

## *Critical Notice*

BRAD INWOOD. *Reading Seneca: Stoic Philosophy at Rome*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005. Pp. xvi + 376.

Students of Stoicism often bewail the state of our sources. Of the works of Zeno and Chrysippus, the two major early Stoics, we have only fragments and later accounts whose distance from the original we can only guess. Our sources for early Stoic ethics are in better shape than our sources for Stoic metaphysics or logic, but they are still gappy and have the frustrating feature that almost none of them are concerned to reveal the argumentative structure of the theory.

So we turn to the later sources, Stoics writing under the Roman Empire, where we at least have, if not the whole, a considerable part of the work in continuous original prose. But here again we find much to complain about. Our major sources, Epictetus, Musonius Rufus and Marcus Aurelius, write works which express Stoic ideas forcefully, but again we look in vain for concern with argument and theoretical structure.

In this situation, Seneca surely ought to be a central author for someone trying to understand Stoic ethics. While we lack some of his works, and have others only in part, we have a great deal, and across a variety of genres — essays, dramas, letters and a treatise on natural science. Seneca is thoroughly educated in Stoicism, yet writes in a non-technical way accessible to the non-specialist. Indeed a large amount of his philosophical work takes the form of letters to one Lucilius, whom he encourages on the path of learning to be a Stoic. Whether or not Lucilius is an actual person is irrelevant to Seneca's educative (and, in the process, self-educative) project, one which we would expect to make him the ideal author from whom to learn about Stoicism, or at any rate his major focus, Stoic ethics.

Yet Seneca is not a favoured source in contemporary discussion of Stoic ethics, neither the specialized secondary literature nor teaching collections (though he is beginning to make more of an appearance in the latter). Seneca is problematic. Why is this?

At all levels of studying ancient philosophy we are the (sometimes uneasy) heirs to a general received view of Seneca, a view on which he is interested only in ethics, not in the entire Stoic system in which ethics ultimately forms part of an organic unity with logic and physics. This supposed neglect of the more technical parts of Stoicism is taken to undermine his grasp of the ethics itself; he is taken to be indifferent to the arguments underpinning central Stoic ethical claims and structuring their interconnections. Being concerned only with ethical doctrines, not their theoretical basis, Seneca, the story goes, ends up preaching to us rather than either engaging with, or telling us much about, Stoic ethical theory. Seneca is accessible, then, because he is shallow; to get to the heart of Stoic theory we should return to the thorny texts of the earlier Greek heads of the school like Chrysippus. And once Seneca's philosophical commitment is seen as shallow, it is tempting to many not to take him seriously as a philosopher (and his role as Nero's tutor has certainly done him no good here).

On the received view Seneca is also 'unorthodox' on various issues. He analyses the emotions in a way unmatched in earlier sources, a way which can appear to abandon the Stoic view of the soul as a rational unity and make concessions to a more Platonic position that emotions belong in a 'part' of the soul distinct from and sometimes in opposition to reason. Seneca is also often taken to have modified Stoic psychology by introducing into it a new notion of 'the will,' a mental event which brings about free action in a way unparalleled in Stoicism. And he is also taken, especially by disciples of Foucault, to have introduced an unprecedented view of the self. The received view in fact sometimes presents an unattractive combination: Seneca is unorthodox and unreliable as a presenter of Stoic theory *because* he is not interested in the technical structure and arguments of the theory; he innovates because of his shallow preference for preaching rather than arguing, which leads him to import, or not notice that he is drifting into, ideas unsuitable to mainstream Stoicism.

In this collection of essays Brad Inwood challenges the received view so effectively that it and any lingering effects of it should be thoroughly swept away. The papers, written over the last fifteen years, give us a challenging and gripping view of Seneca, which will doubtless be reinforced by Inwood's eagerly awaited forthcoming translation and commentary on selected letters by Seneca, in the Clarendon Later Ancient Philosophy series. Reading Inwood should alter the way we engage with Seneca, and hence what we get out of him. For according to Inwood the received view is wrong on both counts. Seneca is not shallow; his

writings are presented very consciously in literary and rhetorical form, but they emerge from and express real, tough philosophical thinking. Nor is he unorthodox, or an innovator on major philosophical issues.

The opening paper, 'Seneca in his Philosophical Milieu,' illuminates the book's sub-title: 'Stoic Philosophy at Rome.' Inwood points out how distinctive was the philosophical context in which Seneca developed, and in particular how different from Cicero's. Seneca grew up in a world in which Athens had lost its role as a philosophical centre and in which 'the importance to philosophers of private patronage in aristocratic houses now rivalled that of organized school life' (8). Seneca was, so to speak, a 'home-schooled' philosopher, who did not need to travel or go to academic institutions to learn or do philosophy. He also knew of Romans who had already committed themselves to the philosophical life, and who had done philosophy in Latin. For Seneca, unlike Cicero, philosophy was 'not something essentially Greek' (11); he could think of himself as belonging without strain in a Roman tradition of philosophizing. One reason we lose our sense of the importance of this, and tend to force him into the same mould as academic philosophers, is that this tradition proved short-lived; after Seneca Musonius Rufus and Marcus Aurelius revert to being Romans who do philosophy in Greek.

Seneca was writing for an audience which shared his interest in doing philosophy in Latin. Inwood points out that, as well as his technical work on natural science, we find Seneca frequently dropping into discussions of technical points of Stoic physics and metaphysics (less so with logic and dialectic). While Seneca feels no need to write a 'school' work on Stoic metaphysics, he is thoroughly knowledgeable about it; the unsystematic way in which he brings in detailed discussion of issues in it, and its relation to ethics, reflects his interests and those of his audience, rather than gaps in his understanding. This claim, that Seneca was writing for a philosophically trained audience, is important for a proper estimation of his seriousness as a philosopher. Inwood finds him to be someone who throughout his life read and engaged with serious philosophical literature in Greek, but thought and wrote philosophically in Latin for an audience of similarly educated Romans. The results of this work challenge anyone who takes Seneca's writings to be philosophically shallow, or mere ethical preaching without argumentative underpinning.

One point about Seneca's philosophical easiness in Latin forms a contrast with Cicero which Inwood underlines (18ff.). When we read Cicero, we can usually establish fairly confidently which Greek word corresponds to the Latin philosophical terms he is using. This is not the case with Seneca, whose language is hard to 'fit onto' the language either of Chrysippus or of Cicero himself. This is a point which philosophers have often found frustrating, and which can lead them to think that Seneca is vague or confused. Inwood shows, brilliantly, that what Seneca

is doing is thinking philosophically for himself in Latin, in a way which goes beyond the term-for-term linguistic dependence we find in Cicero. This is something new in Latin, and, like Seneca's own sophisticated writing for a philosophically educated Roman audience, a short-lived phenomenon. Its brevity is one cause of Seneca's being sidelined in our reconstruction of ancient Stoicism, and sometimes unfairly discredited for his failure to write in a way corresponding neatly to works written in academic institutional settings for quite different kinds of audience.

Seneca's originality, then, lies largely in the *way* he does philosophy and in particular engages with Stoic ethics. To appreciate him as a philosopher, then, we have to enter into his literary projects, rather than treating him as an academic text from which useful evidence can be extracted for our reconstruction of Stoic doctrines. This is itself something which modern philosophers are not terribly keen to do. We are, on the whole, happier with fragments of Chrysippus' clumsy prose or later doxography, because these raise fewer interpretative issues than the writings of someone who is self-consciously setting out to write in specific literary genres. There seems no reason, however, why Seneca should receive less sympathy here than, say, Hume, who is endlessly forgiven by philosophers for his overt seeking of literary fame and his conscious attempts, after the failure of the *Treatise*, to write in literary genres and to exploit rhetorical effects. Philosophers read Hume's *Essays* as well as his *Treatise* because they recognize that in different ways they are the products of a keen philosophical intelligence. In the eighteenth century Seneca's works were read in the same way, and it will be good if Inwood's work can help us to regain this way of reading him, one largely lost since the nineteenth century set us on the road to a more professional way of doing philosophy and its history, and hence to a greater sympathy for ancient writers who are most like professionals.

How 'unorthodox' is Seneca? Inwood thinks that, just as we tend to underestimate his philosophical seriousness and competence, we tend to overestimate his originality and urge to innovate. This issue is explored most fully in the long paper 'Seneca and Psychological Dualism.' Inwood points out something which should be obvious to us but which we tend to pass over uncritically: 'the picture which modern scholars have made for themselves of an orthodox Stoicism teaching internally consistent doctrine, grounded on clear general principles — this picture seems to me to be an artefact of our reconstructive methodology' (25). We assume that the early heads of Stoa held a set of views which were determinate and consistent, and which were motivated in ways which allowed little or no divergence of position or of emphasis. Yet a great deal of this comes, understandably enough, from our own attempts to make coherent sense of our fragmentary materials, and we know that it is controversial to read the whole corpus of Plato or Aristotle with these

assumptions. Clearly, Stoicism was a fairly determinate philosophical tradition, but Inwood takes Seneca at his word (in *de Otio (On Leisure)* 3.1): he is not bound to say exactly what Zeno and Chrysippus said in order to be a Stoic. A critical look at Stoic 'orthodoxy' may make us less inclined to find Seneca 'unorthodox.' In several papers in the book Inwood gives assumed orthodoxy — and hence Seneca's supposed innovation — a long hard look, with interesting and subtle results.

In the 'Psychological Dualism' paper Inwood examines closely the passage at the opening of the second book of *De Ira (On Anger)*, where Seneca has been thought to innovate by introducing new ideas into the 'orthodox' Stoic view of the emotions. In contrast to the Stoic understanding of emotions as excessive impulses of the rational soul, ways in which we go wrong as a whole, it is sometimes claimed that Seneca moves here towards thinking of emotions as forces opposing reason, edging nearer to the Platonic position that they belong to a 'part' of the soul distinct from reason. Inwood carefully gets us to take two important factors into account which are often neglected when this passage is taken out of context and put together with other evidence for the theory, such as the crabbed and scholastic passage on Stoic ethics in Stobaeus, or the polemic of Galen. One is that Seneca is consciously writing in a way which uses images to convey a vivid idea of his points about psychology. Inwood examines in detail passages which if pressed literally in a tin-eared way would seem to present a less psychologically unified soul than Stoics accept. But why should we take such passages literally, or take Seneca to be committed to psychological dualism by his metaphors (especially since he is quite explicit about the pedagogical force of images)? The second point is that Seneca is perfectly aware of Platonic positions on a number of issues, and is even prepared sometimes to acquiesce for the sake of further argument in positions that taken more strictly Stoics do not share with Platonists. This is a common feature of argument everywhere, and good evidence that whatever Seneca is doing he is not carelessly sliding into occupying a position that he should on Stoic grounds reject.

After carefully discussing Seneca's establishment of perfectly standard Stoic ideas about the emotions in the first book, and his declaration at the start of the second book that what follows will be trickier, Inwood takes us through the controversial passage in a way which brings out the point that Seneca is certainly innovating in one way: he is giving us an account of emotion which is finer-grained than anything in our earlier sources. Moreover, it is in one way surprising: Seneca allows some of our reactions and responses to things and events to count as pre-rational even when they are phenomena which can clearly be expressed in a *lekton*, and so would count as rational for earlier Stoics. For Seneca the criterion of rationality here 'appears to be susceptibility to change by a

conscious rational decision' (54). Seneca is interested in conscious control of our emotions, and this concern leads him to give a more nuanced account of emotion, and possibly to introduce a new emphasis, or draw a distinction in a different place. Still, this does not show that he is putting forward 'unorthodox' ideas which earlier Stoics would have ejected from their tradition. Still less does it show what some scholars have thought, that Seneca is here merely importing someone else's ideas into the mainstream tradition.

Here Inwood's Seneca is original, but legitimately within the mainstream of Stoic thought. His own take on an issue differs in emphasis from that of Chrysippus, and this leads to a distinct perspective of his own, underlined by the literary presentation. But this is not a deviation from an orthodoxy, and it comes from thoughtful reflection on fundamentals, not carelessness or copying someone else or failure to notice that he was joining the opposition.

In two other papers in the book Inwood comes to similar conclusions about the way in which Seneca does and does not innovate about the will and the self. These two papers, 'The Will in Seneca' and 'Seneca and Self-Assertion' belong together thematically, and exhibit the same scrupulous and subtle methodology. The first article begins by noting the frequent assumption that it is in Seneca that we first find what Inwood calls 'traditional will' — a mental event which brings about free action. There is no room for any such item in early Stoic psychology, but it appears to be present in Augustine and mediaeval philosophy. Since there is no term plausibly corresponding to 'will' (or the corresponding words in other modern languages) in ancient Greek, and since Seneca makes distinctive use of the term *voluntas* and the related verb *velle*, it is often thought reasonable to find at least the beginnings of a theory of traditional will in his writings. Inwood argues, via subtle analysis of the most striking passages, that Seneca is not in fact committed to any version of traditional will; his psychology and account of deliberation are simply those of the Stoic tradition, and Seneca adds nothing to this ontology.

But there is *something* different in Seneca which has led people to think that he employs the notion of traditional will. Inwood argues that we can find this only if we widen our view beyond passages using words like *velle* and bring together a cluster of interests which characterize the writings as a whole. Seneca is far more interested than earlier Stoics (or perhaps is the first to express the interest in a literary form adequate for it) in self-shaping and self-formation, not just in the traditional form of concern for the shaping of one's character but in a sharper version which stresses self-*command* and self-*control*. Moreover (a topic enlarged on elsewhere in the book) he uses the notion of *judgement* readily in ethical contexts, a point which Inwood stresses is one worth making, though we

may fail to notice its importance because of the way that for us the notion of moral judgement has become weakened to the point of our not noticing the judicial ideas that it imports.

All these points converge to show Seneca as having an interest in himself which is 'second-order' by comparison with traditional concern for character education. Ethical improvement is seen as a formation of the self; the traditional idea that it is hard work is seen in terms of controlling and overcoming aspects of oneself. This does not, however, lead Seneca to recognize second-order concern as such, still less to introduce a new entity, the will, to explain just how he can control, order and judge himself as he does. Seneca does not belong in the development of thought that results in the notion of traditional will; the appearance that he does is due to his increased focus on himself.

This takes us to the second paper, which examines the extent to which Seneca can be said to have introduced a new conception of the self and one's concern for the self (a theme in Foucault and his followers, who are here discussed). Again Inwood is sceptical of the claim that either Seneca or Plato in the *Alcibiades* is introducing a new item to our metaphysical or ethical ontology, and also of the claim that Seneca is doing anything that can reasonably be taken as a transformation of Stoic ethical psychology. Seneca's originality lies, again, in the way he does philosophy, a way which lays more weight than do other Stoic authors on the assertion of the authorial self. Rather than argue in the dry manner of the professionals, or hector us as Epictetus does, Seneca makes his points through a vivid presentation of an authorial self. This is particularly obvious in the letters, which present the author's interchange with another person, Lucilius, who may or may not correspond to a real person, but is in the writing a crucial partner for the author to develop his own self-presentation.

Inwood is interesting about the prospects for taking Seneca's strategy to be a philosophical one, introducing a distinctive way of philosophizing, rather than a creative literary achievement. Where the philosophical conception of the self is concerned, his approach is somewhat more tentative than elsewhere, in a way which reflects the difficulties offered by the texts. Certainly this chapter should lead to a more sophisticated discussion than we have seen hitherto of Seneca's authorial self, the way the author is presented as both instructing Lucilius and improving himself in the process. As Inwood rightly stresses, this is not to be confused with autobiography of the kind we find in Augustine. About Seneca the individual man we know very little, and his philosophical writings tell us almost nothing more. That is not what they were for.

I have dealt here only with a few of the papers in this rich collection. Among the other papers, 'Rules and Reasoning in Stoic Ethics' continues Inwood's exploration of Stoic ethics as involving a flexible and situation-

sensitive account of ethical reasoning, rather than a rigid and unsympathetically applied set of rules. 'Getting to Goodness' points up the problem raised for the Stoics by their combination of a strictly empiricist account of concept formation with an account of goodness which makes it highly ideal. Here Inwood uses Seneca's Letter 120 to suggest that for the Stoics it is built into our natural development that we grasp, and are attracted to, the virtue rather than the vice in the behaviour that we experience around us; we 'privileg[e] the praiseworthy over the defective in our understanding of things' (286). Inwood ascribes this to the Stoic tendency to see nature in a providential way, but surely many non-providential forms of naturalism can share the claim that our cognitive development is biased in ways that further our existence as social animals. The remaining papers are: 'Politics and Paradox in Seneca's *De Beneficiis*,' 'God and Human Knowledge in Seneca's *Natural Questions*,' 'Moral Judgement in Seneca,' 'Natural Law in Seneca,' 'Reason, Rationalization and Happiness' and 'Seneca on Freedom and Autonomy.' In all these papers Inwood finds a challenge in Seneca's work, namely to engage with him philosophically while appreciating the implications of the literary forms in which his argument is presented. Inwood's original and careful approach encourages the reader to join in this challenging activity, and to find Seneca philosophically richer, and also tougher, than we have tended to assume. Anyone interested in Stoicism, ancient ethics or the resources that ancient ethics can offer to us will want to own this collection.

*Received April 2006*

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