tiberius - took him from Spain to Rome. Regardless, circa A.D. 5, Seneca was in Rome becoming educated.

In his education it appears that he re-acted differently to many different fields. These re-actions foretold exactly what would fascinate Seneca beyond anything and what would not interest him in the least for the rest of his life. For example, at some point in his earlier years, he did go to Egypt to let the climate help him with his many ailments, most notably asthma. While there, nature was one of his favorite things to study. On any account, later in life he was to write *Natural Questions* (*Quæstiones Naturales*) which stilled showed his love for matters of nature.

Obviously then, rhetoric and especially philosophy were very important to him. Besides his parent's interests in these matters, Seneca became very drawn to such philosophers as Fabianus, the Stoic Attalus, and Sotion the Pythagorean. It appears that he became involved in the Pythagorean cult before embracing Stoicism, for the most part.³ This flirting with eastern mysticisms and the divine is something which Seneca did off and on his entire life.

When he was in Egypt obtaining care for his condition, his aunt also helped him along after returning to Rome. Her influence helped Seneca become quæstor in Rome. For a time he built himself quiet a reputation as an orator. Like his older brother, it seems Seneca himself wanted a vibrant political career. This was part of his first downfall. In A.D. 37, Seneca's speaking in the Senate had raised much jealousy from the then new emperor, Caligula. This coupled with his fame, wealth, and writing only enraged the emperor more. Having had the thought to put Seneca to death, he was cajoled by someone in the court not to bother with Seneca because he was ". . . suffering from advanced tuberculosis and it would not be long before he died."⁴ While the imperial court was wrong about his death, Seneca's life was saved for the moment. Even so, he decided to temporarily retire from the political life. Seneca was to face more tragedy during this period. His wife, son, and two of his nephews all died. Also, he most likely wrote some of his early prose works at this time as well as some famous letters. However, no concrete proof exists on the exact date of these works.^{5&6}

It was not many years later when Seneca came under scrutiny and suspicion once again from the emperor. (This time the emperor was Claudius, Caligula's uncle, because

Caligula had been murdered. The year was A.D. 41.) Even though he had been out of public life, Seneca still had acquired ". . . intimate terms . . ." with Caligula's sisters, Iulia Livilla and Agrippina.⁷ No proof exists for more than close friendships; however, Claudius' wife, Messalina, considered Seneca a threat and pushed the story of Seneca and Iulia having an affair. This was enough to convince Claudius to exile both parties. Seneca was the luckier of the two, for, while they were both exiled, Iulia was also killed. Until A.D. 49 Seneca spent his life on the island of Corsica.

In that year Messalina was murdered, and Claudius took Agrippina, his niece, as his wife. Since Agrippina and Seneca knew one another very well, she had him re-called to Rome. When he arrived, he was appointed praetor and placed in the Senate. Also, he was given a special charge by Agrippina to tutor her son, Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus, also known to latter generations as the infamous emperor Nero. She, too, saw the power and fame which Seneca possessed and would use these to her advantage to help with her son's ascendancy to the principate and what she believed would be her control over the Empire.

Claudius was murdered by Agrippina in A.D. 54.

(Apparently, no one had a problem with this action because

nothing was done to Agrippina.) Whether or not Seneca was involved in this assassination is unclear, yet it seems very unlikely that he had his hand in the matter. The only document which gives support for speculation of this sort is the Apocolocyntosis or "Pumpkinification." Seneca wrote this for Nero about the former emperor. It was not a flattering work.

This next period was a glorious time for not only Seneca but for the Empire as well. As the Emperor Traian would one day call it, this time in the Empire's history was unequalled, ". . . the golden age of Imperial Rome."⁸ This time from A.D. 54-59 is known also as the *quinquennium Neronis*. Between Nero's excesses and Agrippina's lunges for power, someone had to keep the government in order. Seneca, as one of two of young Nero's confidants, held a remarkable position. The other, Burrus, had also been placed in position by Agrippina to tutor the young Nero in the art of strategy and war since he was a soldier. Together, these two not only kept Nero and Agrippina in checks, but they also made sure that the imperial government continued to run smoothly. This included reforms on all levels of the government. As Dio said, "The two of them 'took over total power, and exercised it, to the utmost of their ability, in

the best and justest way conceivable, thus each alike arousing all men's approval.'"⁹

So the Empire went, onward, with Seneca as the *amicus principis*, by and large, making policy and leading the way with an emperor perfectly content on listening to his teacher. Seneca also kept his Senatorial position at this time. He gained fame as well as fortune during this time. While most everything appeared to be going well for Seneca, at the same time he was amassing an army of enemies which would work against him in the near future.

Again, one of the sisters of Caligula was to stick into Seneca like a thorn. Agrippina's greed for power and exception that it was not going to happen through Nero, caused her to threaten the placing of Britannicus, the son of Claudius by Messalin, onto the throne. This did not settle well with Nero; so, he had Britannicus killed. Tension still existed within the inner circle of the court. This tension was once again relieved when Nero had his mother killed in A.D. 59. While Seneca and Burrus appear to have no direct involvement in her death, they at least knew about it. Seneca especially helped with a cover-story to the Senate which tried to implicate Agrippina in assassination plans of her son.

Seneca did all he could until the death of Burrus in A.D. 62, a death which was suspicious. After this, he could no longer keep the government in balance, especially when men like Publius Suillius Rufus (Suillius) - one very jealous of Seneca - and Tigellinus - replacement of Burrus and equally unscrupulous as Suillius - and Nero's mistress, Poppæa - who wanted Burrus and Seneca gone just as she had talked Nero into murdering his mother - were lusting for control of the Empire. With all these factors in mind, he went to Nero to ask for retirement.

His rationale was to return to his studies here at the latter part of his life. He even went so far as to offer return of all the riches which he possessed. The records are contradictory whether or not Nero accepted Seneca's offer (Most likely, it was rejected.), but, in any case, he left the public arena and avoided Rome. Indeed, he did study these last few years and turned out the greater corpus of his prose work. Eventually during this time, he did relinquish all of his riches, probably for a margin of safety.

In A.D. 65 the great Pisonian conspiracy occurred which may or may not have included Seneca. This conspiracy was done so that Nero might be removed from power and Piso would be placed on the throne. Regardless, Seneca's very implication in the matter gave Nero an excuse to execute his

former teacher and advisor. Seneca was instructed to commit suicide, an account told in detail by Tacitus.¹⁰

Thus ended the life of Seneca. However, not before he left ample amounts of writing. He has many plays to his credit, most of which are based on other works, but include *Medea*, *Hercules*, and *Agamemnon*. Also, at least three epigrams may certainly be attributed to Seneca, with many others possible. His prose list is much more lengthy.

Besides different letters and treatises written to individuals throughout his life, such as *De ira* and *Ad Marciam de consolatione*, he also wrote the above mentioned *Natural Questions*. However, his last grouping of works known to many as "his *maximum opus*"¹¹ is the *Ad Lucilium Epistolæ Morales*, or the *Moral Epistles*. These 124 extant letters represent not only his view and eventual transformation of Stoicism but also his perfecting of his pointed style. Seneca has been harshly criticized by such men as Suillius who claimed that the ideals set forth by Seneca like a lamp in a light house for all men to follow is offset by Seneca's blatant hypocrisy of speaking one way and living another, e.g., his enormous amount of wealth and riches during a large part of his life. Also, Quintilian is also a critic who, a generation after Seneca, started an active attack against the unorthodox style which Seneca had started. Quintilian tried

everything he could to purify Senecan prose style from Roman literature.

In any case, Senecan prose, especially his *Moral Epistles*, has enjoyed wide reading and admiration by many time periods and by many peoples. Contemporary philosophy of the 1990s is one of the more notable examples.

III. Epistle XLI

XLI.

SENECA LVCILIO SVO SALVTEM

¹Facis rem optimam et tibi salutarem, si, ut scribis, perseveras ire ad bonam mentem, quam stultum est optare, cum possis a te impetrare. Non sunt ad caelum elevandæ manus nec exorandus ædituus, ut nos ad aurem simulacri, quasi magis exaudiri possimus, admittat; prope est a te deus, tecum est, intus est. ²Ita dico, Lucili: sacer intra nos spiritus sedet, malorum bonorumque nostrorum observator et custos. Hic prout a nobis tractatus est, ita nos ipse tractat. Bonus vero vir sine deo nemo est; an potest aliquis supra fortunam nisi ab illo adiutus exugere? Ille dat consilia magnifica et erecta. In unoquoque virorum bonorum

Quis dues incertum est, habitat deus.

³Si tibi occurrerit vetustis arboribus et solitam altitudinem egressis frequens lucus et conspectum caeli ramorum aliorum alios protegentium summovens obtentu, illa proceritas silvæ et secretum loci et admiratio umbræ in aperto tam densæ atque continuæ fidem tibi numinis faciet. Si quis specus saxi penitus exesis montem suspenderit, non manu factus, sed naturalibus causis in tantam laxitatem excavatus, animum tuum quadam religionis suspicione percutiet. Magnorum fluminum capita veneramur; subita ex abdito vasti amnis eruptio aras habet; coluntur aquarum calentium fontes, et stagna quædam vel ⁴opacitas vel immensa

altitudo sacrauit. Si hominem videris interritum periculis, intactum cupiditatibus, inter adversa felicem, in mediis tempestatibus placidum, ex superiore loco homines videntem, ex æquo deos, non subibit te veneratio eius? Non dices: "Ista res maior est altiorque quam ut credi similis huic, in quo est corpusculo possit? Vis isto divina ⁵descendit." Animum excellentem, moderatum, omnia tamquam minora transeuntem, quicquid timemus optamusque ridentem, cælestis potentia agitat. Non potest res tanta sine adminiculo numinis stare. Itaque maiore sui parte illic est, unde descendit. Quemadmodum radii solis contingunt quidem terram, sed ibi sunt, unde mittuntur; sic animus magnus ac sacer et in hoc demissus, ut propius divina nossemus, conversatur quidem nobiscum, sed hæret origini suæ; illinc pendet, illuc spectat ac nititur, nostris tamquam melior interest.

⁶Quis est ergo hic animus? Qui nullo bono nisi suo nitet; quid enim stultius quam in homine aliena laudare? Quid eo dementius, qui ea miratur, quæ ad alium transferri protinus possunt? Non faciunt meliorem equum aurei freni. Aliter leo aurata iuba mittitur, dum contractatur et ad patientiam recipiendi ornamentum cogitur fatigatus, aliter incultus, integri spiritus; hic scilicet inpetu acer, qualem illum natura esse voluit, speciosus ex horrido, cuius hic decor est, non sine timore aspici, præfertur illi languido et bratteato.

⁷Nemo gloriari nisi suo debet. Vitem laudamus, si fructu palmites onerat, si ipsa pondere ad terram eorum, quæ

tulit, adminicula deducit; num quis huic illam præferret vitem, cui aureæ uvæ, aurea folia dependent? Propria virtus est in vite fertilitas, in homine quoque id laudandum est, quod ipsius est. Familiam formosam habet et domum pulchram, multum serit, multum fenerat; nihil horum in ipso est, sed circa ipsum. Lauda in illo, quod nec eripi potest nec dari, quod proprium hominis est. Quæris quid sit? Animus et ratio in animo perfecta. Rationale enim animal est homo. Consummatur itaque bonum eius, si id inplevit, cui nascitur. Quid est autem, quod ab illo ratio hæc exigat? Rem facillimam, secundum naturam suam vivere. Sed hanc difficilem facit communis insania; in vitia alter alterum trudemus. Quomodo autem revocari ad salutem possunt, quos nemo retinet, populus impellit? Vale.

XLI.

SENECA (GIVES) HIS GREETING TO LUCILIUS

[ON THE GOD WITHIN US]

¹You do the best and healthful thing for you, if, as you write, you persist to go to a sound mind. Since you are able to obtain it from yourself, it is stupid to desire. Neither must our hands be raised to heaven, nor must the temple attendant be implored so that we may approach the ear of the likeness, as though we were able to be heard better. God is near to you; he is with you; he is within you. ²Thus, I say, Lucilius: A sacred spirit sits inside us, an observer and guardian of our good and bad deeds. Just as this spirit is lead by us, thus we ourselves are lead. Truly, no one is a good man without god. Also, is someone able to rise up above fortune unless having been helped by him? God gives up-right and splendid consultation. In each of the good men:

A god lives; which god is unclear.

³If a crowded wood, with trees ancient and also having a height beyond the usual, is happened upon by you, removing the sight of heaven with sheltering cover of mingling branches. That way, the height of the forest and the secretness of the location and the wonder of the thick,

unbroken shade in the open so much makes, by faith, a presence of a spirit to you. If any cave, with its rocks having been corroded internally, not having been made by hand but, in such roominess, having been hollowed out by natural causes, may support a mountain. Further, it will strike your soul to intimation of awe. We venerate the heads of great rivers; a sudden eruption of a stream from a secret, desolate source has altars; fountains of warm water are worshipped, and either certain dark pools or certain ones immense in height man consecrates. ⁴If you see a man undaunted by dangers, with untouched eagerness, happy in misfortune, placid in the midst of a storm, looking on men from a higher place and on the gods from an equal place, will not veneration of him come over you? Will you not say: "That trait is greater and higher than that which is able to be believed to this same puny body, in which this character dwells? You see, a divine force descended on that one." ^{5A} heavenly power sets into motion an excellent and well regulated soul, just as one having crossed all small experiences, laughing at whatever we fear and hope. So great a thing is not able to stand without support of the presence of a spirit. And thus, a greater of its part is that from whence it descended, like, indeed, how the radiation of the sun reaches the earth. However, they are sent here from

whence they were sent; in this way the great and holy soul is involved with us, indeed. I mean having been dropped so that we might know the godly more closely, but it clings to its origins. From there it hangs down, it catches sight of and strives to that place, and it may ride in between the two as a better.

⁶Therefore, what is this soul? It is one which shines with no good except its own. For what is more foolish than the foreign to praise in a man? What is more insane to him who admires the foreign? What is more insane which, straight on, may be able to be transferred to another? Golden bits do not make a better horse. A lion, one with a mane decorated with gold, is sent, and another uncivilized lion with an untouched spirit is sent. While the decorated one was trained and, having been fatigued, was considered to resignation by necessarily accepting the ornamentation; of course, this fierce one of such a kind nature wanted him to be, handsome from awfulness (to which this is beauty), not having been glimpsed without fear, is preferred by attack to the weak and gilded one.

⁷No one ought to be glorified without his own. We praise a vine, if the branches are loaded down by fruit; if weighty, the supports of them lead to the earth which they bare; surely, would any man prefer that vine from which

golden grapes and golden leaves hang down? The very own virtue in a vine is fertility , and also it must be praised in man which is his own. He has a beautiful household, has a handsome estate, plants much, and invests much; nothing of this one is in himself, but it surrounds him. ⁸Praise in that one which is able neither to be snatched away nor to be given, which is the very own of man. You ask what this may be? It is the soul and reason having been completed in the soul. For man is a rational creature. And thus, the good of him is perfected if that for which he was produced is satisfied. ⁹Moreover, what is it which this reason demands from him? The easiest thing to live according to his nature. But this insanity of the community is made difficult; we push out one another into corruptions. Moreover, in what ways are they able to be re-called to health, and the populous push that which no one holds back? Good-bye.

IV. Summary of Epistle XLI

Epistle forty-one's title, as given by Gummere, is "On the God within Us."¹² When Seneca wrote the *Moral Epistles*, he neither necessarily wrote them in the order which they are found today nor did he give each letter a title. However, a theme is definitely present in most if not all the letters. In this particular letter, Seneca's topic deals with the divine in man.

One must break through the many metaphors which Seneca chooses to use to bring about his points. So, careful maneuvering is the key to get to the core of his *Epistles*. In the first part of the letter, he simply states that, "God is near to you; he is with you; he is within you." He clarifies this by explaining to Lucilius that ". . . a holy spirit sits inside us." Immediately, one may see the metaphor used for this holy spirit: god.

"God" is not directly talked about after this first discourse. However, what exactly was Seneca saying when he used "deus"? In the Lewis and Short *A Latin Dictionary*, its fundamental meaning and the only one applicable in this case is the one which translates it as, ". . . a god, a deity . . ." ¹³ Seneca himself switches between these two senses of the word when, in the first section of the epistle he quotes a Virgilian passage from the *Aeneid*, which has been understood

as god for this passage. Naturally, then, one would translate the related items as such. However, in the next section of the epistle, he uses "*numinis*" which means roughly the "presence of a spirit." To further confuse the situation, remember, Seneca also talked about a "sacred spirit."

Then, he uses "*divina*" to talk about this thing which he is speaking. Its meaning is somewhat more extended to say, ". . . belonging to a deity, divine . . . of divine origin . . ." ¹⁴ Now, it appears Seneca's intentions were to talk about this "dwelling god" in the sense of some type of deity more than in the sense of a god. The difference is not great, but it is important because it seems that the idea which he is trying to express may become confused without proper clarification.

The next reference to this "*deus*" occurs immediately after this last one. He talks about a heavenly power, a "*potentia caelestis*." This, again, ties into the idea of some type of deity in the sense of a force.

Now at this point in the letter, Seneca uses a new word to express this idea of the divine in the human: *animus*. When one refers to the possible meanings of this word, he will find many different definitions given. Two definitions present themselves as possibilities for Seneca's purposes.

The first defines it as pertaining to the Divine Mind, namely God.¹⁵ The second one's definition states, "In a general sense, *the rational soul in man* (in [opposition] to the body, *corpus*, and to the physical life, *anima*)."¹⁶ While the first one talks about God, it does not touch upon what Seneca had been talking about in the epistle.

Moreover, some translators have translated the *deus* which occurs a few times at the beginning of the letter as the one true God. It is true that at some points in his life Seneca did stray from his Stoic beliefs and mixed himself up with cults which may have held beliefs in a monotheistic "God." However, with the evidence, which Seneca himself provides in the letter, it is easy for one to see that this is not the case.

First, the term *deus*, as defined, may mean either a god or deity. No specific reference to a specific deity is given. While it is true, if a parallel would be made between *deus* and *animus*, it is possible that the meaning of *animus* might be taken as the former, the one which states it to be the Divine Mind. Then, using *deus* to mean a monotheistic God, the one true God, would make sense. This is not the case. From the discussion of this divine entity earlier, Seneca did not have this in mind. If anything, he was

leaning more toward the deity side of the definition instead of the god side.

Further, the quoted passage from Vergil most definitely talks about god, not only because this has been the tradition but also because it is commonly held that the archæic Romans did not believe in monotheistic gods. So, if one were to interpret the two differently, a major contradiction would occur, even if the case were made that Seneca was only drawing forth a metaphor.

Finally, Seneca is not talking about the Christian God. While many of his ideas are equal to Christian ideals and many in Christianity have found him to be a great source for moral ideals, especially in the *Epistles*, ". . . his connexion with the early Church has been disproved." Also, he was a ". . . pagan author."¹⁷

Animus, again, is in reference to this deity upon which he dwells. An important message which come across is that it comes from what would best be described as the heavens. It is so much a part of the godly, who dwell in the heavens, that it feels drawn back to them. Indeed, to fit the definition of *animus*, Seneca says, "Will you not say, 'That trait is greater and higher than that which is able to be believed to this same puny body, in which this character

dwells?" This separation appears to re-inforce that this soul is not earthly.

Then, something of a basic idea of man is presented in this letter. In man a part exists which Seneca chooses to call the soul. It is related to a deity, if not a deity itself. It being a deity or at least having the origins of a deity makes it constantly keep in contact with the heavens. This is all done so that man may know the good because, without this soul, man cannot know the good nor achieve it.

These points are stated in the epistle. However, it is very much a dual-edged sword that Seneca is wielding. To hold such views, the body seems to be secondary to this divinity. Also, it seems to be the evil part, since man is soul and body, sometimes good and sometimes bad, and the soul is the good, then the body is necessarily evil. "Man is a rational creature."¹⁸ Other bodily things, not "bodies" in particular, but things un-divine such as external goods are very much frowned upon by Seneca. This is especially made evident with his two metaphors, one dealing with the two lions and the other dealing with the comparison of grape plants.

Even with these directly said thoughts and implied thoughts, some ambiguity remains. A clear distinction is never made between body and soul. Seneca talks like the very

essence of a man is the soul and not the body. Confusion exists by what is implied. At one point in the epistle, he talks about how man must rid himself of externals to become himself for he must "live according to his nature." This is what "reason demands from him." Yet, earlier, Seneca tells how this spirit "sits inside" one, how it ". . . comes down in order that [man] may have a nearer knowledge of divinity . . ." and how it ". . . does indeed associate with [man]." How can this soul be both something within man and also the very essence of who he is?

Seneca did have an idea of a soul dwelling in man in this letter. He did hold that the soul is related to the divine and it plays some facet in the lives of man, especially in achieving goodness, and, thereby, perfection.

V. Roman Stoicism in the First Century A.D.

Stoicism, itself, was founded by Zeno of Citium, a Greek, around the year 313 B.C.. He had moved to Athens by this time. This marks not only the beginning of Stoicism but also the first of three periods within Stoicism: the Early Stoa.

The entire system must be taken as a whole, or one will not understand it. It set about discovering three different parts. The first was logic. This itself was divided into sub-parts, soon becoming a very intricate system. For their logic, the soul was viewed as a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, ". . . and in order for it to know, there is need for perception."¹⁹

Another part in which they delved was ethics. Everything was bad, in a sense, except virtue. Therefore, in man's completing of himself, he would necessarily want to acquire virtue. All things are bad which lead away from virtue, e.g., passions.

Empiricism is a driving force in this system. This leads to the next area which is physics. Having been empiricists, this necessarily made them materialistic. Also, determinism is thrown in the mix. What type of cosmology can come from this? As far as the divine is concerned, in this Early Stoa, "God" was present, a monistic God which was

material, and "He" was the ". . . Consciousness of the world."²⁰ Some devotion was given to this Divine Reason in different forms. It was anything but a common practice.

Finally, man is a rational animal. He must live according to nature in order to reach perfection of the soul. This is what is truly sought after and why worldly things mean very little except as a tool to rid oneself of them. Thus nature and reason go hand-in-hand down the path of Stoicism. By using these two variables, one may find truth.

In the Middle Stoa, the second part, these philosophical theories made their way to Rome. The theory became more eclectic than in the earlier period. Platonic and Aristotelian ideas influenced the Stoic thinkers at this time. Also, some looked at applied ethics more.

The last period, Late Stoa, is where one finds Seneca. This part wanted nothing to do with theory; it searched for the practical way to live, to achieve virtue. This is an extension of what was started in the Middle Stoa. However, it came to full blossom at this time.

Seneca is definitely one of the most famous of his time in the arena of Stoic philosophy. The *Oxford Classical Dictionary* describes Seneca very nicely.

We also find writers less interested in philosophical argument than in presenting Stoicism

as an attitude or way of life. The letters and essays of L. Annæus Seneca . . . tend to edifying and moralizing discussion and give little indication of the philosophical structure of their positions.²¹

This, indeed, is the main thrust of Seneca: how to live the virtuous life. If one wishes to find some theory in the *Epistles*, he need not look any other place than XLI. Confusion may exist in trying to tear apart what is presented.

A monotheism is in many of the Stoic writings. However, as XLI shows, it is not the type which the Christian God is. A very fine line divides these two ideas. Dualism may even come into play if one is not careful. Seneca believed that God was material yet transcending. This tries to explain many confusing aspects of what Seneca presents to the reader. This idea also continues for the soul. While it is material, it is transcendent, an idea which Seneca does not make clear in XLI.

These ideas must not be confused with any true idea of Seneca's total belief in one true God. What he did was to transform Stoicism into a spiritual philosophy with no true worshipped deity. The sacred was the "god within," and it was worshipped by perfecting it. This, of course, is the soul. The most telling sign of this is Seneca's continued

thought back to the pagan gods and goddesses, some of whom are mentioned in the *Epistles*.

As far as basic understanding of other views, it is easy to see how the body would be viewed negatively since it incases the divine in man. The external goods which keeps one back from virtue give pleasure and comfort to the body. One may also see the important part that reason plays, as well as philosophy, in order that one may perfect. So, this all leads to the idea of transcendence.

This is most obviously seen in XLI when Seneca talks about from where the soul comes. It is important to note, when talking about external goods, that Seneca like many other Stoics did not view them as neither good nor bad. They must be put to good use to bring about what Seneca calls in the letter as man living according to his nature - the virtue of the *animus*.

VI. Relevant Passages in Other Letters

Remember, a holistic approach is suggested for Stoicism at all; it is required for Seneca. This is for two reasons: 1) his eclecticism, and 2) his focus on the practical rather than theoretical. However, bits and pieces of his coherent ideas are scattered throughout the existing when dealing with the divine.

In the *Epistles*, many snippets exist which uncover a piece of evidence for Stoic and Senecan beliefs in the divine. To touch on all of these would be very close to impossible. Also, many may be taken out of context, read and interpreted wrongly. Therefore, it is only the longer and relevant about which will be commented.

Epistle XXXI contains much information about the divine. If it is not looked at carefully, one may confuse what is said about what Gummere translates as "God." However, the important part to gather is:

Quod si occupas, incipis deorum socius esse . . .²²

Because if you seize [the good], you begin to be an associate of the gods . . .

By attaining the good, man completes his nature. This nature is perfection of the soul. Therefore, association with the gods occurs since the soul is perfected; namely, it acts like

it should: something which is divine and not bound by the corporeal.

In direct relation to LXI, XXXI.11 contains a wonderful passage.

Animus, sed hic rectus, bonus, magnus. Quid aliud voces hunc quam deum in corpore humano hospitantem? Hic animus tam in equitem Romanum quam in libertinum, quam in servum potest cadere. Quid est enim eques Romanus aut libertinus aut servus? Nomina ex ambitione aut ex iniuria nata. Subsillire in cælum ex angulo licet. Exurge modo

et te quoque dignum
Fingo deo.

It is a soul, - but the soul that is upright, good, and great. What else could you call such a soul than a god dwelling as a guest in a human body? A soul like this may descend into a Roman knight just as well as into a freedman's son or a slave. For what is a Roman knight, or a freedman's son, or a slave? They are mere titles, born of ambition or of wrong. One may leap to heaven from the very slums. Only rise:

And mould thyself to kinship with thy God.²³

Here, the parallels between the two epistles are very clear. Again, Seneca mentions that the soul is a god dwelling inside man. This not only links the soul to divinity, but places the body on a different level with the soul. Perfecting this "god within" only helps the soul attain its natural end: going back to the place from whence it came, namely, heaven where all divine things originate.

Epistle LXXIII.16 also mentions *deus* coming into man. Finally, XCII mentions how the soul yearns to ". . . desire equality with the gods."²⁴ Thus, the *animus* is a divine substance very much like the gods if not a god itself. It yearns to return to its origins. Again, this must be accomplished by attaining good: virtue. Seneca also comments on how this is to be accomplished.

Seneca many times over mentions in the letter how this perfection is to take place. Philosophy will accomplish this task for the individual. This philosophy must be practical for it to be of any use to man. Epistles XXXIX.3-5, L.5-6, and LIII.11 - which makes specific references to one becoming like the gods.

Epistle XLVIII.11 explains this very clearly.

Hoc enim est, quod mihi philosophia promittit, ut parem deo faciat. Ad hoc invitatus sum, ad hoc veni; fidem præsta.

For that is exactly what philosophy promises to me, that I shall be made equal to God. For this I have been summoned, for this purpose have I come. Philosophy, keep your promise!²⁵

Philosophy attains the ends of the *animus*; at least this is what Seneca hopes. By one becoming equal to "God," he may perfect his nature. This is for what man was made: finding

his way back from whence he came; the soul returning to its origins.

What exactly the soul is, in metaphysical and physical terms, is not talked about in great detail in the letters. Two specific refernces do present themselves. The first is in Epistle CVI.5. Seneca clearly states, "*Nam et hoc corpus est.*" (For, also, this [the soul] is corporeal.) This may first appear as a blaring contradiction to everything previously stated about the *animus*. Seneca goes on to describe in further detail this construction.

. . . sic animus, qui ex tenuissimo constat, deprehendi non potest nec intra corpus effligi, sed beneficio subtilitatis suæ per ipsa, quibus premitur, erumpit. Quomodo fulmini, etiam cum latissime percussit ac fulsit, per exiguum foramen est reditus, sic animo, qui adhuc tenuior est igne, per omne corpus fuga est.²⁶

. . . similarly the soul, which consists of the subtlest particles, cannot be arrested or destroyed inside the body, but, by virtue of its delicate substance, it will rather escape through the very object by which it is being crushed. Just as lightening, no matter how widely it strikes and flashes, makes its return through a narrow opening, so the soul, which is still subtler than fire, has a way of escape through any part of the body.²⁷

So, what exactly is said with this seemingly corporeal soul? Remembering that the Stoics believed in materialism, this point of view is more understandable. How is this new

facet of the soul rectified? As Seneca himself explains, small particles composed the soul. The effect Seneca had on Stoicism was in part this redefining of a material soul as transcendent. Coupling this with the Stoic belief that all the divine were "physical stuff," this view fits in the Stoic system very easily. Whether or not it is true is another matter altogether, but its coherence seems very sound and in line with the Stoic beliefs.

In this Epistle LVII.9, Seneca also addresses the issues of immortality of this *animus*. Very clearly he states:

Itaque de illo quidem certum habe: si superstes est corpori, præteri illum nullo genere posse, propter quod non perit, quoniam nulla immortalitas cum exceptione est nec quicquam noxium æterno est.

We therefore come to this question, - whether the soul can be immortal. But be sure of this: if the soul survives the body after the body is crushed, the soul can in no wise be crushed out, precisely because it does not perish; for the rule of immortality never admits of exceptions, and nothing can harm that which is everlasting.²⁸

So, he explains himself and his view on immortality rather succinctly.

This has been but a brief overview of these works to Lucilius. *Animus* is referred to many times throughout the *Epistles*. It does appear that the soul is looked at as a divine substance waiting, indeed, to leave this world, not

because the world is bad but because the place from whence it
came is the better if not the best of all.

VII. Conclusion

Seneca influenced many during his life and many since his death. He presented a new style to Latin readers and authors as well as a new way of looking at his contemporary Stoicism, an effect which drew men like Neitzche as well as some philosophers in the 1990s. While he mostly talked upon practically living out what he believed, at least when it comes to things divine he had a coherent belief.

The *animus*, being divine, comes and dwells in man. This is the soul. It is what one must perfect to fulfill his nature so that this soul may return to its place of origin: the heavens with other divine things. These words from Campbell sum up much of what has been discussed:

In statements of man's kinship with a beneficent, even loving god and of a belief in conscience as the divinely inspired "inner light of the spirit," [Seneca's] attitudes are religious beyond anything in Roman state religion, in his day little more than a withered survival of formal worship paid to a host of ancient gods and goddesses. Christian writers have not been slow to recognize the remarkably close parallels between isolated sentences in Seneca's writings and verses of the Bible. On the other hand the word "God" or "the gods" was used by the philosophers more as a time-honored and convenient expression than as standing for any indispensable or even surely identifiable component of the Stoic system. And the tendency of Stoicism was always to exalt man's importance in the universe rather to abase him before a higher authority. The hope of immortality was occasionally held out but Seneca does not play on it. To him as to most Stoics virtue was to be

looked on as its own reward and vice as its own punishment.²⁹

It is important for one to look at these words as well as Seneca's own words to grasp what he and other Stoics meant. The Stoics valued grammar and language to probably understand one another. Without out knowledge of the Latin language, one could very well become confused by someone's translation that either takes this knowledge for granted or does not realize the implications himself.

Most likely, Seneca's influence will live for another two thousand years. Truly, "his spirit lives among us."

Notes

¹ *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature*, vol. II, *Latin Literature*, ed. E. J. Kenney and W. V. Clausen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 513.

² Anna Lydia Motto, *Seneca: Moral Epistles - Selected and Edited with Introduction, Notes and Vocabulary* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 5.

³ Lucius Annæus Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic: Epistulæ Morales ad Lucilium*, trans. Robin Campbell (Great Britain: Hazell, Watson & Viney Ltd.), 7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵ *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd ed., ed. Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (New York: Oxford university Press, 1996), 96.

⁶ Motto, 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Ibid., 7.

⁹ Campbell, 10.

¹⁰ Motto, 8.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Lucius Annæus Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulæ Morales*, vol. I, trans. Richard M. Gummere, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1917), 273.

¹³ Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, 1962 ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 564.

¹⁴ Ibid., 602.

¹⁵ Ibid., 124.

¹⁶ Ibid., 123.

¹⁷ Seneca, trans. Gummere, xii.

¹⁸ Ibid., XLI.8.

¹⁹ Frederick Copleston, S.J., *A History of Philosophy*, vol. I, *Greece and Rome* (New York: Doubleday), 386.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 388.

²¹ 1446.

²² Seneca, trans. Gummere, XXXI.8.

²³ *Ibid.*, 229.

²⁴ Lucius Annæus Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulæ Morales*, vol. II, trans. Richard M. Gummere, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1920), 467.

²⁵ Seneca, vol. I, trans. Gummere, 321.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, LVII.8.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 387.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Seneca, trans. Campbell, 18.

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