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THE STOIC CLASSIC

SENECA

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY TOM BUTLER-BOWDON

ON THE SHORTNESS OF LIFE

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INTRODUCTION

TOM BUTLER-BOWDON

The three most famous Stoic thinkers had dramatic and unexpected life trajectories.

Marcus Aurelius became the last of the 'Five Good Emperors' only because of a fortuitous adoption. Epictetus was born into slavery but founded an academy and became the philosopher friend of Emperor Hadrian. Seneca was born far from the centre of Rome (in Cordoba, Spain), spent a decade in Egypt, was exiled to Corsica, only to become one of Emperor Nero's key advisers.

Epictetus had no problem squaring his philosophy with his life, but Marcus Aurelius and Seneca were men of power. Political realities, the pressure of position, and the burden of wealth tested their Stoic values to an acute degree.

Lucius Annaeus Seneca's birth in 4 BCE came only 20 years or so after the start of the Roman Empire under Augustus. His very full and eventful life would straddle the reign of five emperors: Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero.

It's hard to find a modern-day equivalent of Seneca: a public intellectual and literary celebrity who climbed to the centre of Roman power. The reality of being an extremely rich and powerful politician was at odds with his self-image as a philosopher with

time to work on himself and think. The truth is that 'peace of mind' and 'the happy life' (two of his essays we feature in this volume) were a challenge for much of his adult existence. His writings provide a window into the *ideal* Seneca, one who might live beyond the turbulent nastiness of late imperial Rome. His forced suicide came after Nero suspected him (wrongly) of a plot. Historians depict it as a slow, heroic death in the company of his wife Pompeia Paulina.

Seneca was complicated, and the facts of his life make his writing even more intriguing. This introduction draws on research (see Capstone's *Letters From A Stoic*, 2021, Introduction by Donald Robertson) into Seneca's life and times, which may illuminate his motivations for writing what he did, when he did. Each essay is prefaced by information about what may have been happening in his world prior to their writing. At the end of this chapter you will also find a timeline of Seneca's life.

For a long period, Seneca's letters were better known than his essays and dialogues – hence our coverage of the letters first in the Capstone series. This edition comprises three of his essays – *On the Shortness of Life*, *On the Happy Life*, and *On Peace of Mind* – that articulate his idea of virtue and the good life within the framework of Stoic philosophy.

ON THE SHORTNESS OF LIFE

DE BREVITATE VITAE (c. 49 CE)

In 37 CE, Emperor Tiberius was supplanted by his adopted grandson Gaius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, or Caligula. At this time Seneca was a rising senator and lawyer, and Caligula considered his influence in the Senate to be a threat. He planned to have Seneca executed, but Seneca's life was spared when Caligula was told that the senator would die soon anyway from consumption.

Shaken by these events, Seneca ended his legal career and focused on writing. He began to have considerable success. In his

early forties he penned *Of Consolation to Marcia*. Marcia was a Roman noblewoman who was mourning the death of her son, and Seneca used Stoic arguments to console her.

After Caligula was assassinated in 41 CE, his uncle Claudius became emperor.

Claudius's wife, Empress Messalina, accused Seneca of having had a relationship with Julia Livilla, Caligula's sister, who was allegedly involved in a plot to kill Caligula. Caligula's other sister, Agrippina the Younger, also a friend of Seneca's, was implicated. Julia was ordered to be killed, but Seneca's fate was much milder. Exiled to Corsica, he got to keep his property in Rome and lived in some comfort on the island. He published *Of Consolation to Helvia* (42 CE), which attempted to comfort his mother over the fact that her son was now in exile.

In 48 CE, Emperor Claudius had his wife Messalina executed and married Agrippina the Younger, Caligula's sister and Seneca's friend. Agrippina had Claudius recall Seneca from exile. She hired Seneca, by now a literary celebrity, to tutor her 12-year-old son, the future Emperor Nero. Because he was older than Claudius's natural son Britannicus, Nero became heir to the throne.

On the Shortness of Life was written sometime between 49 CE and 55 CE, when Seneca was back in Rome. While exiled on Corsica he had had plenty of time to reflect on the brevity of life, a notion very much part of Stoic philosophy. Seneca's own brush with death, his exile, and the various assassinations and murders happening in Rome made 'the shortness of life' a harsh reality, not just an abstract notion. Yet he does not refer to any of these events, rather to more prosaic obstacles to an appreciation of the shortness of life, such as busyness and luxury.

In the very first chapter, Seneca points out that the *amount* of time we have is not the issue:

> Life is long enough to carry out the most important projects – we have ample time, if we arrange it properly. But when it all runs to waste through luxury and carelessness, when it is not

> devoted to any good purpose, then at the last we are forced to feel that it is all over, although we never noticed how it glided away. So it is: we do not receive a short life, but we make it a short one, and we are not poor in days, but wasteful of them. (*On the Shortness of Life*, 1)

He then lists all the ways a person can waste their life, chasing after things with no real meaning. These include: greed ('which nothing can satisfy'); working too hard on things that are not worth it; drunkenness; laziness; ambition, which can make people sell their souls; and love of commercial gain, which sees people constantly on the move seeking clients. Others, Seneca says, are 'plagued by the love of war', making their own or others' lives cheap. Some sacrifice their lives 'in the service of great men' (thus neglecting their own), while others waste their time litigating to get or regain some fortune. The result of such wasted efforts is that, as the Oracle said, 'We live only a small part of our lives.'

The quest for recognition, excitement, and money is not a good use of our lives. A life lost in busyness, in providing services for others, means never giving enough time to *ourselves* – to that quiet voice that yearns for reflection upon our very existence. If our lives become merely one event leading to another, we are little more than animals responding to stimuli. Seneca wished for this life of reflection. He writes that the day a person decides to become a 'philosopher', meaning committed to reflection and truth rather than work, money, duties, and business, that day is a liberation. One starts to belong to one's self.

Many lust after success and power, but when they finally achieve some high office, Seneca notes, all they can think about is when they can leave it and free themselves from the pressure and difficulties of the job. Some daydream of their next vacation, fantasizing about a time when they will not be so busy, to live like normal people. A modern example is provided by Barack Obama's autobiography *A Promised Land*, in which he revealed that, at the

height of his presidency, he had recurring dreams of sitting on a park bench doing nothing. He no longer owned his own time.

So how *does* a person act who understands the value of time? It is not so much what they do, Seneca says, but what they have resolved to escape from, what they have said 'No' to. It takes a superior kind of person to be this intentional and protective of their time:

> You cannot find anyone who wants to give away their money; yet among how many people does everyone distribute their *life*? (*On the Shortness of Life*, 3)

The lament of the rich, lost in their legal troubles and business problems, is 'I am not allowed to live my own life.' Why are they not allowed? Because they have let others and their issues take up their time, when in fact it is in their power to construct a simpler life. Seneca warns:

> When . . . you see a man often wear the purple robes of office, and hear his name often repeated in the forum, do not envy him; he gains these things by losing so much of his life. Men throw away all their years in order to have one year named after them as consul. (*On the Shortness of Life*, 20)

No one values time itself, only things and services. Yet time is the one thing you can never get back or buy:

> Why are you careless and slow while time is flying so fast, and why do you spread out before yourself a vision of long months and years, as many as your greediness requires? (*On the Shortness of Life*, 9)

Seneca's conclusion is that it's a mistake to suppose 'that anyone has lived long, just because they have wrinkles or grey hairs. They have not lived long, but merely existed for a certain duration'.

There are people 'whose minds are still in their childhood when old age comes upon them', and find themselves without the ability to deal with it. They *stumble* into old age, as if it is a shock:

> Just as conversation, or reading, or deep thought deceives travellers, and they find themselves at their journey's end before they knew that it was drawing near, so in this fast and never-ceasing journey of life, which we make at the same pace whether we are asleep or awake, busy people never notice that they are moving till they are at the end of it. (*On the Shortness of Life*, 9)

Yet Seneca also argues that a reflective, meaningful life must include reflection on the years we have already consumed. The past is, after all, 'a holy and consecrated part of our time'. It has gone, yet it is still ours in the form of memory. Seneca pities the busy person who refuses to do this, even though it may help them to make more sense of their lives. They can actually give themselves more time, because they have the present and the past at their disposal.

Seneca takes aim at people who take their leisure so seriously it becomes their main effort to achieve meaning:

> It would take a long time to describe the various individuals who have wasted their lives over playing at draughts, playing at ball, or toasting their bodies in the sun. People are not at leisure if their pleasures have the feel of business. (*On the Shortness of Life*, 13)

They waste their lives in the minutiae of luxury and creating a perfect life of comfort. They work at it like it is a job. Yet they don't have real *leisure*, since there is zero self-reflection:

> O, how does excessive prosperity blind our intellects! (*On the Shortness of Life*, 13)

The only people who have real leisure, Seneca writes, 'are those who devote themselves to philosophy. They alone really live. For they do not merely enjoy their own lifetime, but they annex every century to their own; all the years which have passed before them belong to them' (*On the Shortness of Life*, 14).

Fewer people were more ambitious than Seneca, who vaulted himself (with help from his ambitious father) to the centre of Roman life. *On the Shortness of Life* can therefore be read as the fantasy of a busy and important person who longed to live a quiet scholarly life: one of a philosopher. These lines express that yearning:

> Since Nature allows us to commune with every age, why do we not abstract ourselves from our own petty fleeting span of time, and give ourselves up with our whole mind to what is vast, what is eternal? (*On the Shortness of Life*, 14)

That Seneca never achieved this life, or had it only sporadically, in no way detracts from the value of his insights into time and existence. Busyness, ambition, and leisure remain the thieves of time as much today as in the first century CE.

ON THE HAPPY LIFE

DE VITA BEATA (c. 58 CE)

By the time this essay was written, Seneca had been Emperor Nero's adviser for four years, along with praetorian prefect Sextus Afranius Burrus. His personal wealth had increased dramatically thanks to Nero's direct largesse and just by being associated with an emperor. His rise also benefited his larger family. Seneca's older brother Gallio (to whom the essay is dedicated) was made a proconsul for a time, and his younger brother Mela a procurator.

Seneca himself was made a consul in 56 CE, the highest position in the Senate and one of the top jobs in the Roman Empire. The role made him part of the Roman hereditary patrician class, and so his membership of the establishment was complete.

The previous year, 55 CE, Nero's stepbrother Britannicus (Claudius's biological son), who had a claim to the throne, was poisoned to death just before his fourteenth birthday. It was almost certainly Nero's doing, and in the public outrage that followed Seneca wrote *On Clemency*. In this essay he urges Nero to be more moderate, yet also maintains Nero's innocence of the murder of Britannicus.

Seneca, along with Burrus, became a restraining influence on the unhinged Nero. At the same time he became a 'fixer' of imperial mistakes, and clearly believed that the stability of the Roman Empire was more important than a single life (Britannicus's).

In 58 CE, Seneca's great wealth led Roman senator Publius Suillius to bring charges of financial corruption against him. By this time Seneca had amassed a spread of luxurious houses and farms, was a money lender at high interest to the aristocracy, and was said to be worth 300 million sestertii (a billionaire in today's terms). Yet Suillius himself, who had earlier been indicted for judicial corruption by Seneca, was found guilty and exiled. This was an apparent vindication for Seneca, but the year 58 CE arguably marked a peak in his political career. From this point things got more difficult for him.

Around this time he wrote *On the Happy Life*. Many parts of it are a defence of wealth, which historians believe was a response to the accusations of Publius Suillius. Seneca also wanted to burnish his reputation as a thinker on moral issues.

What *is*, for Seneca, the happy life? Essentially one based on reason. If one thinks and acts rationally, one is in accord with Nature. Only those in accord with Nature can be genuinely happy and at peace:

> . . . true wisdom consists in not departing from Nature and in moulding our conduct according to her laws and model. A happy life, therefore, is one which is in accordance with its own nature. (*On the Happy Life*, 3)

Living happily is inseparable from living honourably.

When lost in some wilderness, the native people can always point you in the right direction. But when it comes to *moral* life,

Seneca says, 'the most walked and frequented tracks are those which lead us most astray'. Many come to the realization that all the things they are known for and have strived after are a bit shallow. They want to develop internal qualities 'that they can use and feel', rather than spend their time in pursuit of things they can merely display. 'Let us search for some blessing which does not merely look fine', Seneca writes, 'but is sound and good throughout, and most beautiful in the parts which are least seen'. Goodness or virtue is immortal; it 'knows no ending, and is not subject to either exhaustion or regret'. In contrast, Seneca says:

> Pleasure dies at the very moment when it charms us most. It has no great vision, and therefore it soon cloys and wearies us, and fades away as soon as its first impulse is over . . . we cannot depend upon anything whose nature is to change. (*On the Happy Life*, 7)

What is our 'highest good'? It is always about our state of mind, not circumstances. A mind that is 'gentle in its dealings, showing great courtesy and consideration for those with whom it is brought into contact'. A mind 'free, upright, undaunted, and steadfast, beyond the influence of fear or desire, which thinks nothing good except honour, and nothing bad except shame, and regards everything else as a mass of mean details which can neither add anything to nor take anything away from the happiness of life' (*On the Happy Life*, 4). A person achieves a constant state of cheerfulness when they stop looking to obtain pleasures and avoid pains, but rather see them both as one constant flow of life.

All that matters, for Seneca, is knowing truth and living in accord with it. This automatically leads to appropriate action:

> The happy person . . . is one who can make a right judgment in all things. He is happy who in his present circumstances, whatever they may be, is satisfied and on friendly terms with the conditions of his life. That person is happy whose reason guides and informs all their behaviour. (*On the Happy Life*, 6)