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Seneca and the Stoic View of Suicide

1. Introduction

Seneca was passionately interested in the problem of suicide. His philosophical works, and especially the *Letters to Lucilius*, are filled with discussions of it,¹ and memorable accounts of his own suicide are preserved in Tacitus and Dio Cassius.² The significance of Seneca's interest in suicide has been vigorously debated.³ John Rist has questioned the orthodoxy of Seneca's treatment of suicide.⁴ Rist argues that Seneca departs from the earlier Stoic position on suicide in a number of ways,⁵ but especially with the new emphasis he places on the freedom (*libertas*) that suicide offers man. Miriam Griffin has answered many of Rist's objections.⁶ She argues that most of what look to Rist like deviations from orthodox Stoic teaching on suicide are differences in emphasis,⁷ and that Seneca's stress on suicide is somewhat misleading. What he primarily wants to rid us of is the fear of death. Although I agree with most of Griffin's account, I think she does not do full justice to the connection Seneca draws between suicide and freedom.

¹ For a complete list and analysis of the passages in which Seneca discusses suicide, see Tadic-Gilloteaux (1963). The first part of the article argues that what Seneca says about suicide in a particular work (or whether he discusses it all) is influenced by the addressee of the work. Seneca never discusses the topic in the works addressed to Nero or Polybius, for example, and has the most to say about it in his *Letters* (which are all addressed to Lucilius).

² Tacitus *Ann.* 15. 62-64; Dio 62. 25.

³ See, Bonhöffer (1894) 29-39, 188-193; Tadic-Gilloteaux (1963), Rist (1969) 246-250, Sandbach (1975) 48-52, Griffin (1976) 367-388, (1986), and Gris  (1982) 206-218.

⁴ Rist (1969) 246-250.

⁵ Among other things, Rist argues that Seneca neglects the need for a "divine call," and sees suicide as "peculiarly ennobling."

⁶ Griffin (1976) 374-376, 383-388. Griffin does a particularly good job of showing that Seneca does allude to the need for a divine sign.

⁷ N. Tadic-Gilloteaux (1963) 541-551 also sees it in this way.

In what follows, I will present a summary of the Stoic doctrine on suicide before Seneca, followed by an analysis of Seneca's own views. Our sources on Stoic views of suicide before Seneca are meager. But they allow us to construct a coherent Stoic theory of suicide, and in Seneca we see the theory fleshed out. Rist is right to point out that we find a connection between suicide and *libertas* for the first time in Seneca, but wrong to suppose that it is inconsistent with earlier Stoic teaching, pathological, or based on a hatred of life.⁸ Seneca's views are consistent with earlier, orthodox Stoic views on suicide. Seneca adapts and builds on the Stoic theory of suicide in a way that is well thought out and perhaps original. He makes the possibility of suicide and the freedom it provides play an important role in the attainment of tranquillity, virtue, and happiness.

2. The Early Stoic View of Suicide

Stoicism was famous in antiquity for its acceptance of suicide. Not only did it defend the right of the wise man to seek a reasonable departure (*eulogos exagôgê*) from life,⁹ but its founder, Zeno, and his successor Cleanthes, died by committing suicide.¹⁰ How did suicide fit into their philosophic system?

The Stoics taught that the goal of all human beings was to live in accordance with nature. They believed that the only good was virtue, the only evil vice. All other things they classified as *adiaphora*, or "indifferents." They distinguished between two classes of indifferents: (1) "things preferred" (*proêgmena*), a class which includes "life, health, pleasure, beauty, strength, wealth, reputation, noble birth,"¹¹ and are said to be in accordance with nature, and (2) "things not preferred" (*apoproêgmena*), a class which

⁸ Rist (1969) 249 "The remark (sc. that it is wrong to hate life too much) gives him away; his own view is based on a hatred of life...Fundamentally Seneca's wise man is in love with death. He is looking out for a tolerable pretext to die."

⁹ SVF 3. 757-768

¹⁰ See D.L. 7. 28 (Zeno), 7. 176 (Cleanthes).

¹¹ D.L. 7. 102. Translation from Long and Sedley Vol. I (1987) 354. I argue below that there are reasons for thinking freedom (*libertas*) was one of the *proêgmena*.

includes their opposites, "death, disease, pain, ugliness, weakness, poverty, low repute, ignoble birth and the like,"¹² and are said not to be in accordance with nature.

When a human being is born, his or her primary impulse is towards self-preservation. Next, as the person grows, he or she learns as far as possible to choose things that are preferred, and to avoid things that are not preferred. These activities of living in accordance with nature were called *kathêkonta* ("proper functions, duties"). Thus, the Stoics taught, it was natural for human beings, and ordinarily a *kathêkon*, to stay alive, since we have an impulse to self-preservation, and since life is one of the things preferred and in accordance with nature. The Stoics further distinguished two types of *kathêkonta*: those that do not depend on circumstances (*ta aneu peristaseôs*), and those that do (*ta peristatika*).¹³ The former are duties it is always appropriate to choose, such as looking after one's health; the latter are duties which would not normally be chosen, but which could be required by unusual circumstances, and include actions like maiming oneself and giving away one's possessions. Suicide belongs to the latter class.¹⁴ The Stoics taught that there were occasions, when the timing and reason were right,¹⁵ a man could commit suicide. Diogenes Laertius (7. 130) reports:¹⁶

[The Stoics] say that the wise man will commit a well-reasoned suicide both on behalf of his country and on behalf of his friends, and if he falls victim to unduly severe pain or mutilation or incurable illness.

The conditions that Diogenes Laertius gives for when the Stoic wise man would rationally commit suicide fall into two categories.¹⁷

¹² Ibid.

¹³ D.L. 7. 109.

¹⁴ Suicide is not listed in the D.L. passage (D.L. 7. 109), but Griffin (1986) 73 seems right to include it among this group.

¹⁵ Emphasis is placed on the right timing (*opportune*) in *De Finibus* 3. 60-61. The Stoics may have thought that the wise man could recognize that the timing was right by means of heeding a divine call. On the divine call, see Rist (1976) 243, Griffin (1976) 374-376.

¹⁶ Translation from Long and Sedley Vol. I (1987) 425.

¹⁷ I am indebted to Griffin (1976) 376-383 and (1986) 72-75 for much of my discussion of the three Stoic reasons for suicide.

(1) Obligations to others. The first type of situation that requires a Stoic wise man to commit suicide is one in which he is called upon to give his life because of his obligations to others, such as his country or friends. Since right action is the only good, while life is not a good, but only something preferable, the wise man must sacrifice his life for important obligations.¹⁸

(2) Imbalance of the Indifferents. The second type of situation, involving “unduly severe pain or mutilation or incurable illness,” is one explained at greater length by Cicero in *De Finibus* 3. 60-61.¹⁹ Although the Stoics taught that virtue was the only good, and vice the only evil, they did not conclude from this, like the Cynics, that the only the wise man should live, and everyone else commit suicide.²⁰ The Stoics believed that virtue was exercised by selecting the indifferents in accordance with nature, and avoiding those contrary to nature. They argued that²¹

When a man has a preponderance of the things in accordance with nature, it is his proper function (*officium*) to remain alive; when he has or foresees a preponderance of their opposites, it is his proper function (*officium*) to depart from life.

Suicide would be rational for anyone faced with a preponderance of things contrary to nature, because any of them, such as poverty, ill health, and pain, if serious and persistent enough, would make it impossible for a human being to live in accordance with nature, and to engage in the selection of things in accordance with nature in which virtuous action consists. Thus, the Stoics argued, a person ought to consider suicide when faced with overwhelming situations like extreme poverty, intense pain, and chronic serious illness, not to escape the pain involved, which is an indifferent, but because these conditions will

18 In the passages on Stoic views about suicide gathered together in SVF, only two mention this type of suicide: SVF 3.757 (the D.L. passage translated above), and SFV 3.768 (Cramer, *Paris Anecdota* 4.403), a long passage which compares life to a drinking party and argues that just as there are five reasons that a drinking party is broken up, so there are five reasons one departs life by committing suicide. For a fuller discussion of the passage, see Griffin (1986) 73.

19 SVF 3. 763 = Long and Sedley (1987) 66G.

20 For an account of the Cynic view of suicide, see Rist (1976) 237-238.

21 Cicero *De Finibus* 3. 60. Translation from Long and Sedley Vol. I (1987) 425.

prevent him or her from practicing virtue. If the opportunity for virtuous action remains, we should stay alive, if it does not, we should depart.

In addition to the two types of reasons for Stoic suicide mentioned in Diogenes Laertius, a third type is reported:

(3) Avoidance of being forced to do or say immoral or shameful things. The Stoics held that it was permissible, perhaps even the duty, of a person who was being forced to perform an immoral or shameful act to commit suicide to avoid having to do it. This feature appears most prominently in SVF 3. 757,²² where life is compared to a drinking party, and one of five possible reasons listed for leaving a drinking party, the arrival of abusive party-goers, is used to illustrate a similar occasion for leaving life : when tyrants try to force a person to do or say shameful things.

Just how this passage should be interpreted is controversial.²³ One of the Stoic paradoxes was that only the wise man is free, and all other men are slaves. The Stoics considered the wise man to be free because he has the power of *autopraxia*, or self-determination.²⁴ He could never be forced to do anything against his will.²⁵ Recognizing that virtuous action is the only good, and bad actions the only evil, the wise man would never perform any vicious action to avoid things that are not evil, including the threats of a tyrant to take money away from him, imprison him, torture him, or even put him to death. The wise man would prefer to suffer any of these things, and even commit suicide, rather than commit evil acts.

Connected to this is a related doctrine which appears in later Stoic sources:²⁶ that human beings are justified in committing suicide to preserve their conception of self, that

²² See n. 18 above.

²³ See Sandbach (1975) 50, Griffin (1976) 379-383 and (1986) 72-75.

²⁴ D.L. 7. 121. See below, p. 12.

²⁵ Epictetus analyzes why someone who is truly virtuous cannot be made to do anything against his will at 4.68-90. More will be said about the freedom of the wise man below.

²⁶ Cicero *Off.* 1. 112; Epictetus 1. 2. 25-37. On these passages, see Griffin (1976) 381-383.

is, in Roman terms, to preserve their *dignitas*.²⁷ This justification for suicide seems to have developed as part of Panaetius' doctrine of the four *personae* and is best known to us from Book I of Cicero's *De Officiis*.²⁸ Briefly, Panaetius taught that there are four *personae*, or "roles," by which we define ourselves and discover what is fitting (*prepon; decorum*) for us to do: (1) our common nature as human beings, (2) our individual natures, (3) our social position and other things bestowed on us by fortune, and (4) the occupation we choose. Panaetius concentrated on the duties (*kathêkonta; officia*) of the non-wise, and as part of his account he stressed the need for acting consistently with one's various *personae*. Thus, in passages probably based on Panaetian accounts, Cicero and Epictetus argue that committing suicide or facing certain death is appropriate in order to maintain one's commitment to one's *personae*.²⁹ Just as the wise man will commit suicide or suffer death rather than commit any evil, so should the non-wise on this latter account suffer punishment, and, if the stakes are high enough and one is brave enough, even death, rather than commit any action which is not consistent with their *personae*, that is, which is not "fitting."

One further topic needs to be discussed before turning to Seneca. The question has been raised about whether the Stoics taught that both wise men and fools, or just wise men, should commit suicide when the conditions are right.³⁰ In the passage quoted earlier,³¹ Diogenes Laertius only reports the Stoics' view about when the wise man will commit suicide. The Stoic wise man, possessed of perfect virtue and knowledge, will unerringly

²⁷ See Griffin (1976) 379.

²⁸ *Off.* 1. 107-121. On the four *personae* theory, see Gill (1988a). Gill discusses the Cicero and Epictetus passages (above, n. 27) on 191.

²⁹ Thus Cicero (*Off.* I. 112) approves of Cato's suicide as consistent with his character (and maintains it would not have been consistent for others), and Epictetus (1. 2. 25-37) says that it is right for an athlete to die rather than have his genitals amputated, and a philosopher to die rather than submit to having his beard shaved off. All of these cases show that commitment to one's *personae* could be so strong as to justify or even require death in order to act consistently with them.

³⁰ Rist (1969) 239-241 raises the question, but as I indicate, I do not see it as a problem. Sandbach (1975) 49 n. 1 also disagrees with Rist on this point.

³¹ Above, p. 3.

know when the time and conditions are right to commit suicide. But what about the rest of mankind? Did the Stoics think that it was ever right for them to commit suicide? It is clear from *De Finibus* 3. 60-61 that the Stoics discussed suicide in the context of duties (*kathêkonta; officia*) that applied to *all* men, fools and wise.³² Suicide, like all duties, can be performed by all men when the conditions are right. It is the duty of fools, just like wise men, to sacrifice themselves for their country or friends, and, when the things contrary to nature completely outweigh the things in accordance with nature, to end their lives. Likewise, fools have the duty to live consistently with their *personae*, and in extreme circumstances to die rather than act inconsistently. Fools might make a mistake about their choice, but this is something that is possible in every action they perform. It is only the Stoic wise man who will know with unerring accuracy when he ought to commit suicide. His duty (*kathêkon*) will be a virtuous action (*katorthôma*).

3. Seneca's Treatment of Suicide

Seneca's treatment of suicide is compatible with the account just sketched. His discussions of suicide show that he recognized the same three classes of reasons for committing suicide as earlier Stoics.³³ He (1) talks about the need to sacrifice oneself for country or friends,³⁴ (2) discusses and gives examples of people who should consider suicide when faced with chronic and painful diseases, the effects of debilitating old age, and other things contrary to nature that are so damaging that they make virtuous life impossible,³⁵ and (3), as we will see below, praises people who commit suicide to

32 This is consistent with SVF 3. 759-760, which indicate Chrysippus argued that there are occasions when the wise man will commit suicide, and fools stay alive. Chrysippus is concerned to show that whether one is to stay in life or not is not determined by whether one is virtuous or not (in which case the wise man would never commit suicide, while the fool always would), but on the preponderance of the indifferents.

33 Gris  (1982) 211-212 analyzes the various reasons Seneca approves of for committing suicide. All of them can be classified under one of the three types of suicides approved of by the Stoics.

34 *Letters* 76. 27; 6. 2

35 *Letters* 30; 61; 58. 32-37.

preserve their *dignitas* and consistency of character.³⁶ Seneca's discussion also seems orthodox in its attention to the distinction between wise men and fools.³⁷ Like earlier Stoics, Seneca thinks that it is at times appropriate for both fools and wise men to commit suicide. As is the case with all actions, a wise man will know when and how to commit the perfect suicide, while the fool will not, but Seneca's account clearly makes room for the suicides of both.

What has been found most problematic about Seneca's account of suicide is the enthusiasm with which he speaks about it, and the way in which he so often discusses it in the context of freedom, or *libertas*. A good example of this occurs at the end of the *On Providence* (VI. 7-8):

Contemnite fortunam; nullum illi telum quo feriret animum dedi. Ante omnia cavi, ne quid vos teneret invitos; pateat exitus. Si pugnare non vultis, licet fugere. Ideo ex omnibus rebus quas esse vobis necessarias volui nihil feci facilius quam mori. Prono animam loco posui: trahitur. Adtendite modo et videbitis quam brevis ad libertatem et quam expedita ducat via.

Turn your nose up at fortune. I (sc. God) have given it no weapon with which it can strike your mind. Above all beware that nothing hold you back against your will. The door lies open. If you don't want to fight, you can flee. Thus, of all the things that I wanted to be required of you, I made nothing easier than death. I have placed your soul on a slanted slope: it is being dragged down. Only pay attention and you will see how short and how quick a road leads to freedom.

God, the imagined speaker in the passage, tells men that it is suicide which allows us to spurn fortune and gain freedom. Why does Seneca speak so enthusiastically about suicide, and how are suicide and freedom related? There are many other passages in Seneca where suicide and freedom (*libertas*) are discussed in the same context. They are difficult to sort out, and not enough attention has been paid to the way in which Seneca connects the two concepts. To understand Seneca's position, and why he often speaks about suicide in such enthusiastic terms, we must look at the contexts in which he discusses suicide and

³⁶ *Ben. I.* 11. 4; *Letter 77.* 14-15 (discussed below).

³⁷ See especially *Letters* 30. 8; 70. 5-6,19; 75. 8-18.

libertas.³⁸ We will find that suicide is connected to three different conceptions of *libertas* in Seneca.

A) *Libertas* = Freedom from the vicissitudes of life through death.

One way that Seneca looks at suicide is as a means of freeing oneself from physical pain, debilitating diseases, torture, suffering, and the senility of old age. A few brief excerpts from the *Letters* will illustrate this use of *libertas*. First, a passage from *Letter* 12. 10, on the topic of old age:

Patent undique ad libertatem viae multae breves, faciles. Agamus deo gratias, quod nemo in vita teneri potest.

Many short and easy roads to freedom lie open on all sides. Let us thank god, that no one is able to be kept in life.

In *Letter* 70. 14-16 he attacks some philosophers who say that one should not commit suicide, but wait to die naturally:

Hoc qui dicit, non videt se libertatis viam cludere. Nil melius aeterna lex fecit, quam quod unum introitum nobis ad vitam dedit, exitus multos. Ego expectem vel morbi crudelitatem vel hominis, cum possim per media exire tormenta et adversa discutere?

He who says this does not realize that he blocks off the road of freedom. The eternal law did nothing better than giving us one entrance into life, but many exits. Should I await the cruelty of disease or man, when I am able to exit through the middle of tortures and shake off my adversities?

Finally, in a passage from *Letter* 91. 21, he praises the advantages of death when it is “in our power”:

At illud scis, quam multis utilis sit, quam multos liberet tormentis, egestate, querellis, suppliciis, taedio. Non sumus in ullius potestate, cum mors in nostra potestate sit.

But you know this, to how many men it (death) is useful, how many men it frees from tortures, destitution, ailments, torments, and weariness. We are in the power of no one, when death is in our power.

³⁸ Tadic-Gilloteaux (1963) 544, Rist (1969) 246-250, Griffin (1976) 367-388, and Gris  (1982) 211-217 all discuss the emphasis on freedom in Seneca’s account of suicide, but do not note that Seneca discusses suicide in the context of several different kinds of freedom.

These and similar passages³⁹ talk about suicide in a way compatible with Stoic teachings. As we saw earlier, one of the three types of reasons for committing suicide was to address a gross imbalance of indifferents. The cases of suicide that Seneca mentions in these passages are all ones in which individuals, lacking important “preferred indifferents” or “things according to nature” and possessing heavy burdens of “things contrary to nature,” are justified in Stoic terms to contemplate and commit suicide.

It is important to see what Seneca means by praising death and suicide for providing freedom from “tortures, destitution, ailments, torments, weariness” and the like. Seneca is not saying that these sufferings, and the pain they cause, in themselves provide good reasons for suicide. Seneca remarks in *Letter 58. 36* that one should not commit suicide to avoid pain, but only when the constant pain prevents one from living a worthwhile life.⁴⁰ Thus when Seneca describes suicide in such instances as providing “freedom,” he means that it provides freedom from a life in which “things contrary to nature” make virtuous activity no longer possible.

2) *Libertas = freedom to act consistently and preserve one’s dignitas*

A less frequent use of the concept of freedom in Seneca’s discussions of suicide is illustrated in *Letter 77. 14*. Seneca tells the story of a Spartan boy who was captured and made a slave. He could not bear his slavery, and the first time he was forced to perform a “servile and humiliating task,”⁴¹ shouted “I will not be a slave” (“*non serviam*”) and cracked his head against a wall. Seneca applauds his actions and remarks, “So close at hand is freedom (*libertas*); and is anyone a slave?” This passage fits in with a number of passages in which Seneca praises the actions of men who valued freedom so much that

³⁹ e.g. *Ad Marciam* 19-20.

⁴⁰ *Letter 58. 36*: “I will not lay violent hands on myself on account of pain; this kind of death is defeat. But nevertheless if I learn that my suffering will be permanent, I will exit, not because of the suffering, but because it will keep me from everything for the sake of which I live.”

⁴¹ He was asked to fetch a chamber pot.

they died rather than be slaves.⁴² Some of Seneca's respect for such actions probably derives from traditional Roman values: *libertas* was a highly charged word even under the emperors. But how can praise for such actions be justified in Stoic terms? There are two possibilities.

The first would be to explain the example in terms of the "balance of indifferents." When one asks from what thing the Spartan boy is freed from when he commits suicide, the only answer can be "slavery." But what is so bad about slavery? In Stoic terms, it is not an evil (only moral viciousness is). It would seem to be one of the "indifferents." If this is true, and *libertas* itself can be considered one of the "preferred indifferents," and its opposite, slavery, a "not preferred indifferent,"⁴³ a possible explanation could be given of why Seneca thinks it is right for the Spartan boy to commit suicide rather than be a slave. As we saw earlier, the Stoics believed that there were occasions when the imbalance of indifferents was so great that a virtuous life was not possible, and suicide was appropriate. Could the Spartan slave boy represent such a case? If he does, Seneca would have to believe that the slavery the boy faced was of such an overwhelming kind that his life was not worth living (i.e. could not be lived virtuously). Seneca indicates that the boy was asked to perform a degrading action (fetching a chamber pot), but it is hard to see how this would provide a reason for committing suicide parallel to extreme poverty or serious chronic illness. There may be cases where someone was subjected to such awful

⁴² Seneca also praises the deaths of the Numantians (*Letter* 66. 13), the actions of a slave who killed his master and himself when they were captured (*Ben.* 3. 23. 5), and those of a German gladiator-trainee who committed suicide by stuffing a toilet sponge down his throat (*Letter* 70. 20-21). Seneca comments on the last example, "the most sordid death is preferable to the cleanest kind of slavery" (*Letter* 70. 21: *...praeferendam esse spurcissimam mortem servituti mundissimae*).

⁴³ Freedom and slavery do not appear on the standard Stoic lists of "preferred" and "not preferred" indifferents, but there are reasons to think they could be considered such. Freedom/slavery seem to meet the same criteria that other indifferents (health/sickness, wealth/poverty, life/death, etc.) do: they are a pair which are not good/evil in themselves, they do not always and necessarily benefit/harm, but can on occasion be put to bad/good use. Finally, freedom is normally considered to have value (and is therefore normally selected when conditions permit, while slavery is normally not selected. On the criteria for indifferents, see Long and Sedley Vol. I (1987) 357-359. Given all this, it is curious that freedom/slavery do not appear on the standard lists of indifferents.

conditions as a slave that a virtuous life would not be possible, but Seneca gives no indication that this was true of the Spartan slave boy.

Rather, Seneca's account seems more compatible with the type of suicide sanctioned in the context of Panaetius' four *personae* theory that was discussed earlier. Seneca would thus be praising the slave boy for behaving courageously and consistently. The slave boy would be saying, by committing suicide, that freedom was so important to him (in his *persona* as an individual, and his *persona* as a member of a certain class and nation) that he would rather die than lose his freedom and degrade himself (and his *dignitas*) by performing unworthy service. Seneca would probably not say that it was appropriate that everyone commit suicide in such circumstances, but he does applaud the actions of those whose personality, commitments, and courage would make such actions consistent.⁴⁴

3) Libertas = freedom from fear in this life.

As I mentioned earlier, one of the Stoic paradoxes was that only the wise man is free, all other men slaves. Diogenes Laertius (7.121) writes,⁴⁵

[The Stoics] say that he [the wise man] alone is free (*eleutheron*), and that fools are slaves. For they say that freedom is the power of self-determination (*autopragias*), and slavery the lack of self-determination.

How Seneca interpreted this form of freedom, the power of self-determination, is brought out in *Letter 51.9*:⁴⁶

Libertas proposita est; ad hoc praemium laboratur. Quae sit libertas, quaeris? Nulli rei servire, nulli necessitati, nullis casibus, fortunam in aequum deducere. Quo die illa me intellexero plus posse, nil poterit. Ego illam feram, cum in manu mors sit?

Freedom is in sight. This is the prize I am working for. What is freedom, you ask? To be a slave to no situation, to no necessity, to no chance events; to force fortune onto an even playing field. On that day when I know that I

⁴⁴ Seneca approves of the action of the Spartan boy to such an extent that he asks Lucilius if it is not true he would have wanted his own son to behave similarly. Seneca implies that he, Lucilius and his son, and all others like them should commit suicide under similar conditions.

⁴⁵ SVF 3. 355. See also SVF 3. 362-363, 544.

⁴⁶ For a similar definition of freedom, see *Letter 75. 18*.

am more powerful, fortune will have no power. Shall I put up with her, when death is under my control?

One of the most insistent themes in Seneca's works is the fear of death and the lack of freedom it produces in this life, and it is in this context that references to a third kind of *libertas* and suicide are found in Seneca. Seneca, like earlier Stoics, held that only the wise man is free, and all other men slaves. He argued that suicide plays a role in guaranteeing the freedom of the wise man. But as we will see, he also identified a way in which suicide could guarantee limited but still important types of freedom to those who had not yet become wise men.

Let us return for a moment to the difference between the Stoic wise man and the rest of mankind in meeting death. Seneca tells us (*Letter* 30. 8-12) that only the wise man can meet death with an untroubled firmness of spirit (*lentam animi firmitatem*), and he contrasts those who face death with a tranquillity which results from certain judgment (*ex iudicio certo tranquillitas*) with two other groups: (a) those who fear death and beg for life, and (b) those who demand death (*deposcunt mortem*) and go to meet it out of madness or a sudden fit of rage (*ex rabie...ac repentina indignatione*). Seneca argues against both these ways of facing death in several passages,⁴⁷ and repeatedly writes that our goal should be to face death as far as possible like a sage: rationally, calmly, gladly, and always ready to depart.

But what does it mean to face death like a wise man, and what role does suicide play in the process? In *Letter* 71. 26, Seneca writes,

Quid est in tormentis, quid est in aliis, quae adversa appellamus, mali? Hoc, ut opinor, succidere mentem et incurvari et succumbere. Quorum nihil sapienti viro potest evenire; stat rectus sub quolibet pondere. Nulla illum res minorem facit; nihil illi eorum, quae ferenda sunt, displicet. Nam quicquid cadere in hominem potest, in se cecidisse non queritur. Vires suas novit.

What evil is there in torture, or in other things we call adversities? This, I think: that the mind gives way, bends, and collapses. None of these things can happen to the wise man. He stands upright under any load. Nothing diminishes him. None of these things that he must endure bothers him. He

⁴⁷ *Letters* 24. 22-26; 58. 32-36; 77. 6.

does not complain when anything that can befall man has befallen him. He knows his own strength.

The wise man presents an awesome spectacle. Knowing, as he does, the difference between virtue and vice, good and evil, and things that are indifferent, and knowing his own strength, both physical and mental, the wise man is able to withstand any amount of torture, illness, poverty, and pain with a firm and tranquil mind, and has no fear of death at all. He feels physical pain,⁴⁸ but his mind does not collapse: he will never view any of these things as bad. The wise man may commit suicide under such conditions, but not to escape pain.⁴⁹ He will exit only when it seems right for him to do so, when he is sure that the sufferings he is undergoing make virtuous action impossible.⁵⁰ The wise man is always free because he is never forced to do anything against his will. Suicide plays a role in the freedom of the wise man because it allows him to exit when he should. The wise man, not fearing death as an evil and knowing that he can commit suicide at any time it is called for, is completely free and in control of his own fate.⁵¹

Seneca realizes that there is a great difference between the wise man and the rest of us. We have many fears and anxieties, chief among them the fear death, and as long as we have these fears, we can never be free and in control of ourselves. They hold us back and enslave us. But Seneca also stresses that we have the power to change. This is why he devotes so much energy in his works to help his readers overcome their fears.

Seneca believes that the best way for us to overcome and gain freedom from our fears is to think about them constantly and see them in the proper perspective. He repeatedly exhorts us to meditate on death and other fearful events so that they will lose their terror. This technique was known as *praemeditatio malorum*, or “thinking about evils before they arrive,” and was an important means Stoics used to overcome anxiety about possible future

48 Letter 51. 30

49 Letter 58. 36.

50 Letters 104. 3-5; 98. 15-18

51 See *De Prov.* VI: 6-9 (part of which is quoted above), where Seneca stresses this fact.

evils.⁵² It involved thinking often about bad things that could happen in the future (extreme poverty, catastrophic illness, torture, death of those close to us, our own death) and taking the fear out of them in two ways:⁵³ (1) by depriving them of their unexpected character, and (2) by viewing them rationally, i.e., seeing that they are not evils and cannot in themselves make us unhappy (only our improper attitude toward them can do that). Ideally, by constantly examining “evils” such as poverty, illness, and death, we begin to see them for what they are, and make progress towards virtue. Such a process should enable us, when we encounter any of these “bad things” in the future, to see them as indifferents and face them like a wise man.

But what is the role that suicide plays in this process of progressing towards virtue? In the *Consolation to Marcia* (20.2-3) Seneca tells how death and the possibility of suicide keep us free of worry in the present:

haec est, inquam, quae efficit, ut nasci non sit supplicium, quae efficit, ut non concidam adversus minas casuum, ut servare animum salvum ac potentem sui possim: habeo quod appellem. Video istic cruces non unius quidem generis sed aliter ab aliis fabricatas: capite quidam conversos in terram suspendere, alii per obscena stipitem egerunt, alii brachia patibulo explicuerunt; video fidiculas, video verbera, et membris singulis articulis singula nocuerunt machinamenta. At video et mortem. Sunt istic hostes cruenti, cives superbi; sed video istic et mortem. Non est molestum servire, ubi, si dominii pertaesum est, licet uno gradu ad libertatem transire. Caram te, vita, beneficio mortis habeo.

It is this [sc. death], I say, that prevents birth from being a punishment, that prevents me from collapsing in the face of the threats of misfortunes, that allows me to be able to keep my mind safe and under my own control. I have a higher court of appeal. Over there I see torture devices not of a single design, but constructed in different ways by different people. Some men have hung their victims upside down, others have driven a stake through the genitals, others have wrenched the arms with a fork-shaped yoke. I see racks, I see whippings, and each joint and limb has its own custom-made torture machine. But I also see death. Over there are sadistic enemies, arrogant citizens. But over there too I see death. It is no trouble to be a slave, when, if one grows tired of the master, in one step one can walk to freedom. Life, I hold you dear through the kindness of death.

52 On *praemeditatio malorum*, see Tadic-Gilloteaux (1963) 548-549; Hadot (1969) 60-62, Gill (1988b) 13. Seneca treats the topic extensively. See, for example, *Letters* 26. 10 and 69. 6.

53 Gill (1988b) 13

In this vivid passage, Seneca is making a large claim. He says that the knowledge that we can die when we want prevents us from worrying about what are normally seen as great evils, including torture, and keeps our mind under our own control. Seneca's position in this passage can be interpreted in several different ways, depending on the perspective of the reader, that is, how much progress the reader has made along the road to virtue.

The reader who understands the perspective of Stoicism only a little or not at all could interpret this passage in a way that would be compatible with some modern views on suicide: that the possibility of suicide is a great boon to mankind because it can free us from life's evils. Knowing that we always have the option to die when we want no matter how bad the situation is, we do not have to worry about the gruesome tortures he lists. By refusing to value life too highly, and by realizing that death can provide a final freedom from intolerable situations, we can also be free of worry now, and in this sense be free. No matter how threatening the thought of future evils may be, we can be calm in the knowledge that we can always kill ourselves.

Seneca seems to think that such a perspective on death and suicide is helpful as far as it goes: for people who view the pains of torture, illness, and poverty as evils, suicide does provide relief and calms their anxieties to some extent.⁵⁴ People can be calm when thinking about or being threatened by "evils," because they know that suicide can provide them with a reliable way of escaping them. This would explain why Seneca praises the courage and ingenuity of many, including slaves and gladiators, who view life as something that can be given up and who commit suicide rather than endure their fate.⁵⁵ But of course Seneca would not think such a view of suicide was right, nor would he think it provided a reliable strategy for allaying fear. From a Stoic perspective, it is a desperate act based on an incorrect view: that the pains of torture, illness, poverty *et al.* are evils, and

⁵⁴ This would explain why in some passages like those quoted above on p. 9, Seneca talks in ordinary, non-Stoic language about the good death brings people when it frees them from excessive pain, etc.

⁵⁵ See especially *Letter* 70. 19-28.

such great evils that we must flee from them by killing ourselves. Suicide provides freedom from these “evils,” but under such circumstances is not a free act. As Seneca tells us, the wise man, the ultimate standard of conduct, should not flee life, but exit it.⁵⁶

But for a second group of people, those making progress toward virtue by meditating on future “evils,” suicide can play a more effective role in allaying fear, and one closer to the role it plays for the Stoic wise man. As people practice *praemeditatio malorum*, they begin to see what the nature of the things are that they fear as evils. They gradually realize that ill health, poverty, even death, are not evils, but just indifferents, and that the only evil is wickedness, the only good virtue. They begin to see reality as a wise man does. Seneca describes in detail the stages that one goes through on the road to virtue,⁵⁷ and admits that almost no one ever progresses far enough to become a sage, secure in his or her virtue and happiness. But this does not mean people should stop trying, since the rewards of progress towards virtue are valuable, even if one never completely attains virtue. The closer people are to virtue, the more peace of mind they have.

The concept of suicide makes an important contribution to this peace of mind. In the quotation above from *Letter 71*, Seneca states that the only evil thing about torture and other things we call adversities is that they can force the mind to bend and collapse. They cause the mind to give up its view of them as indifferents and force it to view them as evils. When this happens, the mind gives way, is seized by fear, and one can no longer die as one ought: “virtuously, sensibly, and courageously.”⁵⁸ But how does a person who is making progress towards virtue, but is not yet a wise man, know how he or she will act when faced with death? How does a person know that under the pressure of extreme pain, such as torture, a life threatening illness, or other serious adversity, his or her mind will not give out, forced by pain to give up its knowledge that these adversities are not “non-

⁵⁶ Letter 24. 25: *Vir fortis ac sapiens non fugere debet e vita, sed exire.*

⁵⁷ Letters 71. 27-37; 75. 8-18.

⁵⁸ Letter 77. 6: *honeste...prudenter, fortiter.*

preferred indifferents,” and to embrace the false belief that they are true evils? The answer is suicide. It protects virtue.

In a passage that immediately follows the one quoted from *Letter 71*,⁵⁹ Seneca writes that the wise man is composed of two parts: the body, which is irrational, and can be “bitten, burned, and feel pain,” and the mind, which is rational, “holds opinions which cannot be shaken, and is fearless and unconquerable,” and in which the “highest good” (*summum bonum*) of man resides. He contrasts the wise men with people who are making progress towards virtue, and says the difference between them is that while the wise man will never falter, those progressing towards virtue “will sometimes give way and let something slacken from the intention of the mind.”⁶⁰ In other words, whereas the wise man’s mind will never give way, and always hold firm to its true opinions about the nature of the pain that is assailing it, the minds of those who are progressing towards virtue will not be able to. Their minds may hold out for shorter or longer periods depending on how far advanced they are towards virtue, but eventually their minds will give way, and will give up their true opinions for false ones. Torture, for instance, will be viewed as an indifferent at the start, but the pain will eventually make the person’s mind give way, so that he or she begins to see torture, falsely, as an evil, and views him or herself as being harmed. The passage quoted above from the *Consolation to Marcia* shows how suicide can give comfort to those making progress towards virtue who would otherwise worry about giving way under intense pain. These people, who realize that their greatest good and only source of happiness in all situations, and especially under dire conditions, is to view things “rationally,” and keep their minds firm and under control,⁶¹ see that suicide can be used to preserve their virtue. Before their minds give way, and begin to see their

⁵⁹ *Letter 71. 27*

⁶⁰ *ibit interim cessim et remittet aliquid ex intentione mentis*

⁶¹ See *De Prov.* 6. 7-9, *Ad Marciam* 20. 2-3, *De Const.* 6.4.

pain as an evil instead of as an indifferent, they can commit suicide, dying bravely, happily, and in command of their rational facilities.

There is still a difference between the suicides of wise men and those making progress towards virtue of course. The wise man is completely free: he can hold out as long as he wants under torture, and never gives way. He will always see virtue as the only good, vice as the only evil, no matter how painful the torture. His suicide is always a free choice. Those making progress towards virtue do not act with the same freedom. They view the pain as the wise man does, but their opinion about it is not unshakeable. They cannot argue against the body forever. But they can, thanks to suicide, preserve their virtue by departing life before their minds give way.

If this interpretation is correct, it helps us explain one final aspect of Seneca's account of suicide. At the end of *On Providence*,⁶² Seneca has God speak and tell us that death is quick and provides an easy road to freedom. He adds the claim that it is good that he made death quicker than birth. He says, "fortune would have held great power over you, if man were to die as slow as he is born." It is important that death come quickly, so that those progressing toward virtue can depart exactly when they want to, before they are persuaded by pain and lose their rationality. If this happened, fortune would have more power over men than it does.

4. Conclusion

Seneca's view of suicide was based on the earlier teachings of the Stoics, and he seems to have been orthodox about under what conditions one would consider suicide: when it was called for by obligations owed to one's country or friends, when the physical conditions of life were so inhospitable that one could no longer practice virtue, or when one was going to be forced to perform actions so base or contrary to one's character that life was no longer worth the price. But to say only this is to miss the richness of Seneca's

⁶² In a continuation of the passage quoted above, p. 8.

account of suicide. For not only does suicide provide freedom from the vicissitudes of life that preclude the possibility of virtuous action, but it also can give human beings freedom from worry about the future. It protects the freedom of the wise man by allowing him to exit whenever it seems right to do so, and it provides some consolation to men by allowing them to escape, when they want, from what they perceive as evils. It also provides great consolation to those progressing toward virtue. They know that they can never be forced to lose their correct view of virtue, no matter what the adversity. They can commit suicide before their mind loses its true opinion, and die like wise men instead of like fools.

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