Epistles}

Ep. 31 is the second letter in Book IV of Seneca’s *Epistulae Morales*. It ranges across a number of themes, but what gives it unity is a desire to enthuse the recipient, Lucilius, in a new, explicitly Stoic, stage in his philosophical progress. This progress is measured in terms of the linked tasks of rejecting the popular values of contemporary Romans and of adopting philosophical ones. This stress on the need to adopt philosophical values and reject popular ones, delivered as it is with extensive exhortation, makes this letter a good vehicle for looking more critically at the claims of Thomas Habinek that Seneca’s writing is all ‘hortatory’ and that it aims to ‘transmit the dominant ideology’. Similarly, the letter offers a useful context from which to consider whether Seneca’s philosophy fits Brent Shaw’s construction of Stoicism as ideology.

Lucilius’ progress is the topic of the letter’s opening sentence. It is described as a rejection of popular goods (*popularibus bonis*) for all that is best (*optima quaeque*). This antithesis is basic to Seneca’s view of philosophy: philosophical progress is a process of rejecting the vitiated values of society for the healthy values of philosophy. In the *Epistles* a basic first step in this is abandoning the false allure of a public career for a life of philosophical retirement. This was a theme of particular importance in the first three books, which Seneca summarized at the end of the last letter of that series (*Ep. 29.11-12*):

*Quis enim placere populo potest cui placet virtus? … Quid ergo illa laudata et omnibus praeferenda artibus rebusque philosophia praestabit? scilicet ut malis tibi placere quam populo, ut aestimes iudicia, non numeres.*

---

* This paper was delivered at ASCS 32 (University of Auckland, January 2011) under the title, ‘Seneca and Roman Ideology (Epistle 31)’. It began as an essay introducing *Ep. 31* in my 2010 doctoral thesis from the University of Auckland, ‘A Commentary on Seneca’s *Epistulae Morales* Book IV (*Epistles 30–41*)’. The Latin texts of Seneca are from Reynolds (1965) and (1977), and of Cicero from May and Wisse (2001) and Wright (1991). All translations are from the texts of Basore (1932), Gummere (1918, 1920, 1925), May and Wisse (2001) and Rackham (1914)

1 Habinek (1992) 189 (= (1998) 139). Habinek (2000) offers a more nuanced version of his ideas; however, his claim, 289, that Seneca’s Stoicism is ‘inevitably political’ rests on the unstable support of the arguments of Shaw (1985); see below, n. 27. Habinek’s ideas have not been without influence, particularly in Roller (2001), but are also evident in Ker (2006), Bartsch and Wray (2009), 14 and Ker (2009), 11, n. 6.

2 Shaw (1985), who, 48-49, situates himself in a succession of authors, such as Wirszubski (1950) and Brunt (1975), who deny any such idea as a ‘Stoic opposition’ to tyrannical emperors. By contrast, MacMullen (1966) ch. 2, sees a philosophical opposition to some emperors, and Wilson (2003) 536-537, is rightly critical of the way these authors fail to engage seriously with Stoic concepts of value.

3 *Ep. 31.1:* *Agnosco Lucilium meum: incipit quem promiserat exhibere. Sequere illum impetum animi quo ad optima quaeque calcatis popularibus bonis ibas.* ‘Now I recognize my Lucilius! He is beginning to reveal the character of which he gave promise. Follow up the impulse which prompted you to make for all that is best, treading under your feet that which is approved by the crowd.’

4 ‘For who that is pleased by virtue can please the crowd? … What benefit, then, will that vaunted philosophy confer, whose praises we sing, and which, we are told, is to be preferred to every art and every possession? Assuredly, it will make you prefer to please yourself rather than the populace, it will make you weigh, and not merely count, men’s judgments.’
Virtue and society in general are irreconcilably opposed. To seek to gain the favour of society is to be alienated from virtue. Philosophy teaches the ability to disregard popular opinion in preference to a self-regard (tibi placere) that is a more reliable touchstone for true value than society in general, a contrast that is also expressed in the ability to form one’s own opinions, rather than follow those most widespread (aestimes iudicia, non numeres). Although Seneca often describes philosophers as noble and focuses his disapproval of popular values on the crowd (turba), it is not adequate to reduce this antithesis to one between the common mob and an aristocracy, as this letter shows: at §2, Seneca says, Surdum te amantissimis tuis praesta. The vox publica that Seneca’s aristocratic correspondent must avoid is one possessed by his very parents.

It is worthwhile to spend some time examining the basis for this antithesis between popular and philosophical values, as it provides a different entry into the question of Seneca and Roman ideology from that used by either Habinek or Shaw. For Stoics this dichotomy of values is explained through the theory of oikeiōsis, a theory that seeks to explain ethical development as something natural that proceeds from our primary impulse. At Ep. 121.17 Seneca describes this primary impulse as an attachment to oneself, a concern for one’s safety:

Primum sibi ipsum conciliatur animal; debet enim aliquid esse ad quod alia referantur. Voluptatem peto. Cui? mihi; ergo mei curam ago. Dolorem refugio. Pro quo? pro me; ergo mei curam ago. Si omnia propter curam mei facio, ante omnia est mei cura. Haec animalibus inest cunctis, nec inseritur sed innascitur.

Seneca continues by arguing (Ep. 121.18-19) that this instinct can be seen in the way nature has instilled in animals from birth a sense of what is dangerous to them. This attachment consists of an awareness of one’s constitution, something Diogenes Laertius describes as nature attaching the animal to itself. For a human the attachment to oneself developed as one grew. With maturity a human should realize that what was most truly oneself was not one’s body, but one’s ratio, that one was rationalis. In addition, when it was understood that this ratio had a divine source, one had the basis for acquiring magnitudo animi. The development, then, of a human into a fully animal rationale was for Stoics part of nature’s blueprint.

The understanding that the mind was the only thing that was truly one’s own was for Stoics the basis of their system of values. From this understanding they could define the good and the bad as entirely mental, related to virtue and vice, as Seneca explicates for the first time to his friend in this letter (§5). What are popularly believed to be goods are revealed not to match this philosophical criterion, as he

---

5 This point is well argued by Bellincioni (1978) 26-27, who, citing Ep. 94.53-54, points out that the populus is everyone, which can become distorted into the more vitiated form of the crowd. Vit. 2.2, as well as Ep. 114.12, make clear that even the crowd includes every social class.
6 ‘First of all, the living being is adapted to itself, for there must be a pattern to which all other things may be referred. I seek pleasure; for whom? For myself. I am therefore looking out for myself. I shrink from pain; on behalf of whom? Myself. Therefore, I am looking out for myself. Since I gauge all my actions with reference to my own welfare, I am looking out for myself before all else. This quality exists in all living beings — not engrafted but inborn.’
7 Diog. Laert. 7.85 (= SVF 3.178).
8 Cic. Fin. 3.21 and Sen. Ep. 121.14-16.
9 Quid votis opus est? fac te ipse felicem; facies autem, si intellexeris bona esse quibus admixta virtus est, turpia quibus malitia coniuncta est. ‘What need is there of vows? Make yourself happy through your own efforts; you can do this, if once you comprehend that whatever is blended with virtue is good, and that whatever is joined to vice is bad.’
demonstrates at §10 with a series of striking antitheses. Technically they form a class of ‘indifferents’, neither good nor bad, though in this letter Seneca only makes a passing reference to such a concept at §3.

That it was by nature’s agency that this occurred was fundamental to the consistency of the Stoic conception of the world — Stoic ethics were built around the imperative to follow nature. Yet this transition to valuing reason over what should be seen as having merely instrumental value, though in theory natural, was not smooth. Its perfect realization, the sage, was exceptionally rare. To follow nature was to be on the path to sagehood; the metaphor of progress as travel is one of the most frequent in Seneca’s works. To turn aside from this path in the Greek sources is diastrophē, a turning away or a distortion. Seneca expresses this as either error, wandering from the correct path, or pravitas, the opposite of what is rectus. For Stoics there were two causes of this error, either being misled by external things, and thereby valuing what should be means as ends in themselves, or through the influence of associates. Of these for Seneca by far the most emphasized is the bad influence of society; we are influenced by the bad example of others, while acting as a bad example ourselves (Vit. 1.4): Nemo sibi tantummodo errat, sed alieni erroris et causa et auctor est. However, the influence of pleasure was an example of the other source; it held the danger of becoming an end in itself (Ep. 116.3):

Curam nobis nostri natura mandavit, sed huic ubi nimium indulseris, vitium est. Voluptatem natura necessariis rebus admiscuit, non ut illam peteremus, sed ut ea sine quibus non possumus vivere gratiora nobis illius faceret accessio: suo veniat iure, luxuria est.

The theory of oikeiōsis, then, was fundamental to the Stoic ethical system. Not only did it give the authority of nature as its basis, but with the additional idea of diastrophē it explained how humans came to live in error, to be divided, that is, into the majority living foolishly contrary to nature and a small group struggling to free itself from this error and follow nature with the aid of philosophy. Seneca is at pains to emphasize the pervasiveness of this error (Ep. 94.55): erras ... si existimas nobiscum vitia nasci: supervenerunt, ingesta sunt. It has some analogy to original sin in that all humans absorb these erroneous values, although not before birth, certainly in all their dealings with other humans, from those closest to them, their parents, out to the wider society. It is an error that Seneca by no means excludes himself from, nor his addressee, and presumably any other reader. It is an error that we all must try to eradicate from our souls, but it is one with the most tenacious roots, requiring all the help of divinized philosophy, other philosophers and friends to

---

10 The basic source for this is Grilli (1963), which is more directly applied to Seneca by Bellincioni (1978) 15-31 and Lotito (2001) 69-75.
11 E.g. Diog. Laert. 7.89 (= SVF 3.228).
12 ‘No man can go wrong to his own hurt only, but he will be both the cause and the sponsor of another’s wrongdoing.’ Frequently society is distilled into its most virulent form, the crowd, as the most pernicious teacher of false values, as at Epp. 7.1 and 8.1.
13 ‘We are endowed by Nature with an interest in our own well-being; but this very interest, when over-indulged, becomes a vice. Nature has intermingled pleasure with necessary things — not in order that we should seek pleasure, but in order that the addition of pleasure may make the indispensable means of existence attractive to our eyes. Should it claim rights of its own, it is luxury.’
14 ‘You are mistaken if you suppose that our faults are inborn in us; they have come from without, have been heaped upon us.’
15 Sørensen (1984) 224, compares the end of the Golden Age in Seneca to the Christian Fall, though with avarice rather than carnal desire being responsible (e.g. Ep. 90.38).
It is an error that has us believing that our self includes somehow our position in society, our possessions, or even our bodies, whereas we need actually to understand that it is only our minds that are truly our own, as Seneca stresses in the last letter of Book IV, *Ep. 41*.6-7.

Error as a disease of the mind fitted well with native Roman concepts of mental health, which Seneca exploited in describing the goal of philosophy as *mens bona*, translatable as a ‘healthy mind’. Seneca in his philosophical works exploits the Stoic syncretism of concepts that in explaining virtue as a mental state makes it possible to describe this mental health simply as *virtus*. Elsewhere I have argued how effectively Seneca exploits the crossover of Stoic values to traditional Roman values through this identification of Stoic *virtus* as having much in common with *virtus Romana*. There I also argue that Seneca does not simply stoicize these Roman ethical values, but through Stoicism changes them by arguing forcefully for their radical independence from traditional aristocratic qualities of wealth, birth and social status. Such arguments are, in fact, very prominent in this letter, especially in §10.

Given all this, what are the grounds for seeing Seneca as writing Roman aristocratic ideology, that is a system of ideas intended to justify the power and position of the Roman elite? Basic to such a view is interpreting the antithesis between the mob and philosophers as a social one: making the mob everyone but Seneca’s social peers, and making Seneca a spokesman for the values of his social class. That this is erroneous has already been mentioned. Seneca includes everyone, even himself, as part of the mob. He differentiates himself and his addressee insofar as they are seeking to change and to follow philosophical values. He is able to appeal to his class to change, and make a very effective appeal in that he does not totally reject their conception of honour, but rather, as noted, fundamentally reinterprets its basis. Equally effectively he is able to argue that such a reinterpretation is in line with traditional Roman conceptions of these values as exemplified in the actions of great figures from their history.

It is much more meaningful to see Seneca as writing counter-ideology, an attack on the dominant ideology of his society.19 This can be illustrated from a number of angles. Firstly, his contrast between the mob and philosophers differs from how Cicero presents a similar contrast. Secondly, the interpretation of Stoicism as ideology generally, as advanced by Shaw, is open to serious question, in that it basically omits any reference to the relevance of the fundamental Stoic conception of values. And finally, a more obvious candidate for Roman ideology exists, that found in a number of their works of rhetorical theory.

Cicero provides an important contrast to Seneca’s insistence that he himself, his addressee, Lucilius, and by implication anyone else reading the work, are mired in the common errors of society at large. Cicero in the *De Finibus* has the interlocutor, Cato, argue that his audience has a clear sense of what is honourable and what is not, a

---

16 The use of friendship with philosophers past and present is discussed in Davies (2010) 186; the role of divinized philosophy is described in Davies (2010) 415.
17 It is not until *Ep. 66*.6 that Seneca directly equates the perfect mind with virtue. At *Ep. 31*, however, he stresses that *virtus* is the ultimate good (§§6 and 8), and that this good for humans is mental (§11).
19 Somewhat different from counter-ideology is the analysis of Seneca's works for political dissidence in Rudich (1993) 17-106. Rudich is generally unsympathetic towards the dissonance he sees between what Seneca did and what he wrote, but notes, 100-1, that this is less pronounced in the *Epistulæ Morales*, as they were composed in retirement.
Davies: Senecan Philosophy as Counter-ideology

sense moulded by the models of their ancestors and provided by good upbringing in honourable households (Fin. 3.37-38):

\[
\textit{Aut quis est, qui maiorum, aut Africanorum aut eius, quem tu in ore semper habes, proavi mei, ceterorumque virorum fortium atque omni virtute praeustantium facta, dicta, consilia cognoscens nulla animo afficiatur voluptate? Quis autem honesta in familia institutus et educatus ingenuum non ipsa turpitudine, etiamsi eum laesura non sit, offenditur?}\]

That such \textit{honestae familiae} exist is suggested at the start of the book. The dialogue is set in the library of Lucullus’ villa and Cicero takes the time to praise the character of the younger Lucullus (Fin. 3.8-9), growing up, as he is in such a household, with such a library and under the guidance of the upright characters of both Cato and Cicero.

Seneca is in agreement with Cicero over some of this: past Romans provided models of aspects of virtue (Ep. 120.5-8), and he is, of course, insistent on the virtue of Cato. However, what is strikingly in contrast to Cicero is the sense that one’s access to these models is not mediated by environment, by one’s upbringing or by tradition. Rather one forms a one-to-one personal relationship with the models (e.g. Ep. 11.10). Such a relationship is open to anyone to form; it is not controlled by one’s lineage or social position, as Seneca stresses at length in Ep. 44.\footnote{21} In his pessimistic appraisal of human society, vice is the norm that makes instances of virtue all the more brilliant: \textit{Omne tempus Clodios, non omne Catones feret. Ad deteriora faciles sumus} (Ep. 97.10).

In contrast to this negative opinion of society, Seneca does seem to view the general character of earlier Romans as more virtuous, less affected in particular by the vices of greed and luxury. At the close of this letter (Ep. 31.11), for example, he reveals a positive opinion of traditional Roman morality as expressed in their former religious customs: this comes through in the approving evocation of the \textit{simplicitas} in the Virgilian quote and it is continued in the closing reference to the gods being favourable when their worship was simpler. This is an opinion he shares in common with both Polybius and Cicero.\footnote{22} Seneca’s respect for the morals of earlier Romans contrasts with the complete absence in any of his works, even in the \textit{De Clementia}, of any praise for Rome’s empire or military power, as Italo Lana points out.\footnote{23} By contrast, we have his condemnation of genocide at Ep. 95.30.

Despite his evocation of the better morality of early Rome, Seneca does not imagine that it can be recovered through an appeal to tradition, and in this also he contrasts with Cicero. As Stefano Maso notes, whereas Cicero saw society as able to be reformed through appealing to tradition, Seneca sees no possible reform for society, but only for the individual, and that reform comes through distancing him from the harm society causes.\footnote{24} Similarly, for Cicero the term \textit{boni} gave moral authority to a political grouping of the aristocracy; for Seneca the term is a moral one, applicable to people whatever their rank, as he stresses at the close of this letter (Ep. 31.11).

\begin{itemize}
\item[-] \footnote{20} ‘Or who is there who feels no sense of pleasure when he hears of the wise words and brave deeds of our forefathers, — of the Africani, or my great-grandfather whose name is always on your lips, and the other heroes of valour and of virtue? On the other hand, what man of honourable family and good breeding and education is not shocked by moral baseness as such, even when it is not calculated to do him personally any harm?’
\item[-] \footnote{21} This relates to his insistence in Ep. 31.10 that the raw material for virtue, the mind, is possessed equally by all and unaffected by birth.
\item[-] \footnote{22} Scarpat (1983) 29-34.
\item[-] \footnote{23} Lana (1955) 288.
\item[-] \footnote{24} Maso (1999) 80.
\end{itemize}
Given the current reality as Seneca sees it, he makes use of it to exhort the reader, as an individual, to see the potential for greater glory in resisting the appeals of a more deeply vitiated society. Similarly, rather than viewing Roman *exempla* as something that Romans possess in some inherent sense, he uses them for their persuasive power with a Roman audience through their appeal to the reader’s sense of pride in this heritage.\(^{25}\)

Turning from the contrast between Seneca and Cicero in their treatment of Roman tradition, the idea that Stoicism generally is Roman ideology is open to serious challenge. The argument for its ideological status was one made by Shaw, who argued that it was particularly formulated by Posidonius as a way of constraining the new political masters of the Mediterranean.\(^{26}\) Shaw is quoted by Habinek as support for his own use of Seneca as ideology.\(^{27}\) Shaw takes the Stoic injunction to follow nature as basic, which is unremarkable, but he ignores the question of *oikeiōsis* as I have outlined it, making not a single reference to Stoic virtue in his entire article! By doing this he can argue that social status is in Stoic terms somehow natural, that Stoicism functioned as an ideology that reinforced the social status quo; but as we have seen, for Seneca at least, this is a massive distortion. Far from being natural, as Seneca stresses at the end of *Ep. 31*, social status is the result of vice (§11):

> *Hic animus tam in equitem Romanum quam in libertinum, quam in servum potest cadere. Quid est enim eques Romanus aut libertinus aut servus? nomina ex ambitione aut iniuria nata. Subsilire in caelum ex angulo licet: exsurge modo et te quoque dignum finge deo.*\(^{28}\)

Social status is the product of a fallen world, specifically of a vice, *ambitio*, that brought down the republic.\(^{29}\) The reader, in seeking to live a philosophical life, is invited to recall the virtues of a better age, those expressed in the quote taken from Virgil’s *Aeneid*. In the next letter, *Ep. 32*, Seneca describes wealth as the result of theft.\(^{30}\) He sees no social remedy to this state of affairs, as we have seen, yet this is scarcely to endorse it, but rather a fatalistic resignation to it; it is the canvas upon which the individual can cultivate and display virtue.\(^{31}\)

Seneca in his writing displays a clear antipathy to the values of his contemporaries, but for Shaw this does not seem to matter; what matters to him is not what Seneca writes, but who he is: he is a senator and ‘his Stoicism has a peculiar

\(^{25}\) Although Seneca rejects the possibility of a general reform of society, he does create an alternative society of philosophers, comprising both the living and the dead; Davies (2010) 186-87.


\(^{27}\) Habinek (1992) 200 (= (1998) 148). This is even though Shaw (1985) 30, specifically excludes Seneca from his study, due to his Stoicism having ‘a peculiar slant to it’. The dependence on Shaw in Habinek (2000) 288-89, is more explicit, where he cites Shaw (1985) for the idea that Stoicism provides ‘a discourse of virtue that is often hard to distinguish from what we might call political analysis’. Yet, as noted in what follows, Shaw engages nowhere in his article with the Stoic concepts of values that shaped their view of virtue.

\(^{28}\) ‘A soul like this may descend into a Roman knight just as well as into a freedman’s son or a slave. For what is a Roman knight, or a freedman’s son, or a slave? They are mere titles, born of ambition or of wrong. One may leap to heaven from the very slums. Only rise “And mould thyself to kinship with thy God.”’

\(^{29}\) Sall. *Cat.* 10.1.

\(^{30}\) *Ep. 32.4*: *Vota illorum multos compilant ut te locupletent; quidquid ad te transferunt alicui detrahendum est*. ‘Their prayers plunder many another person, simply that you may be enriched. Whatever they make over to you must be removed from someone else.’

\(^{31}\) This pessimism is very evident at the end of Seneca’s description of the cyclical world-engulfing flood in the *Natural Questions*. At *Nat.* 3.30.5 he suggests that such a flood is imminent as harmony is already under attack: *Nec longa erit mora exitii. Tempitatur divelliturque concordia.*
slant to it that is dictated by his central political position and his role as an adherent rather than a propagator’. Shaw’s argument starts from a hypothesis that Stoicism was propagated by ‘outsiders’. For this theory to work Seneca, as he is not an outsider, must be an adherent, but such a convenient dismissal of what Seneca writes is not adequate. Seneca’s presentation of himself in his writing should not be seen merely as a veneer to his social status, a veneer that removes the need to engage seriously with what he writes. Rather his status as a philosopher deserves to be taken seriously, and when it is, what he has to say about wealth, birth and political office in Ep. 31 and elsewhere makes untenable the view of him as seeking to promote the status of the Roman elite.

Finally, the argument that Stoicism is the logical vehicle for the ideology of the Roman elite overlooks the role of rhetorical training and theory as a more obvious vehicle for such ideology. The elite devoted most of its schooling to the development of eloquence, and it also rewarded outstanding rhetorical skill with public office, for which Seneca himself is the perfect example. Furthermore, some rhetoricians could claim that it was the power of eloquence that had created human society, a claim that powerfully validated the status of those who possessed the time and money to acquire such eloquence:

Hoc enim uno praestamus vel maxime feris, quod conloquimur inter nos et quod exprimere dicendo sensa possumus. … Ut vero iam ad illa summa veniamus, quae vis alia potuit aut dispersos homines unum in locum congregare aut a fera agrestique vita ad hunc humanum cultum civilemque deducere aut iam constitutis civitatibus leges iudicia iura describere? Ac ne plura, quae sunt paene innumerabilia, consecter, comprehendam brevi: sic enim statuo, perfecti oratoris moderatione et sapientia non solum ipsius dignitatem, sed et privatorum plurimorum et universae rei publicae salutem maxime contineri (Cic. De Or. 1.33-34).

Cicero paints a positive picture celebrating the creation of human society and the orator’s role in it; Seneca’s pessimism, by contrast, has already been noted; he emphasizes rather that much of what is considered civilization is a work contra naturam that is to be distrusted for its tendency to invert the proper ordering of one’s values.

When rhetorical theory offers such a convenient justification for the elite’s position in Roman society, why seek to recruit Stoicism, particularly that expressed by Seneca, as Roman ideology? It reflects, perhaps, the desire of some scholars to give a monolithic unity to all Roman cultural artifacts, and not to allow any ability to disagree within such a system. Habinek attempts in his 1998 book to claim all Roman literature is ideology, an attempt that Henderson (1999) notes could have benefited from some self-irony. The application of this claim to Ovid has been

---

34 ‘For the one thing that most especially sets us above animals is that we converse with one another, and that we can express our thoughts through speech…. But let us now turn to what is surely the most important point of all: what other force could have gathered the scattered members of the human race into one place, or could have led them away from a savage existence in the wilderness to this truly human, communal way of life, or, once communities had been founded, could have established laws, judicial procedures, and legal arrangements? And to avoid enumerating still more points (and they are actually almost numberless), let me summarize everything in a few words: I assert that the leadership and wisdom of the perfect orator provide the chief basis, not only for his own dignity, but also for the safety of countless individuals and the State at large.’ See also Cic. Inv. 1.2.
dismantled by Peter Davis, as has the claim Seneca is writing ‘hortatory literature’ for this end by Marcus Wilson.\textsuperscript{36} What has been said above is another nail, if one is needed, in the coffin of an unsustainable position: in \textit{Ep.} 31 Seneca certainly is keen to enthuse the reader, but it would be special pleading to claim that this enthusing was in any meaningful sense a manifestation of Roman aristocratic ideology.

\textbf{REFERENCES}


\textsuperscript{36} Davis (2002) and Wilson (2001).