

ETHICS V: DEATH AND TIME

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The fear of death, for Seneca, casts over human life a terrible shadow. To accept death is the hardest lesson but the most important one for those seeking the happiness of philosophical calm. This can only be done, however, if we learn to manage correctly our understanding and use of time. The relationship between attitudes to death and to time often comes to the fore in Seneca's writing and is the prime concern of his treatise on the shortness of life, *De brevitae vitae*, composed probably 49–50 AD.¹ People complain that life is too short, observes Seneca, but any life is long enough if used properly. Much of the treatise is concerned with the carelessness with which people give away their time; people live their lives, he claims, as if they were never going to die: *tamquam semper victuri vivitis* (3.4), a reproach cast vividly in the second person.

The treatise concludes with exhorting Seneca's addressee Paulinus to abandon his public career at once and devote himself to philosophical leisure. Those who fill their days to an advanced age even with the law courts, the Forum, and the responsibilities of public office (to say nothing of the pursuit of pleasure) do not really experience life (20.5):

No one keeps death in view, no one restrains his hopes. Some indeed make plans for those things that lie beyond life—great hulking tombs and dedications of public works and offerings for funeral pyres and ostentatious funerals. Yet, in truth, the funerals of such men should be carried out by the light of torches and candles, as though they had lived but the shortest time.²

The signs that mark the death of a publicly distinguished man at an advanced age are juxtaposed with those of the death of a little child; as Seneca has repeatedly asserted earlier in the treatise, even a very old man's death, when he has not spent his life wisely, feels premature (cf. 3.3, 7.10, *epist.* 77.20).

¹ On the background to this treatise, see most recently Williams 2003: 19f., as well as Traina 1984: xv.

² *Nemo in conspicuo mortem habet, nemo non procul spes intendit; quidam vero disponunt etiam illa, quae ultra vitam sunt, magnas moles sepulcrorum et operum publicorum dedicationes et ad rogum munera et ambitiosas exequias. at me hercules istorum funera, tamquam minimum vixerint, ad faces et cereos ducenda sunt.*

Only the wise man, one who is conscious that he has used his time well, can approach death with a steady step, *certo gradu* (*dial.* 10 [= *brev.*].11.2).

The preoccupations of *De brevitae vitae* surface repeatedly in the *Epistulae morales*, the collection of letters written in the early 60s AD, which turned out to be Seneca's final work, composed in the ominous shadow of Nero's displeasure—written, it might seem, in borrowed time.³ Time, death, and the relationship between them are concerns with which Seneca opens the first of his *Epistulae morales*. He exhorts his addressee Lucilius: *tempus [...] collige et serva*, “gather and save your time” (*epist.* 1.1).⁴ Epistle 12, which concludes the first book in the collection, considers at length how time should be conceptualized and presents the contemplation of death as playing a crucial role.⁵

Time, for Seneca, figures among the key concerns of philosophy (*epist.* 88.33). But it is a relatively abstract concept, which can only be fully grasped by those whose philosophical progress is quite advanced (*epist.* 90.29). Earlier Stoics seem to have been notably preoccupied with time in the context of physics.⁶ Chrysippus is said to have argued that no time is present as a whole or exactly.⁷ When he chooses, Seneca is quite capable of engaging with the philosophical technicalities of time. Epistle 49 opens with a poignant account of how a visit to familiar places in Campania has made Seneca feel much more acutely the absence of his friend Lucilius. This emotive opening is a prelude to a discussion of time that touches suggestively on the more technical aspects. *Punctum est quod vivimus et adhuc puncto minus. sed et hoc minimum specie quadam longioris spatii natura derisit [...]*, “The time we spend living is a moment, even less than a moment. But this briefest time nature has mocked by making it appear of greater duration” (49.3). Seneca goes on to argue, however, that it is precisely the brevity of life that makes it foolish to waste time on technicalities of dialectic. *Mors me sequitur, fugit vita; adversus haec me doce aliquid*, “Death is at my heels, life runs away; teach me something that will help me confront this” (49.9). The technical conceptualization of time is useful insofar as it underpins Seneca's insistence on the urgency of his philosophical project.

³ On the chronology of Seneca's works and the circumstances under which they were written, see Griffin 1992. On Seneca's treatment of time in his works generally, see Grimal 1968, Armisen-Marchetti 1986, Gagliardi 1998.

⁴ On this letter see Gagliardi 1998: ch. 3, Richardson-Hay 2006 *ad loc.*

⁵ These concerns underlie all the letters but manifest themselves notably in Letters 4, 12, 23, 24, 26, 49, 61, 69, 70, 71, 77. Death has been seen as a particular theme of the third book of letters (22–29).

⁶ On the complexities of this see Goldschmidt 1979, Brunschwig 2003.

⁷ *SVF* II 509. Helpfully discussed by Schofield 1988.

According to the traditional Stoic scheme, time is one of four incorporeal things (along with the sayable, void, and place).⁸ Seneca acknowledges time's incorporeality (*dial.* 10 [= *brev.*].8.1; *epist.* 58.22) but does not insist on it. Armisen-Marchetti (1995b: 548) argues, in her perceptive discussion, that Seneca's prime concern is with human time, lived time, rather than cosmic time.⁹ Spatial imagery has an important role to play in Seneca's conceptualization of time. Linear images tend to feature in his discussions of the individual human life, often conceived as a *cursus* with a fixed end-point, while cosmic time is usually conceived of in terms of cycles, on the model of the cyclical motion of the planets (e.g., *dial.* 10 [= *brev.*].8.5; *epist.* 107.8f.).¹⁰ Lived time is sometimes measured in terms of change and decay. Epistle 12, for instance, dwells vividly on a house falling into disrepair, some overgrown trees and finally the human body, whose perceptible signs of aging constitute insistent reminders of time's irrevocable passage.¹¹

But an important part of Seneca's approach to the correct conceptualization of time is to encourage a shift in how human time is to be understood from the linear to the circular, from the existential to something approaching the cosmic. A cosmic model of time is brought into play in *De brevitae vitae*, where Seneca declares that the passage of present time can no more suffer delay "than the universe or the stars, whose perpetual unceasing motion never lets them rest in the same position" (10.6).¹² The relationship between human and cosmic time lies at the heart of Epistle 12, where Seneca observes: *Tota aetas partibus constat et orbis habet circumductos maiores minoribus*, "Our space of life is divided into parts; it consists of large circles enclosing smaller" (*epist.* 12.6). He repeats Heraclitus's opaque observation: *parem esse unum diem omnibus similitudine; nihil enim habet longissime temporis spatium, quod non et in uno die invenias*, "One day is equal to all days through resemblance, because the very longest space of time possesses no element that cannot be found in a single day" (12.7).¹³ Two possible interpretations of this are offered. First, each day is the same length, and made up of the same

⁸ Cf. *SVF* II 331, 521, 1142.

⁹ Cf. Traina 1984: x–xi. Seneca like Marcus Aurelius later is, in Rist's (1972: 287) terms, less interested in time "viewed primarily as a problem in physics" but rather concerned with time as "a moral problem".

¹⁰ Armisen-Marchetti 1995b: 550–552. Unusually in *epist.* 36.10 life itself is seen as cyclical—the time will return when we shall be restored to the light of day.

¹¹ Edwards 2005a. On Letter 12 see also Henderson 2004: 19–27.

¹² *Nec magis moram patitur quam mundus aut sidera, quorum inrequieta semper agitatio numquam in eodem vestigio manet.*

¹³ On the circles, see Habinek 1982. This issue is also explored in Ker 2009a.

divisions of time as any other. Second, each day has the same shape as any other, as light succeeds darkness, to be succeeded again by darkness. It is on the latter basis that one might understand a kind of equivalence between a day and a lifetime, as Habinek suggests. *Angustissimum habet dies gyrum, sed et hic ab initio ad exitum venit, ab ortu ad occasum*, “The day is the smallest circle, but this too has its beginning and its end, its sunrise and sunset” (12.6). Another implication of this resemblance seems to be that because each day of one’s life is *like* the last day, it should not be too onerous to treat it as if it were the last day: *sic ordinandus est dies omnis, tamquam cogat agmen et consummet atque expleat vitam*, “every day should be regulated as if it concluded the series, as if it consummated and filled out our life” (12.8). An individual life seen as a circle may be experienced as complete, perfect, whenever it comes to an end.

Earlier Stoics, as we have seen, had debated at length how to define the present. Seneca seems inclined to treat the individual day as the most productive way of conceptualizing present time: *singuli tantum dies [...] praesentes sunt*, “Only one day at a time can be experienced in the present” (*dial.* 10 [= *brev.*]10.4). We might see this, he asserts, as a philosophical variant on the poet’s motif of *carpe diem*; we should not focus on preparing for the future but live today rightly (*dial.* 10 [= *brev.*]9.3).¹⁴ The individual day is the focus of scrutiny according to the technique of self-examination Seneca repeatedly advocates, attributing it in *De ira* to the philosopher Sextius (*dial.* 5.36.1–3):

Sextius used to do this, and when the day was over and he had retired to bed he would put these questions to his soul: “What faults of yours have you cured today? What vice have you resisted? In what way are you improved?” [...] I have adopted this strategy and every day I plead my cause before myself as judge.¹⁵

For Seneca, the single day is the unit of time best adapted to a philosophical approach to life.¹⁶ While this emphasis is also to be found in other Stoic writers, for instance, Epictetus (*diatr.* 3.10.2),¹⁷ it is developed furthest in

¹⁴ On the contrast between Seneca and Horace’s treatments of *carpe diem*, see Williams 2003: 22.

¹⁵ *Faciebat hoc Sextius, ut consummato die, cum se ad nocturnam quietem recepisset, interrogaret animum suum: “quod hodie malum tuum sanasti? Cui vitio obstitisti? Qua parte melior est?” [...] utor hac potestate et cotidie apud me causam dico.*

¹⁶ Cf. *epist.* 4.5, 16.1. This passage plays a key role in Foucault’s *The care of the self* (1986: 46, 61 f.). On the practice of daily self-scrutiny, see Hadot 1995, Edwards 1997 and (offering an illuminating account of the *De ira* passage) Ker 2009b. For Ker, the strategies of time-control advocated by Seneca are deeply implicated in the set of techniques by which the Roman aristocracy maintained its social power.

¹⁷ Epictetus refers to Pythagorean practice in this context and Pythagorean writings may also have influenced Seneca. Cf. Ker 2009b.

Seneca. Indeed, as Foucault and others have observed, the practice might seem to underlie Seneca's treatment of his daily experiences in the *Epistulae morales* (perhaps most explicitly in *epist.* 83). Ker (2009b: 185) suggests that one might detect in the *De ira* passage "a fusion of day and self as the object of scrutiny." There is a kind of equivalence between control of time and control of the self set out even in the opening passage of the first letter in the collection, where Seneca urges Lucilius: *vindica te tibi, et tempus [...] collige et serva*, "Lay claim to yourself and gather and save your time."¹⁸

Seneca returns again and again to the excoriation of those who fail to value time correctly, who waste their own time. The denunciation of their failings is one of the principal themes of *De brevitae vitae*. They spend little of their lives in actually living (2.2). The letters, too, return repeatedly to the concern with time wasted. In Epistle 122, Seneca compares to the dead those who fritter away their time in the self-indulgent pursuit of pleasure (2 f.):

Though they pass the night-time hours with wine and perfume, though they spend every minute of their unnatural waking hours in eating dinners—and those, too, cooked separately to make up many courses—they are not really banqueting, they are conducting their own funerals.¹⁹

The luxurious anticipate their own deaths, not only in the sense that they may be shortening their lives but also in their preoccupation with the meaningless experiences of the body rather than with what is truly good.²⁰ The repetitive and unsatisfactory pleasures of the mortal flesh should be a matter of indifference to one who is properly focused on life's only true goal, the pursuit of virtue. As Seneca asserts in Epistle 12, one who wastes his time is not truly alive; *immo mortuus est*, "indeed he is dead" (12.9).

PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

For Seneca, time is a supremely valuable possession, *re omnium pretiosissima* (*dial.* 10 [= *brev.*].8.1). Indeed, he sometimes characterizes it as the only thing that belongs to us: *omnia, Lucili, aliena sunt, tempus tantum nostrum est*, "No other things, Lucilius, belong to us; time alone is ours" (*epist.* 1.3). One must properly take account of one's time: *rationem facere* (*dial.* 10 [= *brev.*].17.5; cf.

¹⁸ Cf. Grimal 1968.

¹⁹ *Licet in vino unguentoque tenebras suas exigent, licet epulis et quidem in multa feracula discoctis totum perversae vigiliae tempus educant, non convivantur, sed iusta sibi faciunt.*

²⁰ Cf. *epist.* 60.3f., 65.16. One might trace here the influence of Plato's *Phaedo* (esp. 65 f.), where Socrates is made to argue that the body is a tomb and the philosopher only truly lives insofar as he frees himself from the body's needs. See further Edwards 2007: 172–176.

dial. 9 [= *tranq.*].3.8, *epist.* 1.4). A multitude of images drawn from commerce are used to emphasize time's value. As Armisen-Marchetti stresses, these also serve to undermine the traditional Stoic characterization of time as incorporeal. The idea of time as a commodity makes it seem fixed and static—and is in considerable tension with Seneca's stress on the fleeting nature of time (1995: 552 f.).

Seneca offers a variety of techniques to enable the would-be philosopher to take possession of time (1.2, 101.8). The very process of writing letters, in itself (at least as practiced by Seneca) a form of self-scrutiny, could be seen as a means to this end.²¹ The focus here is primarily on present time. *De brevitate vitae*, in particular, develops at length important distinctions between past, present, and future time: *in tria tempora vita dividitur: quod fuit, quod est, quod futurum est*. It is present time, often, as we have seen, conceptualized in terms of the individual day, which we must value and exploit to the full.²²

In contrast to the fleeting nature of the present, past time is *certum*, sure (*dial.* 10 [= *brev.*].10.2). It is an everlasting and untroubled possession (10.4). Fortune, which forever threatens the present and the future, has no dominion over the past. The past, therefore, has the capacity to be a source of certain happiness—at least for the would-be philosopher. Again, we must take possession of it. But the manner in which we effect this in relation to the past is different. We must allow ourselves (as those who are too busy, whether with work or pleasure, fail to do) the leisure to enjoy its recollection (*dial.* 10 [= *brev.*].10.4 f., cf. *epist.* 83.2). Memory plays a key role here.²³ But only those who have lived all their lives well are in a position to take pleasure from looking back (10.3 f.). And as he comments in the Epistles, it is only contemplation of the past that enables us to formulate a productive plan for the future (*epist.* 83.2).

Elsewhere, however, Seneca sometimes chooses rather to stress that time that is past no longer exists: *usque ad hesternum, quicquid transit tempus, perit*, "Even including yesterday, whatever time is passed is lost" (*epist.* 24.20). A later letter describes both past and future times as *aliena* (74.73).²⁴ In

²¹ Sangalli 1988: 55. On the broader implications of his use of epistolary form, see Wilson 2001.

²² Marcus Aurelius lays a similar emphasis on the need to focus on the present. Indeed his *To himself* offers a similarly episodic model of self-scrutiny. This is suggestively discussed by Hadot 1998: 131–137.

²³ The emphasis Seneca places on memory here is developed further in his discussions of the role of memory in overcoming the pain of bereavement in *cons. Helv.* and *cons. Marc.* (cf. Armisen-Marchetti 1995b: 554).

²⁴ Sangalli 1988: 59 sees Seneca as influenced by Epicureanism here. Cf. Grimal 1968.

reminding his reader how much time has already been wasted, Seneca seeks to underline the urgency of making good use of whatever time remains. It is the imminence of death that renders time so valuable, so precarious. It is by reminding ourselves of death's imminence that we may be galvanized to make the best use of our time.²⁵ The thought of death must be our constant companion.

Time must be valued, but we can never depend on it—future time cannot be counted on. Hope poses a significant threat to the mental tranquility that should be the philosopher's goal (*dial.* 9 [= *tranq.*].2.7–9). How long we live is not in our power, Seneca insistently reminds his reader.²⁶ “The man who is spurred ahead by hope of anything [...] is troubled and unsure of himself” (*epist.* 23.2). Hope is always accompanied by fear. Anxiety for the future creates intense wretchedness (*epist.* 98.6). And concern with the future serves as a dangerous distraction from the present, another cause of wasted time. One who thinks too much of the future spends his life getting ready to live rather than living (*epist.* 45.12 f.).

If we are to derive full value from the present, we must free ourselves from anxieties about the future. Above all, many people's lives are blighted by the fear of death.²⁷ This must be overcome if we are to enjoy life. A key strategy here is the *Praemeditatio futurorum malorum* (cf. Armisen-Marchetti 1986). Arguing that unexpected misfortunes are felt as more grievous blows than those for which one is prepared, Seneca advises his readers to make mental preparation for the possibility of poverty, of losing one's loved ones, one's home, but above all for death (*epist.* 30.18, 70.17 f.). One should make a habit of rehearsing these events in one's imagination, so that one is never taken by surprise. The imagination of one's own end, filled out in gruesome detail, is to be dwelt on and embraced.²⁸ The most appalling of future events transposed by imagination into the present can thus be robbed of their power.

Another way to conceptualize the experience of death is to think of it as a very gradual process, a process in which we are already far advanced. We die a little every day, Seneca advises his correspondent, in the first of the *Epistulae morales*: “What man can you show me who values his time, who takes account of the worth of each day, who understands that every day he is dying?” (1.2).²⁹ Seneca at once reminds his readers that past time is lost time.

²⁵ Marcus Aurelius offers similar comments, if not so insistently as Seneca (cf. *M. Aur.* 2.5.2).

²⁶ E.g., *epist.* 92.25, 93.4–7.

²⁷ Here too Seneca has much in common with Lucretius' version of Epicureanism, cf. Edwards 2007: ch. 3.

²⁸ See Edwards 2007: 107.

²⁹ Cf. *epist.* 24.20 f., 58.24.

It is already in the possession of death. Yet by this means he also presents a picture of death itself as an already familiar part of our lives rather than the great unknown. Here, too, Seneca focuses on rethinking our disposition toward death by transposing it from the future to the present.

Seneca insists repeatedly that the length of one's life is not significant (*epist.* 77.20). Death, he claims, should not be seen as an intrinsically bad thing. Is there no case to be made, we might wonder, for regret at, for example, good deeds unfinished? A crucial consideration here is that for Stoics virtue does not need the dimension of time to be complete (*epist.* 78.27, 93.4). Behavior is judged on the basis of intention rather than result: *consilium rerum omnium sapiens, non exitum spectat* (*epist.* 14.16). The wise man lives fully in the present moment (cf. Armisen-Marchetti 1995b: 565).

ACCEPTING DEATH

The wise man never does anything unwillingly; dying well is dying willingly, Seneca observes (*epist.* 61.2, 82.17 f.). The philosopher, then, accepts death. His disposition toward death colors the whole of his existence. But it is most evident at the moment when he meets his own end. The question of how one should die has a particular prominence in the Epistles. It is here that we find articulated most explicitly a view (which can also be found in the writings of other authors of the Principate) that the moment of death, above all, expresses an individual's true value. *Mors de te pronuntiatura est*, "death will pronounce judgment on you" (*epist.* 26.6).³⁰ It is because dying is such a significant experience that one must prepare oneself with particular care to face death: *egregia res est mortem condiscere* "It is a great thing to learn thoroughly how to die" (26.6).³¹ This is what philosophy primarily offers (cf. *dial.* 10 [= *brev.*].15.1, *epist.* 4.6). Seneca's use of this claim as a means of countering the fear of death might seem paradoxical. But his argument is that only one who has learned to overcome the fear of death can die well.

Examples of courageous ends have a key role to play here. Seneca explores in detail instances of individuals who encounter death from disease with great bravery. His friend Bassus, for example, overwhelmed by the infirmities of old age, is praised at length for seeing death coming and welcoming it (*epist.* 30.9). The death of Socrates, condemned to drink hemlock in

³⁰ On this as a general cultural preoccupation see Edwards 2007.

³¹ There is perhaps an echo of Plat. *Phaid.* 64a.

an Athenian prison recurs several times, as does that of Regulus.³² Most striking, perhaps, is Seneca's repeated celebration of the suicide of Cato the Younger, notably in Epistle 24.³³ By rehearsing in our minds the deeds of such individuals we can perhaps spur ourselves to equal their bravery when the time comes.

A TIME TO DIE

Accepting death may sometimes, as in Cato's case, entail choosing death. One might say that suicide can offer the most graphic evidence that one has overcome the fear of death.³⁴ Seneca's frequent references to and examples of suicide are an aspect of his writing that has disturbed (and fascinated) many readers. They need to be seen as a key part of his project to overcome the fear of death (Griffin 1992: 384). The implication of numerous passages in the Epistles is that to take one's own life at the moment one chooses may sometimes be a good death. Seneca concludes Epistle 69 with further observations on death: *hoc meditare et exerce, ut mortem et excipias et, si ita res suadebit, accersas*, "consider and practice this—how you may welcome death and, if circumstances recommend, invite it" (*epist.* 69.6). The following letter, Epistle 70, offers a lengthy and sustained exploration of the right time to die.

Seneca, in Epistle 69, invokes Epicurus's advice: *meditare mortem*, "think on death." Yet the Epicureans apparently condemned suicide under almost all circumstances—despite their doctrine that "death is nothing to us" (*Kyria doxa* 2, cf. Warren 2001: 92). When he killed himself the philosopher Diodorus was criticized, according to Seneca, for not following the teachings of Epicurus (*dial.* 7 [= *vit. beat.*].19.1).³⁵ By contrast, Stoicism in imperial Rome, at least in Seneca's rendering of it, seems to endorse, even encourage, suicide under certain circumstances. Arthur Darby Nock famously referred to "the Stoic cult of suicide" (1933: 197). Seneca's views on the appropriateness of suicide are to some extent shared by other Stoics (even if his concern

³² Socrates: *epist.* 13.14, 67.7; Regulus: *epist.* 67.7, 12.

³³ See too *epist.* 13.14, 98.12, *dial.* 1 (= *prov.*).2.12, *dial.* 9 (= *tranq.*).16. Edwards 2007: 87–90.

³⁴ For some—in other cases, paradoxically, suicide can actually be motivated by the fear of death, *epist.* 4.4, 24.23.

³⁵ Though *nota bene epist.* 12.10 f. On Epicurean attitudes to suicide, see also Hill 2004: ch. 3 who stresses that some texts offer a rather different picture, most notably Cic. *fin.* 1.49 where the Epicurean Torquatus asserts that the individual may leave life whenever he or she chooses, as though leaving the theatre.

with suicide is particularly intense).³⁶ Epictetus acknowledges Stoic teaching that suicide could be justified under intolerable circumstances, although he seems to insist on a theological endorsement.³⁷ Closer still to Seneca is the view Cicero puts in Cato's mouth in *De finibus* (3.60–62) and that outlined by Diogenes Laertius.³⁸ According to Diogenes in his account of Zeno and later Stoics (7.130), they considered self-killing to be an appropriate action, if it would save a friend's life, if it would benefit one's country, or if it would allow one to escape from painful or incurable disease. Seneca invokes this as Stoic tradition. In Epistle 104 he comments that Socrates can teach us how to die when it is necessary, Zeno before it is necessary (104.21).³⁹

According to Stoic theory, as set out by Diogenes Laertius (7.130), one might simply calculate whether the natural advantages of living are outweighed by the corresponding disadvantages.⁴⁰ Seneca presents himself as readily resorting to such a process of calculation, in considering whether life continues to be worth living in the face of the physical and mental afflictions of old age (*epist.* 58.34f.). The term *ratio*, in the sense of calculation, recurs frequently in Seneca's discussions of when is the right time to die (accounting imagery that also figures significantly in Seneca's thinking about time, as we have seen).⁴¹ Should one anticipate the executioner or not? Sometimes this may be the appropriate course. But on other occasions to wait is better. An important example here is that of Socrates (70.9):

³⁶ According to Griffin 1992: ch. 11. However for Rist, Seneca's interest in suicide far exceeds that of other stoics. "Seneca's wise man is in love with death", comments Rist 1969: 249. For a comprehensive account of Seneca's comments on suicide see Tadic-Gilloteaux 1963. Hill also discusses these texts in detail, arguing that Seneca "produces very little that is philosophically innovative" with regard to suicide (2004: 147).

³⁷ Cf. 3.24.101f. Long 2002: 203f. comments: "Epictetus shows none of Seneca's fascination with suicide, nor does he treat it, like Seneca, as the supreme test of Stoic freedom." Cf. Droge and Tabor 1992: 34–37.

³⁸ Though Rist 1969: 239–241 argues that according to the position set out by Cicero's Cato, only the *sapiens* is ever in a position to know when it is right to kill himself. On the vagueness of this Ciceronian account, see Hill 2004: 36–41.

³⁹ As Griffin 1992: 373 suggests, it makes most sense to interpret Seneca's Zeno not as making an arbitrary decision but as perceiving the increasing weakness of his body (cf. *epist.* 58.34).

⁴⁰ Cf. *Cic. fin.* 3.60f. On the notion of the balance sheet, see van Hooff 1990: 122, Griffin 1986: 200.

⁴¹ E.g. *epist.* 14.2, 24.24, 98.16. Griffin 1992: 376–380 discusses some specific examples of such calculations in the letters. On the discourse of *rationes* in relation to planning one's death see also Plin. *epist.* 1.12.3–5 on the death of Corellius Rufus.

Socrates could have brought his life to an end by abstaining from food rather than dying of the poison. Yet he passed thirty days in prison with death in prospect and not with the thought that anything could happen, that such an extended period brought many hopes but in order that he might show himself obedient to the laws and let his friends benefit from the last days of Socrates.⁴²

Interestingly, Seneca chooses not to engage with the argument Socrates is made to advance in the *Phaedo* against suicide, that it is only permissible when one has received a divine sign.⁴³ Rather he stresses Socrates's wish to demonstrate his own respect for the laws of Athens. At the same time, the desire to benefit others, even though one might experience greater pain oneself, is also shown as a laudable motive for letting the law take its course rather than rushing to embrace death.⁴⁴

The example of Drusus Libo that follows is altogether more ambiguous. Seneca seems at first to be reproaching him for not following his aunt's advice and awaiting execution rather than taking his own life, after his conspiracy against the emperor was discovered. But Seneca then shifts tack: *manus sibi attulit, non sine causa*, "He laid violent hands on himself—and not without reason" (70.10). What point is there in living for another few days at one's enemy's pleasure? Significantly, this line of debate leads Seneca to the claim (*epist.* 70.11):

And so you cannot make a general pronouncement on the matter of whether, when an external force decrees death, you should anticipate it or wait for it. For there are many considerations which may incline a person in one direction or the other.⁴⁵

There is no general answer.⁴⁶ Thus, careful consideration is always needed. Moreover, the process of reasoning is itself particularly valuable. This is a key aspect of the contemplation of suicide, which could be seen as, for Seneca, the most important philosophical exercise the would-be philosopher undertakes.⁴⁷

⁴² *Socrates potuit abstinentia finire vitam et inedia potius quam veneno mori. Triginta tamen dies in carcere et in expectatione mortis exegit, non hoc animo tamquam omnia fieri possent, tamquam multas spes tam longum tempus reciperet, sed ut praeberet se legibus, ut fruendum amicis extremum Socraten daret.*

⁴³ On the *Phaedo*'s discussion of suicide, see Warren 2001. On Seneca's engagement with this see further Edwards 2007: 105.

⁴⁴ Compare the example Seneca offers in Letter 98 of an elderly friend who, despite suffering pain, continues to live while he may be of service to his companions (98.15–18).

⁴⁵ *Non possis itaque de re in universum pronuntiare, cum mortem vis externa denuntiat, occupanda sit an expectanda. Multa enim sunt quae in utramque partem trahere possunt.*

⁴⁶ See Inwood 2005a: 106, 113 on the discussion of situational factors in *epist.* 71.

⁴⁷ See Hill 2004: 151–157.

DEATH AND FREEDOM

Death is to be accepted. Sometimes it is to be chosen. For Seneca death has a positive value for the opportunity it can offer to exercise virtue. The thought of death can also, under some circumstances, serve as an important source of hope—perhaps the only hope the philosopher may legitimately entertain. For death can offer a very particular kind of freedom, *libertas*. In Epistle 24, Seneca makes Cato, on the point of taking his own life, exclaim (*epist.* 24.7):

“O fortune,” he said, “you have achieved nothing by impeding all my enterprises. Until this time, I fought not for my own liberty but for that of my fatherland, nor did I act with such persistence so that I might be free but so that I might live among the free. Now that our state has no future, let Cato be led to safety!”⁴⁸

Similarly, Seneca has Jupiter in *De providentia* declare that Cato’s sword can give him *libertatem, quam patriae non potuit*, “the freedom it could not give his fatherland” (2.10).⁴⁹ Seneca’s marked emphasis on the freedom suicide can offer could be read as a counter to the concerns of some Stoics who concluded that “if we are supposed to live according to nature, we should wait for nature to release us from life.”⁵⁰ Cato’s death seems to have prompted an intense debate about the acceptability of suicide (cf. Plut. *Brut.* 40.4).

The freedom death can offer is repeatedly stressed in the letters more generally. Death offers *libertas recedendi*, “the freedom to withdraw” (22.5f.). Thus death is something to be valued rather than feared: *Mihi crede, Lucili, adeo mors timenda non est, ut beneficio eius nihil timendum sit*, “Believe me, Lucilius, so little is death to be feared that, thanks to death, nothing is to be feared” (24.11). Epistle 26 develops this idea at some length: “*meditare mortem*”; *qui hoc dicit, meditari libertatem iubet*, “Think on death: one who says this instructs us to think on freedom” (26.10).⁵¹ And Seneca criticizes those philosophers who exclude the possibility of committing suicide: *hoc qui dicit, non videt se libertatis viam cludere*, “One who says this does not see

⁴⁸ “Nihil,” inquit, “egisti, fortuna, omnibus conatibus meis obstando. Non pro mea adhuc sed pro patriae libertate pugnavi, nec agebam tanta pertinacia, ut liber, sed ut inter liberos viverem. Nunc quoniam deploratae sunt res generis humani, Cato deducatur in tutum.”

⁴⁹ Cf. too *epist.* 95.72. In *epist.* 14.12 f., however, Seneca sets out the view that *libertas* was already lost when Caesar and Pompey were in conflict and that it was not appropriate for the philosopher to take part in the struggle for power between them.

⁵⁰ As Griffin 1992: 375 suggests.

⁵¹ Seneca here claims to be quoting Epicurus. Further examples in the Letters include: 66.13, 16; 70.14, 24f. *De providentia* also returns to this theme (*dial.* 1.6.7): *adtendite modo et videbitis quam brevis ad libertatem et quam expedita ducat via*, “only observe and you will see what a short and easy path leads to liberty”. See too *dial.* 6 (= *cons. Marc.*) 20.2 f.

that he is shutting the gate to freedom" (70.14). The slightest of weapons will achieve this end: *scalpello aperitur ad illam magnam libertatem via et puncto securitas constat*, "A small blade opens the way to great liberty and peace of mind can come through a pin prick" (70.16).

In Stoic philosophy, freedom (*eleutheria* in Greek, *libertas* in Latin) had come to have the sense of "total independence of the person from all passions and from all wrong desires."⁵² Such an understanding of freedom could reinforce the appeal of death as a means of escape from any situation, no matter how oppressive. A key issue here must be agency.⁵³ The option of death guarantees that action is always possible, however constrained one's circumstances may be. As Seneca comments (*epist.* 26.10):

One who has learned to die has unlearned slavery. He is superior to all powers, and certainly beyond their reach. What to him are prison, guards and fetters? He has an open door.⁵⁴

Here, then, is at least part of the value in thinking on death, in calculating and recalculating whether and for how long one's life may be worth living. Such exercises serve to keep the possibility of freedom forever before one's eyes.

At the same time there seems to be an ambivalence here, highlighted by Seneca's pervasive use of military imagery. At one point, Seneca comments with regard to the freedom offered by the possibility of suicide: *si pugnare non vis, licet fugere*, "if you do not want to fight, you can run away" (*dial.* 1 [= *prov.*].6.7). This surely reveals a tension in Seneca's thinking on suicide.⁵⁵ For the Socrates of Plato's *Phaedo*, suicide was no more to be contemplated than deserting one's guard post (62b).⁵⁶ Yet that seems to be just what Seneca is advocating in this passage from *De providentia*.

⁵² Bobzien 1998a: 339. As Inwood comments, this constitutes an "internalisation of social and political reality". On this issue, see particularly Inwood 2005a: ch. 11, 'Seneca on freedom and autonomy'.

⁵³ Inwood 2005a: 306. Contrast the view of Hill 2004: 11, who argues that in Roman discussions of suicide the central issue is not agency but rather honour. His approach rightly emphasises the Roman tendency to categorise together voluntary and enforced suicides. Yet even in the case of the latter there might be considered some scope for agency which though limited is nevertheless highly valued. See further Edwards 2007: ch. 4.

⁵⁴ *Qui mori didicit, servire dedidicit; supra omnem potentiam est, certe extra omnem. Quid ad illum carcer, et custodia, et claustra? Liberum ostium habet.*

⁵⁵ Lavery 1980: 150 comments: "the suicide would appear to be a deserter in battle and a soldier who surrenders to fortune". Another aspect of this problem is discussed by Griffin 1992: 380f.: "If the virtue of the wise man's actions lies in its intentions, not its result, what danger of disgraceful action can he be said to avoid through suicide?"

⁵⁶ The term *phrouria* can also have the sense of "prison" as well as "guard-post".

The most extreme—and notorious—formulation of Seneca’s celebration of suicide comes in his treatise on anger, *De ira*. Seneca has been describing situations in which anger will inevitably arise and what the consequences might be of concealing or revealing it. Praexaspes has been punished for advising king Cambyses that he should moderate his drinking; the king demonstrates his steadiness of hand by shooting an arrow—through the heart of Praexaspes’s son. Praexaspes praises the king’s aim—he thus demonstrates that anger can be restrained under the most extreme provocation. Harpagus, the object of another king’s cruelty, finds at the king’s banquet that he has been served and has eaten the bodies of his own children. He, too, moderates his anger, flattering the monarch (*dial.* 5 [= *de ira* 3].14f.). While these stories purport to show that anger can always be concealed—ostensibly a good thing—they also reveal some profound difficulties for Seneca’s position.⁵⁷ Ultimately, he cannot bring himself to endorse the restraint of either Praexaspes or Harpagus. Praexaspes is a slave in mind *animo* [...] *mancipium* (*de ira* 3.14.3). The gods should curse him. In relation to Harpagus, Seneca comments that he should try *quaerere dignam tam truci portento poenam*, “to find a punishment worthy of such monstrous ferocity” (3.15.2).⁵⁸ For these men, urges Seneca, suicide by any means would surely be the best option. It is to them he offers this chilling advice (3.15.4):

Wherever you turn your gaze, there is an end to your troubles. Do you see that cliff? From there you can drop to freedom. Do you see that sea, that river, that well? Freedom lies in its depths. Do you see that stunted, twisted, barren tree? Freedom hangs from it. Do you see your throat, your gullet, your heart? They are the means to escape slavery. Are the ways out I’m showing you too troublesome? Do they require too much bravery, too much strength? Do you ask what may be the way to freedom? Any vein in your body!⁵⁹

Detachment, Seneca understands, is and should be impossible. He cannot quite bring himself to advocate any act of resistance to tyranny other than suicide; the individual cheats the tyrant of the pleasure of his murder—the most

⁵⁷ As Nussbaum 1994: 437 (cf. 435) emphasises: “The twistings and turnings of the text contain a far more complex message.”

⁵⁸ Nussbaum 1994: 434 stresses the vehemence of Seneca’s language here and comments: “Seneca never seriously doubts that a parent will *feel* anger inside himself at these incidents, nor does he even try to suggest that it would be a good thing if he didn’t.”

⁵⁹ *Quocumque respexeris, ibi malorum finis est. vides illum praecipitem locum? illac ad libertatem descenditur. vides illud mare, illud flumen, illum puteum? libertas illic in imo sedet. vides illam arborem brevem, retorridam, infelicem? pendet inde libertas. vides iugulum tuum, guttur tuum, cor tuum? effugia servitutis sunt. nimis tibi operosos exitus monstro et multum animi ac roboris exigentes? quaeris quod sit ad libertatem iter? quaelibet in corpore tuo vena!*

effective punishment he can devise.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, the decision to withdraw from the world by deciding on suicide, motivated as it is by anger, constitutes the Stoic as one deeply implicated in the world and what happens in it.

The act of choosing death could convey a specifically political message.⁶¹ To celebrate death as a means of escape is to undermine the power of a regime that seeks to control its subjects through the threat of lethal punishment. This political dimension is explicit in the Stoic Epictetus's discussion of suicide, where keen students want to demonstrate by their own deaths that tyrants have power over no one (1.9.15). Seneca alludes to the general moral weakness that afflicts his contemporaries. Yet even now some show enough spirit to seek security in death (*epist.* 24.11):

Think about our own times, whose inertia and fastidiousness we complain about. They will include persons of every rank, of every degree of fortune, of every age who have cut short their own trouble with death.⁶²

It is interesting that Seneca does not, in the Epistles, refer explicitly to specific *exempla* of self-killings from times closer to his own.⁶³ But this more general claim certainly adduces self-inflicted death as a means of displaying qualities opposed to the moral weakness exemplified by *languor* and *delicia*. The political overtones of *libertas* (with which Seneca so closely associates death) are never wholly absent.

In political terms, this is a kind of resistance but one that in some respects carries a heavy price.⁶⁴ In Seneca's writing we see what appears to be an increasingly extreme form of the Stoic depreciation of life. At 71.12, for instance, political change is, on one level, to be equated with the change of the seasons, something over which one has no control whatever, something that must simply be accepted. We may well feel uneasy at the implications of a philosophy that effectively discourages its adherents from taking any initiative to change a social order they find repugnant. And yet, once no choice was left, Stoicism, especially as developed in Seneca's writing, could offer a means to make sense of a horrible death, to appropriate it as part of a virtuous life. And even before death was imminent, to think over in advance

⁶⁰ See Nussbaum 1994: 436 f.

⁶¹ The limitation of suicide, however, is that it can never make the same kind of statement on behalf of social justice that could be conveyed by a more active kind of resistance, such as an attack on the king. See Nussbaum 1994: 436 and Barton 1994: 59.

⁶² *Respice ad haec nostra tempora, de quorum languore ac deliciis querimur; omnis ordinis homines suggerent, omnis fortunae, omnis aetatis, qui mala sua morte praeciderint.*

⁶³ Though the death of Cremutius Cordus, Marcia's father, is discussed briefly in *cons. Marc.* 1.2, while that of Julius Canus receives extended treatment in *tranq.* 14.4–10.

⁶⁴ See Nussbaum 1994: 468.

how one might die was to prepare oneself against the worst, to assume an armor that might prove invincible.

Seneca is by no means an enthusiastic advocate of suicide under all circumstances. In Epistle 24, having first referred to Epicurus's criticism of those *qui mortem concupiscent*, "who desire death," Seneca himself explicitly criticizes those who are obsessed with death. The brave and wise man should avoid that *libido moriendi*, "longing for death," which has afflicted so many (24.25).⁶⁵ "The idle and abject," *ignavos iacentesque*, finding life tedious, often fall victim to a desire to die. The diurnal pleasures of the flesh slip readily into torments (24.16).⁶⁶

At the same time, in Epistle 24, he also concedes that it is sometimes the noblest individuals, *generosos atque acerrimae indolis viros*, who are overtaken by the desire for death. While apparently condemning those who are simply tired of life, he expresses sympathy with those who despise it.⁶⁷ In Epistle 30, which, beginning with the particular case of Bassus, discusses death in old age, Seneca praises the inspiration offered both by those who call for death—*qui deposcunt mortem*—and those who meet it in a state of calm and good cheer—*qui hilares eam quietique opperiantur* (30.12). He goes on to qualify his praise for the former: *illud ex rabie interdum ac repentina indignatione fit*, "this first attitude is sometimes derived from frenzy and sudden anger." Yet this is not invariably the case, as *interdum* makes clear. Such statements seem to betray a profound ambivalence on Seneca's part.

There is perhaps an acknowledgment that the wise man might legitimately want death. An endless life, after all, would be a life without meaning.⁶⁸ Certain people say to themselves, claims Seneca (*epist.* 24.26):

How long will these things go on? Shall I keep on waking up and going to sleep, being hungry and being full, getting cold, getting hot? There is no end to anything but all goes round in circles, one thing connected to another, each succeeding the one before? Night comes on the heels of day, day on the heels of night. Summer lapses into autumn, winter follows autumn, spring puts an end to winter. Everything passes away so that it returns again [...].⁶⁹

⁶⁵ For Stoic criticism of the desire for death, see also Epictetus 1.9.12 and 2.15.4–12.

⁶⁶ Hill 2004: 175–178 offers a suggestive discussion of Seneca's *fastidiosi*, stressing the influence of as well as the contrast with Lucretius.

⁶⁷ Disapproval of those who kill themselves for frivolous reasons, out of boredom or under the influence of extreme emotion: *cons. Helv.* 10.9 f., *tranq.* 2.14 f., *de ira* 2.36.5 f., *epist.* 4.4.

⁶⁸ Discussing Letter 12, Habinek 1982: 68 helpfully cites Bernard Williams' argument about the meaninglessness of endless life, set out in his 1973 essay 'The Makropoulos case: reflections on the tediousness of immortality'.

⁶⁹ "*Quousque eadem? Nempe expergiscar dormiam, esuriam fastidiam, algebo aestuabo. Nullius rei finis est, sed in orbem nexa sunt omnia, fugiunt ac secuntur. Diem nox premit, dies*

While earlier in the letter Seneca explicitly criticized those on whom excessive familiarity with the routines of life weighed heavily, this passage could be taken to express greater sympathy with this perspective.⁷⁰ It is tempting to see an echo here of Seneca's discussion of the structures of time in Epistle 12, where time is understood in terms of *orbes*, "circles" (12.6). The insistent, repetitive demands of the flesh intensify the philosopher's disdain for the body. As Plato's Socrates advised in the *Phaedo* (63a–64b), embodied life has little to offer the philosopher, who should always be preparing for death.

WRITING IN TIME

Seneca's mode of philosophy is largely paraenetic. His work offers an approach to wisdom, which is to be achieved by slow maturation, the outcome of lengthy spiritual exercises. This is a process that operates in and through time (Armisen-Marchetti 1995b: 545). As Grimal (1968: 109) suggests, it is in part Seneca's preoccupation with the experience of everyday life that informs his particular concern with temporality. The very concept of a series of Epistles itself implies composition over time. Seneca's letters describe incidents that appear to hook them into their author's quotidian experience. Epistle 64, for instance, begins "Yesterday you were with us," and describes a convivial evening of fireside talk with a group of friends. The letters of Cicero earlier and (later) Pliny the Younger, though quite possibly edited after their original time of composition, present themselves as compositions firmly situated in a particular time. Although Seneca's letters, by contrast, do not contain the kind of references to specific events that would allow their precise dating (much to the frustration of modern scholars), nevertheless they appear as a sequence composed in order over an extended period, most notably by evoking the gradual philosophical development of Lucilius.⁷¹

Waiting for Nero's centurion, Seneca will have been especially alert to the possibility that each letter he added might prove to be the last in the collection (as it is, it seems the final letters he wrote have not survived).⁷² At whatever point the series is interrupted it will be complete, he asserts—like

noctem, aestas in autumnum desinit, autumnus hiemps instat, quae vere conpescitur; omnia sic transeunt et revertantur. nihil novi facio, nihil novi video; fit aliquando et huius rei nausia."

⁷⁰ We might compare an observation offered as consolation for the inevitability of death in Letter 77.16: "Your pleasures have been exhausted; none of them is a novelty."

⁷¹ On this contrast see further Edwards 2005b.

⁷² Aulus Gellius (12.2.3) refers to a now lost twenty-second book of letters.

the life of the wise man. In Epistle 12, Seneca advised: *sic ordinandus est dies omnis, tamquam cogat agmen et consummat atque expleat vitam*, “every day should be regulated as if it concluded the series, as if it consummated and filled out our life” (12.8). It is death’s imminence that makes urgent the need to balance life’s account at the end of every day. Each day should be treated as if it were our last. This thought recurs later in the letters (*epist.* 61.1f.):

I am behaving as if each day were a complete life. Of course, I’m not seizing it as my last but I look upon it as if it could be my last. This is the frame of mind in which I am writing to you now, as if death might call me away, just as I am writing.⁷³

The claim is made still more insistently in Epistle 101: *qui cotidie vitae suae summam manum inposuit, non indiget tempore*, “One who puts the finishing touch to his life every day is never in need of time” (101.8). But can the life of the *proficiens*, one who is merely on the road to philosophical understanding, be understood as complete? Is there not a profound tension between the exhortation to see life as whole, whenever it terminates, and the sense of a philosophical journey toward *sapientia*, a journey that death might well interrupt before the goal is attained?

Yet there are perhaps other senses in which Seneca’s writings offer a more powerful challenge to the limitations of mortality. The opening of Epistle 64 moves from the recollection: *Fuisti here nobiscum*, “Yesterday you were with us,” to a different kind of engagement with temporality: *mecum [...] semper es*, “you are always with me.” There is an important sense in which letters have the power to transcend constraints of both space and time. The act of writing can serve as a strategy to fix time, and thus to transcend death. The writers, too, can hope to overcome mortality. In Epistle 21, Seneca evokes the analogy of Cicero’s Epistles to Atticus, promising Lucilius renown similar to that of Cicero’s friend among future generations: “Time’s deep flood will roll over us; a few great men will put their heads above it and, though bound in the end to depart into that silence, will resist oblivion and for a long while maintain possession of themselves”⁷⁴ (*epist.* 21.5). Achievement through writing will enable some talented individuals to maintain a presence far into the future. In his prediction *se vindicabunt*, “they will maintain possession of themselves,” Seneca uses a term that appeared in his exhortation to Lucilius

⁷³ *Id ago, ut mihi instar totius vitae dies sit. Nec mehercules tamquam ultimum rapio, sed sic illum aspicio, tamquam esse vel ultimus possit. Hoc animo tibi hanc epistulam scribo, tamquam me cum maxime scribentem mors evocatura sit.*

⁷⁴ *Profunda super nos altitudo temporis veniet, pauca ingenia caput exerent et in idem quandoque silentium abitura oblivioni resistant ac se diu vindicabunt.*

in the opening sentence of the first letter in the collection: *vindica te tibi* (*epist.* 1.1). The longevity of great writing offers another kind of mastery of time, allowing the philosophical self, the author (and perhaps his correspondent too) the means to continue his existence far beyond the limit of human mortality.

The relationship between time and philosophical writing is also a key concern in *De brevitae vitae*. Reading the philosophers, Seneca stresses here (echoing earlier poetic texts as well as Aristotle), can enable the reader to escape time: *hi tibi dabunt ad aeternitatem iter [...] haec una ratio est extendendae mortalitatis, immo in immortalitatem vertendae*, “They will offer you the road to immortality [...] This is the only means to prolong mortality, indeed to transform it into immortality” (15.4). The philosopher is freed from the limits that constrain others (the most significant of these being death) (15.4). The philosopher alone has the capacity to collapse distinctions between past, present, and future, to combine all times into one: *longam illi vitam facit omnium temporum in unum conlatio*, “Combining all times into one makes life long for him” (15.5). Philosophers teach us how to die (*dial.* 10 [= *brev.*].15.1) but at the same time communing with philosophers allows one to transcend time (15.4).⁷⁵

In his *Aporias: Dying—Awaiting (one another at) the “limits of truth”* (1993), Derrida draws on the *De brevitae vitae*. Seneca’s intense engagement with death, his sense of the imminence of death, Derrida finds particularly good to model, as one contemplates “the rear-view mirror of a waiting-for-death at every moment” (1993: 55). Death limits time, death gives time its value, makes us value time. The vividness with which Seneca conveys this has appealed to many readers. But more than this, it is precisely in accepting the time-bound nature of human life, the inevitability of death that, for Seneca, we can come closest to the transcendence of both death and time. In one of the last of his letters to have survived, Seneca comments paradoxically that the human heart *numquam magis divinum est, quam ubi mortalitatem suam cogitat*, “is never more divine than when it reflects on its mortality” (120.14).

⁷⁵ On this passage see Dionigi 1995a and Williams 2003 *ad loc.*