

REVIEW

Shadi Bartsch and David Wray (eds.), *Seneca and the Self* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), ISBN: 978-0521888387

This book contains twelve papers which were originally presented at a conference hosted by the University of Chicago in 2003. This collection is a very good example of how research on an ancient author should be done. The remarkable quality of this volume is the result of the choice of bringing together an impressive group of scholars—some of the contributors are amongst the most distinguished scholars of Roman philosophy and literature.

The purpose of this book is to reflect on Foucault's famous thesis that Seneca is a philosopher who is particularly concerned with the "care of the self," i.e., the investigation of the "technologies" (i.e., practices) that are most suitable to lead a person to moral and spiritual improvement. Some of the contributors (i.e., Inwood, Ker, and Long) of *Seneca and the Self* explicitly concentrate on Foucault's interpretation of Seneca; others keep Foucault's reading of Seneca in the background and analyze, more or less directly, Seneca's elusive notion of the self. In this review, I will devote more attention to the articles which explicitly discuss Foucault's theory since this section of the book is probably of greater interest for the readers of this journal. *Seneca and the Self* is divided into four parts, an introduction and three sections which approach Seneca's notion of the self from a philosophical, cultural, and literary perspective respectively. The text's interdisciplinary approach is one of its greatest merits since it does justice of the complexity of Seneca's corpus of works which consists not only of philosophical texts but also of tragedies and satires. The diversity of Seneca's literary production has always constituted a challenge for any scholar who has attempted to consider his thought in a holistic way—*Seneca and the Self* offers an important contribution to the understanding of the relations between Seneca's very diverse works.

In the introduction the editors effectively outline both the merits (i.e., the interdisciplinary approach and the discussion between different evaluations of Seneca's notion of the self) and the content of the book. The editors also present the key difficulty involved in the study of Seneca's notion of the self: in Seneca's works the notion of the self is not clearly outlined, in spite of the many texts in which he seems, as Foucault shows, to reflect on how to care for one's self. On the whole, *Seneca and the Self* shows that Foucault's interpretation of Seneca presents a very serious exegetical difficulty. In the *History of Sexuality* (vol. 3) Foucault argues that the care for the self was a constant preoccupation among the philosophers who lived during the Imperial Age, regardless of their philosophical affiliations. Foucault's inclusion of authors such as Seneca in the list of those who developed strategies to care for the self is pro-

blematic since his affiliation to Stoicism makes it difficult to understand what the self is for him. Different from Platonism in which the self is clearly identified with man's soul which is his real essence, Stoic psychology does not seem to make room for the self. The Stoic notion of man's commanding faculty (i.e., *hēgemonikon*) does not, indeed, carry the sense of individuality which seems to be required to develop a notion of the self. In the introduction to *Seneca and the Self* the editors suggest an attractive solution to such an exegetical difficulty: Seneca's notion of the self is "not ontological but rather ethical, and even there more rhetorical than doctrinal." (4) According to this interpretation, Seneca seems to be interested (i) not in assessing what the self is from an ontological or psychological perspective, but (ii) in examining a basic feature of human existence, i.e. the concern for one's moral and spiritual condition. The exegetical difficulty of assessing what Seneca's notion of the self is and the solution suggested by the editors are explored in great detail throughout *Seneca and the Self*.

The basic difficulty posed by Seneca's notion of self is directly tackled by A. A. Long's article "Seneca and the Self: Why Now?" Initially, Long shows that Foucault's study of Seneca's notion of the self has two main merits: 1) it contributes to deepening our understanding of the Roman author; 2) it brings to our attention a way of thinking about the self which constitutes a valuable alternative to the Cartesian idea of the self that is still fairly prominent in our culture. In the second part of his article, Long acknowledges the difficulty of placing a reflection on the self within Stoic psychology and proposes an insightful model of the structure of the self. Long's model is not explicitly presented by either Seneca or other Stoic philosophers, but it (i) may have been tacitly employed by Seneca and other Stoic thinkers or, at the very least, (ii) is in harmony with the basic tenets of Stoic psychology. Long indicates that it is possible to distinguish within a human being between (i) an "occurrent subjective self" which consists of a person's present thoughts and emotions and (ii) a "normative self" which is what a person should aspire to become. On this reading, Seneca's re-current analyses on how to care for the self can be regarded as a sort of roadmap which indicates how an individual should proceed in order to abandon his "occurrent" self and acquire the "normative" self. Long's analysis of Seneca's notion of the self is an effective way to (i) follow up Foucault's intuition that Seneca does have a notion of the self and (ii) offer the theoretical framework to understand how to place Seneca's frequent analyses of the self within the Stoic philosophical framework.

B. Inwood's essay, "Seneca and Self-assertion," is the most critical of Foucault's reading of Seneca amongst the contributions contained in *Seneca and the Self*. Inwood's primary target is the view (which he attributes to Foucault) that Seneca innovates on previous treatments of the self by Stoic and Platonic philosophers. Inwood shows very persuasively that that there is no distinctive novelty in Seneca's ontology of the human mind. This reading, however, raises some important exegetical issues. The first is whether Foucault really thinks that Seneca's notion of the self introduces a novelty in Stoic psychology. In his first extensive treatment of the self in the *History of Sexuality* Foucault mentions Seneca together with many other Epicurean, Stoic, and Platonic philosophers without stressing Seneca's originality but simply presenting

him as one of the protagonists of the “discovery of the self.”¹ As for Foucault’s analysis of the notion of the self, he seems to be interested in describing the ways in which authors of the Imperial Age reflected on how to proceed in order to improve one’s intellectual, spiritual, and emotional condition. The possible problem which Foucault’s interpretation presents is not that it attributes to Seneca a view that he never held—as it is suggested by Inwood—but that he may have failed to consider what the theoretical ground for the care of the self is. In the second part of his article, Inwood offers a very penetrating analysis of Seneca’s texts which aims to show that, contrary to what Foucault claims, Seneca’s recurrent use of reflective pronouns is not evidence that he developed a sense of the self. Inwood argues very persuasively that Seneca’s self-reflecting language is a literary device which aims to create a literal persona, a moral *exemplum* of the moral principles Seneca advocates. Inwood’s interpretation has the merit of showing the necessity to recognize the difference between Seneca-the-author and the image of Seneca that we get from his works. This reading, however, raises the further problem of assessing what motivated Seneca-the-author to portray himself in a particular way rather than in another. It can be made the argument—which Foucault may have endorsed—that Seneca-the-author’s goal in portraying a “fictional Seneca” is therapeutic: his fictional self-portrait may allow him to reflect, individuate, and objectify some of his fears and aspirations.

In “Seneca and Selfhood: Integration and Disintegration” C. Gill explores the difficulties involved in defining what, according to Seneca, the self is. Gill concentrates on the difficulties concerning Seneca’s notion of the self and its unity that are raised by the descriptions of the struggles that Medea and Phaedra—as they are portrayed by Seneca in his tragedies—experience when choosing what course of action they should take. Gill addresses this difficulty by developing a very useful model of the structure of the self that is not too dissimilar to the one offered by Long in the first article of *Seneca and the Self*. Gill suggests that it is possible to distinguish between a “natural self” and an “actual self.” The former captures how human beings should be if they were to follow their nature (i.e., reason) completely; the latter indicates the state that human beings are in when they conduct their existence in a way that is not wholly rational. In the light of this distinction, Gill argues that Seneca’s descriptions of Medea and Phaedra can be interpreted as dramatic illustrations of the struggle between their “natural” and the “actual” selves. In Seneca’s philosophical works, Gill claims, we have the description (i) not of the struggle between the “natural” and the “actual” self portrayed in the tragedies, but (ii) of the process which allows human beings to integrate these two selves. Gill calls this process *oikeiôsis* (i.e., affiliation) and describes it as a natural but challenging process. Gill’s article should be taken very seriously by any scholar of Foucault since it does a wonderful job in filling some of the exegetical gaps of Foucault’s interpretation of Seneca. Gill’s distinction between “natural” and “actual” self and his analysis of *oikeiôsis* offer the theoretical justification for Seneca’s interest in how we should proceed to care for the self. Gill’s article has the further merit of explaining with great efficacy the difference between Seneca’s notion of selfhood and the one that is common in Cartesian and post-Cartesian philosophy. In Cartesian and post-Cartesian philosophy the self is identified with a person’s self-consciousness,

¹ Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, in *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 3, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage books, 1990), 37-69.

individuality, and subjectivity; in Seneca the “natural” self is the state that all human beings experience when they act and feel in complete accordance with reason.

Nussbaum’s “Stoic Laughter: Seneca’s *Apocolocyntosis*” concludes the section that investigates Seneca’s notion of self from a “philosophical perspective.” Nussbaum deals with Seneca’s notion of the self indirectly by reflecting on the therapeutic role of laughter and satire. Initially, Nussbaum presents a very useful outline of three basic kinds of laughter: 1) the vulgar and mindless laughter which is effectively illustrated by the “frat boy”; 2) the “Stoic and Cynic” laughter which has a therapeutic goal and occurs when a person realizes the discrepancy between philosophical values and the values of ordinary people; 3) the “Aristophanic laughter” in which we assist at the comic celebration of the human body and its needs. In the second part of her article Nussbaum examines the difficulty of classifying the laughter that we encounter in Seneca’s *Apocolocyntosis*. Through a thoughtful and insightful analysis of Seneca’s text Nussbaum shows that *Apocolocyntosis* presents a particular type of laughter which is centered on the notion of *fastidium* (i.e., “disgust,” “revulsion at contamination.”) The disgust that Seneca describes in the *Apocolocyntosis* has, Nussbaum argues convincingly, the therapeutic effect of exposing life-styles and behaviours that a student of philosophy should feel compelled to reject. This article may be taken to support the idea that activities such as reading and writing can crucially contribute to the process of caring for the self—an idea that Foucault strongly endorsed.²

The section on Roman culture begins with a stimulating essay by E. Asmis: “Seneca on fortune and the kingdom of god.” Amis offers a fascinating analysis of the originality of Seneca’s depiction of fortune. Different to most Stoic philosophers who recommend their followers to develop indifference towards fortune and her gifts, Seneca advocates engaging in a heroic fight against fortune. Amis’s original interpretation of Seneca shows that we can find in the Roman thinker the seeds of the Renaissance ideal of the *homo faber fortunae suae*. Scholars of Foucault will find this article useful since it shows how the activity of caring for oneself was considered by authors such as Seneca to be a dramatic and agonistic process.

C. Edwards’ “Free yourself! Slavery, freedom, and the self in Seneca’s *Letters*” is an exemplary article which offers a very good example of how the knowledge of the historical and social context in which an author operates is crucial for an accurate understanding of his works. Edwards investigates how in his *Letters* Seneca often employs the images of the master and the slave to illustrate the challenges a person encounters when he tries to free himself from the slavery of passions and become master of his moral and spiritual self. Edwards shows that in order to fully appreciate the way Seneca uses the images of the master and the slave it is necessary to recognize the complex dynamics which were at play between slaves and masters in Seneca’s time. The dialectic between the images of the master and the slave is used by Seneca, Edwards explains very persuasively, to illustrate the process that philosophers engage in when they abandon the self which is attached to external things and embrace the “real” self. The study of the way Seneca uses the images of the master and the slave to describe the process of acquisition of the “real” self offers further textual support to Fou-

² Michel Foucault, “Self Writing,” in Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity, and Truth. Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, vol. 1, edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 207-222.

cault's interpretation of Seneca as a philosopher who is concerned with understanding how to properly care for the self.

J. Ker's "Seneca on Self-examination: *On Anger* 3.36" concentrates on a famous Senecan text on which Foucault's interpretation of the Roman thinker heavily relies. Notoriously, Foucault considers *On Anger* 3.36 as an effective example of a particular "technology of the self" which Seneca employs to examine his own moral progress towards a "conversion to self." Ker thoroughly examines Foucault's reading of *On Anger* 3.36 and highlights its merits as well as its problems. Then, Ker offers an extremely sophisticated literal analysis of *On Anger* 3.36 which leads him to show that the philosophical content of Seneca's text is closely connected to the particular literary style he employs. According to Ker, the care in choosing images or terms which effectively capture a philosophical idea that Seneca's text displays constitutes a specific "technology" which Seneca employs to connect with his true self. The activity of reflecting on how a general philosophical idea can be effectively conveyed requires an author, Ker thinks, to internalize such an idea and to connect it with his own self. On a more general note, Ker's article seems to correctly grasp the spirit of Foucault's reading of the Ancient world. Foucault aimed not to offer a definitive analysis of certain phenomena of the Ancient world, but to bring to our attention aspects of Antiquity which had been previously neglected in order to stimulate further research of the kind pursued in works such as *Seneca and the Self*.

S. Bartsch's "Senecan metaphor and Stoic self-instruction" can be considered as the ideal continuation of Ker's article. Ker reflected on the importance of analyzing Seneca's language; Bartsch concentrates on a specific aspect of Seneca's language, i.e. his frequent use of metaphors. Traditionally, Seneca's fondness for metaphor has puzzled scholars who regarded with skepticism the use of metaphor in philosophical works. Bartsch considers the interpretations of Seneca's use of metaphor by Inwood and Mireille Armisen-Marchetti as indicative of two possible ways of reflecting on this issue. Inwood is unsympathetic of Seneca's recurrent use of metaphor since he considers that conveying a philosophical idea through a metaphor contains always the risk of distorting it. He argues that a serious exegesis of Seneca's works has to unveil the philosophical meaning that a metaphor conceals or skews. On the contrary, Mireille Armisen-Marchetti explores the pedagogical purposes of expressing philosophical ideas through metaphors; she argues that metaphors can facilitate the expression of abstract ideas by overcoming the limitations of human language. Bartsch acknowledges his debt to this second interpretation and argues that Seneca's use of metaphor has a self-therapeutic goal. Bartsch indicates that, in order to design a metaphor which can effectively express a specific philosophical view, an author has to internalize the doctrine in question and to relate it to his experience. In other words, the effort of choosing the appropriate metaphor requires an author to gain an in-depth knowledge of a theory. On this reading, the process of choosing which metaphor can best convey a particular philosophical idea can be a very effective aid, Bartsch argues, towards moral progress. Although Bartsch does not directly engage with Foucault's interpretation of Seneca his analysis of the therapeutic purpose of Senecan metaphors is very close to Foucault's idea that Ancient authors regarded the activity of writing as a "technology of the self."

The three articles which compose the last section of *Seneca and the Self* explore the relation between Seneca's tragedies and his philosophical works. In "Seneca and the denial of

the self” A. Schiesaro argues that the tragedies contain an analysis of the self as constituted by reason as well as passion which is ultimately incompatible with the way in which the self is presented in Seneca’s philosophical works. In “Seneca and Tragedy’s Reason” D. Wray shows that Seneca’s philosophical production cannot be separated from his tragedies since they are both crucial for the articulation of his thought. Seneca’s detached, almost clinical analysis of human beings that we get from the philosophical works is balanced by his tragedies’ graphic descriptions of the brutalities that human beings commit when they are in the grip of extreme passions. The article which concludes *Seneca and the Self* (i.e., A. Bush, “Dissolution of the Self in the Senecan Corpus”) also focuses on the relation between Seneca’s philosophical writings and his tragedies. Busch outlines the difference between the analysis of death and the afterlife that we find in Seneca’s philosophical works and that which emerges from his tragedies. In his philosophical works Seneca proposes a fairly comforting idea of death which is described as either the end of all sufferings or the transition to a blessed afterlife. On the contrary, in the tragedies Seneca has a dark view of death which is portrayed as the transition to an afterlife characterized by sufferings that are even greater than the ones we can experience in this life.

In conclusion, the collection *Seneca and the Self* offers a stimulating debate on a challenging topic of Seneca’s philosophy and is a telling example of the lasting effect that Foucault’s studies has had on the scholarship in Ancient philosophy and literature.

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