



Dialogues and Essays

Seneca, John Davie (Translator)

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This superb volume offers the finest translation of Seneca's dialogues and essays in print, capturing the full range of his philosophical interests. Here the Stoic philosopher outlines his thoughts on how to live in a troubled world. Tutor to the young emperor Nero, Seneca wrote exercises in practical philosophy that draw upon contemporary Roman life and illuminate the intellectual concerns of the day. They also have much to say to the modern reader, as Seneca ranges widely across subjects such as the shortness of life, tranquility of mind, anger, mercy, happiness, and grief at the loss of a loved one. Seneca's accessible, aphoristic style makes his writing especially attractive as an introduction to Stoic philosophy, and belies its reputation for austerity and dogmatism.

This edition combines a clear and modern translation by John Davies with Tobias Reinhardt's fascinating introduction to Seneca's career, literary style, and influence, including a superb summary of Stoic philosophy and Seneca's interpretation of it. The book's notes are the fullest of any comparable edition.

De Providentia, De Ira, Ad Helviam matrem De consolatione, De Vita Beata, De Tranquillitate Animi, De Brevitate Vitæ, Ad Marciam De consolatione, De Clemantia, Naturales quaestiones book 6 On Earthquakes.

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Nemo says

Venturing through the choppy waters of existentialism: the cynicism of Nietzsche, Rousseau's contradictory reminiscence of primitivism, science's deterministic and biological view of human life, the quest of free will: now I've finally come to read about something more socially acceptable, the father of the Stoics and the pre-Christian school of thought, Seneca. I've borrowed this book from the library without any expectation to what ideas it's going to plant in my mind, but it doesn't take long to realise the familiar outlook that resonates so much of the fundamentals of modern virtue. It seems after all the tumult and frustration in scepticism and satirical works, Seneca's thought seems to be comforting as the waves of ocean caressing seashores, motivating as the soldiers' cry before rushing towards the sharp edges of weapons, yet painful as an evoking scent from a long-distance past.

"Life divides into three periods: that which has been, that which is and that which is to be... No one who has not exposed all his actions to the censure of his own conscience, which is never deceived, is willing to direct his thoughts back to the past; the man who has ambitiously longed to possess something, arrogantly show contempt conquered with restraint, deceived through treachery, stolen out of greed, squandered in excess, must fear remembering himself. And that has passed beyond all human accidents and is no longer subject to the rules of Fortune... The present offer days that come only one at a time, and these moment by moment..."

For Seneca tells his readers to honour endurance that act by conscience, and to fear no death by looking upon gratitude. But he expressed his maxims and thoughts in such a richening beauty of emotion, poetic metaphors and through the mouth of Fortune. He consoles not solely by reason but by letting the reader to empathise what it feels like to be virtuous. To read his essays is more of making an effort to understand the grandeur in his way of perspective, rather than an argument to convince. His writing brings the disturbed mind tranquility.

"Pity is a mental sorrow caused by the sight of others' wretchedness, or a sadness induced by the suffering of others, which it believed happen without their deserving them; but no sorrow falls in the wise man... And nothing can be great and sorrowful at the same time. Sadness blunts the mind's power, scattering and restricting them."

There's ways to deal with the feeling of being futile among the infinity of the universe, when emotion, the fuel to act for survival, exceeds its application in reality. Some counter this divine discovery with contempt, some with faith, some with inactivity. Seneca deals with reinforcing further his reason for behaving righteously. An act that'll bear its name through eternity, beyond its profits and a good reputation, bring joy to self independent of all external elements. I confessed that even if I'm still reticent to this kind of thought, but his redefining in the importance of virtue aren't completely wrong either. The ancient peace that came along with acting benevolently still inspires people through centuries.

Carsten says

in a way the mother of all self help books. but since it is a classic way cheaper. makes one realize that humans have been looking for advice about how to deal with life forever.
while seneca might not be the smoothest of these advice givers he certainly he can claim first dips on a lot of

the advice folks like dr. phil make sound like they invited it themselves.

Michael A says

I think I was in the middle of "On Tranquillity of the Mind" when I came to the realization that I just couldn't keep reading this.

Unfortunately for Seneca, he doesn't rate very high either as a thinker or as a self-aware individual. You see, I usually use Wittgenstein as a point of comparison. Wittgenstein is amazing to me not only for making many lucid points about language and certainty but also in how he was able to self-reflect about his own worth as a thinker. Somehow this man managed to re-invent himself three times throughout his life, whereas most philosophers would have pushed one particular point of view and kept on hammering it over a long period of time. Rather than doing this, he was one for constant self-reflection and re-invention.

On the other hand, Seneca reminds me of my childhood church preacher -- pounding the pulpit with his sermons on duty, living in accordance with nature, and checking emotions as a wise man would do. My former preacher would have lectured about Christian values, but the format is the same. This is rhetorically rich stuff here - thematically linked collections of sentences probably meant to be read aloud in an oratorical style (much of reading in those days was out loud). Rich as it is in rhetoric, though, it does not hide the fact that these essays are much too long and convoluted for the simple messages they convey. I also agree with the criticism of hypocrisy he received in his own lifetime. I'll explain a bit more below.

On Providence: This essay states the dominant Stoic position that the world is a place designed according to the wisdom of the Gods and that everything within it has some teleological (end/goal-oriented) purpose dictated by fate. In this sense, we should be thankful we have things (life, children, etc.) in the first place because the Gods didn't have to give them to us. Dying early because of sickness may not be a first choice for someone, but we just have to deal with it if it happens to us because it's what the Gods had in mind for us.

Not only can you read about this position elsewhere, but it's also much more succinctly explained in Epictetus and secondary sources.

On Anger: Of the ones I managed to finish reading, this one is the best. It offers some practical advice to curb anger, also suggesting that anger is far more damaging than helpful. Nothing mind-blowing, but it's worth keeping in mind. Since it avoided Stoic-specific kinds of inquiries, it also avoided his shortcomings.

Consolation to Marcia: I know someone who mourned for her dead husband for about three years. In her case, she needed all that time to get better. Seneca is far too harsh on a person's emotions. Not only did this letter show no sympathy for the person in question (she had lost her son in the prime of his youth) -- it's entirely out of place given the circumstances. This person also lost her father through suicide (!) -- how is preaching Stoic doctrine a good idea in this case? Different people need different amounts of time to relieve their emotional situations. This essay doesn't work for me.

On the Happy Life: More prescriptive preaching about following virtue and living in accordance with nature and reason. Oddly, his defence of his riches and material wealth is completely unconvincing. In his case, rhetoric becomes weak and he tries to make allowances for himself when he would not do so for others. He tries to get off the hook by claiming he is a better person than the person to whom the letter is addressed and that he is better able to use wealth than a more profligate man is. He owns wealth, the wealth

doesn't own him like it would us. And it is a lot easier to practice his principles when he doesn't have to sweat and work hard for his means! Good lord, what a hypocrite. If he had not been so prescriptive and unforgiving in previous essays, I might have been able to deal with it a bit better, but he is hardly kind to those people who receive his other letters and essays.

(I have read, too, about the way he tried to kill himself -- trying to die like Socrates and then the resulting farce it became as nothing was effective. In the end, he drank poison and cut himself twice before finally drowning himself in hot water. He also had to make a speech like Socrates and have people around to witness his suicide. This is not the act of a Stoic sage -- a real Stoic would have died in a much less histrionic, melodramatic way.)

A total fail in every respect. Epictetus might have some of the same philosophical flaws, but he keeps it short. If you need this kind of Stoic philosophy in your life, I would suggest looking for his work instead.

A final update:

I really do wonder why it takes him so many pages to say the obvious? I just skimmed over "Shortness of Life" and the main point seems to be to use your time wisely before you die. I think most of us understand that without the tirade. An aphorism or short lecture could have been just as effective.

Dean Lloyd says

When opening this book I could not have foretold how much impact it would have on me. I was blown away by Seneca's insightful writings and they have had a profound and lasting impact on me. I have been reading more and more Stoic teachings but to have the practical application, albeit two thousand years old, so eloquently directed could not have made a greater impression. It's a book I will undoubtedly return to as I continue my education in this field.

Doug Craig says

Seneca, what can you say? Montaigne read him centuries ago stating he could not read him for more than fifteen minutes at a sitting. With modern lighting and my spectacles, I am able to read for a half hour. Seneca's pr-Christianity sophistic philosophy view is disturbingly relevant to our so-called modern advanced life.

Vince Potenza says

Marvelous lengthy exposition from the famous Roman Stoic and advisor to the young Nero. The last essay, On Earthquakes, is of historical interest only. Naturally the science is totally wrong.

Evan Leach says

Lucius Annaeus Seneca was an interesting man. His father, Seneca the Elder, was a famous teacher of rhetoric. His older brother (Junius Annaeus Gallio) was proconsul of Achaea during the 50s and makes an appearance in the Bible, where he lets the Apostle Paul off the hook. The younger Seneca was a tutor and advisor to Emperor Nero, one of the wealthiest men of his day, and one of the most prolific writers of the 1st century.

Seneca's surviving writings include nine tragedies, 124 letters, a satire and 13 essays. This collection includes seven essays in their entirety and sections of two more:

On Providence: This is the only essay of Seneca's that actually qualifies as a dialogue, with some back-and-forth between Seneca and another figure (Lucilius). Tackles the age-old question of why God Providence would let bad things happen to good people. I didn't find Seneca's explanation particularly convincing (if people are truly good nothing actually bad can happen to them; things that appear bad are really good, it's our perception that's the problem), but there are some interesting bits.

On Anger: A section of Seneca's essay on anger. Controlling one's temper is a good thing; acting rashly out of anger can have disastrous consequences. Nothing particularly mind-blowing here...only including a portion of this essay was probably a good choice.

Consolation to Marcia: An early work consoling a woman who's been mourning her dead son for three years. While Seneca does not come across as incredibly sympathetic towards Marcia, philosophically this was interesting and one of the stronger essays in the collection.

On the Happy Life: The first half of this essay is a great introduction to Seneca's Stoic beliefs. The second half is a muddled defense of Seneca's vast personal fortune (for a man that preached about the unimportance of material possessions, Seneca had a lot of stuff). This one kind of fell apart down the stretch.

On the Tranquility of the Mind: Anxiety and restlessness can be cured by a calm mind focused on duty and philosophical reflection.

On the Shortness of Life: Valuing and allocating time properly, not squandering it frivolously, is key to a fulfilling life. It's not about how much time you have, but how you use it. Probably Seneca's most famous essay, and his strongest.

Consolation to Helvia: Emperor Claudius exiled Seneca to Corsica for eight years. This essay was written to console his distraught mother. Not as strong as the first consolation, in my opinion.

On Mercy: An essay to Nero, Seneca's former pupil. Discusses the benefits of merciful rule as opposed to tyranny. Very interesting, although considering what Nero turned into, and given that he later ordered Seneca to kill himself, it's safe to say the lesson didn't take.

Natural Questions, Book 6: On Earthquakes: An exploration of what causes earthquakes. The science is pretty much bunk, as one would expect. Interesting as a window into the science of antiquity, but mostly for its occasional references to the recent disaster at Pompeii.

This edition is the perfect collection of Seneca's essays. The translations are excellent (as far as I can tell)

and the decisions behind what to include and what to cut were very sound and will provide readers with an excellent understanding of 1st century Stoic thought. Seneca is sometimes criticized for not being a particularly original or profound thinker, and I do think there's a degree of truth to that (I like him better as a tragedian). Readers expecting Plato or Aristotle will probably be disappointed. But Stoicism was the primary philosophy of ancient Rome, and this is a solid introduction to that school of thought. **3 stars**, recommended for readers interested in Roman history and the history of philosophy.

Stephen says

Care to read the thoughts of a man chosen to tutor an emperor? Seneca the Younger lived in the opening century of the Roman Empire, and was such an accomplished author that even the early Roman Church tried to claim him. I've previously read a collection of his letters (Letters from a Stoic), part of an exchange between Seneca and his friend Lucilius, but Analogs and Essays is far more sharply focused. The theme of the letters ran toward the general; here, Seneca writes on particular topics, beginning with theodicy and touching on anger, happiness, tranquility of mind, sorrow, and -- oddly -- earthquakes.

This is a magnificent collection. If the translators' rendering in English is representative of the power Seneca imbued his Latin with, little wonder the early Church regarded a 'pagan' author with such admiration. Seneca here is clear, direct, and forcefully dramatic. After I finished the final piece, I re-read several essays over again, just to savor the experience. Stoicism is the reigning influence, of course: the ideas of Zeno are utterly pervasive. In the opening essay "On Providence", Seneca asserts that the universe is a fundamentally sensible and moral place: nothing happens without good purpose, and even the harshest of circumstances can prove a boon to the wise man. It matters not what we endure, Seneca writes, but how we endure it. Difficulties are not punishments: they are opportunities. The worst of luck is in fact a sign of favor of the gods, that they have deemed a man worthy of his character being tested. While I don't particularly agree with the notion that everything that happens is the product of a deity enforcing character training on we poor mortals, I rather like the indomitable attitude, and the idea that can be winnowed out from the text -- life is nothing without struggle. We are creatures made to run and strive, not sit idly whining.

Although Stoicism dominates, Seneca is no puritan: he freely borrows from Epicurus, and not simply to 'know his enemy' as he piously defended himself in the Letters. Seneca sees Epicurus as quite wise, in fact, and not at all deserving the slander heaped upon him because of the abuses of those who call themselves his followers. Epicurus is in Seneca's eyes the soul of virtuous moderation -- and Seneca defends comfort and wealth at several points, perhaps feeling guilty at his own success. But lest we think him a hypocrite, when the time came Seneca followed in the path of his heroes, Cato and Socrates -- accepting death in the manner he advocated several times in this collection. (The final piece on earthquakes isn't quite as odd as it might seem: while Seneca spends most of it musing on how earthquakes might happen, he uses the then-recent destruction of Pompeii to point out that nothing in the material universe is truly reliable: only virtue matters, only it can maintain us against the ravages of fickle fortune.)

I have been sharing excerpts from this book on facebook's Stoics group, and they've found a very will-pleased audience there. This is the stuff of excellence; obviously of interest to those interested in philosophy, mindfulness, and wisdom literature, but a must-read for moderns who find such value in the Stoa as I do. Seneca's essays are elaborations on the potent thoughts of Epictetus' Handbook and Marcus Aurelius' Meditations.

This is one to re-read, remember, and recommend.

Ross Cohen says

Seneca's writings are crowded with truths. Excellent, if occasionally in need of paring down.

Oskari says

This is a book that will stay with you for the rest of your life. As it is with Stoic philosophy, it's filled with insights that can directly be applied to many daily-life circumstances, in particular here dealing what challenges, anger, grief, etc. and also what is happiness and what brings tranquility of mind and enjoying our life as it actually is. I find quite interesting as well, that even though Seneca - as well as most other stoics and ancient philosophers - comes from a patriarchal mode, through the big insights unifies the feminine of surrendering to nature and what life brings. An excellent book in itself and a great introduction to the Stoic way of thinking.

Hector Puigcerver says

I enjoyed specially the first dialog On Providence, in which Seneca is conversing with his friend Lucilius. And the type of advice on how to live our lives that he is giving to his beloved friend is just timeless.

One just has to understand what bad means: bad for the wise man would be to have bad thoughts, to commit crimes, to desire money or fame.

Lucian says

I like Epictetus better, Seneca can be a little long-winded.

Khands says

Excellent insights into the stoic philosophy.

Blair says

Another classic of Stoic philosophy. Seneca's writing is pretty timeless and still has lots of relevant advice for people today. He draws on lots of historical examples to illustrate his points which are fascinating in themselves. His prose is a bit more engaging than that of Epictetus.

James Violand says

Excellent. If only more would read him. Seneca and the Stoics had a marvelous way of looking at life. A very wise man. We should imitate him.
