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## **Seneca: Knowledge of Self and Nature**

*Gudrun Holtz*

### **Abstract:**

Knowledge of self is at the heart of Seneca's philosophical work. Yet, he cites the Delphic maxim only twice. Self-knowledge in Seneca thus is not derived from the maxim but from the Stoic self-understanding of what philosophy is, namely "wisdom of things divine and human." In one of the rewordings of this definition, he puts it in terms of "knowledge of self and nature." Since both aspects are intrinsically related, they circumscribe the scope of the present paper. After a general introduction (1), a sketch of Seneca's philosophical project concerning "knowing oneself" is given (2). Subsequently, I discuss those two passages in which this maxim is quoted. In contrast to other interpreters, for him, knowing oneself in the first-place means knowing oneself to be mortal. Furthermore, it will be argued that this maxim is of minor importance in his work because, for him, its proper place is popular philosophy and not philosophy in the sense of the Stoic definition of this concept, to which he is indebted (3). In section 4, the question is raised how a person can achieve knowledge of self. It will be shown that for Seneca, knowing oneself is not in the first place an intellectual endeavor, but an eminently practical one that is gained through self-examination. In the process, at least two persons are involved: the philosopher as teacher and mental guide or therapist and the person who is in need of therapy of emotions or passions. There is an objective side to knowing oneself and a subjective one. To different degrees, they are present in both the instructor and the person in need of instruction. In section 5, I ask why Seneca defines knowing oneself in terms of knowing oneself to be mortal. I argue that, for him, being conscious of one's mortality is the key to a happy life, that is, ethically, existentially, and religiously. With transcendence pointing to the philosophical realm of physics dealing with nature, section 6 at first explains Seneca's reasoning for the unity of knowledge of self and nature. Then, content and benefits of knowledge of self and nature are discussed. Whereas the former is concerned with ethics in terms of eradicating passions like anger and fear in order to become one's own person, the latter leads to transcending the limitations of ethics and becoming free from oneself and entering into partnership with the gods and knowing them. In section 7 a summary follows.

### **Keywords:**

Philosophy (ethics and physics); philosophical therapy (mental guidance), objective-normative and subjective-individual dimensions of it; emotions (passions); self-examination; self-transformation; becoming one's own person; freedom; fate (Fortuna); death; nature; rationality; self-transcendence; the divine.

## **1. Introduction**

Although knowledge of self is at the heart of Seneca's philosophical work, in his numerous writings he cites the Delphic maxim – in Latin *nosce te* – only twice. If at all, allusions to the maxim are rare.<sup>1</sup> Self-knowledge in Seneca is not derived from the maxim but from Stoic self-understanding of what philosophy is, namely “wisdom of things divine and human” (Ep. 89.5). One of the rewordings of the definition is “knowledge of self and nature” (82.6), with both aspects being intrinsically related. Since, for Seneca, the maxim is of marginal importance only, its interpretation in the relevant contexts is taken as the starting point for exploring self-knowledge in his work in greater depth.

Time and again, biography and circumstances leave their mark on his literary development of self-knowledge. Probably in Corduba in Spain, L. Annaeus Seneca was born into a wealthy and respected family in the 1st century CE. He received his training in Rome. After starting with law, he decided to take up philosophy. He studied in the school of Sextius, an eclectic, who sympathized with Stoicism but was influenced by other philosophical directions as well, especially by Pythagoras and Plato. From early on his health was delicate, causing him to move to Alexandria for several years. He stayed in this city with his aunt, the wife of the prefect in Egypt, C. Galerius. Upon returning to Rome in 31 CE he worked as lawyer and later became a high official. During the reign of the last three emperors of his lifetime he encountered various problems. Gaius Caligula (37–41) apparently had plans to execute him because of one of Seneca's speeches that he had heard. He was exiled by Claudius (41–54) to Corsica for more than seven years. Nero (54–68), suspecting him of conspiracy, forced him to commit suicide (65). In his young years Seneca had been Nero's educator. In the early years of Nero's reign, together with Afranius Burrus, the commander of the Praetorian guard, Seneca became politically highly influential. During his time at the court, he seems to have accumulated much wealth.

Implicitly, sometimes explicitly, his life situation transpires in his literary work that he wrote over a period of more than 25 years. It encompasses philosophical writings<sup>2</sup> in which knowledge of self is dealt with, as well as tragedies. To a considerable extent, his work is philosophical therapy that is intended to guide his addressees to tackle desire and harmful emotions or passions.<sup>3</sup> Seneca is the philosopher-therapist, and his instruments of guiding are reading and writing. Unlike other Stoic philosophers of the period, as Epicte-

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<sup>1</sup> Among the numerous instances that Courcelle, *Connais-toi*, 49–60, attributes to Seneca's discussion of knowledge of self, he only assumes the phrase *ignotus moritur sibi* in Thy. 403 to allude to the maxim; but cf. current scholarship on *Thyestes* (Tarrant, *Seneca's Thyestes*, 148, and Boyle, *Seneca*, 245). – I wish to thank the co-authors of the present volume, with whom I had the chance to discuss preliminary versions of my paper. It helped to sharpen my ideas.

<sup>2</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper to present an overview of Seneca's extensive work; cf. Maurach, *Seneca*, and the relevant chapters in Damschen and Heil, *Brill's Companion to Seneca*, e.g. The writings dealt with in the following are provided with brief introductory remarks.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Filtvedt, *Maxim*, 2.4.3.

tus, for example, he is not a professional teacher but writes strictly as a private person.

There is a plethora of material on self-knowledge in Seneca. With the maxim being the starting point for inquiry, the language employed for its wording and the meaning it is given are the basis for the selection of the material discussed in the following. The phrase *nosce te* shows cognitive language in reflexive usage. Seneca hardly uses this term (*nosse* etc.) but prefers equivalents for both the terminology of cognition and the pertinent reflexive wording. Since his language is rich in expression, many equivalents are found in the material selected.<sup>4</sup> In order to do justice to this material, the texts will be analyzed philologically and interpreted within their given contexts. To broaden the perspective, they will be linked to more general aspects of the current debate.

In the subsequent sections, I will look at the overall theme of self-knowledge from the following perspectives: After presenting Seneca's general project and the role of self-knowledge therein (2), I explore his understanding of the maxim (3). Thereafter, I consider the practice of knowing oneself in Seneca (4). Having clarified that the meaning of the maxim consists in knowing oneself to be mortal, I will pursue this notion in additional materials (5). The focus then is widened to include the second dimension of Seneca's overall philosophical project, that is, knowledge of nature and its interrelatedness with knowledge of self (6). Finally, a summary is given (7).

## **2. Seneca's Project: From the Philosopher's Self-knowledge to Self-knowledge as Project of Psychagogy**

Seneca's philosophy of self essentially is philosophical therapy. Accordingly, his writings are "tools of education and aim at the moral improvement"<sup>5</sup> of the self that he understands to be in need of healing one's passions. The complete cure lies in the attainment of the ultimate goal of Stoic philosophy, the *summum bonum*. To describe this goal, he resorts to multiple paraphrases, among which happiness (*vita beata*), (mental) tranquility, virtue, freedom, and (being) one's own person are of particular importance.<sup>6</sup> The self that he deals with is first of all the self of his addressees, those named explicitly like Marcia, to whom he writes a piece of consolation, and Lucilius, the addressee of the *Epistulae Morales* and the *Naturales quaestiones*,<sup>7</sup> but also the wider au-

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<sup>4</sup> The reflexive aspect can also be expressed by a cognitive verb plus a noun connected with a possessive pronoun. Reflexive terminology of cognition can be followed by the verb *scire* ("know") introducing the content of knowledge of self (and nature) and thus to what has to be pondered in the further process. The verb *cogitare* ("think") and its equivalents often refer to what has been learned in the process of knowing oneself (and nature) so far and thus to what has to be pondered in the further process. For the importance of reflexive phraseology in that context, cf., e.g., Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 3:46.60–62, and Ker, "Seneca," 176.

<sup>5</sup> Setaioli, "Ethics I," 239.

<sup>6</sup> Setaioli, "Ethics I," 255, defines it as "the restoration of harmony with Nature and the *logos*, which is identical with happiness, wisdom, and virtue."

<sup>7</sup> The *Epistulae Morales* are Seneca's principal philosophical works. They present themselves as a collection of letters that, well planned, are intended to give guidance to people aiming to

dience of his contemporary readers. For them to reach the therapeutic end of Stoic philosophy he offers guidance based on what he himself has learned in the process of knowing himself in order that they might come to know themselves too. Knowing oneself, in other words, is the essence of the therapy he advises others to follow.

Although Seneca acts as mental guide, he has not yet perfected himself and reached the *summum bonum*. This he knows to be the privilege of the wise man (*sapiens*). In his *Ad Helviam matrem. De consolatione*, probably his most personal work<sup>8</sup> written during exile in Corsica, he openly admits that he is far from being wise.

What then? Do I say that I am a wise man (*Quid ergo? sapientem esse me dico*)? By no means (*Minime*); for if I could make that claim, I should thereby not only deny that I am unhappy, but should also declare that I am the most fortunate of all men and had been brought into the nearness with the god (5.2).<sup>9</sup>

Like his addressees he is a *proficiens*, a person progressing toward the goal of Stoic philosophy.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, he is the first addressee of his guidance.<sup>11</sup> He himself needed to arise from his grief and regain power before being able to console his mother (1.1). Unable, though, to help himself and alleviate his pain, he had to entrust himself to “wise men (*sapientibus [...] viris*,” 5.2) whom he says not only have the competence to defend themselves but also those they care for. Just like Helvia, Seneca too is in need of external guid-

perfect themselves morally. They are addressed to Lucilius, who historically was a friend of Seneca but often represents any of his addressees (cf. Maurach, *Seneca*, 174). Like the *Naturales quaestiones*, the work was written between 62–64 CE. The latter work is a book on natural philosophy. It deals primarily with what the Greeks call *meteorologia*, that is “geography, meteorology, seismology, and astronomy,” but also touches upon what he elsewhere labels *natura* in a general sense (cf. Hine, *L. Annaei Senecae naturalium quaestionum libros*, 2–3; citation, *ibid.*, 2).

<sup>8</sup> In the present paper, Seneca’s self-descriptions are taken as statements of his authorial self. Here and there, they might coincide with biographical facts. These issues are beyond the scope of this paper; cf., e.g., Edwards, “Self-Scrutiny,” 23–24.32–36, and eadem, “Self,” 229–230. *Ibid.*, 230, she claims that “the letter form [...] retains a privileged status in relation to the authorial self. Intrinsic to the letter is the idea of a message composed by a particular individual, in a specific time and place, and addressed to another.” This statement applies to all the texts covered in this paper, since all of them, though not being letters in terms of genre, are letters in the sense of being addressed to a specific person.

<sup>9</sup> The translation of *Ad Helviam* is based on Basore, *Seneca*, 2:416–489. – To mark the difference between the Jewish-Christian understanding of the divinity and the Stoic-Senecan one, in this paper the term *deus* is translated as “the god.”

<sup>10</sup> There are different stages of progress toward perfection; cf. Edwards, “Self,” 240, referring to Ep. 75.8–10. Apparently, the differentiation between the *sapiens* and the *proficiens* is the frame of interpretation for Seneca’s denial of being wise. It does not seem to be linked to the Socratic motif of ignorance seen in Plato, Philo, Epictetus; cf. the papers of Wasmuth, Self-knowledge, Wyss, Philo, and Wehus, Delphic Maxim, in the present volume.

<sup>11</sup> Writing for Seneca not only serves as communication with his addressees but also as self-reflection; see below 4.2 with fn. 105. The latter will be the main purpose of the work commonly known by the title “To Myself” by Marcus Aurelius; but cf. Holtz, *Die Wichtigkeit des Menschen und die Übermacht Gottes*, 303–304.

ance. He must internalize the wisdom of the wise men to be able to pass it on to her. He expects her, in turn, to embark upon healing herself with the help of his guidance. That Seneca is just as much the addressee of his therapeutical philosophy as others can be seen in various ways.<sup>12</sup> Still, in his works he is the philosopher-teacher who is equipped with the knowledge of self, indispensable for the guidance he offers, whereas his addressees are the recipients of his teaching.

In the fundamental description of his project of psychagogy or mental guidance in the *Epistulae morales*, Seneca offers a concise outline of his endeavor. Not by accident is it related to the center of his philosophy, knowledge of self and nature, about which he gives the rationale in Ep. 8.2–3:<sup>13</sup>

(2) The work that I am doing is for posterity (*posterorum negotium ago*): it is they who can benefit (*prodesse*) from what I write. I am committing to the page some healthful admonitions (*salutares admonitiones*), like the recipes of useful salves (*medicamentorum utilium compositiones*). I have found these effective on my own sores, which, even if not completely healed, have ceased to spread. (3) That right path (*[r]ectum iter*), which I myself discovered (*cognovi*) late in life when weary from wandering, I now point out to others (*aliis monstro*).<sup>14</sup>

The self-understanding of Seneca is that of the mental guide who teaches others the right path to happy life in order to benefit the greater number, that is, posterity for whom he is convinced to possess a teaching of universal relevance.<sup>15</sup> Here as elsewhere he “displays the Stoic use of the medical analogy,” which relates the doctoring of bodily diseases to its philosophical equivalence, the cure of passions. In this way, a study of that “analogy will help Stoic philosophy to reach its practical goal,”<sup>16</sup> that is, the cure of passions and other faults ideally amounting to nothing less than the attainment of the *summum bonum*. Before passing on the results of his study to others, however, Seneca observed the effects of his medication on his own self. Though not healing him completely, he came to understand that it stopped the spreading of his disease. In this way, he reveals himself to be no more than a *proficiens* on par

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Edwards, “Self-Scrutiny,” 27–28; eadem, “Self, 232,” and see Ep. 26.4; Ep. 27.1, and below Ep. 8. It must be noted that his addressees, particularly Lucilius, not only are the recipients of Seneca’s knowledge but also partners in dialogue. “The Letters repeatedly emphasize the significance of philosophically informed friendship as the context for self-improvement” (Edwards, “Self-Scrutiny,” 30). Ethical formation then is a “necessarily social process” (Edwards, “Self,” 233).

<sup>13</sup> According to Graver and Long, *Lucius Annaeus Seneca*, 1, in Ep. 8.2, on which part of my remarks on the letter focus, the “premise of the entire collection” of letters is stated.

<sup>14</sup> In principle, the translations of the *Epistulae* follow Graver and Long, *Lucius Annaeus Seneca*; other translations were consulted though.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Setaioli, “Ethics I,” 253.

<sup>16</sup> Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 316. *Ibid.*, she claims that this analogy is “more pervasive and more highly developed in Stoic texts than it is in those of any other Hellenistic school.” It can be traced back to Chrysippus, who used it in his “book on the therapeutic treatment of the passions” (cf. SVF 3.471); cf. further Cicero, *Tusc.* 3.2.6.

with his addressee who like him is on the path to the goal without having reached it yet.<sup>17</sup> Standing the test of his own experience, he feels entitled to write down his admonitions. He compares them to *compositiones* or recipes of useful salves, thereby indicating that his remedies are composed from various ingredients that, as will be seen later on, are mixed to the individual need of the patient.<sup>18</sup>

Seneca describes the right path that he has discovered (*cognovi*) late in life in terms of the very center of Stoic philosophy, that is, “die umfassende Erkenntnis des ‘Göttlichen und Menschlichen.’” The wording chosen in § 6 is *humana divinaque*.<sup>19</sup> By the term *divina*, Seneca for the first time in the *Epistulae* refers to the concept of “cosmic consciousness,”<sup>20</sup> which alongside knowledge of self is indispensable for attaining the *summum bonum*. The phrase *humana divinaque* thus serves to summarize the content of the mental guidance he offers in Ep. 8 and beyond. It ought to be noted that it corresponds to what in Ep. 82.6 is called “knowledge of self and nature,” which, in other words, is another formulation of the content of Seneca’s psychagogy.<sup>21</sup>

### 3. Seneca’s Interpretation of the Maxim

In this section, I analyze two texts that quote the maxim, namely Marc. 11.3 and Ep. 94.27–28.<sup>22</sup> Only in *Ad Marciam* is it interpreted at length. By contrast, Ep. 94 does not show any interest in its meaning, but is concerned with its rhetorical function, that is, the persuasive powers resting on its form. Since Marc. 11 turns out to be an illustration of the purpose ascribed to it in Ep. 94, I first deal with the latter text.

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<sup>17</sup> He paints himself even more critical of his ethical performance in Vit. beat. 17.3–4. A different frame, yet in a similar discussion as that of Ep. 8.2, is found in Ep. 27.1, where reflexive terminology is used.

<sup>18</sup> The term *compositio* is also a medical term; cf. Richardson-Hay, *First Lessons*, 279, and Vit. beat. 17.4; Ben. 4.28.4. The main aspects of his medical compositions are “counsel, argument and admonition” (ibid.), all of which are knowledge-related.

<sup>19</sup> Maurach, *Seneca*, 159. For him, Seneca’s reference to matters both “divine and human” is “ein [...] noch unausgeführter Vorgriff” (cf., e.g., Ep. 65; 89.5). Maurach’s rendering of that center corresponds to Seneca’s above-mentioned definition of Stoic philosophy that can be defined as *divinorum et humanorum scientia[m]* (89.5). Probably due to the fact that in §§ 3–5 his focus is on ethics, Seneca reverts the order in § 6: *humana divinaque*.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Williams, *The Cosmic Viewpoint*, 17–53. The citation is part of the heading of the first chapter: “Interiority and Cosmic Consciousness in the Natural Questions” (partly in italics).

<sup>21</sup> Similarly in the original opening of *Naturales quaestiones* (cf. Hine, *L. Annaei Senecae naturalium quaestionum libros*, 1), Seneca in Nat. 3 pref. 1 presents himself as a mental guide: “I have decided to traverse the universe, to seek out its causes and secrets, and to present them for others to learn about (*mundum circumire [...] et causas secretaque eius eruere atque alii noscenda prodere*”. – Here and in the following the translations of the writing are based on Hine, ibid., with adaptations here and there.

<sup>22</sup> In the critical edition of Reynolds, followed by Graver and Long, *Lucius Annaeus Seneca*, 357, the maxim is assigned to Ep. 94.28, whereas Gummere, *Seneca*, 3:30, Rosenbach and Préchac, *L. Annaeus Seneca*, 4:432, and Giebel, *Lucius Annaeus Seneca*, 449, quote it in § 27. Here, the enumeration of the critical edition is followed.

### 3.1 The Rhetorical Function of the Maxim (Ep. 94.27–28)

In Ep. 94, the maxim is part of a lengthy discussion on the role of the precepts in philosophy,<sup>23</sup> with the maxim, introduced as an exemplar of the “oracular responses (*oraculo*),” being understood as a subgenre of the precepts. Their role in philosophy is the object of a fierce argument between the philosopher Aristo<sup>24</sup> and Seneca. Aristo holds that philosophy, that he conceives as therapy too, only requires the “principles (*decreta*) of philosophy,” because they effect both: they “either completely cure the sick mind (*percurare mentem aegram*)<sup>25</sup> and free it from its faults (*vitiis liberare*), or forestall the mind that is still free from error but headed in the wrong direction.” Therefore, he states, “the entire business of giving precepts is useless” (13). In negating their importance in philosophy, Aristo’s position amounts to a fundamental questioning of Seneca’s method of therapy to which precepts, addressed to specific individuals, are instrumental.<sup>26</sup> No wonder then that Seneca, in response to Aristo’s arguments, defends the centrality of precepts.

The maxim is discussed as part of Seneca’s refuting Aristo’s position that, if precepts are not clear, additional proofs are needed “in which case, it is they and not the precepts that will help.” Seneca contradicts saying that it is “the authority of the preceptor (*ipsa monentis auctoritas*)” that is “beneficial even without proofs.” Thus, for Seneca, it is not the rational argument that counts but authority. That precepts do not require additional proofs, for him, is all the more evident in case they are worded in a rhetorically effective manner: “the actual precepts have great weight in themselves, especially if they are expressed in verse or packed into a memorable phrase (*in sententiam coartata*) in prose,” like the well-known<sup>27</sup> sayings of Cato (27). The same weight he attributes to “oracular responses and things of that kind (*oraculo aut similia*).” One of Seneca’s examples is the maxim: “Know yourself (*te nosce*)” (28). Although he does not say so explicitly, the train of thought points to the fact that in his view both arguments apply to the maxim equally, authority and language or form.

Sayings such as Cato’s or the maxim, he holds, “don’t require a defense attorney,” because they “have an immediate impact on our feelings, and are helpful because our nature is deploying its very own force.”<sup>28</sup> The defense attorney, Seneca has in mind, would consist of additional proofs or explanations (28)

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Graver and Long, *Lucius Annaeus Seneca*, vii.

<sup>24</sup> Aristo of Chios was a student of Zeno of Citium and “was later viewed as a dissident from the mainstream Stoic tradition” (Graver and Long, *Lucius Annaeus Seneca*, 555, note on Ep. 89.13).

<sup>25</sup> Both Aristo and Seneca compare philosophy with medical treatments; for Aristo cf. Ep. 94.17, for Seneca §§ 19–20.24.

<sup>26</sup> For details of the argument cf. Hadot, *Seneca und die griechisch-römische Tradition der Seelenleitung*, 8–9, and Schafer, *Ars Didactica*, 85–110.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Giebel, *Lucius Annaeus Seneca*, 449.

<sup>28</sup> *Advocatum ista non quaerunt: affectus ipsos tangunt et natura vim suam exercente proficiunt.*

that appeal to ratio. He judges them to be superfluous because he claims those sayings or admonitions to directly appeal to the seeds of virtue that are contained in the mind. These seeds or “‘sparks’ of the virtues” are “(o)ur innate tendencies to prefer certain kinds of objects,” such as “our instinct for self-preservation (121.17–18) and for the companionship of others (9.17).” They serve as “the starting-points for our development toward perfected rationality.”<sup>29</sup> In order for rationality to fully develop, therefore, the

seeds of everything honorable (*honestarum*) [...] are activated by admonitions (*admonitione excitantur*), just as a spark fanned by a slight breeze blossoms into flame. Virtue is roused by a touch, a nudge (*erigitur virtus, cum tacta est et impulsata*). Besides, there are some things that are indeed present in the mind, but not accessible; these begin to be usable when they are put into words (94.29).

Admonitions of which oracles, such as the maxim, <sup>30</sup> are thus the impulses necessary to activate the seeds to develop toward rationality and virtue: “Our intelligence (*[i]ngenii vis*) is fostered and enhanced by precepts, and thus enabled to supplement our innate convictions and correct our errors (*depravata corrigit*)” (30). In this way, the precepts are important tools for implementing philosophical therapy, as conceived by Seneca.

The meaning and function that he attributes in Ep. 94 to the Delphic oracle as subgenre of the precepts already occurs in his earliest work *Ad Marciam*, a piece of therapeutic consolation. Here other aspects pertaining to the maxim in Ep. 94 are also reflected, namely, its rhetorical purpose with its interest in ethics, authority as the reason for its effectiveness, and its mode of operation in terms of a “reminder” that “does not teach, but [...] does call attention;” that “arouses us, focuses the memory and prevents it from slipping away” (25).<sup>31</sup> Both writings clearly presuppose that the maxim is a well-known tradition that is deeply rooted in Roman culture.<sup>32</sup>

### 3.2 The Meaning of the Maxim: Know Yourself to be Mortal (*Marc. 10–11*)

As mentioned, Seneca only once in his works, in *Marc. 10–11*, quotes the maxim (11.3) and interprets it at length. *Ad Marciam. De consolatione* belongs to the genre of consolation literature.<sup>33</sup> The piece is the earliest example of this genre that has survived in Latin. Cicero’s *Consolatio* was likely a

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<sup>29</sup> Graver and Long, *Lucius Annaeus Seneca*, 560, note on Ep. 94.29.

<sup>30</sup> In the passage (27–30) under discussion, *precept* is the generic term of which *admonitio*, *sententia*, *oraculum* and *versus* are examples or, as the case may be, subgenres.

<sup>31</sup> This is another definition of the *modus operandi* of the precept or admonition closely linked to §§ 27–30; terminologically relevant is the verb *excitare* (25, 29).

<sup>32</sup> For Cicero see esp. section 7.(4).

<sup>33</sup> The *terminus ante quem* of *Ad Marciam* is the beginning of Seneca’s exile in 41 CE, the *terminus post quem* is 37 CE, that is the “first months of Caligula’s reign,” a date that currently is accepted by most scholars; cf. Sauer, *Consolatio ad Marciam*, 135. The translation of *Ad Marciam* is based on Basore, *Seneca*, 2:2–97.

strong influence. “The fact that many thoughts and arguments can be traced back to the repertoires of different Hellenistic schools of philosophy confirms the strong influence of the tradition of the genre where elements from rhetoric and popular philosophy abound.”<sup>34</sup> Seneca’s immediate addressee is Marcia, who mourns the death of her adult son Metilius; the writing, however, is intended for a wider audience too.<sup>35</sup> The main aim of the text is “the overcoming of pain” by way of “inward guidance of the addressee,”<sup>36</sup> that is, psychagogy. Still mourning her son three years after his death (1.7), Seneca judges Marcia’s grief to be excessive. Such hardened grief being one of the passions (*affectus*), which constitutes an evil, it is imperative for him to vehemently fight it and crush it (1.8) in order to pull her out of her depression and cure her.

Since the nature of her sickness is intellectual – it consists of false opinions – the therapy is rational. Seneca thus appeals to her cognition, trying to make her perceive her faulty thinking, which shows a profound misunderstanding of human nature. To that end, in chs. 7–11 general precepts are employed that aim at “a radical inner change of attitudes.” Marcia should see “that her loss is not particularly abnormal or unexpected and that excessive grief is an inappropriate reaction.”<sup>37</sup> With the maxim figuring in 11.3, the focus will be on the second part of the general precepts (cf. chs. 9–11),<sup>38</sup> particularly on its immediate context in 10.5–11.5. The overall topic is the workings of Fortuna, who is depicted as hitting out at will. This being a general human experience, Seneca oscillates in the selected passage between using the singular of the second person for Marcia and the plural of the first and second persons for the wider audience.<sup>39</sup> In this way, in addressing Marcia, human beings in general are meant; *nosce te* in 11.3 is no exception.

Directly addressing Marcia in 10.5, Seneca argues that by excessively grieving over the death of her son she, in fact, opposes nature (φύσις / *natura*) that prescribes the conditions of human existence. She ignores that her son’s “death was proclaimed at his birth” (10.5). *Natura* here refers to the active divine principle of the universe, of which one manifestation is the εἰμαρμένη, thus constituting the natural order of the universe.<sup>40</sup> Human existence is lived out in this realm, the “realm of Fortuna (*regnum fortunae*),” whose principle of

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<sup>34</sup> Sauer, *Consolatio ad Marciam*, 136.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Abel, *Bauformen in Senecas Dialogen*, 22.

<sup>36</sup> Sauer, *Consolatio ad Marciam*, 136; cf. *ducam* in Marc. 4.1.

<sup>37</sup> Manning, *On Seneca’s “Ad Marciam”*, 9. By way of contrast, in the second part, chs. 12–25, the precepts relate to Marcia’s specific situation and that of Metilius; cf. Manning, *ibid.*, referring to Abel, *Bauformen in Senecas Dialogen*, 19.

<sup>38</sup> In chs. 7–8 Seneca rejects Marcia’s argument that grieving for one’s own is “natural” (*naturale*).

<sup>39</sup> For the second person of Marcia cf. Marc. 10.1, 4, 5; 11.1–2, for the general audience the first person plural in 10.2–3, 6–7; 11.4 and similarly the second person plural in 10.4, 7. In 11.3–5 then the third person singular, referring to *homo* (twice in 11.3), is used.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Hager, *HWP*, 433–434. Characteristic of the natural order is causality. In that context the second principle of φύσις is providence (πρόνοια); also cf. Seneca, Ben. 8.3.

ruling is fate. “With violence, insult, and cruelty she will maltreat our bodies” (10.6), inflicting all kinds of punishments on human beings. Not only parts of life call for tears but the whole of it (*tota flebilis vita est*; 11.1).<sup>41</sup> No living creature can evade Fortuna’s attacks.

Since such is the law of nature, Seneca urges Marcia and women in general (*vobis*) to “observe moderation (*[m]oderandum est*) [...], you who are immoderate (*inmoderate*) in your grief” (11.7). Moderation, which is one of the cardinal virtues, and excessive desire<sup>42</sup> – passions such as grief and suffering<sup>43</sup> – are strictly antithetical, with moderation complying with reason and desire constituting an aberration. Evils such as these can only be overcome by virtue,<sup>44</sup> which in Stoic thinking is the same as living according to nature (*κατὰ φύσιν ζῆν*). Being urged to observe moderation, Marcia then implicitly is asked to eliminate her passions and to return to reason and virtue, in other words, “to conform to the normative and ‘natural’ behavior of the educated Greco-Roman male – in metaphorical terms, to ignore the female-specific ‘wound.’”<sup>45</sup> Here, we have a particularly clear example of how in Senecan therapy the actual or “occurrent” self is expected to conform to the “normative” self as understood in Stoic philosophy.<sup>46</sup>

Continuing his reflections on the *condicio humana*, Seneca in Marc. 11.1–2 turns to the issue of self-deception. It shows itself in the “forgetfulness of what is your (individual) and the general lot (*tuae*<sup>47</sup> *publicaeque condicionis oblivio*),” that is mortality decreed by nature (11.1–2):

1 Mortal (*[m]ortalis*) have you been born, and to mortals (*mortales*) have you given birth. You, who are a crumbling and perishable body and often assailed by the agents of disease, – can you have hoped yourself that from such a frail matter you gave birth to anything durable (*solida*) and imperishable (*aeterna*)?<sup>48</sup>

2 Your son has died; that is, he has finished his course and reached that goal toward which all those whom you count more fortunate than your child are even now hastening.

Ignored by Marcia, mortality and death are the common fate of all humans. To assume that finite creatures can engender anything infinite is illusionary. Although Seneca’s focus here is on human morbidity and mortality, by referring

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<sup>41</sup> 11.1 in Basore’s and Reynold’s edition; 10.7 in the edition of Rosenbach and Préchac; for a discussion of the issue cf. Malchow, *Interpretation von Senecas Werken*, 87.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Cicero, Tusc. 4.29.34 (= Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 61O).

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Stobaeus, SVF 3.394 (= Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 65E).

<sup>44</sup> This fundamental Stoic conviction is concisely phrased by Cicero, Tusc. 4.15.35: “So the only cure for those vices is situated in virtue alone” (= Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 61O).

<sup>45</sup> Ker, *The Deaths of Seneca*, 93, referring to Marc. 1.5, 8; 7.3; 8.2.

<sup>46</sup> For further details of that terminology see below section 4.3.

<sup>47</sup> MSS R and V read *tuae*, MS A *suae*.

<sup>48</sup> These are properties of the gods.

to the goal her son has already reached, the discourse on the soul immortal anticipates that, being liberated from all chains and darkness of its earthly existence, namely from error, it will have reached its true and natural sphere (24.5–6).<sup>49</sup> At this point of the argument, however, Seneca’s focus is on the disillusionment of Marcia. She has to rid herself of her overestimation of herself, which is the source of her pain, and to fully accept her nothingness in order for this source to dry up.<sup>50</sup>

Embracing the human condition is what is identified with the maxim in Marc. 11.3:

*Hoc indicat illa pythicis oraculis ascripta vox: NOSCE TE.*<sup>51</sup>

This is the meaning of that utterance inscribed in the Pythian oracles: KNOW YOURSELF.

In light of the preceding section, the meaning of the maxim is purely anthropological: The addressees are to perceive themselves as mortal, frail, and temporary, in short, as nothing.<sup>52</sup> This understanding of self-knowledge in Marc. 11 is elaborated in the subsequent argument:

What are human beings (*Quid est homo*)? A vessel that the slightest shaking, the slightest toss will break. No mighty wind is needed to scatter you abroad: whatever you strike against, will be your undoing.

What are human beings? A body weak and fragile (*inbecillum corpus et fragile*), naked (*nudum*), in its natural state defenseless (*suapte natura inerme*), dependent upon another’s help (*alienae opis indigens*), and exposed to all the affronts of Fortuna (*ad omnis fortunae contumelias*). (3)

Explaining the nature of human beings in § 3, Seneca in the first response to the question: *Quid est homo*, continues the *ad hominem*-orientation of the maxim addressing the second person singular of Marcia. In his second response he takes the third-person perspective of the wider audience. As long as they have not transcended the enslavement to their bodies and, unrefined by

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. Abel, *Bauformen in Senecas Dialogen*, 38–39, and Malchow, *Interpretation von Senecas Werken*, 88–89.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Abel, *Bauformen in Senecas Dialogen*, 39. For self-illusion and overestimation of self, cf. Marc. 9.1–10.2. In 9.3 the technical term *decipere* is explicitly mentioned; see below section 5.1 with fn. 130.

<sup>51</sup> Conspicuously, in Marc. 9.2 the phrase *de morte non cogitamus* (“we do not think of death”) is found. In view of De ira 3.42.2 (see below section 5.2), the phrase seems to be a rewording of reflexive formulations, such as “to know oneself to be mortal.”

<sup>52</sup> According to Malchow, *Interpretation von Senecas Werken*, 90, by contrast, the meaning of the maxim is: “Der Mensch muß seine Rolle erkennen, die er in der Universalnatur spielt, von der er ein Teil ist,” that is, “eine sehr untergeordnete.” This interpretation he claims is grounded in Cicero, Fin. 3.22.73, where the point, however, is that *se noscere* and other precepts of the wise men cannot be understood without physics (*sine physicis*). In Marc. 10–11 this issue is not in view; but see below, sections 6.1 and 6.2.2 especially.

Stoic philosophy, have not realized their true self yet, knowing oneself means understanding the true character of human beings as subjugated to the will of Fortuna: they are nothing but frail, miserable, and pitiful creatures.

For the rest of § 3, Seneca further depicts the misery of human beings concerning body and soul: prey to wild beasts, suffering from cold and heat, filled with anxiety, deficient and useless. How then would Marcia, would anybody, “wonder that in this thing is death, which needs but a single sigh.” In sum, a human being is a “despicable creature (*contemptum animal*)” indulging in illusions about his or her very condition (4): That creature ponders immortal and eternal things, forgetting that death can overtake it at any moment (5). Disillusionment, then, proves to be an important aspect of Seneca’s therapeutic approach. With self-knowledge being defined as “knowing oneself to be mortal,” in Marc. 10–11 the notion is understood in purely anthropological terms.

The reason why in all his works Seneca only quotes the Delphic oracle in *Ad Marciam* can be seen in the rhetorical function ascribed to it in Ep. 94, namely to produce “an immediate impact on our feelings” (28). It is not meant to teach something new but to highlight the point Seneca wishes to make by employing a concise, well-known phrase that serves to arouse the reader (25). Admonishing Marcia with the imperative *nosce te*, Seneca wants her to finally wake up and take account of the human condition as defined by mortality and nothingness in order to be able to leave behind her excessive grief. In this way the maxim serves a limited purpose. Yet, by appealing to her feelings, thus activating her innate capacities for virtue, the maxim is meant to impact on her conduct too. The precept *nosce te* in Marc. 10–11, therefore, not only requires her (and the wider audience) to embrace a specific anthropological viewpoint but also proves ethically relevant. Overcoming her grief, Marcia will be able to conform to the normative behavior prescribed by reason and virtue, which is the purpose of Seneca’s therapy.

The rhetorical function of the maxim that transpires in the passages discussed – theoretically in Ep. 94 and by way of literary usage in Marc. 10–11 – points to the fact that in Seneca’s view it belongs to popular philosophy suitable for the early stages of psychagogy. Internal and external reasons corroborate this assumption. As to the internal reasons, he uses the maxim in a piece of the genre of consolation-literature popular in antiquity that, as mentioned, abounds with elements from rhetoric and popular philosophy.<sup>53</sup> In Marc. 2,1 he states that despite the accepted pattern of argumentation, he intends to proceed with *exempla* before *praecepta*,<sup>54</sup> because “Marcia is more likely to be influenced by authority and example than by reason,” with authority showing in the “famous names (*nomina clara*)” mentioned in the writing.<sup>55</sup> This de-

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<sup>53</sup> Apart from Sauer – see above (with fn. 34) – cf. Maurach, *Seneca*, 61–62, and Ker, *The Deaths of Seneca*, 89–92.

<sup>54</sup> The examples are found in chs. 2.2–5.6, the precepts in 7–25.

<sup>55</sup> Manning, *On Seneca’s “Ad Marciam”*, 10; further cf. Abel, *Bauformen in Senecas Dialogen*, 21–22.

scription of Marcia complies with the theoretical insights formulated in Ep. 94, even though the details of the argument differ. In Ep. 94, Seneca relates the maxim implicitly to “the authority of the preceptor,” with precepts, including oracles, being understood to appeal to emotion rather than reason.<sup>56</sup> Similarly in Marc. 11.3, arguing by way of using the maxim, he resorts to authority that is derived from the speaker and the place with which the maxim is connected, namely, the god Apollo, speaking through the Pythian oracles, and the temple of Delphi.<sup>57</sup> Finally, *Ad Marciam*, which is also addressed to a wider audience, deals with a problem of general concern, the death of a child and its emotional consequences for the mother.

As to the external reasons, according to Seneca, maxims in general “are suitable only for beginners” in the early stages of philosophical education – a point he makes in Ep. 33. Therefore, he no longer intends to convey maxims to Lucilius.<sup>58</sup> Their assessment agrees with his understanding of the precepts in Ep. 94. Furthermore, there is a consensus that Seneca in *Ad Marciam* strongly draws from the pool of common topics and motifs. Concerning the maxim, Cicero is of particular interest. In Fin. 3.22.73 he cites four “old precepts of the wise men (*vetera praecepta sapientium*),” among them *se noscere*, rendering γνῶθι σεαυτόν, and *nihil nimis* for μηδὲν ἄγαν.<sup>59</sup> Both these phrases were inscribed in Delphi. Conspicuously, before quoting the maxim in Marc. 11.3, Seneca admonishes Marcia to observe moderation in 10.7. Moderation is what *nihil nimis* – do not exaggerate – refers to. Against this background, there can be no doubt that for Seneca, the appropriate literary context of the maxim *nosce te* is popular philosophy.

In the interest of the overall project of the present volume, it is to be emphasized that in terms of history of tradition a number of agreements between Seneca’s interpretation of the maxim and Philo on the one hand and Seneca and Plutarch on the other come to the fore. They concern both the maxim and its interpretation and other common motifs. All three authors share the basic understanding that knowing oneself means acknowledging one’s nothingness.<sup>60</sup> They, too, connect it with moderation.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> By contrast, in Marc. 2.1 it is the precept that Seneca implicitly connects with reason. Comparable differences can be observed throughout his work. As used in Marc. 10–11, however, the maxim hardly appeals to reason; further cf. the introduction to section 4 on the role of admonishments.

<sup>57</sup> Conspicuously, neither the god Apollo and the priestess Pythia nor the place of his temple are mentioned explicitly; see below section 7.(1). Furthermore, to draw the readers’ attention to the authority of the preceptor, Seneca only refers to the Pythian oracles in general without referring to the priestess as a person.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Long, *Death and Immortality in Ancient Philosophy*, 161–162; quotation p. 161.

<sup>59</sup> The context of the citations though differs in Fin. 3.22.73 and Marc. 10–11.

<sup>60</sup> See Wyss, Philo, F, and Hirsch-Luipold, Plutarch, section 1.1. Concerning the futility of life as described in Marc. 10, Malchow, *Interpretation von Senecas Werken*, 86, refers to Plutarch, Cons. Apoll. 28 (= 115E–116D) and 30 (= 117A–D).

<sup>61</sup> For Seneca see on Marc. 10.7. For Plutarch cf. Sept. sap. conv. 164B, and Garr. 511B, where the Delphic saying μηδὲν ἄγαν is quoted alongside γνῶθι σεαυτόν and ἐγγύα πάρα δ’ ἄτα (“give a pledge and mischief is at hand”). In both contexts the meaning of μηδὲν ἄγαν is

Differing from both Philo and Plutarch though, Seneca gives the maxim a non-religious interpretation. Yet, by linking self-knowledge to knowledge of nature in other writings, he has an equivalent to the religious dimension of the maxim that in Philo shows in its theological corollaries, in Plutarch in its connection with the EI.<sup>62</sup> As regards both Seneca and Philo, they relate nothingness to the fragility of the human body.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, both perceive self-knowledge as a remedy for self-deceit.<sup>64</sup> As concerns Plutarch and Seneca (Ep. 94.28) specifically, both authors reflect on the conciseness of the language of the oracle as a specific means of communication.<sup>65</sup> Finally, for both of them the “*argumentum de communi hominum condicione*” in particular is a powerful means of consolation.<sup>66</sup>

#### 4. How to Achieve Knowledge of Self: The Practice of Knowing Oneself in Seneca

As much as knowing oneself, for Seneca, is an intellectual endeavor, it is an eminently practical one too. The process as a whole in both its dimensions ideally culminates in radical self-transformation that is effected by self-fashioning based upon knowledge of self: “leaving all else aside, you concentrate only on making yourself each day a better person (*ut te meliorem cotidie facias*)” (Ep. 5.1).<sup>67</sup> The process is complex and ideally involves three dimensions, admonishment (*admonitio*), rehearsal or practical exercises (*meditatio*)<sup>68</sup> including self-scrutiny, and the instruction in the theoretical foundations of wisdom (*sermo*), including the intellectually conceived philosophical ideal of the goal humans should attain. The first two instruments appeal to emotion, whereas the last one “is addressed to reason.”<sup>69</sup> Evidently, Seneca on his way to self-transformation has educated himself with all three instruments and expects Lucilius in the *Epistulae Morales* to do the same. As the example in *Ad Marciam* shows, this does not apply to all his addressees. As psychagogos, a leader of the rational soul (Ep. 13.15), Seneca has all the instru-

not given, with moderation, however, being its plain sense; for details of these texts cf.

Hirsch-Luipold, Plutarch, sections 1.7, 1.8. Regarding Philo, the idea of moderation is implicit in what he criticizes: arrogance and the like (Spec 1.10; cf. Wyss, Philo, B) and excess (Somn. 1.56; cf. *ibid.*, E).

<sup>62</sup> For Seneca see below section 6, for Philo and Plutarch, see the papers of Wyss and Hirsch-Luipold in the present volume.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Wyss, Philo, E.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Wyss, Philo, B.

<sup>65</sup> See below Hirsch-Luipold, Plutarch, sections 1.2, 1.8. In contrast to Seneca, Plutarch stresses the complexity of its meaning.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Abel, *Bauformen in Senecas Dialogen*, 37, referring to Plutarch, Mor. (= Tranq. an.) 475C. It is already found in Cicero, Tusc. 3.77.

<sup>67</sup> For further details cf. Edwards, “Self-Scrutiny,” 29–30; for the translation see *ibid.*, 29. For an illustrating text see below section 4.2.

<sup>68</sup> Referring in the context of self-knowledge to Jacob (cf. Wyss, Philo, E.) who is depicted as an ascetic Philo too shows himself to be familiar with the notion that knowing oneself is accomplished by way of exercises and rehearsals (cf. Holtz, *Die Wichtigkeit des Menschen und die Übermacht Gottes*, 314–324).

<sup>69</sup> For details cf. Setaioli, “Ethics I,” 244–252; quotation p. 251.

ments at hand intended to facilitate knowledge of self in its various dimensions. But he uses them according to the capacity of his addressees.

In the following, I discuss two texts using cognitive terminology in reflexive form that illustrate the practice of knowing oneself (4.1; 4.2). In the interest of the overall project,<sup>70</sup> the findings are subsequently evaluated with a view to the objective and subjective dimensions of the self in Seneca (4.3).

#### 4.1 Seneca's Practice of Guidance: Self-Knowledge through Self-Examination (Ep. 13)

Ep. 13 expounds Seneca's practice of guidance in view of human anxieties about the future.<sup>71</sup> In § 15 the goal of his guidance is explained on the basis of the fundamental tenet of Stoic ethics *κατὰ φύσιν ζῆν*: "We are not pulling you in a different direction from your own nature (*[n]on in diversum te a natura tua ducimus*). You were born to our doctrines. All the more, then: augment your own good (*bonum*); embellish it" (15). In accordance with nature, Lucilius is asked to make progress in transforming himself and to get ever closer to becoming his own person, that is, a person who fully realizes his or her innate rationality and virtue.

To this end, Seneca gives the "helpful" psychagogic advice (*auxilia*) to Lucilius, consisting of the precept (*praecipio*): "don't be miserable before it is time (*ne sis miser ante tempus*)" (4).<sup>72</sup> This advice is the "philosophical variant" of Horace's motif of *carpe diem*, that is, that "we should not focus on preparing for the future,"<sup>73</sup> but on deriving "full value from the present." Future time "cannot be counted on," as it is a source of anxiety and "threat to the mental tranquility."<sup>74</sup> From this perspective, in the following an admonitory passage<sup>75</sup> is looked at in which cognitive terminology, including reflexive phraseology, is used to illustrate the practice of therapeutic self-examination (13.6–7) in view of the specific anxieties of Lucilius. In Seneca's diagnosis they are rooted in his failure to differentiate between his actual situation here and now and his own and others' judgments of it.

(6a) What I am asking of you now is just this: (b) whenever those around you begin to convince you that you are unhappy, consider (*cogite*) what you actually feel rather than what you hear them say. (c<sub>1</sub>) Consult (*deliberes*) your own endurance; (c<sub>2</sub>) and

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<sup>70</sup> In the present volume, esp. cf. Filtvedt, Maxim, and Wehus, Delphic maxim.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Graver and Long, *Lucius Annaeus Seneca*, v: "Anxieties about the future."

<sup>72</sup> According to Dietsche, *Strategie und Philosophie bei Seneca*, 126, this precept is "genuin epikureisch;" the letter as a whole though he takes to be a "stoischer Werbeprospekt" (ibid., 121). For a similar notion in the New Testament cf. Matt 6:34; Luke 12:25.

<sup>73</sup> Edwards, "Ethics V," 326.

<sup>74</sup> Edwards, "Ethics V," 329. Here, she particularly has hope in mind, which is also dealt with in Ep. 13.12–13; further cf., e.g., Tranq. 2.7–9; Ep. 23.2; 98.6.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. the terms *praecipio* (4) and *exhortatione* (15) that form an *inclusio* regarding the main part of Ep. 13. The imperatives in § 6 are indicative of that. § 7b.d must be regarded as implicit imperatives.

since you are the best judge of your own affairs (*tua optime nosti*), ask yourself (*te ipse interrogas*), (c<sub>3</sub>) Why is it that these people are commiserating with me? On what grounds do they shrink from me, fearing even to come in contact with me, as though misfortune was contagious? (d<sub>1</sub>) Is there really anything bad in your condition? Or is the reputation worse than the reality? (d<sub>2</sub>) Ask yourself (*[I]pse te interroga*), (d<sub>3</sub>) Could it be that I am suffering and moaning for no reason? Am I making something bad that is not?

(7a) How am I to know (*intellegam*), you (sc. Lucilius) say, whether the causes of my anxiety are real or empty? (b) Here is the measuring stick (*regulam*). (c) We are tormented either by things past, or by things to come, or both. (d<sub>1</sub>) Concerning things present it is easy to make a judgment (*iudicium*): (d<sub>2</sub>) if your body is at liberty, and healthy, if you are not in pain from injury, then we can wait and see what is to come; (d<sub>3</sub>) today is not an issue.<sup>76</sup>

To pull himself out of his anxieties, Lucilius is asked to know himself and his situation by way of scrutinizing himself and his condition. The therapy prescribed for his self-improvement is “tailored” to his current needs.<sup>77</sup> Yet, knowing him to be the best expert on himself and his situation (6c<sub>2</sub>), Seneca stresses that there is an individual dimension of the therapy on the part of Lucilius as well: applying the advice of the philosopher-guide to his own specific self, he too has to tailor it to his own particular needs. He is expected to analyze himself and his situation critically and compare the impression he makes on others – his evident unhappiness that the teacher-philosopher fears, takes possession of him “before it is time” (4) – with his actual situation (6c<sub>3</sub>.d). This can be done by the best expert of himself only, namely Lucilius, who knows himself better than anybody else. On the other hand, the mental guide is the one who has the overall knowledge, able to formulate the general rule (*regula*) (7b.d<sub>2</sub>) applying to the specific problem of Lucilius. The rule is based on the guide’s theoretical insights on the dimensions of time and their value (c.d<sub>1</sub>). Though tailored to Lucilius’s individual needs, Seneca’s rule then points to the objective dimension of mental guidance. By contrast, the application of the rule is left to the one in need of healing and to his self-scrutiny, that is, to the individual.

#### 4.2 The Practice of Self-Scrutiny in Psychagogy (*Ira* 3.36)

*Ira* 3.36 is a good example of how “only by knowledge of the self will it be possible to become better and to act effectively to help others.”<sup>78</sup> Within the framework of psychagogy, self-knowledge here shows in self-scrutiny. *Ad Novatum*. *De ira* is Seneca’s response to a request from his brother Novatus

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<sup>76</sup> For a further tradition dealing with psychagoge\* operating through self-examination, cf. Ep. 24.1–4.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Edwards, “Self,” 234: “Strategies for self-improvement,” according to Seneca, “need to be tailored to the needs of the individual.”

<sup>78</sup> Setaioli, “Ethics I,” 249. If not otherwise mentioned, the translation of *De ira* is based on Basore, *Seneca*, 1:106–355.

“to write on the subject of how anger may be allayed.” The philosopher deems this subject of utmost importance, since anger is “the most hideous and frenzied of all passions.” It is “wholly violent and has its being in an onrush of resentment, raging with a most inhuman lust for weapons, blood, and punishment [...]” (1.1.1). This description of anger points to the character of the work as having “an obvious resonance in the tumultuous political court of the Julio-Claudian emperors.” For their courts as well as “for elite Roman society more generally” it has been seen as articulating an “ideology of anger control.”<sup>79</sup> Therapy of anger, therefore, is “both individual and broadly social.”<sup>80</sup> Decisive remedies of it are self-scrutiny and “knowing oneself to be mortal.”<sup>81</sup> Ira 3.36 is rightly seen as one of the “more subjective and personal” passages in Seneca<sup>82</sup> that, at the same time, does not lose sight of the public dimension:<sup>83</sup>

(1 [a]) All our senses must be rendered entirely resilient: they are by nature (*natura*) suited to endurance, as soon as the mind (*animus*) stops corrupting them. (b) [The mind] must be called upon to render account (*ad rationem reddendam*) each day (*cotidie*).

(c) This is what Sextius used to do. (d) And when the day was over and when he had withdrawn for his night’s sleep, he questioned his mind (*interrogaret animum suum*): (e) Which ill of yours (*malum tuum*) did you cure (*sanasti*) today? What fault (*vitio*) have you resisted? In what part are you improved (*melior es*)?

(2 [a]) Anger will cease and will be more moderate if it (sc. the mind) knows (*sciet*) that it must come before a judge (*ad iudicem*) each day. (b) Is there anything more beautiful than this habit of examining the whole day (*executiendi totum diem*)? (c<sub>1</sub>) The sleep that follows a self-review (*post recognitionem sui*)! (c<sub>2</sub>) How tranquil (*tranquillus*), deep (*altus*), liberated (*liber*), when the mind has received either praise or admonishment and the hidden self-observer and private censor (*speculator sui censorque*) has conducted a review of its own behavior (*cognovit de moribus suis*).

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<sup>79</sup> Ker, “Seneca on Self-Examination,” 162, referring to Harris, *Restraining Rage*, 220. The dating of *De ira* is uncertain. It was written “sometime” after the assassination of Gaius Caligula in early 41 and “prior to 51–2 CE, since by that time Novatus had been adopted and renamed Gallio, and was proconsul of Achaëa” (Ker, “Seneca on Self-Examination,” 162); but see, e.g., Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 405 fn. 5, who proposes the date “41 C.E., the first year of Claudius’ reign.” Novatus is a “non-philosophical public man who is depicted as having characteristic Roman concerns about military strength and success, about the safety and dignity of one’s family and home, about strength and dignity and manliness and greatness of soul generally” (ibid., 405).

<sup>80</sup> Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 405.

<sup>81</sup> For the latter cf. Ira 3.42, dealt with below in section 5.2. Another important element to curb one’s potential anger is “morning *praemeditatio*” about what the coming day will have in stock for oneself (Ira 2.10.7).

<sup>82</sup> Cf. Ker, “Seneca on Self-Examination,” 163.

<sup>83</sup> In principle, the translation of this passage follows that of Ker, “Seneca on Self-Examination,” 164. Basore, *Seneca*, 1:339, 341, and Edwards, “Self-Scrutiny,” 29, have also been consulted.

(3 [a]) I exercise this authority and each day plead my case (*apud me causam dico*) before myself [as judge]. (b) When the light has been removed from view and my wife, now a witness to my behavior, has fallen silent, I scrutinize my whole day (*totum diem meum scrutor*) and go back over what I have said and done (*factaque ac dicta mea remetior*). (c) There is nothing that I conceal from myself or pass over. (d<sub>1</sub>) You see, why should I fear any of my mistakes (*erroribus meis*) when I can say: (d<sub>2</sub>) See that you don't do that any more – this time I'll let you off (*ignosco*<sup>84</sup>).

(4[a<sub>1</sub>]) In that debate you spoke too aggressively: (a<sub>2</sub>) from now on don't spend time with the ignorant; (a<sub>3</sub>) those who have never learnt don't want to learn. (b<sub>1</sub>) You admonished (*admonuisti*) that one more freely than you should have, so you upset him instead of improving (*emendasti*<sup>85</sup>) him: (b<sub>2</sub>) after this, make sure not only that what you are saying is true but also that the one to whom it is being said is able to accept the truth; the good man enjoys being admonished (*admoneri*), but bad people bristle at someone correcting them.

Concerning the structure of *Ira* 3.36, Seneca begins by stating the problem: How can the *animus* be enabled to meet its purpose, that is, to rightly use the impressions produced by the senses in the mind (1a).<sup>86</sup> His answer is that the mind has to adopt self-scrutiny as “ritualized daily activity” (b).<sup>87</sup> To illustrate this practice he refers to the example of the philosopher Sextius, who, after withdrawing for sleep, had the habit of asking himself three questions regarding his conduct that day (c–e).<sup>88</sup> All of them are concerned with his own self-improvement. In § 2 Seneca evaluates Sextius' example, focusing on the account-giving of the *animus*. In ceasing or curbing the passion of anger, its first consequence is ethical (a) while its second is existential (b–c). The latter manifests itself in tranquility and freedom (c<sub>2</sub>), being illustrations of ethical perfection (*summum bonum*) that here shows itself to be the result of self-scrutiny in terms of the practice of self-knowledge. What is being reviewed by the mind is conduct that is evaluated ethically in terms of both its negative and positive aspects (c<sub>2</sub>).

In § 3 Seneca depicts himself as imitating the example of Sextius, serving in turn as a model for Novatus and the wider audience. The philosopher gives a “first-person testimony”<sup>89</sup> concerning his own practice of self-examination

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<sup>84</sup> Ker, “Seneca on Self-Examination,” 164; literally: pardon. In some editions § 3d<sub>1,2</sub> is assigned to § 4. The presentation of the text above is based on the critical edition of Reynolds, whom Ker follows.

<sup>85</sup> Ker, “Seneca on Self-Examination,” 164, translates “healing.”

<sup>86</sup> Cf. Holtz, *Die Nichtigkeit des Menschen und die Übermacht Gottes*, 284, 305.

<sup>87</sup> Edwards, “Self-Scrutiny,” 28, referring to *Ep.* 83.2 and *Ira* 3.36. Seneca four times refers to the present day as either the object of self-scrutiny or the occasion for that ritualized activity. It coincides with Seneca's general focus on the present day; cf. above on *Ep.* 13.

<sup>88</sup> This practice is anticipated “dans la mouvance pythagoricienne” (Veillard, “*De ira* 3.25–43,” 219); the text is cited by Epictetus, *Diss.* 3.10.1–3. For withdrawing see below fn. 166.

<sup>89</sup> Ker, “Seneca on Self-Examination,” 184, who sees it “at the center of the self-examination passage.” The “I” in § 3 too is the authorial “I.”

(a). Again, it aims at his actions, both words and deeds (b), in their totality, so that nothing escapes his self-scrutiny (c), particularly not his mistakes (d<sub>1</sub>). His self-review is meant for self-betterment, not for determining culpability.<sup>90</sup> This is clearly seen in § 4, where he gives two examples of the benefit of self-examination. As different from his evaluation of Sextius' self-questioning, which, on the surface at least, exclusively focuses on the self in its relation to its own self, Seneca's evaluation of his own self centers on the self in its social relations. Firstly, he reflects on his personal self-improvement in everyday encounters with others (a), and then on self-betterment concerning his guiding others and their improvement: he wants to become a better therapist (b).

Enriched with his own insights, he wants to pass on to others what he himself has learned from Sextius, that is, self-improvement and self-transformation by way of self-scrutiny. However, he surpasses his predecessor's example in that he not only aims at his own self but also at his social self. Self-betterment serves his pedagogic-therapeutic endeavor, which in *De ira* he hopes will indirectly have socio-political implications too.<sup>91</sup>

The reflexive phraseology and its equivalents point to what Michel Foucault calls "adult pedagogy" in which "one should be, for oneself and throughout one's existence, one's own object."<sup>92</sup> This notion is at the center of Ira 3.36. To express it, the following phrases are used: concerning the self, *interrogaret animum suum*<sup>93</sup> (3.36.1); *recognitionem sui; speculator sui censorque* (2); *apud me causam dico* (3), concerning its actions,<sup>94</sup> *totum diem meum scrutator*;<sup>95</sup> *nihil mihi ipse abscondo* (3). In §§ 3d<sub>2</sub>–4, the reflexive language is substituted by the interplay of the pronouns "I" and "you", with the former referring to the "I" that addresses the "you" of the inner self as object.<sup>96</sup> Additionally, three of the metaphors used in Ira 3.36 – *speculator sui, censor [sui]*, and

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<sup>90</sup> This has rightly been pointed out by Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 3:60–61; similarly, e.g., Edwards, "Self-Scrutiny," 29, and Ker, "Seneca on Self-Examination," 166–167. Furthermore, Foucault, "Technologies," 33–34, insists that self-examination in Seneca is not aimed at conscience but at behavior.

<sup>91</sup> By way of contrast, in Seneca's tragedy Thy. 401–403, the consequences of self-ignorance (*ignotus [...] sibi*) are spelled out: it prevents happiness and is similar to "bestiality" (Boyle, *Seneca*, 245). Boyle refers to Vit. beat. 5.2. Here, the opposite of the happy person (*beatus*), who is free from both desire and fear because of the gift of reason (*ratio*; 1) and, therefore, knows herself or himself, are people whose "ignorance of themselves (*ignoratio sui*) has reduced them to the level of beasts of the field and of inanimate things." If, as assumed, this drama in some way mirrors the situation of Neronian Rome, self-knowledge not only has an individual dimension by alleviating death but also serves criticism of society (cf. *ibid.*, cv: "If *De Clementia* is a 'mirror', *speculum*, for the *princeps*, *Thyestes* is a mirror for Rome").

<sup>92</sup> As quoted by Ker, "Seneca on Self-Examination," 165.

<sup>93</sup> The *animus* is self. The reflexive dimension here is expressed by the possessive pronoun (*suum*).

<sup>94</sup> Cf. Ker, "Seneca on Self-Examination," 185.

<sup>95</sup> The phrase is further explained by: *factaque ac dicta mea remetior* (literally: "I rethink my actions and sayings").

<sup>96</sup> For a discussion of the I-you dialogue in Seneca, cf. Bartsch, *The Mirror of the Self*, 246–249.

*iudex* – illustrate the self-objectivation of the *animus*. The metaphors serve the dramatization of self-scrutiny.<sup>97</sup> Two of them, *speculator sui* and *iudex*, are of particular interest here.<sup>98</sup>

The metaphor *speculator* (2) connotes the use of *speculum* (“mirror”) that in Ira 2.36.1 is mentioned as a tool for “literal self-observation:”

According to Sextius, for some angry people it was useful to have looked at a mirror (*speculum*): it shocked them that they had changed so much and, led to the actual reality, so to speak, they did not recognize themselves (*non agnoverunt se*).<sup>99</sup>

The mirror is the object reflecting the observing self that literally sees its image. As such the mirror functions as means for self-knowledge.<sup>100</sup> This metaphor helps visualize the process of knowing oneself: the spectator of self is transposed to a face-to-face encounter with his or her inner self as reflected in its visible image in the mirror.

Similarly, the juridic imagery illustrates objectivation of self. Here, the “procedures of the Roman law-court” are transferred into the minds of Sextius and Seneca and those who imitate them.<sup>101</sup> The self of a person is likened to a judge (2) whose object of judgment is this very self and its activities. This self then is implicitly compared to an accused who is obliged to render account for his or her actions before the judge (1, 3), thereby acting as its own defense counsel too.<sup>102</sup> The place of the inner law-court is the *animus*. The *animus* is identical with the self that in this judicial simile “divides in order to play a variety of roles simultaneously.”<sup>103</sup>

Self-scrutiny as function of self-knowledge, in short, means that the self examines the self (i.e., itself). The relevant metaphors serve pedagogical-therapeutic purposes in that they visualize the process of scrutinizing oneself for the addressees. Self-examination aims at self-improvement and self-transformation. It is, however, not purely self-relational since in Ira 3.36 it shows dialogical dimensions as well. It leads Seneca to critically review his

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<sup>97</sup> Cf. Edwards, “Self-Scrutiny,” 29, and similarly Ker, “Seneca on Self-Examination,” 179, who notes that in Roman rhetoric, figurative language has “the *movere* function,” with Quintilian characterizing such representations in terms of their “ability to affect the audience, and sometimes even the speaker, in a way indistinguishable from that of the event itself” (Inst. 6.26–35).

<sup>98</sup> The metaphor *ensor sui* is probably transferred from the political realm to self-knowledge; cf. Ker, “Seneca on Self-Examination,” 179–180.

<sup>99</sup> Translation: Ker, “Seneca on Self-Examination,” 181. For the interrelatedness of Ira 2.36.1 and 3.36, cf. *ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> For a similar text, cf. Nat 1.17.4, where the mirror functions as medium for knowing oneself. Mirrors, Seneca claims, “were invented so that human beings might know themselves (*ut homo ipse se nosset*);” for another reflexive term in § 4, cf. *sui notitiam* (self-knowledge). As he points out in §§ 2–3, mirrors, as found in natural substances like water, serve knowledge of nature as well.

<sup>101</sup> Edwards, “Self-Scrutiny,” 29, to Ep. 28.10 and Lucilius.

<sup>102</sup> Implied is the self as accuser too; further cf. Ep. 28.10.

<sup>103</sup> Edwards, “Self-Scrutiny,” 31.

conduct toward the persons he encounters on a daily basis and to endeavor to improve himself as a therapist. Furthermore, as philosopher-therapist he is in dialogue with the larger community of philosophers,<sup>104</sup> on whose insights he depends, as well as with Novatus and the wider audience,<sup>105</sup> sharing his own example of knowing himself.

### *4.3 Objective and Individual Perspectives in Seneca's Conception of Knowing Oneself*

One of the issues currently debated in Stoic studies concerns the role of the subject or individual in Seneca's conception of self. The following remarks serve the limited purpose of relating the material discussed to that debate. To this end, Anthony A. Long's distinction between the "occurrent" and the "normative" self proves useful. The former refers to "a person's present and particular mind-set and consciousness," the latter to "what the person would like to be or, according to specific social norms, should aspire to be."<sup>106</sup>

The normative self represents the objective dimension in the sense that it refers to "our universal role as rational agents capable of virtue."<sup>107</sup> This true human self, as it also can be called, is "certainly not just this or that individual, but rather a kind of self that is self-identically shared by all human beings who operate human cognition in the proper way,"<sup>108</sup> that is, the self-perfected, the transformed self fully realizing its own rationality. It is represented by the figure of the *sapiens* whom the *proficientes* aspire to imitate. It is they who undertake to bridge the "gap [...] between our occurrent and our normative selves,"<sup>109</sup> that is, between our particular everyday failings and faults<sup>110</sup> and ethical perfection.

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<sup>104</sup> As Bartsch, *The Mirror of the Self*, 245, points out with reference to Ep. 104.21–22, in Seneca's present in imperial Rome, the guiding values that are needed for "progress toward normative Stoic virtue" are "no longer to be found within the community, but only in the writings of philosophers and the conduct of long dead exemplars." Seneca's reflective procedures thus can be said to be "more or less alienated from any immediate group" (ibid., 254).

<sup>105</sup> The medium of that communication is writing, which for Seneca (along with reading), is an important tool of knowing himself; cf. Ep. 2; 8; 84 and on the latter letter Graver, "Honeybee."

<sup>106</sup> Long, "Seneca," 367.

<sup>107</sup> Gill, "Self," 373. Gill, ibid., 372–375, and Long, "Seneca on the Self," 366–367, not only differ in terminology, but also in their evaluation of the importance of subjectivity in Stoic thinking; cf. Gill, ibid., 367–374. The details of their argument are beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>108</sup> Engberg-Pedersen, *Cosmology and Self in the Apostle Paul*, 113. Further cf. Gill, *The Structured Self in Hellenistic and Roman Thought*, 328–344, and idem, "Self," 370.

<sup>109</sup> Long, "Seneca," 375. Another dimension of the scholarly debate on the importance of individuality in the Stoic understanding of the self concerns the problem of whether the individual dimension of the human self is preserved in the normative self as realized by the *sapiens* or whether it loses its distinctive features; cf. Edwards, "Self," 240–245, and Reydams-Schils, "God."

<sup>110</sup> Cf. Edwards, "Self," 230.

In the relevant material, the objective-normative dimension of the self is first and foremost the goal in terms of the *summum bonum* to which the occurrent self aspires. Stoic guidance pulls the *proficiens* in the direction of his own nature (Ep. 13.15). By contrast, “one’s individual and temporal identity” is still influenced by the allotments of Fortuna<sup>111</sup> – like being rich or poor, female or male, free or slave, healthy or sick, etc. Therefore, having no control over them, human beings, according to Stoic philosophy, have to focus on what is under their control, that is, the activities of the mind. The individual dimension of the self primarily plays out in the context of therapy of self. The self-examination of a poor or sick person will differ from that of a rich or healthy individual because the difference in their social or physical situation will cause them to experience different ethical challenges and different emotions. To be sure, the goal they are to attain, the normative self, is identical for both just as the general rules applying to the therapeutic process.

At the same time, several individual aspects can be discerned in this process, both on the part of the therapist and of the person being guided. As has been illustrated, Seneca feels the need of adapting the therapy to the latter’s specific needs.<sup>112</sup> Furthermore, he perceives the person engaged in self-scrutiny, that is, the occurrent self, to be *the* expert on its own self *par excellence* (Ep. 13). This implies the self’s particularity and also can be seen in its tailoring the guidance received to its own needs. Additionally, it reviews all the actions it takes as an individual, and, being an expert on itself, it is able to perceive any of its actions (Ira 3.36). Finally, it is the individual who internalizes the (normative) Stoic teachings in order to improve, with Seneca being the prime example of the individual struggles this involves when trying to accept exile (*Ad Helviam*). To be sure, exile in Seneca’s time is widespread, but, still, coming to terms with it is a challenge that each one faces as an individual. In other words, it is no other but the occurrent self of a particular person in his or her present specific mindset that in the process of psychagogy is required to adopt the ways of the normative self of Stoicism.

When it comes to “addressing the specific needs of the individual student,” Catherine Edwards concludes that “(p)articularity is all.”<sup>113</sup> At the same time she claims that “the *Epistulae Morales* are not, in the end, about any specific individuals.” The ailments and problems Seneca discusses only seem to be “specific,” “but, more importantly, they are ones to which anyone may be subject.”<sup>114</sup> This is certainly the case. In light of the preceding discussion, however, the individual dimension seems strongest in what Edwards does not discuss, that is the involvement of the person guided in the therapy. As individual as the therapy tailored by the mental guide might be, its theoretical

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<sup>111</sup> Cf. Long, “Seneca,” 366.

<sup>112</sup> Cf. Ep. 8; 22.1; 64.4; 94.20–21, 23.

<sup>113</sup> Edwards, “Self,” 234–335; citation p. 235.

<sup>114</sup> Edwards, “Self,” 239–340. In the end, it might be asked if there is any ailment or problem to which one single person is subject and which, therefore, is truly individual.

framework is objective, as, in its own way, is the exterior situation of the person<sup>115</sup> to whom the therapy is prescribed. For psychagogy to be effective, however, the persons guided must adopt the objective norms received from the therapist to their own specific needs in their own objective situation and adopt them. This is hard work (Ep. 5.1) that demands a high degree of individual involvement on the part of the expert on his or her own self.

### 5. Beyond the Maxim: Knowing Oneself to Be Mortal and its Benefits

It is no accident that Seneca interprets the maxim “know yourself” in *Ad Marciam* in terms of “knowing oneself to be mortal,” because death and mortality are among the focal points of his thinking. According to Brad Inwood, the law of mortality even represents the “key sense of natural law” for Seneca.<sup>116</sup>

In Stoic ethics there are both positive and negative values that are morally neutral, like health, wealth, or life on the one hand and illness, poverty, and death on the other. As much as human beings are inclined to pursue items of the first group, they are inclined to avoid those of the second group. As Alex G. Long points out, “It is up to the individual Stoic philosopher to decide whether to focus on death or some other member of the group.”<sup>117</sup> Seneca clearly decides to focus on death. Beside Marc. 11.3, this also appears in other passages dealing with knowledge of self. Meditating on one’s death, for him, is the best preparation for dealing virtuously with any attacks from Fortuna. His reflections on death as part of knowing oneself, though, are not limited to death as a negative value brought about by her. As will be seen, knowing oneself to be mortal is instrumental in the interface of ethics and cosmology. As James Ker states, “The philosopher is [...] the spectator par excellence, and in the detached observation of the world and the contemplation of universal Nature and one’s own personal nature, Seneca privileges the recognition of our mortality.”<sup>118</sup>

This calls for inquiring into the reasons for Seneca’s focusing on death. Ker identifies several reasons why Seneca’s daily rehearsal is “first and foremost a *meditatio mortis*.”<sup>119</sup> One reason is the history of philosophy. As Seneca recalls in *Ad Marciam*, his very first writing, *meditatio mortis* “is identified by Plato’s Socrates as the defining act of the philosopher.” According to Marc. 23.2,

souls that are great find no joy in lingering in the body; they yearn to [...] burst their bonds [...] and from on high to look down in scorn (*despicere*) upon human affairs. Hence it is that Plato cries out that the mind of the wise man reaches out toward death (*sapientis animum totum in mortem prominere*), longs for it (*hoc velle*), thinks upon it

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<sup>115</sup> Cf. Long, “Seneca,” 366.

<sup>116</sup> Inwood, “Law,” 92.

<sup>117</sup> Long, *Death and Immortality in Ancient Philosophy*, 155.

<sup>118</sup> Ker, *The Deaths of Seneca*, 120–121.

<sup>119</sup> Here and in the following Ker, *The Deaths of Seneca*, 163.

(*hoc meditari*), and because of this passion (*cupidine*) moves through life striving ever for the things beyond (*in exteriora tendentem*).<sup>120</sup>

Another reason, Ker identifies, is authorial-biographical. Throughout life Seneca suffered from severe illnesses. In his youth, his frequent breathing problems caused him “more than once” to “entertain an impulse to end my life” (Ep. 78.2). In the *Epistulae* he relates his current medical problems (54.1–3; 65.1), which, he says, doctors call “the rehearsal of death (*meditationem mortis*)” (54.2). In those situations he tests his philosophical knowledge and experiences it as most beneficial: “Yet even as I was suffocating, I did not fail to find peace in cheerful and brave reflections (*cogitationibus*)” (3). Such rehearsals constitute the practice of self-knowledge,<sup>121</sup> that is, self-knowledge in terms of a theoretical knowledge rehearsed and applied when the person is put to test.<sup>122</sup>

Furthermore, Seneca was confronted with death for political reasons, coming “close to being terminated by Caligula’s near-execution of him in 39” after a senatorial speech.<sup>123</sup> Shortly before, his only child had died (Helv. 2.5).

Finally, death is a universal human experience. Death is of “unique certainty” and “is accompanied by a temporal singularity: you die only once.”<sup>124</sup> For both reasons, Epicurus’ advice *meditare mortem* (rehearse death) should be followed (Ep. 26.8): As death is inevitable, one should be prepared all the more, since a person has only a single chance to prove himself or herself in that moment.

In the following, I discuss passages that, like *Ad Marciam*, interpret knowing oneself in terms of being aware of one’s own mortality, without, however, referring to the maxim. Still, they use cognitive terminology, including reflexive phraseology. Additionally, they differ from Marc. 9–11 concerning the rationale they give for the need to know oneself to be mortal.

### 5.1 *Knowing Oneself to Be Mortal as Gateway to Enjoyment and Peace (Ep. 4)*

In Ep. 4 Seneca aims to show how human beings can come to terms with death.<sup>125</sup> For him, it is not death itself but fear of death that prevents human

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<sup>120</sup> Cf. Plato, *Phaedo* 64a; 67d–e. According to the Plato-summary of Manning, *On Seneca’s “Ad Marciam”*, 138, the philosopher’s whole life “is directed towards the separation of soul from body which is what he believed happened at death.” Therefore, he would spend “life trying to achieve a state as near as possible to death.” Seneca’s indebtedness to Plato shows in that the separation of soul and body is a recurring motif in his writings.

<sup>121</sup> For the reason, cf. § 4; for a discussion of Ep. 54, cf. Ker, *The Deaths of Seneca*, 163, and Long, *Death and Immortality in Ancient Philosophy*, 157–160.

<sup>122</sup> Cf. Ker, *The Deaths of Seneca*, 162.

<sup>123</sup> Ker, *The Deaths of Seneca*, 94; cf. Dio 59.19.7–8.

<sup>124</sup> Ker, *The Deaths of Seneca*, 163; cf. Ep. 70.18; 30.4; 26.8–9.

<sup>125</sup> Cf. the title of the letter given by Graver and Long, *Lucius Annaeus Seneca*, v: “Coming to terms with death.” Within the *Epistulae Morales*, Ep. 4 is the first letter in which death is the “central focus” (Richardson-Hay, *First Lessons*, 181).

beings from the *beata vita*<sup>126</sup> in the sense of living enjoyably.<sup>127</sup> Arguing his case, he makes use of the different instruments of philosophical therapy, theoretical insights, admonishment, and rehearsal (3–9). Thereby he intends to make Lucilius “respond rationally and dispassionately to whatever” situation he will be confronted with.<sup>128</sup> In the following, the last part of § 9, which summarizes the main points, is looked at in greater detail. In order to place the summary in its context, though, an overview of the argument in §§ 3–9 is first given.

Seneca’s thesis is that if something seems frightening, people certainly have reason not to fear it. His first argument in support of this is taken from philosophical tradition, namely from Epicurus: Whatever has an ending is no great evil. It would have to be feared only if it could ever be present to Lucilius, which death is not. It either does not arrive or is gone (3). Seneca continues his reasoning by refuting his friend’s argument that it is “hard [...] to get one’s mind to despise life” (4). Starting with § 5, the tools of guidance change. To dissipate his fear of death, Lucilius, now in a series of imperatives, is asked to internalize some basic facts about the ordinariness of death on a regular basis. He is to rehearse it every day (*[h]oc cotidie meditare*) to leave life with equanimity (5–6). In his daily meditations, he is to exhort (*adhortare te*) and to toughen (*indura*) himself in view of the possibility of a violent death as even befalls the most powerful figures of history (6–7) and is to ponder (*[c]ogita*) the reality of murder (8). Finally, he is asked to picture himself as falling into the hands of the enemy and being put to death. This too is no reason for fearing death, because death is where he is headed anyway. In a final crescendo Seneca summarizes his main argument (9):

(a) Why do you deceive yourself (*te ipse decipis*)? (b) Do you realize (*intellegis*) now for the first time what has in fact been happening to you all along? (c) So it is: since the moment of birth, you have been moving toward your execution.<sup>129</sup> (d) These thoughts, and others like them, are what we must ponder (*versanda in animo*) if we want to be at peace (*placidi*) as we await the final hour. (e) For fear (*metus*) of that one makes all our other hours uneasy (*inquietas*).

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<sup>126</sup> Cf. Richardson-Hay, *First Lessons*, 181.

<sup>127</sup> Cf. Graver and Long, *Lucius Annaeus Seneca*, 517, note on Ep. 23.3: “This joy is a strong feeling; it is called ‘exhilaration’” (cf. Vit. beat. 4.4) and, “in Stoic terminology, an ‘elevation of the mind.’” It is one of the “good emotions (εὐπάθεια);” cf. SVF 3.431 (= Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 65F). According to Ep. 4.1 there is complete joy in the future and a preliminary joy experienced in the process of making the mind flawless. For terms related to the notion of joy in Ep. 4, cf. §§ 1–2, 6, 9.

<sup>128</sup> Ker, *The Deaths of Seneca*, 121. This same response he expected from Marcia too; see above section 3.2.

<sup>129</sup> The term used is *duceris*; Seneca thereby “highlights the verb *ducere* which first stands for the literal march towards execution at the hands of the enemy [...], before it then shifts into an image for the relentless on-going movement of life which draws man along without postponement towards death” (Richardson-Hay, *First Lessons*, 197). Graver and Long, *Lucius Annaeus Seneca*, 30, have opted for the first meaning.

Trying to dissipate Lucilius' fear of death, Seneca criticizes him for lacking self-knowledge in that he indulges in self-deception<sup>130</sup> (a) and is unable to read the basic facts of his life (b), namely, that he too, being subject to the order of nature, is mortal (c). Changing from the second person to the universal "we", Seneca reiterates that this knowledge must be internalized if people want to live their lives without fear of death (e) but with inner peace and ease (d, e) or, using the preceding terminology, with equanimity and joy. In Ep. 4, knowing oneself to be mortal is at best not a theoretical knowledge that Seneca's Lucilius certainly can be assumed to have. For it to actually become knowledge of self, though, it must have reached the heart through rehearsal and internalization. Knowledge of self, in other words, is a theoretical knowledge having become existential knowledge.

### 5.2 *Knowing Oneself to Be Mortal as Gateway to Anger Control (Ira 3.42–43)*

In *De ira* at the very end of the work (3.42–43), Seneca's therapy of anger culminates in "contemplation of mortality (*cogitatio mortalitatis*)" (42.2). Pondering it, for him, is the decisive tool to eradicate "this evil" (*hoc malo*; 1), the passion of anger. Though the phrase *cogitatio mortalitatis* is non-reflexive, it points to the reflexive terminology Seneca uses elsewhere to explain knowledge of self.<sup>131</sup>

Since for him anger is the most hideous of passions, he claims that trying to moderate and control it<sup>132</sup> is senseless. Rather it must be completely eradicated, since otherwise it will rise up again (§ 1). Most effective in doing so is to think about one's mortality (§§ 2–4).

(2[a]) And nothing will be more beneficial than pondering mortality (*cogitatio mortalitatis*). (b) Let each person say to herself and her fellow (*[s]ibi quisque atque alteri dicat*): (c) Why do we, as if born forever, take delight in proclaiming our wrath and in wasting the little span of life (*brevissimam aetatem*)? (d) Why do we delight to employ for somebody's distress and torture the days (e) that we might devote to virtuous pleasure (*voluptatem honestam*)? [...].

(4 [a]) Why do we run riot and perturb life with our uproar? (b) Fate (*fatum*) looms above our heads, and scores up to our account as the days go by, and draws nearer and nearer. (c) That hour which you appoint for the death (*morti*) of another is perchance near your own.

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<sup>130</sup> According to Malchow, *Interpretation von Senecas Werken*, 80, the term *decipere* is a psychological term; it also appears in Marc. 9.3.

<sup>131</sup> The phrase is closely connected with two reflexive formulations found in the *Epistulae*, *mortalem se cogitat* (he or she "thinks of himself or herself as mortal;" 114.26) and *mortalitatem suam cogitat* (the heart "reflects on its own mortality;" Ep. 120.14). In the latter text, the possessive pronoun serves to express the reflexive dimension; similarly, Ira 3.10.4: *Prodest morbum suum nosse* ("it is beneficial to know one's malady"). The reflexive dimension of the wording in Ira 3.42.2 is underpinned by the reflexive terminology immediately following.

<sup>132</sup> In Ira 3.42.1, *temperare* is used twice.

Reflecting on mortality (2a), can have both a self-reflexive and a social dimension (b). The “I” engaged in it talks to his or her own self, being one aspect of the therapy of the self. He or she is to rehearse and to internalize the fundamental truth of human life: that life is limited. Furthermore, by reminding others of this truth, contemplating one’s mortality should become part of social interaction as well. It is probably not by chance that Seneca discusses the issue in his *De ira* – a work that aims to articulate an ideology of anger control with a view to the Roman elite, that, like his prime addressee, Novatus, runs society and politics. Particularly for the members of this group it seems imperative to rid themselves from the passion of anger and to re-embrace ethical conduct, in short: to practice humanity (*colamus humanitatem*; 3.43.5).

As to content, pondering mortality in *Ira* 3.42 means to realize how short the lifespan is that is allotted to human beings, with one’s own person being no exception. Temporal expressions abound in the passage. The connection of time and death is characteristic of Seneca, which Catherine Edwards defines as follows: “Death limits time, death gives time its value, makes us value time.”<sup>133</sup> These aspects are fully reflected in *Ira* 3.42. Time limited by death makes time too precious to be wasted with anger.<sup>134</sup> Time valued is time devoted to virtue (e). But, in fact, no one knows the worth of time (*Ep.* 1.2). Allowing anger to dominate them, the “we” spend their time doing evil, while ignoring that death is decreed by fate. “It is by reminding ourselves of death’s imminence” that “we” should “be galvanized to make the best use of our time.”<sup>135</sup> It is on this notion that *De ira* ends, showing once more the importance of knowing oneself to be mortal and of contemplating this truth.<sup>136</sup>

### 5.3 *Knowing Oneself to Be Mortal as Gateway to Transcendence (Ep. 120.14–15)*

In *Ep.* 120.14–15, Seneca gives the philosophical rationale about why knowing oneself to be mortal is the key to knowledge of self as connected with knowledge of nature. The context is ethics, with the function of §§ 14–15 being to provide the philosophical reasons about why human beings must acknowledge their mortality in order to be able to act ethically. In the following the focus is on *Ep.* 120, although further material pertinent to the topic is also discussed.

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<sup>133</sup> Edwards, “Ethics V,” 341. The importance of time for Seneca is evident from the fact that he opens his *Epistulae* with a discourse on time that amounts to a commentary on *Ira* 3.42–43.

<sup>134</sup> Similarly, in *Ep.* 114.26–27, it is desire’s control that is said to be affected by pondering mortality. Here, cognitive terminology, including reflexive phraseology, is particularly rich.

<sup>135</sup> Edwards, “Ethics V,” 329. Time-bound phrases continue to be used in *Ira* 3.43.

<sup>136</sup> Apart from interpreting knowing oneself in terms of knowing oneself to be mortal, there are more agreements between *Ep.* 4 and *Ira* 3.42–43 on the one hand and *Ad Marciam* on the other: the importance of this knowledge to philosophical therapy, self-deceit concerning one’s mortality, and the argument that humans are born in order to die.

The subject of Ep. 120 is: “How we develop our concept of the good.”<sup>137</sup> For people to arrive at it, the perfect man (*vir [...] perfectus*; 12) or *sapiens* is instrumental as he embodies the good<sup>138</sup> that is to be imitated by the non-wise. He shows us what happy life (*beata vita*; 11) is, that is, virtuous life. It manifests itself in his calm acceptance of the allotments of Fortuna so that he treats any incident which the non-wise would curse, as a task assigned to him (12). In short: “He shone like a light in the dark, drawing attention to himself, because he was calm and gentle, equally resigned to matters human and divine (*humanis divinisque rebus pariter aequus*)” (13). Seneca ends his depiction of the *sapiens* by giving the reason for his perfection (14): “He had a mind that was perfect and at the peak of its condition (*[h]abebat perfectum animum et ad summam sui adductum*).”

Lacking this perfection,<sup>139</sup> the good that the non-wise observe in the wise man is what they should aim for because they too are capable of ethical conduct (18). In what follows, Seneca explains why and how to attain this. The main reason is that human beings participate in the divine mind, from “which a part (*pars*) has passed down into this mortal heart (*pectus mortale*) of ours” (14).<sup>140</sup> For this reason they, too, are able to occupy themselves with things human and divine and to obtain knowledge of self and nature, even though, having an imperfect mind, they are unable to fully do justice to them. As Seneca explains in §§ 14–15, knowing oneself to be mortal is the decisive means to make progress:

(14[a]) [The] heart is at its most divine when it reflects on its own mortality (*quod numquam magis divinum est quam ubi mortalitatem suam cogitat*). (b<sub>1</sub>) Then it knows (*scit*)<sup>141</sup> (b<sub>2a</sub>) that a human being is born in order to complete life’s term; (b<sub>2b</sub>) that this body is not a home (*domum*) but a sort of short-term guesthouse (*hospitium*) that you have to leave when you notice (*videas*) that you are being bothersome to your host.

(15[a<sub>1</sub>]) The strongest proof, I repeat it, Lucilius, that mind comes from a loftier source (*animi ab altiore sede venientis*) is (a<sub>2a</sub>) when it recognizes the lowliness and limitations (*si [...] humilia iudicat et angusta*) in its present environment (a<sub>2b</sub>) and when it is unafraid of leaving it (*si exire non metuit*). (b<sub>1</sub>) For he knows (*scit enim*) where he is headed (*quo exiturus sit*) (b<sub>2</sub>) and remembers (*meminit*) where he has come from (*unde venerit*). (c) Don’t we notice (*videmus*) how many inconveniences trouble us and how little satisfied we are with our bodies?<sup>142</sup>

<sup>137</sup> Graver and Long, *Lucius Annaeus Seneca*, viii; cf. Ep. 120.1, 3.

<sup>138</sup> As is well-known, the *sapiens* first and foremost is an ideal that in real life is extremely rare.

<sup>139</sup> Cf. Gill, “Seneca,” 71–72.

<sup>140</sup> At the beginning of § 14 Seneca deals with the mind of the three entities participating in the universal mind, the wise man, the divine, and non-wise people. This highly condensed passage serves to link the discussion of the non-wise people. The unit ends in § 18.

<sup>141</sup> For *scire* as being preceded by a reflexive phrase, see above fn. 3.

<sup>142</sup> The translation is my own.

As indicated by “I repeat it – I underline it (*inquam*),” § 14 and § 15 are equivalents, with § 15 rephrasing § 14 and enhancing it. The thesis to be developed is that the mortal heart<sup>143</sup> is at its most divine when it contemplates its own mortality (14a); similarly, according to § 15a, the celestial origin of the mind paradoxically is perceived when it acknowledges its deplorable environment, that is, its present home in the body, and is unafraid of death.<sup>144</sup> This cognitive activity leads to the knowledge of human destiny (14b<sub>1-2a</sub>; 15b) and of the reality of life in the body (14b<sub>2b</sub>; 15c). The human destiny as explained by completing one’s life term (14b<sub>2a</sub>) is re-interpreted in the sense of what follows and what precedes human life (15b).<sup>145</sup> It is to be noted that the knowledge acquired by pondering one’s mortality in § 14 concerns human matters, in § 15a.b divine matters.

Against this background, Seneca’s thesis makes sense. Pondering mortality discloses the whole of reality to the mind. It not only comes to understand human nature as body and mind, participating in the divine, but also cosmic order and the place human life is assigned therein. Knowing oneself to be mortal, in other words, is a doorway to transcendence.

Catherine Edwards in her study on “Death and Time” – the twin theme also reflected in Ep. 120.14–15 – discusses the nature of this transcendence. Regarding this passage she states that, for Seneca, in “accepting the time-bound nature of human life, the inevitability of death [...] we can come closest to the transcendence of both death and time.”<sup>146</sup> The reason, she gives, is that human time as limited by death approaches cosmic time by shifting “from the linear,” the way time is usually experienced, “to the circular.”<sup>147</sup> As concerns human time, human life as a whole, encompassing the span from birth to death, constitutes the largest circle. The smallest one is the day that moves from a beginning to an end, from sunrise to sunset (Ep. 12.6). Human time as limited by death thus meets cosmic time.

In addition, in Ep. 120.14–15 the time-bound perspective is linked with a spatial one. The human sphere as characterized by mortality, lowliness, and limitations is opposed to the “loftier sphere” from which the mind was passed down to the mortal heart. The celestial-divine sphere, however, not only is the sphere where the “we” have come from, but also the realm where they are headed. Therefore, their spatial origin corresponds to a transcendent past, their destiny to a transcendent future, with that past and that future being temporal

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<sup>143</sup> It is not by chance that Seneca uses the phrase *pectus mortale* here. The term *pectus* connotes both a part of the body subject to mortality and human rationality that represents the divine within the human being.

<sup>144</sup> A contrary though not antithetical interpretation of the proof of the divineness of the mind is found in Nat. 1 pref. 12b; see below section 6.2.2. – Again, in §§ 14–15 cognitive terminology is used; *videre* is new.

<sup>145</sup> This is what Long, *Death and Immortality in Ancient Philosophy*, 157–164, discusses in terms of the “symmetry argument.”

<sup>146</sup> Edwards, “Ethics V,” 341.

<sup>147</sup> Edwards, “Ethics V,” 325, in reference to Ep. 12.

dimensions that converge with eternity. In Ep. 120, transcendence is thus bound up with both time and space.

Reflecting on their mortality leads them to understand human nature as both being in the body and mind's orientation toward the celestial sphere. Contemplating one's mortality, in other words, leads "to transcend one's mortality (*transilire [...] mortalitatem suam*) and be registered with a higher status (*in meliorem transcribi sortem*),"<sup>148</sup> allowing the mind to realize its divineness.

Such a mind, for Seneca, is a "great mind" (*magnus animus*; 18). Understanding all this through contemplation of one's own mortality is the closest non-wise people can get to the perfect man. As with the wise man, those insights ideally are reflected in ethical conduct. Briefly touched on only in Ep. 120, the ethical implications of knowing oneself to be mortal, as explained in §§ 14–15, are spelled out in greater detail in other passages. Of particular importance is Ep. 65.21–22. Here, the mind that views the body from a celestial perspective understands it to be "but a shackle fastened around my freedom."<sup>149</sup> Serving as a hindrance to *fortuna*, the body keeps her attacks from "passing through it to me (*ad me [...] transire*)," thus protecting the self in terms of the free mind (*animus liber*). Being "flesh (*caro ista*)," paltry and weak, it is also the body, however, that causes human beings to behave unethically. It compels them to fear or to acting cowardly, to pretenses and lies – all because they want to preserve their body unharmed. In order not to succumb to unethical behavior and to be able to preserve one's freedom, Seneca is convinced of the necessity to disregard one's body (*[c]ontemptus corporis sui*) and to be prepared to die, and even, as the case may be, to commit suicide:<sup>150</sup> "Too great I am (*[m]aior sum*) and too great is that for which I was born (*ad maiora genitus*) to be a slave to my body" (21).

In sum: The heart is at its most divine when it reflects on its own mortality because by doing so, the mind transcends its existence in the body so as to view life from the distance of the divine regions that are its true home. There-

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<sup>148</sup> Nat. 1 pref. 17. Here, this formulation follows upon a reflection on what is learned by inquiring into nature, a point only hinted at in Ep. 120.15b<sub>1-2</sub>. There is another indication that these passages are connected. Stating the usefulness of this insight, Seneca continues, "I shall know that everything is limited (*sciam omnia angusta*) when I have measured the god" (Nat. 1 pref. 17); for *angusta* see above Ep. 120.15a<sub>2</sub>.

<sup>149</sup> This understanding appears in Seneca's work from the very beginning; see above Marc. 23.2. As Long, *Death and Immortality in Ancient Philosophy*, 162–164, points out, Seneca is "undecided" (p. 162) about the future of the rational soul or mind, that is, whether it will be destroyed at the moment of death or continues to exist: "What is death? Either an end or a crossing over (*aut finis aut transitus*)" (Ep. 65.24).

<sup>150</sup> Cf. Ep. 120.15a. Further cf. Nat. 3 pref. 16: Important in human life, as conceived from above, is "(h)aving your soul on your lips," that is, "being prepared to die at any moment" (Hine, *L. Annaei Senecae naturalium quaestionum libros*, 194 n. 5). It is the awareness of one's own mortality paired with the willingness to die, then, that "makes you free not according to the law of the Quirites [sc. the Roman civic law], but according to the law of nature" (pref. 16) that conforms to divine reason. Embracing one's mortality, therefore, ensures human freedom in that it prevents self-enslavement. For the nexus of the readiness for suicide and freedom, cf. Edwards, "Ethics V," 334–339.

by the mind perceives the conduct in the prison of the body that conforms to its divine nature, thus allowing the great mind to realize virtue.

## 6. Unity of Knowledge of Self and Knowledge of Nature

The expression *sui naturaeque cognitio* (Ep. 82.6) is far from being an incidental saying. It is a programmatic wording that reflects the very center of Seneca's Stoicism alongside his definition of philosophy as the knowledge of things divine and human (Ep. 89.5). Stoic philosophy is divided into three parts, namely logic, ethics, and physics, with the divine coming under physics dealing with nature. Ethics and physics are inseparably connected. Mind is the bridge because the human mind is a part of the cosmic mind. Knowing oneself, one's nature as body and mind, therefore, is impossible without knowing nature (*natura*). In this section *natura* mostly refers to the divine, since, for Seneca, *natura* is merely another name for god, who is none other than the "god and divine reason (*deus et divina ratio*) that pervades the whole universe and its parts" (Ben. 4.7.1).<sup>151</sup> Nature so perceived is both the active principle that acts upon the passive one, that is, matter, and the whole in terms of the complete being encompassing the god and matter; as such, this being is governed by reason.<sup>152</sup>

In the following, I first give Seneca's reasoning for the unity of knowledge of self and nature (6.1). Subsequently, I explore the content of what is learned in the process of knowing oneself and nature as well as its benefits (6.2).

### 6.1 Seneca's Reasoning for the Unity of Knowledge of Self and Nature

In Seneca's works different reasons for this unity are given. The arguments, of course, are not mutually exclusive but are different aspects of one and the same phenomenon. They concern philosophical logic, ethics, and the existential dimension of human life.

(1) In *Ep.* 89.5 the argument is philosophical logic. The issue that Seneca discusses here is which of two Stoic definitions of wisdom should be privileged, "the science of things divine and human (*divinorum et humanorum scientiam*)" or "the knowledge of things human and divine and of their causes (*sapientia est nosse divina et humana et horum causas*)."<sup>153</sup> Seneca opts for the former on the grounds that adding "and of their causes" in the second definition is "superfluous, because the causes of things human and divine are part of

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<sup>151</sup> According to Hager, *HWP*, 435, the strongly religious interpretation of *natura* is the specific contribution of late Stoicism to the understanding of nature. Its consequence for the cosmological term φύσις is, "daß die Ph. [sc. physis] als göttliches Prinzip in den Vordergrund tritt." It must be pointed out, however, that the theological dimension of cosmology is already attested in early Stoics (cf. Holtz, *Die Nichtigkeit des Menschen und die Übermacht Gottes*, 92–93 [with further literature]). For the different dimensions of nature in Stoicism, cf. *ibid.*, 433–435, and Ricken, *Philosophie der Antike*, 165–170.

<sup>152</sup> Cf. Wildberger, *Seneca und die Stoa*, 1:22; further, cf. Holtz, *Die Nichtigkeit des Menschen und die Übermacht Gottes*, 92–95, esp. fn. 95.

<sup>153</sup> The Stoics defined philosophy as ἐπιστήμην θεῶν τε καὶ ἀνθρωπίνων πραγμάτων (SVF 2,36).

the divine.” Their study, in other words, is included already in the study of the divine. The point then is that the study of ethics is impossible without physics, because the causes of things human are unearthed by studying physics or nature. Therefore, it is imperative to learn about things divine for those who undertake it to know themselves. In philosophical tradition, ethics is usually seen “as ultimately more important for human beings than physics.”<sup>154</sup> This is why Seneca more than once defends the importance of the study of physics. The following passages are found in this context. They highlight different aspects of the issue.

(2) Stating “that what pertains to ethics does not necessarily make for ethical conduct,” Seneca’s argument for the unity of knowledge of self and nature in *Ep. 121.1–3* refers to ethics in the specific sense of what makes human beings better. Two philosophical approaches in this are differentiated. One inquiry is said to be dedicated to “correct and regulate (*corrigunt et ordinant*)” human conduct (*mores*),<sup>155</sup> “while others investigate its nature and origin (*naturam eorum et originem scrutantur*)” (2). Seneca defends the latter approach to ethics, arguing that to “ask why nature produced human beings and why it made them superior to other animals” in no way is to “abandon the field of ethics.” For unless one has “discovered what is best for a human being and ha(s) studied human nature (*naturam eius inspexeris*),” one simply does not “know what conduct should be adopted.” “You will not understand what you should do (*faciendum*) and what you should avoid (*vitandum*) until you have learned what you owe to your own nature (*naturae tuae*)” (3).<sup>156</sup> Here, nature specifically refers to the *animus* coming under physics.<sup>157</sup> The study of nature, in short, is an indispensable prerequisite for ethics, providing the reasons for acting appropriately or, in Stoic terminology, for acting “according to nature.” (3) In *Nat. 1 pref. 1–4*, Seneca’s argument for the unity of knowledge of self and nature is the existential benefit that knowledge of nature adds to knowledge of self. He differentiates between two branches of philosophy. The one is concerned with human beings (*ad homines*), the other with the gods (*ad deos*). Philosophy *ad homines* deals with ethics, teaching “what should be done on earth (*quid in terris agendum sit*).” As such it “dispels our wrongdo-

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<sup>154</sup> Hine, *L. Annaei Senecae naturalium quaestionum libros*, 13; similarly, Setaioli, “Physics III,” 379. Plato’s Socrates in *Phaedrus* 230a (see above Wasmuth) just as Philo in *Migr.* 138 and *Somn.* 1,56 (see Wyss [C; E]) dismiss the study of physics (in Philo, however, this answer is motivated by the context; but cf. his *De Opificio Mundi*). But see Cicero, *Fin.* 3.22.73, who not only stresses the importance of physics for ethics but also for the understanding of the teachings of the wise men, among them: *se noscere*.

<sup>155</sup> Cf. the argument in *Ep.* 13 and *Ira* 3.36 (see above sections 4.1 and 4.2). Ethics (*morale*) according to Seneca, however, is not restricted to “ethical conduct (*mores bonos*),” but comprises other aspects of human life pertaining to human beings as well: nutrition, physical training, clothing, learning, and entertainment (*Ep.* 121.2).

<sup>156</sup> In § 4 several examples follow. A similar argument is also found in Cicero, *Fin.* 3.22.73. For a comparable argumentation in Seneca, see below section 6.2.1. – In *Ep.* 121 cognitive terminology is strongly used: *scrutantur* (2); *quaero, iudicas, scies, inveneris, inspexeris, intelleges* (3).

<sup>157</sup> Cf. Hager, *HWP*, 433, and see above section 5.3.

ings (*errores*) and brings a light (*lumen*) up close to us so that the uncertainties of life can be clearly discerned,” for example, fear of death. The light brought by philosophy *ad homines* is surpassed by the light of philosophy *ad deos*. It is about “what is done in the heavens (*quid agatur in caelo*).” It “rises far above the darkness in which we stumble around, whisks us away from the shadows, and leads us to the source of light (*unde lucet*)” (1–2). Philosophy *ad deos* (3),<sup>158</sup> in brief, is of existential relevance because it elevates the human soul and makes it “worth being born.” If it were not for knowing nature, life would only be about the care of the physical-material needs of the body: of digesting food and drink, stuffing full a vulnerable body and “living as nurse to a sick man.” “Fearing death” would be “the one thing to which we are born.” Without it, therefore, “life is not worth the sweat and the panic” (4). Only philosophy in the unity of philosophy *ad deos* and *ad homines* grasps human life as a whole. But it is the former that makes life in the body bearable in that it allows the mind to transcend the reality of the body and to draw from its divine sources. In Nat. 1 pref. 1–4, Seneca then confines the discussion to the existential dimensions of this philosophy.<sup>159</sup>

(4) Although in *Ep. 65.16–22* Seneca employs similar arguments to those used in Nat. 1 pref., the rationale he gives for the unity of knowledge of self and nature is ethical. Knowledge of self in the sense of how a person should act necessitates knowledge of nature because the results of ethics disconnected from physics are wanting. At the center of his arguments is freedom, being one way to phrase the meaning of the *summum bonum*. According to Seneca, ethics alone does not affect freedom in its full sense (*certa libertas*; 22), for which obtaining the study of physics is indispensable. It is the experience of existential freedom, the goal of the study of nature, that allows the free mind (*animus liber*; 21) to prove freedom in its ethical dimension as well. It manifests itself in that the free mind will never act under the pressure of exterior realities.<sup>160</sup> Existential freedom follows the release of the mind “from earthly things to things divine.” Its freedom (*libertas*) and diversion (*evagatio*) is to “get away for a while from the prison-house where it is confined, and find refreshment in the skies (*caelo reficitur*)” (16). To be forbidden to study the universe, therefore, would mean to be confined to the part (*in partem*), enslaved to the body, and would result in living “with eyes cast downward,” instead of perceiving with eyes directed upwards to the “whole” (*toto*), the origins of the universe and one’s own “whence and where” (19–20). As seen in the previous chapter, in *Ep. 65* the freedom that the mind experiences in the

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<sup>158</sup> The issues with which philosophy *ad deos* is concerned are spelled out in detail in § 3.

<sup>159</sup> For further aspects of Nat. 1 pref. see below section 6.2.2.

<sup>160</sup> For details see above section 5.3. Seneca’s defense of the study of physics follows Lucilius’ interlocution (*Ep. 65.15*): “What is the attraction for you in frittering away your time on these matters which do not eliminate any of your passions (*adfectum*) nor drive out any desires (*cupiditatem*).” In *Ep. 65.15–22* as well cognitive language is used: *scrutor* (in reflexive and non-reflexive usage; 15); *contemplatione* (17); *cogitationes* (18); *inspectione* (19); *quaeram* (three times in §§ 19–20); *nesciam* (20).

celestial spheres are ethically reflected in one's existence in the body in terms of freedom from passions and desires inhabiting the body. Thus, for this freedom to be attained, the study of both ethics and physics is imperative.

## 6.2 Content and Benefits of Knowledge of Self and Nature

In this section two passages, Ep. 82.4–6 and Nat. 1 pref. 5–17, are dealt with. They explain what exactly can be known when humans engage in knowing themselves and nature. Each text covers both dimensions of knowledge, with Ep. 82 focusing on ethics and Nat. 1 on physics. As pointed out by Gareth D. Williams, in *Naturales Quaestiones* a “(perhaps *the*) dominating principle [...] is that the study of nature is inseparable from reflection on human nature.”<sup>161</sup> In this writing just as in the *Epistulae*, Seneca for the most part defends the study of nature in view of the moral benefit it produces.<sup>162</sup> In the previous sections, sufficient attention has been given to this aspect. Here, therefore, I discuss a passage that takes a different perspective, namely, “that study of the world will lead to the ultimate goal – knowledge of the divine ordering of the world and of god himself.”<sup>163</sup>

### 6.2.1 Knowledge of Self as Knowledge of How to Act Ethically (Ep. 82.4–6)

In this passage, Seneca discusses how philosophy, understood in terms of knowledge of self and nature (*sui naturaeque cognitio*), helps human beings deal with their misery. For him, this condition shows itself in that there is no physical place in the world for them to hide from worries such as fear of death, thoughts of pain, or human misfortune. Wherever these worries occur, people are troubled both by external things (*extra*) that “deceive and oppress” them and by internal things (*intus*) “boiling up from within, even in the midst of solitude” (4). The only way out is to resort to philosophy, enabling them to free themselves from those troubling external and internal matters. This philosophy, later identified as knowledge of self and nature, is

(5[a]) the one rampart that can never be stormed, that the siege engines of Fortuna (*fortuna*) can never breach. (b) The mind (*animus*) that has abandoned external goods (*externa*), that asserts its freedom (*se sua vindicat*) within its own citadel, has taken up an impregnable position. (c) Sling-bullets and arrows fall harmlessly at its feet. (d) We speak of the long arm of Fortuna, but Fortuna has no long arm: it catches nobody but those who hold on to it.

(6[a]) So let's keep distance (*resiliamus*) from Fortuna as much as we can. (b) But the only way we can do that is through knowledge of self and nature (*sui naturaeque*

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<sup>161</sup> Williams, *The Cosmic Viewpoint*, 3.

<sup>162</sup> Cf. Nat. 3 pref.; further cf. Hine, *L. Annaei Senecae naturalium quaestionum libros*, 13, additionally mentioning Nat. 4b.13.1; 6.4.2; 6.32.1; 2.59.2. The ethical focus is also chosen in Ep. 65; 120; 121 (see above sections 5.3; 6.1.[2]; 6.1.[4]).

<sup>163</sup> Hine, *L. Annaei Senecae naturalium quaestionum libros*, 13.

*cognitio*).<sup>164</sup> (c<sub>1</sub>) Let us know (*[s]ciat*) (c<sub>2</sub>) where we are headed (*quo iturus sit*) and where we come from (*unde ortus*); (c<sub>3</sub>) what is good (*bonum*) for us and what is bad (*malum*); (c<sub>4</sub>) what to pursue (*petat*) and what to avoid (*evitet*); (c<sub>5a</sub>) what reason (*ratio*) is, (c<sub>5β</sub>) which distinguishes objects of pursuit (*adpetenda*) and avoidance (*fugienda*), (c<sub>5γ</sub>) soothes the madness of our desires (*cupiditatum [...] insania*), (c<sub>5δ</sub>) checks the savagery of our fears (*timorum saexitia*).

The intent of philosophy defined in terms of knowledge of self and of nature (6b), then, is to fight off the attacks of Fortuna in order to protect the mind or rational soul. This goal is reached when the mind asserts its freedom (5b)<sup>165</sup> in having “absolute power over oneself” (*in se ipsum habere maximam potestatem*) and in being “one’s own person” (*suum fieri*; Ep. 75.18), detached from both internal turmoil and external things, among them those caused by the long arm of Fortuna (82.5d). Freedom then is self-sufficiency.<sup>166</sup> For those who experience it, it is “wealth beyond measure” (*inaestimabile bonum*; 75.18).

Getting access to the citadel of the inner self is only possible by taking resort to philosophy in terms of knowledge of self and nature, ethics and physics (6b). It is hardly by chance that Seneca begins with the latter, which, for him, as has been shown, is the presupposition of ethics (for example, Ep. 65.16–22; 121.1–3). Knowledge of nature is explained in just one sentence (6c<sub>2</sub>), which for Seneca, is a key to understanding human nature in its totality. Mentioning the where and whence of the mind, anthropology in general is envisaged, for it is the mind whose temporary home is the body being the object of the attacks of Fortuna (65.21). In Stoic understanding, the body is under the power of nature and is its possession (Prov. 5.8). Nature in its manifestation as fate or Fortuna (Ben. 4.7.2) decrees the hour of birth and the length of life (Prov. 5.7),<sup>167</sup> bordering the whence and where of human existence.

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<sup>164</sup> Graver and Long, *Lucius Annaeus Seneca*, 272, translate: “through an understanding of ourselves and of nature”; Gummere, *Seneca*, 2:243: “through knowledge of self and of the world of Nature.”

<sup>165</sup> Defining the ultimate goal of philosophy in terms of *se sua vindicat*, Seneca references Ep. 1.1. At the very outset of the *Epistulae* the phrase *vindica te tibi* defines the program of the letters. This then is what Lucilius is advised to do from the very beginning: *Ita fac, mi Lucili, vindica te tibi*.

<sup>166</sup> Cf. Hamacher, *Senecas 82. Brief an Lucilius*, 139. As to contents, a text similar to Ep. 82.4–6 is found in Marcus Aurelius, *To Myself*, 4.3; cf. Holtz, *Die Nichtigkeit des Menschen und die Übermacht Gottes*, 303–304. Courcelle, *Connais-toi toi-même*, 63–64, mentions it as pertaining to the general theme of self-knowledge. Conspicuously, though, the passage does not use cognitive terminology but interprets the turn toward the self in terms of withdrawing from the world into the inner realm of the rational soul. This notion appears in several of Marcus’ texts adduced by Courcelle; it is also stressed by Foucault, “Technologies,” 34. Yet, they neither mention the maxim nor use γιγνώσκειν reflexively. But there is one example of cognitive terminology in reflexive usage (οὐκ εἰδότεων οὐδ’ ἑαυτούς; 3.10.2) that, however, can hardly be ascertained to allude to the maxim.

<sup>167</sup> For further details cf. Holtz, *Die Nichtigkeit des Menschen und die Übermacht Gottes*, 283, 359–362.

The additional details mentioned in § 6c<sub>3-5</sub> explain knowledge of self and concern ethics. Whereas c<sub>3-5a</sub> comes under the theoretical foundations of ethics, c<sub>5β-δ</sub> concerns the practice of ethics as understood in Stoicism. Ratio is the key to preventing desires and passions (c<sub>5γ-δ</sub>) from overtaking the mind or rational soul (*animus*). It is to “exclude (*excludere*) harmful [passions] [...] and [...] deny them admittance (*non admittere*)” (De ira 1.7.2). To that end, reason must distinguish objects of pursuit and avoidance. Correctly used, that is, in accordance with nature, the process of distinguishing orientates itself to the ethical good and bad, which is the yardstick of what is to be desired and avoided.<sup>168</sup> These mental processes are of utmost importance, “for when they [sc. the passions] have established themselves in possession, they are stronger than their ruler [sc. reason] and do not permit themselves to be restrained or reduced” (De ira 1.7.2).<sup>169</sup> Distinguishing objects of pursuit and avoidance, therefore, is at the very center of the Stoic principle of self-care (*cura sui*).<sup>170</sup> As Seneca underlines in §§ 7–8, for this knowledge, both theoretical and practical, to become effective, ratio and its operations are insufficient. To become one’s own, this knowledge must be appropriated by applying the technologies of self. Quoting Vergil, Seneca states that the heart (*pectore*) must be made “stout” (*firmiter*). To acquire a firm heart able to quell desires and passions or emotions, the self has to prepare itself so as to be ready whenever they emerge. The type of technologies of self needed to this end are “constant practice (*meditatio*), rehearsing (*exercueris*) [...] your mind and preparing (*praeparaveris*) yourself for death.” Using “tricks of logic to persuade you that death is not an evil” is of no avail to secure tranquility of mind, since logic “neither encouraged you nor roused your spirit.”<sup>171</sup> For self-betterment, then, knowledge of self as theoretical endeavor alone is useless; instead, it requires the practice of knowing oneself in the sense of internalizing what one knows. Ep. 82 thus gives a full account of knowledge of self with regard to its ethical dimension.

### 6.2.2 Knowing Nature is Knowing the Divine: Content and Benefits (Nat. 1 pref. 5–17)

The section of Nat. 1 pref. discussed in the following, §§ 5–17, continues the passage about the difference between philosophy *ad homines* and *ad deos* looked at in section 6.1. In *Naturales quaestiones*, philosophy *ad deos* refers

<sup>168</sup> The differentiation between *adpetenda* and *fugienda*, in Greek: ἡ ὄρεξις and ἡ ἐκκλισις, goes back to early Stoicism; cf. Chrysippus, SVF 3.175. Epictetus takes it up by referring to the “faculty (δύναμις) of choice and refusal, of desire and aversion, or, in a word, the faculty which makes use of external impressions (φανταστικῆς)” (Diss. 1.1.12); cf. the discussion in Holtz, *Die Wichtigkeit des Menschen und die Übermacht Gottes*, esp. 284–286. Judging from the context, in Nat. 3 pref. 14 the term *consilia* (“intentions”) is used instead.

<sup>169</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the issue cf. Holtz, “Paul,” 197–202.

<sup>170</sup> Cf. Holtz, *Die Wichtigkeit des Menschen und die Übermacht Gottes*, 285–286, 288.

<sup>171</sup> In this, according to Graver and Long, *Lucius Annaeus Seneca*, vii, lies the thrust of Ep. 82, whose topic they give as “Syllogisms cannot make us brave.” For the motif of arousing the spirit see above section 3.1 on Ep. 94.

to the twofold study of nature, that is, to cosmology as “divided into astronomy, meteorology, and geography”<sup>172</sup> on the one hand and to theology on the other, in short, to the study of visible and invisible nature.<sup>173</sup> Pref. 5–17 goes beyond §§ 1–4 arguing that the perfection of the self is not the ultimate goal of self-care but the precondition for the knowledge of the divine.

To this end, Seneca begins by deconstructing fundamental assumptions of ethical philosophy. Even if the “we” are “not as bad as the worst people” (5), prevail over their passions, have “broken free from moral vices,” and otherwise act in accordance with philosophical ethics too, he claims (6),

[y]ou have not yet achieved anything (*nihil [...] consecutus es*): you have broken free from many things (*multa effugisti*), but not yet from yourself (*te nondum*).

The virtue (*virtus*) to which we aspire is marvelous not because freedom from evil (*malo caruisse*) is in itself wonderful, but because it releases the mind (*animum laxat*), prepares it for knowledge of the celestial (*ad cognitionem caelestium*), and makes it worthy to enter into partnership with the god (*in consortium deo*).

The problem with philosophy *ad homines*, then, is that its understanding of freedom is incomplete. In the way developed in *De ira* 3.36 or *Ep.* 82.6c<sub>3–5</sub>, for example, it focuses on freeing one’s self from evil but not from one’s own self. As important as self-scrutiny may be for self-improvement, its focus is on the human self. Self-objectivation aiming at self-fashioning, for Seneca, therefore, is not an end in itself because freedom in its full sense means overcoming self-centeredness. In *Nat.* 1, then, ethics is conceived of as a propaedeutic endeavor. With virtue in its full sense of the realization of the ultimate goal of human existence, the *summum bonum*, however, being transcendent, the study of nature is indispensable. It guides the mind to transcend its self-relatedness and to rise to the celestial-divine regions it comes from. There, the self freed from itself, is ready to take up a new relationship and to “enter into partnership with the god.” Like the *sapiens*, the self of the *proficiens*, as Seneca knows himself to be one, will “abide [...] within his body, yet with his better part is absent, turning his thoughts to things above” (*Ep.* 65.18). Virtue in this sense

has consummated and fulfilled the blessings of human destiny (*plenumque bonum sortis humanae*) only when it has trampled over every evil and has sought the heights (*altum*) and entered the inner recesses of nature (*in interiorem naturae*) (*Nat.* 1 pref. 7).

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<sup>172</sup> Gauly, “Physics II,” 373–374.

<sup>173</sup> Cf. *Nat.* 1 pref. 3, where Seneca differentiates between visible nature ([...] *ab hac parte video qua publica est*: “I see her [...] in her public aspect” [Hine, *L. Annaei Senecae naturalium quaestionum libros*, 136] or “wenn ich sie [...] so sehe, wie sie sich aller Welt darbietet” [Schönberger, *L. Annaeus Seneca*, 7]), and invisible nature that refers to its secrets (*secretiora*), namely to the god.

Acquired by wandering in the celestial regions, the “cosmic viewpoint”<sup>174</sup> causes human beings to completely reevaluate terrestrial realities. Inquiring nature will lend them a new perspective on the way human affairs are conducted on the individual and collective planes. They will laugh at luxury, as exhibited, for example, by the Roman elite, and judge “mortals’ boundaries” as “ridiculous” and their wars as battles about just little more than nothing (7–11, 13). Then, even “the strongest imperial power must appear minuscule.”<sup>175</sup>

Further benefits of knowing nature concern the existential dimension of human self-understanding. Allowing the mind to enter and occupy the vast spaces of heavens,

(a) it finds nourishment, it grows, and, as though freed from its chains [sc. of the body], it returns to its origin. (b) It has this proof of its own divinity, that it takes delight (*delectant*) in the divine and enjoys it not as someone else’s possession (*alienis*) but as its own (*suis*) [...]. (c) As a fascinated spectator (*spectator*) [sc. of cosmological phenomena], it examines (*excutit*) and inquires (*quaerit*) into each detail. (d) And why should it not inquire (*quaerat*)? It knows this all relates to itself (*scit illa ad se pertinere*)” (12).

Accordingly, the mind cannot develop its full potential in its bodily habitat; it is only able to do so when it is released from the body, that is, when it returns to its celestial-divine origins (a).<sup>176</sup> Originating from this sphere, the human mind is also divine. The proof is that the mind experiences delight and joy in the divine. With both these positive emotions and the mind being divine, they are the mind’s possessions (b), not that which humans usually take to be their possessions. The second part of § 12 (c, d) refers back to the last two of the attributes of virtue (6), its preparing of the mind for “knowledge of the celestial” and its making “it worthy to enter into partnership with the god.” Similarly in § 12, the mind inquires into the cosmological phenomena, like the movement of the stars, because it knows them to relate to itself.<sup>177</sup> Unlike in the terrestrial realm reigned by Fortuna, inquiring into the celestial spheres the mind comes home to what belongs to itself. Therefore, encountering its likes, it enters a new relationship that surpasses its directedness toward its own self. A particular aspect of the study of the cosmos is the knowledge of the god. Inquiring into it, the mind will come to “know the god (*deum nosse*),” thus learning “what it has long been inquiring (*quaesit*)” (13). Knowledge of the

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<sup>174</sup> The term is borrowed from Williams, *The Cosmic Viewpoint*.

<sup>175</sup> Williams, *The Cosmic Viewpoint*, 199.

<sup>176</sup> The metaphor of the body as prison of the *animus* / *ψυχή* is Platonic; cf. Plato, *Phaedo* 82d–83b. It is frequent in Seneca; cf., e.g., Ep. 41.5; 65.16–21. Nat. 1 pref. 12 (d) in Hine’s edition is assigned to § 13.

<sup>177</sup> As might be noted, in § 12 the cognitive terminology is particularly dense; further cf. §§ 6.13.16–17.

divine thus is the realization of the ultimate goal of philosophy.<sup>178</sup> In what follows, Seneca explains what that knowledge of the god is (13–16).<sup>179</sup>

13 (a) What is the god (*quid est deus*)? The intelligence (*mens*) of the universe. (b) What is the god? All that you see and all that you do not see. (c) Only then is his true greatness recognized – greatness than which nothing greater can be imagined (*qua nihil maius cogitari potest*) – if he alone is everything, if he controls his creation both from within and from without.

14 (a) So what is the difference between god’s nature (*naturam dei*) and our own? The mind (*animus*) is the superior part of us; in him there is nothing apart from mind (*animum*). He is nothing but reason (*totus est ratio*) [...].

This definition (13) reflects the Stoic understanding of the god.<sup>180</sup> Rhetorically, it aims to determine the difference between the nature of the god and that of humans. Common to both is the mind or rational faculty. They differ in that the god is reason only, whereas in humans it is the superior part only with the body being the chain or prison.<sup>181</sup> Knowing the nature of the god, then, adds to the knowledge of self.

In what amounts to a summary, the preface closes by giving a final reason for the study of nature (17):

(a) To look into (*inspicere*) all this, to learn about (*discere*) it, to brood over (*incubare*) it – is that not to transcend one’s mortality and be registered with a higher status? (b) What use will that be to you? you say. (c) If nothing else, at least this: I shall know that everything is limited (*sciam omnia angusta*) when I have measured the god (*mensus deum*).

The first reason for inquiring into the meteorological and celestial-divine realities and meditating them<sup>182</sup> is the transcendence of one’s own mortality in order to fully realize one’s true self, a divine *animus* (a). In answering the in-

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<sup>178</sup> This definition of the ultimate goal of philosophy evidently differs from its understanding in terms of the *summum bonum* elsewhere in this paper. It corresponds to the new evaluation of the self found in Nat. 1 pref.

<sup>179</sup> Part of this exposition is a refutation of erroneous conceptions of the god (14–15).

<sup>180</sup> For details cf. Holtz, *Die Nichtigkeit des Menschen und die Übermacht Gottes*, 345–363 (with further literature).

<sup>181</sup> In Ep. 8.5 this difference is coined in terms of the great mind of the divine and human mind.

<sup>182</sup> It must be emphasized that, for Seneca, not only regarding self-knowledge in the narrow sense, rehearsal and internalization are indispensable but also regarding what has been learned (*discere*) in the process of inquiring nature: that too is to be internalized (*incubare*) by way of pondering it. The latter term refers to this inner process that contributes to knowing oneself as well. Again, the result of it, being an aspect of self-knowledge, is introduced by *scire*. Without expressly mentioning internalization, Seneca already makes this point at the beginning of what presumably constituted the original opening of *Naturales quaestiones* (cf. fn. 21), that is, Nat. 3 pref.: The visible phenomena of nature are “remedies (*salutaribus*) which are learned (*discuntur*) in order to counter our wickedness and madness” (18).

terlocutor (b), the argument takes a new direction (c). The movement from below to above (a) is inverted in order to explain its benefit for human existence: Having traversed the vast spaces (12) and known the god (13), the mind understands the terrestrial realities (*omnia*; 17) to be limited and puny, when seen from above. In the present context, however, Seneca's focus is on the punyness of human beings and their affairs, that is, their mortality and weakness on the one hand and their ridiculous boundary-makings and wars on the other hand, comparing them to ants toiling in narrow confines (10). Again, knowledge of nature and the god is seen as relating to knowledge of self as well. With *Naturales quaestiones* written after Seneca's withdrawal from Nero's court, it is very possible that in Nat. 1 pref. 11, 17 Seneca also engages "with his times [...] by offering a different, cosmically informed perspective on Roman imperial self-confidence in the early first century. What matters is our *inner* victory, our different form of universal dominion [...], as Roman global measurement now gives way to measurement by a still higher standard: [...] 'I shall know that all else is petty when I have measured god.'"<sup>183</sup>

In summary, knowledge of nature as conceived in the preface to Nat. 1 concerns both cosmological phenomena and the god(s). The benefit it has for those inquiring into nature is manifold. It provides them with the existential experience of transcending the darkness of human existence, participating in the divine, and experiencing deep joy. Thus, they realize virtue in the sense of ultimate freedom that is defined both negatively and positively: It is freedom from evil, from the limitations experienced in the body, and from self-relatedness, with liberation from one's own self, allowing the mind to converse with the divine cosmic *animus*. Seeing themselves from above, inquirers of the cosmos gain a new perspective on the terrestrial realities that concern their own place in the cosmos as well as of all others. Because of their inquiring nature, they get to know themselves, that is, their human nature and its destiny. Knowing themselves in this way, they will consent to nature in its manifestation as fate or Fortuna and agree to her allotments as part of the divine order of nature in terms of the All.<sup>184</sup>

Martha Nussbaum's critique of Michel Foucault is able to deepen Seneca's privileging of philosophy *ad deos* as compared to philosophy *ad homines*. Stoicism, she holds,

is indeed, as Michel Foucault and other affiliated writers have [...] insisted, a set of techniques for the formation and shaping of the self. But what their emphasis on habits and *techniques du soi* too often obscures, is the dignity of reason.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Williams, *The Cosmic Viewpoint*, 53.

<sup>184</sup> Cf. Hager, *HWP*, 433, referring to Chrysippus (SVF 3.4).

<sup>185</sup> Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 353. A comparable account is given by Filtvedt, Maxim (2.4.2) in the present volume.

Focusing on the turn toward the self and on self-fashioning at the expense of rationality, Foucault obscures the interrelatedness of the human and the divine-cosmic mind or intellect, which, at least for the late Seneca, is crucial. Ideally, the human mind is identical with the true self to which the *proficiens* aims in the process of self-formation. In transcending the body, that is, one's mortality, the mind temporarily realizes its rational nature that it shares with the divine (Nat. 1 pref.). Furthermore, in Nat. 3 pref. self-contemplation is interpreted to include contemplation of the cosmic-divine sphere as well.<sup>186</sup> Ethics and physics in Seneca form a unity. A historical account of Seneca's understanding of knowing oneself, therefore, is incomplete when overlooking knowledge of nature encompassing the divine.

Pierre Hadot has given an account of Stoic philosophy that differs from that of Foucault:

Mais je pense que ce mouvement d'intériorisation est inséparablement solidaire d'un autre mouvement, où l'on s'élève à un niveau psychique supérieur dans lequel on retrouve un autre type d'extériorisation, une autre relation à l'extérieur, une nouvelle manière d'être-au-monde et qui consiste à prendre conscience de soi comme partie de la Nature, comme parcelle de la Raison universelle.<sup>187</sup>

Unlike Foucault, Hadot opines "naïvement peut-être" that the modern human being, unable though to live according to wisdom, can live "un exercice, toujours fragile, de la sagesse" that will constitute an effort "pour s'ouvrir à l'universel." To practice the Stoic exercises, he or she would not be required to believe in the universal nature and reason of Stoicism, "mais, en les pratiquant, on vit concrètement selon la raison [...], on accède concrètement à l'universalité de la perspective cosmique, à la présence merveilleuse et mystérieuse de l'univers."<sup>188</sup>

In Nat. 1 pref. and other passages from *Naturales quaestiones*, however, a different perspective of the universe is envisaged, the study of the cosmological phenomena. Writing the work in his old age, it certainly can be presumed

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<sup>186</sup> Seneca makes that point in Nat. 3 pref.: Defining what is essential in life, he states, "[L]et the mind have time entirely to itself, let it turn to contemplation of itself (*sibi totus animus vacet, et ad contemplationem sui [...] respiciat*)" (2). In the context of the preface, self-contemplation of the mind in the first place refers to the mind in its inner recesses, detached from the body and the world as the theater of the acting of Fortuna. With the mind of the person engaged in self-contemplation, however, raising above the terrestrial sphere and engaging with the divine (11), self-contemplation turns out to be contemplation of the cosmic realities at the same time. Further, cf. Cicero, Tusc. 5.25.70: [...] *illa <a> deo Delphis praecepta cognitio, ut ipsa se mens agnoscat coniunctamque cum divina mente se sentiat, ex quo insatiabili gaudio compleatur* ("[sc. to the soul that deals with these things and ponders them, night and day, comes] that knowledge prescribed by the god at Delphi, that the mind should become aware of itself and realize that it is linked with the divine mind, whence it is filled with a joy of which it cannot have enough").

<sup>187</sup> Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, 330, adding that "on pratique alors la 'physique' comme exercice spirituelle."

<sup>188</sup> Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, 331–332.

that Seneca was well-versed in the technologies of self that helped him avoid faults and evil. Still, in this chapter he does not link the study of nature with the tools of self. Here it is the study of visible nature that leads to perceiving the secrets of the universe. The greatest benefit of studying phenomena like earthquakes is “knowledge of nature (*nosse naturam*).” No aspect, he claims, is “finer than that it captivates people with its own magnificence (*magnificentia*), and their motives for studying it are not gain (*nec mercede*) but wonder (*sed miraculo*)” (Nat. 6.4.2). Hadot’s account of the access to the wonders and secrets of nature and that of Nat. 1 pref. and Nat. 6 might not be mutually exclusive. But, for Seneca, the technologies of self or exercises used in the field of ethics apparently are not the *condicio sine qua non* to perceive the secrets of the cosmos. The access that he proposes in Nat. 6, perhaps naively spoken too, might also be open to postmodern experience.

## 7. Summary

In the following, the present study is evaluated with the focus on Seneca’s interpretation of the maxim and its place in philosophical tradition, particularly as documented in the contributions to this volume.

(1) For Seneca’s philosophical project knowing oneself is central. Conspicuously, he hardly links his reflections with the Delphic maxim. Several reasons account for this. He derives the importance of knowledge of self from the Stoic definition of philosophy. Furthermore, he only uses it in a subgenre of popular philosophy and limits its relevance in philosophical instruction to its rhetorical function, that is, to arouse the reader by way of an authoritative saying. Finally, in its historical setting it is connected with the Delphic god Apollo who, being one of the gods of the pantheon, according to Seneca is not apt to represent the divine, which he regards as an abstraction that, if given a name at all, is Zeus-Jupiter.<sup>189</sup>

(2) Knowing oneself has both a theoretical and a practical dimension. It comes to fruition once the knowledge relating to knowing oneself has been internalized and has become one’s own possession. Regarding content, self-knowledge has different aspects, all of which contribute to reaching the ethical goal of human existence, the *summum bonum*, that is, asserting one’s freedom and being one’s own person. Such knowledge concerns ethics, individual human nature, common human nature, and nature in the sense of the All pervaded by mind.

Of particular importance is knowing oneself to be mortal, a meaning common to both Seneca’s interpretation of the maxim and to passages unrelated to it.<sup>190</sup> The importance of this interpretation is not derived from its explanation in *Ad*

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<sup>189</sup> On Apollo and his relation to Zeus see Wehus, Delphic maxim, II. The differences between Epictetus’ and Seneca’s understandings of Apollo might be due to differing perceptions of the god in Greece and Rome; cf. Roloff and Le Bonniec, *LAW*, 213–214.

<sup>190</sup> Further agreements concern the importance of that knowledge to philosophical therapy; self-deceit concerning one’s own mortality; the argument that humans are born to die.

*Marciam* but from the centrality that mortality has in his thinking. It is due to the twin theme of knowledge of self and nature not found in Marc. 10–11.

(3) Self-knowledge in Seneca transcends self-reflection. Two aspects are relevant. Knowledge of self has a social dimension directly related to knowing oneself in the sense of ethical perfection. Furthermore, it aims to transcend one's own self. Its freedom is external to the self, manifesting itself in conversing with the celestial realities.

(4) In terms of history of tradition, it shows that most of the aspects mentioned by Ellisif Wasmuth regarding “the Ancient Greek philosophical treatment of the Delphic injunction ‘Know Thyself!’” are found in Seneca as well – with the exception of the Socratically informed notion of “self-knowledge as a knowledge of one's own ignorance.”<sup>191</sup> Seneca, by contrast, presumes that self-knowledge in principle is possible, even though its full realization is found wanting compared to most. However, in generally deriving the ancient philosophical treatment of knowing oneself from this injunction, Wasmuth's account<sup>192</sup> ignores Seneca, for whom the maxim is irrelevant in this respect. By contrast, Cicero conforms to her account, linking the “most difficult” teaching of philosophy, that is, to know ourselves (*ut nosmet ipsos nosceremus*), with the god of Delphi as the giver of that precept (Leg. 1.22.58).<sup>193</sup> Epictetus will follow this line.<sup>194</sup>

Regarding the understanding of the maxim proper, Seneca also differs from his Stoic co-philosophers. In his reading, knowing oneself means knowing oneself to be mortal, whereas Cicero takes it to mean knowing one's *animus* or *mens*, which he, like Seneca, perceives as being “joined together with the divine.”<sup>195</sup> Similarly, Epictetus understands the maxim to mean human exceptionality in the sense of human rationality.<sup>196</sup> Seneca's interpretation of the maxim, however, agrees with Philo's and Plutarch's, with whom he has other motives in common as well.<sup>197</sup> In view of the preceding and the following tradition, Seneca thus proves to be an original interpreter of the maxim.

## 8. Bibliography

### (1) Sources

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<sup>191</sup> Cf. Wasmuth, *Self-knowledge*, 1. Introduction.

<sup>192</sup> Similarly, Hager, *HWP*, 406. Wasmuth, *Self-knowledge*, section 5, seems to subsume Roman Stoicism under ancient Greek philosophy.

<sup>193</sup> “For she alone (sc. philosophy) has taught us, in addition to all other wisdom, that most difficult of all things – to know ourselves. This precept is so important and significant that the credit for it is given, not to any human being, but to the god of Delphi.” Further cf. Cicero, *Fin.* 5.16.44; *Tusc.* 5.25.70.

<sup>194</sup> See below **Wehus**, *Delphic maxim*, p. 7; for Plutarch cf. **Hirsch-Luipold**, *Plutarch*, section 1.6.

<sup>195</sup> Cf. Cicero, *Tusc.* 5.25.70 (see above fn. 186); further cf. *Leg.* 1.22.59; *Tusc.* 1.22.52; *Fin.* 5.44.10.

<sup>196</sup> See below **Wehus**, *Maxim*, p. 14–17.

<sup>197</sup> See above section 3.2.

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