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SENECA

SELECTED PHILOSOPHICAL LETTERS

Translated with an

Introduction and Commentary by

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Some commentaries have benefited from work on papers originally written for oral presentation and since published separately. The commentary on Letter 66 is intimately connected to a paper given at the Universities of Buffalo, British Columbia, and Alberta, 'Reason, Rationalization and Happiness'; it now appears as chapter 9 of *Reading Seneca* (Inwood 2005). The commentary on Letter 120 began as a sketch for 'Getting to Goodness', delivered to the Princeton Ancient Philosophy Colloquium and at the University of Pittsburgh and now published as chapter 10 of *Reading Seneca*. The commentary on Letter 87 has been enriched by discussion of an unpublished paper presented at Cornell University, the University of Arizona, and UC Santa Barbara.

I owe a particularly concrete debt of gratitude to Margaret Graver, who subjected the penultimate draft of my translation to an exacting scrutiny. Her influence has saved me from many errors and infelicities and I have often accepted her suggestions for better wording; the remaining blunders are my own fault. Margaret also read an early version of the commentaries with a critical eye; her comments and suggestions have improved my comment on almost every letter.

It is no mere cliché to say that without the encouragement, advice, and loving support of my wife, Niko Scharer, I would not have been able to write this book. An even older debt is owed to my parents, Marg and Bill Inwood. For many decades they have provided a wonderful education, both moral and intellectual. My brothers and I had the privilege of growing up in a household where critical enquiry, teaching, intellectual challenge, and a passion for fairness were in the fabric of daily life. It has taken me a long time to see how precious a gift our parents gave us. Humbly, I dedicate this book to them.

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INTRODUCTION

Seneca's Life and Works

Lucius Annaeus Seneca, better known as Seneca the Younger, was a complex figure. At some point between 4 and 1 BC at Corduba in Roman Spain, he was born into a prosperous and prominent provincial Roman family. His father, Seneca the Elder, was an important literary figure in Rome itself, famous as the author of the *Controversiae* and *Suasoriae*, compilations of rhetorical declamations by the most famous speakers of the day. Seneca the Younger was the middle of three sons; while his older brother had a successful if conventional political career leading to a provincial governorship, the youngest son lived a private life and did not achieve senatorial rank. Seneca the Younger took an early interest in philosophy, oratory, and literature and over the course of a long career rose to become a senior adviser to the emperor Nero and the most prominent literary figure of his generation, publishing extensively in both prose and verse.

Seneca's early life is difficult to document, although his career becomes easier to track after he was forced into exile in AD 41 owing to some sort of court intrigue.¹ He was recalled to Rome and political influence in AD 49. For readers of this volume, the most important facts are his early interest in philosophy, his lifelong commitment to philosophical study and writing, and his determination to combine those interests with a long and active political career as well as a major role as a prominent literary figure. He was the author of many tragedies (whose relationship to philosophy is a controversial issue) and a famous orator; his satirical work on the emperor Claudius, the *Apocolocyntosis*, is yet another demonstration of his virtuosity.

Seneca's influence at Nero's court lasted for more than a decade, but waned as the character of the emperor and his regime deteriorated. Having withdrawn from public life in the period between AD 62 and 64, Seneca was eventually forced into committing suicide in the spring of 65 because

¹ The best account of Seneca's life and background is still Griffin 1992: part I. See also Inwood 2005: ch. 1.

of the emperor's suspicion that Seneca was involved with a conspiracy against him.

The chronology of many of Seneca's works is debatable, although Griffin 1992, Appendix A is a reliable guide. The *Letters*, however, are securely datable to the period after AD 62 when Seneca, then in his mid-sixties and at the end of a long career, was in retirement. This setting for the composition of the *Letters* is often relevant to their tone and themes.

The Nature of Seneca's letters?

It is now widely agreed that Seneca's letters in their present form, whatever their relationship might have been to a real correspondence, are creations of the writer's craft.³ Like the dialogues of Plato, Seneca's letters create an atmosphere of interpersonal philosophical exchange, with the difference that the medium of this exchange is not face-to-face conversation but intimate correspondence between friends.⁴ The contributions to this conversation of Lucilius, a long-time friend of Seneca's, must be inferred from what Seneca says to him, but as all readers of the letters have recognized, the assumption of a dialogue between the two friends is an important factor shaping the way the letters are meant to work for readers.⁵ For the most part the letters function as independent works of philosophical literature and there is little reason to suppose that readers of them were expected to have read the rest of Seneca's works, and almost certainly not his dramas. In commenting on them, though, a certain amount of comparison with his other philosophical works is desirable.

² More detailed discussion of the issues raised here is given in 'The Importance of Form in the Letters of Seneca the Younger' in Morrison and Moré, forthcoming. Recent studies from which I have benefited are Wilson 1987, and 2001, and Teichert 1990.

³ Note the promise of literary immortality to Lucilius at 21.5 (Letter 21, section 5; for reference conventions in this book, see below pp. xxiii, xxv). See the discussion by Griffin 1992, Appendix B 4. For a generous survey of earlier views see Mazzoli 1989. More particularly, see Leeman 1951, 1953; Abel 1981; Cancik 1967: 53–4; and chapter 1 of Margaret Graver's unpublished dissertation (1996), *Therapeutic Reading and Seneca's Moral Epistles*.

⁴ See Teichert 1990: 71–2.

⁵ Teichert (1990: 71–2) points out that the one-sidedness of the conversation between Seneca the letter-writer and his silent partner Lucilius encourages a greater engagement on the part of the reader, who can play both the role of reader and of recipient of the letters, being addressed by the author in both modes. I am, however, sceptical about Teichert's supposition that the author's philosophical experience is meant to be shaped by the nature of the correspondence. As author Seneca is surely more in control than that.

Other essential facts about the letters can be summarized quickly.⁶ Despite appearances, our corpus of letters is significantly incomplete; originally there were more than the twenty books which now survive; an excerpt from a letter on style is preserved by Aulus Gellius (*Gal.* 12.2) from Book 22. Among other things, this excerpt confirms that literary themes remained important in later books of the letters; the appearance in our twenty-book collection of an accelerating emphasis on 'rough' philosophical themes might to some extent be misleading. Furthermore, the collection we do have circulated in at least two volumes in late antiquity (Letters 1–88 and 89–124). The fact that the collection came to circulate in separate components in antiquity is significant for understanding its structure. L. D. Reynolds⁷ once suggested that the incompleteness at the end of our collection might be the result of an early loss of one entire volume of letters. But it is also possible that small groups of letters have been lost *within* the span of our transmitted collection, and the volume join between 88 and 89 would be a particularly likely location for such a loss.⁸ The letters are not alone in having been maimed; the *Natural Questions* also suffered severe damage early in the history of its transmission.⁹

The incompleteness of our collection is significant when we consider the issue of the internal articulation of the letters, how they were meant to be grouped for reading or publication. The hermeneutical issues surrounding this issue are perhaps insoluble, since we cannot any longer look at the whole collection of letters as Seneca meant it to be read. Moreover, it has so far proven difficult to separate philosophical interpretation from questions of structure and literary form.¹⁰ If one's ultimate goal is a philosophical interpretation of the letters, it will not help much to seek guidance from a

⁶ Parts of what follows are adapted from 'The Importance of Form in the Letters of Seneca the Younger' (Inwood forthcoming).

⁷ Reynolds 1965: 17.

⁸ See Cancik 1967: 8–12, for sensible discussion of the internal completeness of our collection. In n. 18, p. 8, she notes that Reynolds fails to consider the possibility that letters may have been lost at the join between the two volumes of letters that came down separately through the medieval manuscript tradition.

⁹ In addition to the loss of two half books, the order of the books in our *NQ* seems to have become seriously confused in the course of transmission. It is likely that the original order was 3, 4a, 4b, 5, 6, 7, 8, 1, 2 and quite possible that the work was left incomplete on Seneca's death. For further discussion and references, see my 'God and Human Knowledge in Seneca's *Natural Questions*', ch. 6 in Inwood 2005.

¹⁰ Virtually everyone who writes on Seneca's letters has taken an at least implicit position on their pedagogical or literary structure and a review of the issue would be both lengthy and inconclusive. But some works stand out for their relative good sense. See Maunach 1970; Cancik 1967, who commits herself to the view that the organizational principle of the collection is pedagogical rather than doctrinal, is unusually sensitive to the methodological problems involved in discussing the plan and organization of the collection and emphasizes

view about their literary form which is itself partly shaped by an incipient philosophical interpretation.

These are very serious challenges to the reader, and reflection on these difficulties makes the decision to select groups of letters for philosophical comment less unjustifiable than it might otherwise be; it certainly makes serious philosophical work on the letters a daunting prospect. But the *Letters to Lucilius* remain Seneca's masterpiece, and this is in part because they are philosophical letters. We should, then, ask why he chose this form. Why, at the end of a long life, a long and tumultuous political career, and (perhaps most relevant) at the end of a brilliant literary career of unmatched versatility, write letters? The answer is not immediately clear and Seneca's motivation was probably not simple. In the commentary I assume that the choice of the letter as the literary form is in fact relevant to what Seneca aimed to accomplish, and that his inspiration for writing philosophical letters came from many sources, the most important of which was perhaps Epicurus' published philosophical correspondence, which was originally much more extensive than and much of it different in character from the letters preserved in Diogenes Laertius, book 10.¹¹ At the same time, Seneca's self-conception as an author of *Latin* literature is relevant. Not only should we assume (what can also be confirmed by observation) that Cicero's philosophical works, especially the *De Finibus* and the *Tusculan Disputations*, were a stimulus for his work, but it is also likely that the then recent publication of Cicero's *Letters to Atticus* contributed to the decision to add the literary epistle to the other genres in which Seneca chose to write.¹² (Seneca had, after all, been a brilliantly successful author in more genres than any other Roman writer one can think of: he was a poet, dramatist, public speaker, and essayist in many styles.) The approach to Seneca taken in the present commentary presupposes that his character as the complexity of the techniques used by Seneca (in her view) to give unity and texture to the work.

¹¹ By Seneca's time there had been a long tradition of philosophical letter-writing. There were copora of letters attributed to Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoreans, Cynics and others. For a fuller discussion of Seneca's place in this tradition and the influence of the tradition on the way his letters are written, see 'The Importance of Form in the Letters of Seneca the Younger' (Inwood forthcoming).

¹² See Griffin 1992: 418–9. For background see Maunach 1970: 181–99. The major limitation of his assessment of generic influence on Seneca's letters is his nearly exclusive concentration on literary form and his emphasis on Seneca's situation within his Latin literary tradition. Hence (pp. 197–8) he downplays the importance of Epicurus' letters and focusses more on Horace and Lucilius. Similarly, his grudging concession of possible Ciceronian influence on the project of the letters (p. 197) seems to underestimate the motivational power of authorial *emulation*.

a man of letters is of great importance,¹³ although this in no way detracts from an appreciation of the philosophical intensity of Seneca's project.

Seneca's Motivation as Author

It is common, in the interpretation of Seneca's letters, to emphasize the apparent 'moral progress' of Lucilius throughout the collection. There is an increase in the philosophical intensity and difficulty of the letters as the reader proceeds from the first letter to the more technical themes of the letters which come latest in our surviving collection. It is, further, common to emphasize the role Seneca apparently takes on, not just in these letters, as a guide to and inspiration for the moral improvement of his addressee. Sometimes this role is described as that of a 'spiritual guide' and often this characterization of Seneca's nature as an author has a powerful influence on the interpretation of his letters. John Cooper, for instance, has been inspired by Ilsetraut Hadot's superb analysis of Seneca in *Seneca und die griechisch-römische Tradition der Seelenleitung* (Hadot 1969) to treat him primarily as such a spiritual guide (Cooper 2004). This is a risky characterization of Seneca's central motivation as an author, and some critics have tended to treat Seneca's self-presentation (as an adviser and correspondent) as though it were his fundamental philosophical motivation. It is tempting but unwarranted to assume that virtually all of Seneca's philosophical activity, his interest in theory and argumentation, his concern for understanding the phenomena of the natural and human world and for convincing his readers of what is the case about it, should be approached on the assumption that he is *first and foremost* a spiritual guide, someone whose interests, activity, and methods dominate over the more theoretical aspects of philosophy.

Yet one of the most persistent problems in understanding Seneca has always been the large number of roles he plays. In the corpus of his writing and in the relatively rich historical record we possess about him we see Seneca in many guises: as an occasionally Machiavellian political figure of great but transient power, as an eloquent orator devoted to the artfulness of fine speech as much as to its power to persuade, as a dark but brilliant poet, as a friend, son, and brother, as a philosopher of surprisingly wide interests, and as a moral adviser. The contradictions often seen in Seneca's life and works stem in part from this variety of roles, and it is obvious

¹³ See the longer discussion in chapter 1 of Inwood 2005.

that choosing one role or another as central has a considerable impact on how one understands Seneca. Perhaps the chief frustration faced in studying Seneca lies in the absence of confidence about which role, if any, should be treated as central. It would be a great help if we had a fully reliable biography or autobiography of the man, but despite our mass of information about his life we do not.¹⁴ That is not to say that we know nothing about the place of the letters in Seneca's philosophical and authorial career—far from it. Griffin's dating of the letters to the period after his forced retirement in AD 62 is secure; since Seneca was forced to commit suicide in AD 65 the letters can be dated fairly exactly. This means that we must bear in mind that Seneca is at the same period working on the *Natural Questions* and quite possibly had only recently completed the large and frequently quite technical work *On Favours*.¹⁵ In assessing Seneca's basic motivations as author of the letters, we should not neglect these facts; the range of works he wrote at this stage of his career ought to make us hesitate before assuming that Seneca's main intention was to be a spiritual guide for the reader. We should perhaps take a wider view of the question.

In recent years two developments have occurred that bear on the question of how to approach Seneca's character as a philosophical writer. Among students of ancient philosophy there has been a dramatic increase of interest in and sympathy for the notion that moral guidance and moral improvement are an important part of philosophy; many philosophers in the English-speaking world generally have embraced the humanly practical, political, and psychological functions of philosophy in a way that could not have been predicted in 1965 or even 1975. The other development has been in the study of literature. Students of ancient literature are now much more wary of relatively simple biographical claims based on the works they study; there is a much greater appreciation now for the elusiveness of the author behind the texts he or she wrote, for the complexity of the roles one author may play, and for the difficulty of isolating with sufficient confidence a central and determinative biographical fact which might guide our understanding of literary works.

These two developments pull the study of Seneca's philosophical works in opposite directions. Philosophers are now much more likely to take

¹⁴ See Edwards 1997: 23–4; this is true despite the magnificent work of Griffin 1992.

¹⁵ Griffin 1992: appendix A; see especially n. G, p. 399. Here Griffin takes account of Seneca's lost work *On Moral Philosophy*, of which sparse fragments survive in Lactantius (collected in F. Haase's 1871–2 Teubner edition of Seneca's works, vol. 3, 442–4). These fragments do not suggest that the work was of the character indicated by Seneca in his allusions to it as a work in progress in 106.1–3, 108.1, and 109.17. See Leeman 1953: 309–10.

Seneca's role as a moral (or 'spiritual') guide to be philosophically relevant, to play a central role in the understanding of his philosophical works, especially of his letters. Indeed, in light of the impact of Pierre Hadot, Michel Foucault, and Martha Nussbaum we would hardly expect the therapeutic capacities of philosophy to be of less interest than they were a generation ago. And students of literature are now much less likely to embrace any biographical facts or presumed motivations as central to understanding Seneca's works. In themselves, both of these developments are welcome; it is now much less likely that philosophers will pass Seneca by as having nothing of philosophical interest to say and students of literature are less likely to marginalize for the wrong sort of reasons the philosophically robust parts of Seneca's corpus.

Nevertheless, in approaching Seneca's letters philosophically, it is surely a mistake to take it for granted that the author's central motivation is to play the role of moral or 'spiritual' guide for his readers. That is often his persona, his authorial voice, to be sure. But it is as much a mistake to take that authorial self-presentation as the key to philosophical interpretation as it would be to begin from his role as political adviser or tragic poet. The role of guide and adviser is one that Seneca *adopts* to write the letters; it is apparently the voice which he often wishes to be heard first by his readers. But it does not follow that it represents his basic authorial motivation or that our philosophical understanding of the letters must begin from this alleged fact about Seneca. We should be no reader to assume that the literary strategy Seneca chose defines his central philosophical concerns than we are to assume that Plato's choice of the Socratic dialogue as a form defines his philosophical agenda. In both cases it probably matters, but the way that it matters is not something to be taken for granted.

This is especially important for the interpretation of Seneca's letters, many of which combine detailed and gritty philosophical discussion with an apparent renunciation, halfway through the letter, of that very discussion in the interests of what Seneca says is *actually* relevant to moral improvement. For a philosophical reading of the letters perhaps the main problem is Seneca's internal self-criticism, his flagrantly ambivalent attitude towards philosophical detail and technicality.¹⁶ If we begin from the assumption that his central interest is spiritual guidance we will not be able to understand why he bothered to give us so much more; we often won't be able to ask the right questions about the letters; and

¹⁶ On Seneca's complex attitude to logic, see Barnes 1997; for his attitude to physics see most recently Wildberger 2006.

we are unlikely to persist in the close analysis of his arguments if we are too ready to treat Seneca's approach to his readers as pedagogical rather than philosophical. We will find ourselves unable to explain why a Roman senator with these motivations bothered to write so much more widely on various philosophical themes than, for example, Musonius Rufus.

In the letters Seneca writes a great deal about physics, dialectic, and what we would call metaphysics alongside of argumentation in ethics which is far more technical than mere moral guidance requires. He didn't have to do this, just as he didn't have to write the *Natural Questions*, or explore at length the intractable ethical paradoxes of the *De Beneficiis*, or write tragedies and the satirical *Apocolocyntosis*. I assume, then, in writing the commentaries which follow that the facts that we do know about Seneca's literary output and life history simply do not justify regarding him first and foremost as a moral or spiritual guide and as being motivated essentially by that mission, any more than those facts would justify regarding him fundamentally as an actor on the political scene who had literary ambitions on the side.

Yet some stance must be taken in order to interpret the letters, a philosophical work which has had persistent and profound impact on the western philosophical tradition, and one of the largest and earliest works by a Stoic philosopher to survive from the ancient world. If one is wary of treating Seneca as a spiritual and moral guide, as a politician with philosophical interests, as a poet or orator with anomalous enthusiasm for philosophy, what stance should one take? The safest approach to Seneca's work is, as I have suggested, to regard him first and foremost as a man of letters, a *litterateur*, as a writer whose first concern is with his art and his audience. This is a relatively neutral stance to take and a relatively solid foundation for interpretation; it does not impose very heavy constraints on how we interpret his works. We do, after all, know with certainty that he wrote literary works of real distinction in a wider range of genres than any other Latin author. His harshest critics, ancient and modern, concede his stylistic accomplishments, his authorial *éclat*, even if they deplore what they interpret as a certain self-indulgence and lack of self-restraint. Moreover, literary ambition is compatible with many different substantive motivations—moral, metaphysical, poetic, political. All such themes benefit from, even require, literary skill if they are to have impact on a wide audience as they were certainly meant to do. Hence thinking first of Seneca's authorial ambitions will enable us to read each letter with a more open mind.

Seneca's Approach to Writing Philosophy

It is still quite common to see Seneca treated as an eclectic philosopher, someone who picks and chooses his inspirations not on the basis of a commitment to the central doctrines of Stoicism and not on the basis of a conviction about the intellectual coherence of the views he adopts. This seems misguided. As I have tried to show in *Reading Seneca* (Inwood 2005), he is better characterized as a creative and engaged philosophical writer, prepared to argue for the merits of the positions which he holds. He writes in an intellectual environment where the influence of Plato and Aristotle and their schools cannot be neglected, and in which readers interested in philosophy could be assumed to be comfortable in Greek as well as in Latin.¹⁷ Like Cicero a century before and like most outward-looking philosophical writers in all eras, he writes with an eye to the positions held by the significant philosophical interlocutors with whom he is engaged. On the internal evidence of the letters alone we can be sure that these interlocutors included Epicureans as well as Platonists and Aristotelians. Yet he never presents himself as anything other than a Stoic. Seneca feels quite comfortable in taking independent and critical stances about various of his Stoic predecessors and, as I shall argue in the commentary, he seems to have particular sympathy on some issues with the views of Aristotle of Chios (while opposing him on others), with those of Cleanthes, and those of Posidonius. Zeno takes pride of place as founder of the school, of course. Chrysippus and other Stoics are suitable targets of criticism when there is reason to object to their views, yet that does not diminish Seneca's commitment to Stoicism; nor should this sort of criticism itself make us doubt his skill as a philosopher. In many letters Seneca is notably concerned to emphasize the common ground he shares with Epicureans; he is less vociferous about the fact that his version of Stoicism often emphasizes approaches shared with Platonism. But through all of this he thinks and speaks independently as a Stoic. Perhaps a short extract from letter 84 (not included in this selection) will serve as a helpful guide to interpreting the letters in particular.

¹⁷ Seneca writes determinedly in a Latin tradition, but does not hesitate to introduce Greek terms when it is philosophically appropriate. Since the most important work in philosophy had been done in Greek, Seneca, like Cicero, must often use Latin technical terms to represent Greek terms (such as *convivola*, advantages, for *progenita*, preferred indifference). He is not, however, mechanical in so doing (see Inwood 2005: ch. 1) and the relevant Greek background and terms are discussed in the commentary as needed.

In the case of our body we see that nature does this [produces a new unity out of distinct inputs] without any effort on our part.

As long as the food which we ingest keeps its original character and sits intact in our stomach, it is a burdensome lump. But when the food is transformed from its original state it is then able to pass into the bloodstream and contribute to our bodily strength. In the case of the nourishment we take for our intellects, we should do the same thing and not permit what we consume to remain intact—for fear that it should be foreign to us. Let's digest it. Otherwise, it will be remembered but won't affect our intellect. Let us give these things our genuine assent and make them our very own, so as to create a unity out of plurality, the way one total is produced out of distinct numbers when a single calculation brings together several different, lesser sums. This is what our mind should do. It should conceal the ideas which have helped it along and display only the final result. If your admiration for someone leads to the appearance of a deep similarity to that person, I'd want that resemblance to resemble that of a son [to his father] and not that of a picture [to its model]; a [mere] picture is something dead. (84.5–8)

Seneca thinks for himself and claims to produce something new and his own from the sources of his inspiration; we should not expect him to display all the joints of his intellectual physiognomy.

Perhaps the most engaging feature of Seneca's letters is the directness and urgency of the author's personal voice, that is, of the voice which he chooses to let us hear. Since this aspect of his thought will not be much emphasized in the letters chosen and in the comment on them, let me round out this introduction with Seneca's own introduction to the collection, Letter 1.

1. Do it, Lucilius my friend. Reclaim yourself. Assemble and preserve your time, which has until now been snatched from you, stolen, or just gotten lost. Convince yourself that what I say is true: some of our time is robbed from us, some burgled, and some slips out of our hands. The most shameful loss, though, is what happens through negligence. And if you're willing to pay attention: a good deal of life is lost for those who conduct it badly; most of it is lost for those who do nothing at all; but all of life is lost for those who don't pay attention.

2. Who can you show me who values his time? who knows what a day is worth? who understands that he is dying every day? Our mistake, you see, is in looking ahead to death. A good deal of death has already passed. The years which have so far gone by are in the hands of death. So, Lucilius, do what you claim to be doing and embrace every hour. In that way you'll be less dependent on tomorrow if you set your hand to today. Life flits by while things get put off.

3. Lucilius, everything belongs to someone else. Only our time is our own. We have been sent by nature to seize this one possession, which is fleeting and slippery; we can be driven out of it by anyone who cares to do so. People are so

stupid that they let themselves go into debt by acquiring the cheapest and most trivial things, which they could easily pay off. But no one who has received the gift of time acknowledges the obligation, even though this is the one thing which even a grateful man cannot repay.

4. Maybe you're going to ask about my own behaviour, since I'm giving you all this advice. I'll make a clean confession. Like a careful spendthrift I keep good records of my expenditures. I cannot claim that I don't squander anything. But I could tell you what I squander and why and how. I can give a full account of my poverty. My experience is like that of most people who are impoverished through no fault of their own: everyone forgives, no one helps out.

5. So what's the situation? I don't think that anyone is poor if the little bit he still has is enough for him. Nevertheless, I'd rather see you preserve what's yours and start in good time. For as our ancestors thought,¹⁸ it's too late to pour sparingly from the bottom of the bottle. There is only a tiny bit left at that point, and that bit is of the lowest quality.

Whatever his real feelings and motivations, Seneca presents himself in the *Letters* as a philosopher in a hurry, as a man interested above all else in the concrete result of making his life better, as a man with no time to lose. Further, he presents himself as an imperfect man, someone with many failings and at least able to claim awareness of his own failings. There is an urgent sense of the importance of making progress in the philosophical life, an awareness that the end of life is always near, and an admission of his own ignorance. Seneca is certainly not a Socrates, but in these letters we see a dramatic representation of many things which are central to the Socratic tradition of philosophizing. In the letters which follow we can see the argumentative and sometimes truculent side of philosophy as well as its homiletic and self-reflective aspects. It is the aim of this book to emphasize the former, even at the expense of the latter. The philosophical gain will be considerable, I hope, and if in the process we can come to a better understanding of why he should have been such an influential philosopher for so many centuries that will be an historical gain as well.

The Selection of Letters

This book represents an attempt to open up Seneca's most influential prose work, the *Letters to Lucilius on Ethics*, to a larger and more philosophically oriented readership than it now enjoys. Limitations of space and time have

¹⁸ Hes. *Op.* 369.

required that only a small number of letters be selected for translation and comment; this inevitably skews the portrayal of Seneca, but the distortion will I hope be a useful corrective for the even more unbalanced representation of Seneca and his philosophical works which prevails today. Seneca's letters form a large and varied corpus, much of which is of only indirect philosophical interest, and yet the collection is put together in an orderly and artistic way, with strong thematic interdependences among the letters which inevitably affect the significance of individual letters and of sections within various letters. I have tried to keep such relationships in mind throughout, but selection inevitably imposes limitations. Hence a brief word about how the selection was made seems in order.

The integrity of each book of letters (twenty books survive and we know that originally there were at least twenty-two) is an important fact about the collection. Despite their outwardly casual manner, great care went into the crafting of each book as a literary unity. As a representation of this feature of the letters, Book 20, which contains a very high concentration of philosophically important letters, is included in its entirety, although some of its letters would not merit inclusion on their own. On the other hand, two of the most important letters in the collection, 94 and 95, are omitted because of their size—to include them would make it impossible to include much else, and there is already an abundant scholarly literature on them. Because Seneca's relation to other philosophical schools is of particular importance for establishing the interest of his approach to various issues in Stoicism, I begin with 58 and 65, which engage in a very direct manner with issues in Platonism and Aristotelianism. These letters too (or rather, select portions of them) have generated a substantial amount of scholarly attention. But too little of it, in my view, addresses the letters which as wholes are works of philosophical interest. They have usually been regarded as evidence for an attempted reconstruction of earlier and mostly non-Stoic philosophy. My approach is to allow such questions to recede into the background as I isolate what I take to be the main philosophical issues of these letters themselves, unexcerpted. Letter 66 is not only of great interest in connection with 58 and 65, but like several others (71, 76, 85, 87) it tackles central issues in the Stoic theory of value. Consideration of this set of letters permits an exploration of Seneca's attitudes towards Platonism and Aristotelianism, as well as to earlier phases in the school's history.

Book 20, which contains seven letters, begins with 118, a letter which is impossible to appreciate fully without a consideration of 117, itself one of

a group of letters that raise important questions about the balance between technical philosophical writing and a more 'literary' or popular approach to the main issues of ethics and physics. Because I think that Seneca's position on and contribution to Stoic physics and even metaphysics has been misunderstood I also include 106, 113, and 117.

The final tally, then, is seventeen letters, a number coincidentally the same as that included in a literary collection compiled by C. D. N. Costa (*Seneca: 17 Letters* (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1988)) with which my selection overlaps by only one letter, 122. For convenience I have divided my seventeen letters into five groups, but the reader should be warned that this is a somewhat arbitrary procedure. What is not arbitrary, though, is my determination to treat each chosen letter as an integral whole rather than excerpting the parts of each which stand out for the intensity of their philosophical merit. This kind of excerption has often been practiced (especially with 58, 65, and 87) but it inevitably prejudices the nature of Seneca's philosophical endeavour in an unproductive way. Whatever else Seneca may have intended to accomplish in a given letter, he certainly wrote each one as an artistic unity and any philosophical interpretation should begin from a recognition of that fact.

Seneca's letters are cited in boldface font (4r.1 is Letter 41, section 1) without the title of the work. In the translation I retain the section divisions used in Reynolds's Oxford Classical Text and often the paragraphing as well. Throughout I adopt Reynolds's text, except where I explicitly signal disagreement in the notes or commentary; important textual variations are mentioned briefly in the commentary. With regard to gendered usages (man vs human, for example) I have respected Seneca's marked use of the gendered term for man (*vir*) and the non-gendered term for humans (*homo*) as consistently as I could manage; where the context seems to demand a gendered interpretation I have used 'man' rather than 'human' or 'person' as appropriate. Throughout the masculine personal pronoun is used for generic references to human beings.

A final note: Each letter begins and ends with the conventional phrases of Latin letter-writing: *Seneca Lucilio suo salutem* and *Vale* ('Seneca wishes health to his friend Lucilius' and 'Farewell', a phrase which literally means 'be strong' but is also the standard way of saying 'goodbye' in spoken Latin). These are standard phrases, not personalized to reflect the writer's feelings or attitude towards the recipient. Yet Roman letter-writing conventions are not our own, so that a wholly modern 'Dear Lucilius ... Yours truly' would be almost as misleading as omission of

the epistolary conventions altogether. It is easy to imagine Seneca being aware at some level that these standard formulae do in fact wish Lucilius health and strength, a sentiment he surely feels for his friend. Hence these phrases are translated in a formulaic manner designed to reflect the conventional character of epistolary discourse and still to hint at the nuances of the Latin: 'Seneca to Lucilius, greetings;' and 'Farewell!'

ABBREVIATIONS AND CONVENTIONS

Abbreviations generally follow the practice of LSJ (Liddell-Scott-Jones, *Greek-English Lexicon*) and the *OLD* (*Oxford Latin Dictionary*), with the exception of the following:

<i>Acad.</i>	<i>Academica</i>
<i>Ben.</i>	<i>De Beneficiis</i>
<i>Brev. Vit.</i>	<i>De Breuitate Vitae</i>
<i>CHHP</i>	<i>Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy</i>
<i>CIAG</i>	<i>Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca</i>
<i>Clem.</i>	<i>De Clementia</i>
<i>Cons. Helo.</i>	<i>Consolatio ad Helviam Matrem</i>
<i>Cons. Marr.</i>	<i>Consolatio ad Marciam</i>
<i>Cons. Polyb.</i>	<i>Consolatio ad Polybium</i>
<i>Const. Sap.</i>	<i>De Constantia Sapientis</i>
<i>Ecl.</i>	<i>Stobaeus, Eclogae</i>
<i>E-K</i>	<i>Edelstein-Kidd (1989)</i>
<i>KD</i>	<i>Epicurus, Principal Doctrines</i>
<i>LS</i>	<i>Long and Sedley (1987)</i>
<i>NQ</i>	<i>Naturalis Quaestiones</i>
<i>Proo.</i>	<i>De Providentia</i>
<i>SVP</i>	<i>Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta</i>
<i>Tranq. An.</i>	<i>De Tranquillitate Animi</i>