INTRODUCTION

Of all those who start out on philosophy—not those who take it up for the sake of getting educated when they are young and then drop it, but those who linger in it for a longer time—most become quite queer, not to say completely vicious; while the ones who seem perfectly decent . . . become useless.

—PLATO, *Republic* (487c–d)

Once upon a time, philosophers were figures of wonder. They were sometimes objects of derision and the butt of jokes, but they were more often a source of shared inspiration, offering, through words and deeds, models of wisdom, patterns of conduct, and, for those who took them seriously, examples to be emulated. Stories about the great philosophers long played a formative role in the culture of the West. For Roman writers such as Cicero, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius, one way to measure spiritual progress was to compare one's conduct with that of Socrates, whom they all considered a paragon of perfect virtue. Sixteen hundred years later, John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) similarly learned classical Greek at a tender age in order to read the Socratic "Memorabilia" of Xenophon (fourth century B.C.) and selected *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, as retold by Diogenes Laertius, a Greek follower of Epicurus who is thought to have lived in the third century A.D.

Apart from the absurdly young age at which Mill was forced to devour it, there was nothing unusual about his reading list. Until quite recently, those able to read the Greek and Roman classics were routinely nourished, not just by Xenophon and Plato but also by the moral essays of Seneca and Plutarch, which were filled with edifying stories about the benefits and consolations of philosophy. An educated person was likely to know something about Socrates, but also about the "Epicurean,"

the "Stoic," and the "Skeptic"—philosophical types still of interest to David Hume (1711–1776), who wrote about each one in his *Essays, Moral and Political* (1741–1742).

For Hume, as for Diogenes Laertius, each philosophical type was expressed not only in a doctrine but also in a way of life—a pattern of conduct exemplified in the biographical details recounted by Laertius about such figures as Epicurus, the founder of Epicureanism; Zeno, traditionally regarded as the first Stoic; and Pyrrho, who inaugurated one branch of ancient Skepticism. Besides Hume and Mill, both Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900)—to take two equally modern examples—also studied *The Lives of the Eminent Philosophers.* Indeed, both Marx and Nietzsche, while still in their twenties, wrote scholarly treatises based, in part, on close study of just this work.

Today, by contrast, most highly educated people, even professional philosophers, know nothing about either Diogenes Laertius or the vast majority of the ancient philosophers whose lives he recounted. In many schools in many countries, especially the United States, the classical curriculum has been largely abandoned. Modern textbooks generally scant the lives of philosophers, reinforcing the contemporary perception that philosophy is best understood as a purely technical discipline, revolving around specialized issues in semantics and logic.

The typical modern philosopher—the Kant of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), say, or the John Rawls of *A Theory of Justice* (1971)—is largely identified with his books. It is generally assumed that "philosophy" refers to "the study of the most general and abstract features of the world and the categories with which we think: mind, matter, reason, proof, truth etc.," to quote the definition offered by the outstanding recent *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy.* Moreover, in the modern university, where both Kant and Rawls practiced their calling, aspiring philosophers are routinely taught, among other things, that the truth of a proposition should be evaluated independently of anything we may know about the person holding that proposition. As the philosopher Seyla Benhabib puts it, "Philosophical theories make claims to truth that transcend historical and social context. From inside the discipline, the details of personal lives seem quite irrelevant to understanding or evaluating a thinker's views."

Such a principled disregard of ad hominem evidence is a characteristically modern prejudice of professional philosophers. For most Greek and Roman thinkers from Plato to Augustine, theorizing was but one mode of living life philosophically. To Socrates and the countless classical philosophers who tried to follow in his footsteps, the primary point was not to ratify a certain set of propositions (even when the ability to define terms and analyze arguments was a constitutive component of a school's teaching), but rather to explore "the kind of person, the sort of self" that one could elaborate as a result of taking the quest for wisdom seriously. For Greek and Roman philosophers, "philosophical discourse . . . originates in a choice of life and an existential option—not vice versa."

Or, as Socrates puts it in the pages of Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, "If I don't reveal my views in a formal account, I do so by my conduct. Don't you think that actions are more reliable evidence than words?"

In ancient Greece and Rome, it was widely assumed that the life of a philosopher would exemplify in practice a specific code of conduct and form of life. As a result, biographical details were routinely cited in appraisals of a philosophy's value. That Socrates faced death with dignity, for example, was widely regarded as an argument in favor of his declared views on the conduct of life.

But did Socrates *really* face death with dignity? How can we be confident that we know the truth about how Socrates actually behaved? Faced with such questions, the distrust of modern philosophers for ad hominem argument tends to be reinforced by a similarly modern skepticism about the kinds of stories traditionally told about philosophers.

Consider the largest extant compilation of philosophical biographies, the anthology of Diogenes Laertius. This work starts with Thales of Miletus (c. 624–546 B.C.): "To him belongs the proverb 'Know thyself,'" Diogenes Laertius writes with typically nonchalant imprecision, "which Antisthenes in his *Successions of Philosophers* attributes to Phemonoe, though admitting that it was appropriated by Chilon." He describes Thales as the first absentminded professor: "It is said that once, when he was taken out of doors by an old woman in order that he might observe the stars, he fell into a ditch, and his cry for help drew from the old woman the retort, 'How can you expect to know all about the heavens, Thales, when you cannot even see what is just before your feet?'"

The work of Diogenes Laertius has long vexed modern scholars. His compilation represents an evidently indiscriminate collection of material from a wide array of sources. Despite its uneven quality, his collection of maxims, excerpts from poems, and extracts from theoretical treatises remains a primary source for what little we know today about the doctrines held by a great many ancient Greek philosophers, from Thales and Heraclitus (c. 540–480 B.C.) to Epicurus (341–270 B.C.). Diogenes' anecdotes, on the other hand, have often been discounted, in part because he makes no effort to evaluate the quality of his sources, in part because his biographies are riddled with contradictions, and in part because some of the stories he recounts simply beggar belief.

The stories preserved by Diogenes Laertius occupy a twilight zone between truth and fiction. From the start—in the Socratic dialogues of Plato—the life of the philosopher was turned into a kind of myth and treated as a species of poetry, entering into the collective imagination as a mnemonic condensation, in an exemplary narrative, of what a considered way of life might mean in practice. Joining a school of philosophy in antiquity often involved an effort, in the company of others, to follow in the footsteps of a consecrated predecessor, hallowed in a set of consecrated tales. Long before Christians undertook an "imitation of Christ," Socratics struggled to imitate Socrates; Cynics aimed to live as austerely as the first Cynic, Diogenes; and Epicureans tried to emulate the life led by their eponymous master, Epicurus.

The telling of tales about spiritual heroes thus played a formative role in the philosophic schools of antiquity. The need for such narratives led to the crafting of idealized accounts that might enlighten and edify. In such dramatic dialogues as the *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo*, Plato's picture of Socrates facing death is meant to stir the imagination and to fortify the resolve of a student setting out on the uncertain path toward wisdom. As the classicist Arnaldo Momigliano has put it, Plato and his peers "experimented in biography, and the experiments were directed towards capturing the potentialities rather than the realities of individual lives . . . [Socrates] was not a dead man whose life could be recounted. He was the guide to territories as yet unexplored."

Following in Plato's footsteps, and experimenting with some of the earliest known forms in the West of biography and autobiography, a number of Hellenistic philosophers, including Seneca and Plutarch,

similarly supposed that a part of their job was to convey precepts by presenting, in writing, an enchanting portrait of a preceptor: hence, Plutarch's lives of the noble Greek and Roman statesmen, and Seneca's account of himself in his *Moral Letters.* To separate what is fact from what is fiction in such portraits would be (to borrow a simile from Nietzsche) like rearranging Beethoven's *Eroica* symphony for an ensemble consisting of two flutes.

But if the quest for wisdom about the self begins with heroic anecdotes, it quickly evolves into a search for abstract essences. For numerous Greek and Roman philosophers from Plato to Augustine, one's true self is immaterial, immortal, and unchanging. But that is not the end of the story, since inquiry into the self eventually encounters, and is forced to acknowledge, the apparently infinite labyrinth of inner experience. First in Augustine (A.D. 354–430) and then, even more strikingly, in Montaigne (1532–1592), there emerges a new picture of the human being as a creature in flux, a pure potentiality for being, uncertainly oriented toward what had previously been held to be the good, the true, and the beautiful.

The transition from ancient to modern modes of living life philosophically was neither sudden nor abrupt. Writing a generation after Montaigne, Descartes (1596–1650) could still imagine commissioning a kind of mythic biography of himself, whereas, less than two hundred years later, Rousseau (1712–1778) can only imagine composing an autobiography that is abjectly honest as well as verifiably true in its most damning particulars. It should come as no surprise, then, that so many modern philosophers, though still inspired by an older ideal of philosophy as a way of life, have sought refuge, like Kant, in impersonal modes of theorizing and teaching.

This sort of academic philosophizing notoriously left Friedrich Nietzsche cold. "I for one prefer reading Diogenes Laertius," he wrote in 1874. "The only critique of a philosophy that is possible and that proves something, namely trying to see whether one can live in accordance with it, has never been taught at universities; all that has ever been taught is a critique of words by means of other words."

A century later, Michel Foucault (1926–1984) expressed a similar view. In the winter of 1984, several months before his death, Foucault devoted his last series of lectures at the Collège de France to the topic of

parrhesia, or frank speech, in classical antiquity. Contemplating, as Nietzsche had a century before, possible antecedents for his own peculiar approach to truthfulness, Foucault examined the life of Socrates and—using evidence gathered by Diogenes Laertius—the far odder life of Diogenes of Sinope (d. c. 320 B.C.), the archetypal Cynic, who was storied in antiquity for living in a tub, carrying a lit lamp in broad daylight, and telling anybody who asked that "I am looking for a man."

Foucault of course knew that the lore surrounding a philosopher like Diogenes was no longer taken seriously. But he, like Nietzsche, decried what he called our modern "negligence" of what he called the "problem" of the philosophical life. This problem, he speculated, had gone into eclipse for two reasons: first, because religious institutions, above all Christian monasticism, had absorbed, or (in his words) "confiscated" the "theme of the practice of the true life." And, second, "because the relationship to truth can now be made valid and manifest only in the form of scientific knowledge."

In passing, Foucault then suggested the potential fruitfulness of further research on this topic. "It seems to me," he remarked, "that it would be interesting to write a history starting from the problem of the philosophical life, a problem . . . envisaged as a choice which can be detected both through the events and decisions of a biography, and through [the elaboration of] the same problem in the interior of a system [of thought], and the place which has been given in this system to the problem of the philosophical life."

Foucault was not the only twentieth-century figure who appreciated that philosophy could be a way of life and not just a study of the most general features of the world and the categories in which we think. For example, a conception of authenticity informed Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927), just as a horror of bad faith inspired Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1944). Toward the end of that work, Sartre went even further, and imagined creating a comprehensive biographical and historical account that might demonstrate how *all* the apparently haphazard particulars of a single human being's life came together to form a "totality"—a singular and unified character.

As a graduate student in the history of ideas, and as an activist in

the sixties, I aspired to understand and describe how the broader currents of social and political existence informed lived experience, and hence to show how the political became personal, and vice versa. My interest in these themes was doubtless shaped by my own religious upbringing in a Protestant community that claimed to prize telling the truth about one's deepest beliefs and inward convictions. Perhaps as a result, "authenticity" for me has meant an ongoing examination of my core commitments that would inevitably entail specific acts: "Here I stand. I can do no other." Later, when I wrote an account of the American New Left of the sixties, I focused in part on how other young radicals sought to achieve personal integrity through political activism. And when I wrote about Michel Foucault, I produced a biographical and historical account of his Nietzschean quest to "become what one is."

Still, as Foucault himself reminds us, the theme of the philosophical life, despite its durability, has been challenged since the Renaissance and Reformation by the practical achievements of modern physics, chemistry, and biology, as well as by the rival claims of a growing array of religious and spiritual traditions that, like Protestantism, stress self-examination. Hence the *problem* of the philosophical life: Given the obvious pragmatic power of applied science, and the equally evident power of faith-based communities to give meaning to life, why should we make a special effort to elaborate "our own pondered thoughts," in response to such large questions as "What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope?"

The twelve biographical sketches of selected philosophers from Socrates to Nietzsche that follow are meant to explore these issues by writing, as Foucault suggested, a "history starting from the problem of the philosophical life." Instead of recounting one life in detail, I recount a number of lives in brief. Anecdotes and human incident flesh out the philosopher under discussion. Distinctive theories are summarized concisely, even though their nuances and complexities often puzzle philosophers to this day. And following the example of such ancient biographers as Plutarch in his *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*, I am highly selective, in an effort to epitomize the crux of a character. My aim throughout is to convey the arc of a life rather than a digest of doctrines and moral maxims.

Modern standards of evidence are acknowledged—I am a historian

by training, and facts matter to me. But for the ancient philosophers especially, the myths must be acknowledged, too, for such legends long formed a constitutive part of the Western philosophical tradition. That the lives of many ancient philosophers have beggared belief is a cultural fact in its own right: it helps to explain the enduring fascination—and sometimes the resentment—aroused by spiritual athletes whose feats (like those of the early Christian saints) have so often seemed beyond the pale of possible experience.

This history properly begins with Socrates and Plato, for it was Plato in his Socratic dialogues who first gave currency to the word *philosophy*. In the century after the death of Socrates, a distinct, identifiable group of "philosophers" flourished for the first time. Monuments to their memory—busts, statues—were erected in Athens and elsewhere in the Greek-speaking world. And in retrospect, ancient scholars extended the word *philosopher* to earlier Greek sages.

Some now said that the first philosopher had been Pythagoras (c. 580–500 B.C.), on the Socratic grounds that he regarded no man as wise, but god alone. Aristotle, in his *Metaphysics*, went even further, applying the term to a broad range of pre-Socratic theorists, from Thales to Anaxagoras (c. 500–429 B.C.), on the Socratic grounds that these thinkers, filled with wonder as they were at the first principles behind all things, "philosophized in order to escape from ignorance."

How a history of the problem of the philosophical life is written depends in key part on what one takes to be the ambitions of this sometimes neglected tradition. For the purposes of this study, I generally picked figures who sought to follow in Socrates' footsteps by struggling to measure up to his declared ambition "to live the life of a philosopher, to examine myself and others."

For Socrates, as for many (though not all) of those who tried to measure up to his example, this ambition has in some way revolved around an effort to answer to the gnomic injunction "Know thyself." (Aristotle, for one, assumed that this injunction was a key motive for Socrates' lifework.)

Of course, what, precisely, the Delphic injunction means—and what it enjoins—is hardly self-evident, as we learn in Plato: "I am still unable," confides Socrates in the *Phaedrus*, "to know myself; and it really

seems to me ridiculous to look into other things before I have understood that."

Moreover, self-examination, even in antiquity, is only one strand in the story of philosophy. From the start—in Plato, and again in Augustine—the problem of the philosophical life evolves in a complicated relationship between what we today would call "science" and "religion"—between mathematical logic and mystical revelation in the case of Plato, between an open-ended quest for wisdom and the transmission of a small number of fixed dogmas in the case of Augustine.

The series of biographies that follows is not comprehensive. It omits Epicurus and Zeno, Spinoza and Hume, and such twentieth-century philosophers as Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Sartre, and Foucault. But I believe the twelve ancients and moderns I selected are broadly representative. While I include some figures rarely taken seriously by most contemporary philosophers—Diogenes, Montaigne, and Emerson, for example—I also include several canonic figures, notably Aristotle, Descartes, and Kant, whose life's work helped lead philosophy away from its classical emphasis on exemplary conduct toward a stress on rigorous inquiry, and whose biographies therefore raise larger questions about the relation of philosophy as a way of life to the mainstream discipline of philosophy as it currently exists in academic institutions around the world.

When Emerson wrote a book of essays on *Representative Men*, he began by declaring it "natural to believe in great men"—yet nearly two hundred years later, such a belief hardly seems natural, and what makes a character "great" is far from self-evident. When Nietzsche a generation later imagined approaching a philosophical life "to see whether one can live in accordance with it," he presumably had in mind an exemplary—and mythic—character like Socrates. But it is the fate of a modern philosopher like Nietzsche to have left behind notebooks and letters, offering detailed evidence of a host of inconsistencies and singular foibles that make it absurd to ask seriously whether "one could live in accordance with them." And it is one consequence of Nietzsche's own criticism of Christian morality that anyone who takes it seriously

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finds it hard, if not impossible, to credit any one code of conduct as good for everyone, and therefore worth emulating.

Of course, works of moral edification remain popular, certainly in the United States. Some spiritual and religious manuals promise a contemporary reader invaluable lessons in living well, but the essays that follow can make no such claim. Taken as a whole, these twelve biographical sketches raise many more questions than they can possibly answer:

If, like Plato, we define philosophy as a quest for wisdom that may prove unending, then what is the search for wisdom really good for?

What is the relation of reason to faith, of philosophy to religion, and how does the search for wisdom relate to the most exacting forms of rigorous inquiry and "science"?

Is philosophy best pursued in private or in public? What are its implications, if any, for statecraft, for diplomacy, for the conduct of a citizen in a democratic society?

Above all, what is the "self" that so many of these philosophers have sought to know, and how has our conception of the self changed in the course of history, in part as a result of how successive philosophers have embarked on their quests? Indeed, is self-knowledge even feasible—and, if so, to what degree? Despite years of painful self-examination, Nietzsche famously declared that "we are necessarily strangers to ourselves, we *have* to misunderstand ourselves."

If we seek, shall we find?

Here, then, are brief lives of a handful of philosophers, ancient and modern: Socrates and Plato, Diogenes and Aristotle, Seneca and Augustine, Montaigne and Descartes, Rousseau and Kant, Emerson and Nietzsche. They are all men, because philosophy before the twentieth century was overwhelmingly a vocation reserved for men: a large fact that has limited the kinds of lives—stubbornly independent, often unattached, sometimes solitary and sexless—that philosophers have tended to lead. Within these common limits, however, there has been considerable variation. Some philosophers were influential figures in their day, while others were marginal; some were revered, while others provoked scandal and public outrage.

Despite such differences, each of these men prized the pursuit of

wisdom. Each one struggled to live his life according to a deliberately chosen set of precepts and beliefs, discerned in part through a practice of self-examination, and expressed in both word and deed. The life of each one can therefore teach us something about the quest for self-knowledge and its limits. And as a whole, they can tell us a great deal about how the nature of philosophy—and the nature of philosophy as a way of life—has changed over time.

SENECA

The Death of Seneca, 1633, oil on canvas, by Claude Vignon (1593–1670), a French painter influenced by Caravaggio. Condemned to death by Nero in 65, the philosopher has voluntarily sliced open his veins—his retinue includes a scribe who is poised to record his every dying thought. (Louvre, Paris, France/Peter Willi/The Bridgeman Art Library International)

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What is personal integrity? How can one cultivate and maintain a consistently good will? These were pressing questions for Lucius Annaeus Seneca, the most important of the pagan philosophers to write, and to think, in Latin. Yet Seneca's personal inconsistencies are so well documented that his foremost modern biographer simply takes his hypocrisy for granted, in order to analyze the extent of the gulf between his words—as a moralist, a dramatist, and a philosopher—and his deeds, especially in his years as the principal adviser to the Roman emperor Nero (A.D. 37–68).

Some contradictions seem obvious. In many passages in his writing, Seneca praises poverty, but he amassed great wealth. He championed a life of contemplation but spent many years as Nero's most powerful adviser. His most personal texts depict their author as a man of apparent humility and highlight the common experience of common men as a precious source of philosophic insight, but more public declamations, including an essay on clemency he dedicated to Nero, reveal a master of rhetoric superbly skilled in making a lawless sovereign seem like a perfectly fine embodiment of the common good.

It is no wonder that students of his life and work should sharply disagree about their merits. The most painstaking of the Roman historians, Tacitus, was not unsympathetic to Seneca's aims as Nero's most

powerful minister. In the fourth century, a legend arose that Seneca had met and corresponded with Paul—the spurious letters survive—and he was one of the few pagan thinkers that the theorists of early Christianity regarded as pertinent to their own quest for wisdom, as attested by Jerome. Modern historians, working with much more substantial evidence than the patristic fathers had available, have argued at length that Seneca was "the conscience of an empire," a man whose moral integrity for long stayed the hand of Nero and spared Rome from even greater atrocities.

But from the start, Seneca had enemies—and they had their doubts about his true character. In 58, Publius Sullius Rufus, a venal administrator under Nero's predecessor, the emperor Claudius, taunted Seneca in public: "By what wisdom, by which precepts of the philosophers had he procured three hundred million sesterces"—an extraordinary sum of money—"within a four-year period of royal friendship?" The Roman historian Dio Cassius concurred, saying that "though he censured the extravagance of others, he had five hundred tables of citrus wood with legs of ivory, all identically alike, and he served banquets on them." (This accusation is improbable but amusing, since, if true, it would unmask a famous Stoic as a gourmandizing showman, with a taste for lavish spectacle.)

Though the sources for Seneca's life are far more abundant than those for the lives of Socrates, Plato, Diogenes, or Aristotle, the evidence is uneven. The externals of his political career are recounted by three different Roman historians: Tacitus, Dio Cassius, and Suetonius. Still, we know much less about how Seneca behaved in public—as an orator, a senator, a tutor to Nero, the emperor's principal policy maker for several years—than we know about his inner life. That is because the historical sources, vivid though some of them are, are greatly outnumbered by the many eloquent texts by Seneca himself, describing in even more vivid detail his quest to become a perfectly wise man.

And there is a further paradox. Though the written texts sometimes take the outward form of letters written to a friend, these letters cannot be regarded as straightforwardly autobiographical: they are also hortatory, highly stylized, and written as admonitions to oneself, even when they are ostensibly reports of events in the author's life that are addressed to others.

Thus, in a series of 124 *Moral Letters* he wrote at the end of his life, Seneca presents an idealized account of a moral odyssey, in order to compose his thoughts for at least three audiences: for himself; for Lucilius, his explicit addressee and philosophical friend; and for posterity.

Though various personal details imply that the odyssey is the author's own, a reader must keep in mind the idealizing and fictive aspects of biography and autobiography in the ancient world, and also keep in view Seneca's two parallel lives: the one external, lived in the public eye; the other internal, called to judgment every day before the court of his conscience.

The externals of the author's life rarely enter into the written exhortations to himself, perhaps because one of the primary aims of the *Moral Letters* is to enable the author to purge himself of concern for such externals, in order to cultivate a feeling of inward freedom, serenely independent of the vagaries of fate, indifferent to the waxing and waning of public renown, political power, private property—external goods a wise man should be able to have, or have not, at will.

"Never have I trusted Fortune, even when she seemed to be offering peace; the blessings she most fondly bestowed upon me—money, office, and influence—I stored all of them in a place from which she could take them back without disturbing me. Between them and me, I have kept a wide space."

Money, office, and influence were things that Lucius Annaeus Seneca had been raised to appreciate. He was born around 1 B.C. in Corduba, in Hispania, at the time the largest province of the Roman Empire. The second of three children of colonial settlers who had emigrated from Italy, Seneca grew up speaking Latin. His father, Lucius Annaeus Seneca the Elder, was a man of letters and a gentleman wealthy enough to belong to the "equestrian order" of Roman citizens, a rank that entitled a man to participate in the administration of the empire. Despite his fame as a writer and repeated sojourns in Rome, the elder Seneca, thwarted in his ambition to become a Roman senator, devoted himself to preparing his two oldest sons for a career in politics, bringing them at an early age to Rome to be trained in declamation and debate. It was in this context—as a young man being groomed to enter politics, not unlike Plato before he met Socrates—that Seneca first came into contact with philosophy in general, and Stocism specifically.

By this time, during the reigns of Augustus (31 B.C.–A.D. 14) and Tiberius (A.D. 14–37), philosophers were not hard to find in Rome. The prominence of philosophy in the city's public life dates to the middle of the second century B.C., roughly the same time that the cities of the Greek peninsula, including Athens, became Roman protectorates. In 155 B.C., Athens had sent an embassy of philosophers to Rome, to argue, successfully, for the remission of a fine that the Romans had imposed on their city. "These men argue so well that they could gain anything they ask for," remarked Cato the Elder, who persuaded his fellow senators to settle the matter of the fine, "so that these men may return to their schools and lecture to the sons of Greece, while the youth of Rome give ear to their laws and magistrates, as in the past."

In the first centuries after Plato's founding of the Academy, Athens remained the primary place to study philosophy as a way of life. Besides the informal training on offer from Cynics hoping to follow in the footsteps of Diogenes, four major schools flourished in the city, associated with various locales and exemplary figures: besides Plato's school and that of Aristotle (resurrected once his treatises became widely known in the first century B.C.), there was the garden where Epicurus established the first avowedly materialist sect of philosophers—and the stoa (or porch) where Zeno of Citium (c. 334–262 B.C.) first organized the philosophical tendency known as Stoicism.

Zeno had started out in philosophy by conducting an ascetic life modeled on those of Socrates, Diogenes, and Crates, an avowed Cynic and Zeno's first teacher. Like Socrates, Zeno preached a stern ethic of integrity and aimed in practice to present a perfect example of consistently good conduct, in this way offering others an existential "pattern for imitation in perfect consistency with his teaching." Like Plato, Zeno wrote books, including one on political institutions; like Aristotle, he promoted a beguiling vision of divine order, arguing that the visible world of nature offered evidence of a cosmos that was providentially organized and governed by intelligible laws, which offered a pattern for both just political institutions and the proper conduct of life.

In the centuries that followed, under the leadership of Chrysippus of Soli (c. 280–207 B.C.) and Panaetius of Rhodes (185–109 B.C.), Stoicism evolved into a comprehensive system of philosophy. For example, Stoics taught that an individual's perceptions could be considered reli-

able only if they met certain conditions, including clarity, probability, and agreement with the perceptions of others. Stoic cosmology depicted a deterministic universe that ran through repeating but predetermined cycles (a notion that was doubtless one inspiration for Nietzsche's similar concept of "eternal recurrence"). Because Stoics adhered to a set of characteristic doctrines, they became particularly bitter opponents of the Academy throughout the Hellenistic period, when Plato's old school was associated not with upholding a positive theory of the Forms but rather with thoroughgoing skepticism.

Although students of the stoa were expected to uphold core teachings and master the rudiments of the school's distinctive logic, which concerned the structure of language as well as the validity of various types of reasoning, the crux of Stoicism remained firmly practical, as one might expect from a school descended from Socrates and Diogenes. As one modern scholar puts it, the intellectual energies of most prominent Stoics were focused on elaborating "a systematic plan of life that would, ideally, assure purposefulness, serenity, dignity, and social utility at every waking moment, irrespective of external circumstances." The goal of a good life was to attain tranquillity, or peace of mind, which the Stoics regarded as synonymous with true happiness. Reaching this goal required understanding and reconciling oneself to the divine (and inevitable) order of the universe, and also training oneself through spiritual as well as physical exercises to become inured to physical pain and indifferent to a host of potentially overpowering and disquieting emotions, such as anger, lust, jealousy, grief, and—above all—the fear of death. Committed adherents characteristically wore a short coat made of coarse cloth (the so-called philosophers's cloak) and slept on a hard bed—an austerity that even wealthy Stoics were enjoined to practice from time to time.

For two centuries, roughly from 155 B.C. until A.D. 65, the training of a proper Roman gentleman climaxed with a study of philosophy. Cicero (106–43 B.C.) was only one of many aspiring Roman noblemen who journeyed to Athens in the first century B.C. to complete his training to enter public life by visiting the city's famous philosophical schools. In Seneca's day, by contrast, Greece was no longer the center of the philosophical world—and Seneca, despite being bilingual like any other cultured Roman nobleman, himself never made the pilgrimage to Athens.

By then, some of the city's traditional schools had been closed, and Greek-speaking philosophers had migrated throughout the empire.

This philosophical diaspora changed the nature of philosophy as it had been practiced in Athens. Gone were the small circles of friends gathered around a spiritual master, a living scholarch whose way of life carried on the example of the founding master. The tendency of some Academic and Peripatetic philosophers to value the contemplative life above all others was reinforced by the rise of scattered communities of aspiring philosophers who, in the absence of a living scholarch, dedicated themselves to what later generations would call "scholasticism"—the close reading of consecrated texts and the composition of detailed commentaries on these texts as the heart of philosophical practice.

This theoretical and bookish trend in philosophy had to contend with the pragmatic cast of Rome's political culture, which scorned abstract idealism and stressed civic duties. Cynics and many Epicureans and Stoics also stoutly resisted scholasticism. One result was the rise among Roman philosophers of a lively debate over the relative merits of a life of service to the res publica versus a life of leisure (*otium* in Latin) primarily devoted to philosophizing. Another result was the rise of a distinctively Roman version of Stoicism, which managed to fuse, albeit in an unstable admixture, a contemplative cosmology with a strict code of personal conduct, as well as a renewed fascination with the idea, first broached by Plato, of somehow producing a philosopher-king—not a surprising development, given the evolution of Roman political institutions in Seneca's day.

These were troubled years for the Roman Empire. Edward Gibbon remarked on the "peculiar misery of the Roman people under the tyrants" and avowed that no people had suffered as much as the Romans under their emperors Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero. All these emperors were the objects of cult worship: Caligula was a madman, Nero, an infantile sadist, and none of them proved able to resist purging their enemies through means fair and foul. "Fortune will totter back and forth between them," Seneca wrote in his greatest play, the tragedy of *Thyestes*, speaking of ancient Greece but in terms that perfectly evoked the Julio-Claudian dynasty: "power follows misery and misery power, and waves of disaster batter the kingdom." The consolidation of arbitrary power in the person of the Roman emperor in these

decades certainly helps to explain the renewed appeal of the Platonic idea of training a philosopher-king, whose good character might restrain his sovereign will.

But at first, Seneca was far more interested in the search for wisdom than in the pursuit of political power. One of Seneca's first important teachers, the Stoic Attalus (fl. A.D. 14–37), a Greek-speaking philosopher from Alexandria, stressed the value of cultivating few wants and endorsed the paradox (familiar since Diogenes the Cynic) that the wise man, even if he lacks political power or material wealth, was nevertheless a true king. "When I used to hear Attalus denouncing sin, error, and the evils of life," Seneca recalled years later, "I often felt sorry for mankind and regarded Attalus as a noble and majestic being—above our mortal heights . . . Whenever he castigated our pleasure-seeking lives, and extolled personal purity, moderation in diet, and a mind free from unnecessary, not to speak of unlawful, pleasures, the desire came upon me to limit my food and drink . . . And later, when I returned to the duties of a citizen, I did indeed keep a few of these good resolutions."

At the same time, Seneca was reading the works of Quintus Sextius, who a century before had become the first Roman to found a school of philosophy: "My God, what strength and spirit one finds in him! This is not the case with all philosophers . . . They ordain, dispute, quibble"—wooden pedants, unable to inspire or convert a soul to a better way of life. Revering Sextius as a model of virtue—he would later claim that he was at heart a Stoic—Seneca adopted his master's daily routine of introspective self-examination: "Sextius had this habit, and when the day was over and he had retired to his nightly rest, he would put these questions to his soul: 'What bad habit have you cured today? What fault have you resisted? In what respect are you better?' . . . And how delightful the sleep that follows this survey—how tranquil it is, how deep and untroubled, when the soul has either praised or admonished itself."

Seneca finally came under the spell of the foremost living follower of Sextius, Papirius Fabianus, a Roman teacher who seems to have been even more vehemently committed to the Socratic and Stoic ideal of integrity: "the man communicated a disposition, not mere words, that spoke to the soul, and not just the ears." No armchair philosopher, Fabianus was, Seneca writes elsewhere, a philosopher in the "true and

ancient" sense, a man who despised dialectical debating tricks, preferring to teach by example, showing students in practice how he had mastered his passions.

By following in the footsteps of Fabianus and Sextius as well as of Attalus, while simultaneously mastering rhetoric, Seneca became a characteristically Roman sort of philosophical pragmatist, skilled in both introspection and oratory. "Philosophy is both contemplative and active," he declares in one of his *Moral Letters*. He treats every form of experience, properly examined, as a potential source of wisdom.

Around A.D. 25, Seneca departed for Egypt, where he continued his study of philosophy and also investigated a growing range of natural phenomena, from comets to the annual flooding of the Nile, both among the topics analyzed in his one surviving treatise on *Naturales Quaestiones*. It is not clear whether he was away for a few months, or a few years. But by 31, he was back in Rome, and by around 35 or 36, he had entered the Senate and embarked on a belated political career. He may have delayed an entry into politics out of a supervening interest in the pursuit of wisdom and the study of nature, or he may have waited until his rhetorical talents had ripened. He took an innovative approach to composing orations in Latin, refining a style that was distinctively terse and condensed—and of great appeal to the public.

By 39, Seneca had become perhaps the most famous orator in the empire. Legend has it that the emperor Gaius, better known to posterity as Caligula, grew jealous of Seneca's reputation. After hearing an especially eloquent speech to the Senate that year, the emperor ordered his execution, only to be talked out of the idea by a "female associate," who argued that since Seneca suffered from consumption, he would be dead soon in any case.

Seneca did suffer from poor health. "His body was ugly, weak, and subject to many kinds of illnesses," writes his Renaissance biographer Giannozzo Manetti, "and he was an invalid, though he tolerated his ailments with a steady spirit." And after Caligula spared his life, it seems that Seneca dramatically lowered his public profile: in one of the letters to Luciliums, evoking the swift passage of time, he remarks that it "was but a moment ago" that "I began to plead in public, that I lost the desire, that I lost the ability."

Two years later, Caligula was dead—and Seneca's political career

was abruptly aborted. The new emperor, Claudius, accused Seneca of committing immoral acts with Caligula's sister Julia Lavilla, a charge evidently concocted at the behest of the new emperor's wife at the time, Valeria Messalina, who feared that Seneca's silver tongue posed a threat to her husband and her own ambitions. (Besides being Seneca's alleged paramour, Julia Lavilla was rumored to have slept not only with Caligula himself but also with the emperor's favorite catamites. But since Roman politicians often used accusations and rumors of moral turpitude as a means to vanquish enemies, one cannot assume that the twenty-four-year-old Julia had ever done any such things.) Declared guilty, Seneca was again spared the death penalty in a show of mercy by the new emperor and exiled to the island of Corsica.

For the next eight years, Seneca lived a life of not quite spartan leisure, with a financial allowance and a library at his disposal. (Like Aristotle, he was a bibliophile who read avidly.) Though confined to the island, he was free to resume his pursuit of wisdom in peace and quiet, and he was also at liberty to write.

Although there is no agreed-upon chronology of Seneca's writings, it seems that five of his so-called *Dialogi*, which are in fact moral essays, date from this period: three related essays on anger, which Seneca considers the worst of passions, because it is so hard to control; a consoling essay dedicated to his mother, Helvia, which includes several passages that implicitly align Seneca with the Senate opposition to imperial tyranny; and a thinly veiled plea for a pardon, disguised as yet another consoling essay, this one addressed to Polybius, a minister in the court of Claudius.

In 48, Seneca's nemesis, Valeria Messalina, was summarily executed after it was revealed that she had committed bigamy with Gaius Silius, with whom she had plotted to depose the emperor. A year later, Claudius married his niece Agrippina—another sister of Caligula's—a woman of equally large lusts, especially for power. And the emperor now recalled Seneca, apparently at the behest of Agrippina.

Why would Claudius suddenly change his mind about Seneca? In his *Annals*, Tacitus gives three reasons apart from the death of Messalina: Agrippina wanted to curry favor with the public by rescuing from oblivion a well-known man of letters; she wanted to have Seneca train Domitus, her headstrong son from a prior marriage, and the future

emperor Nero; and she apparently hoped to enlist Seneca as an ally who might help her advance her own political ambitions.

This explanation implies that Seneca had developed a reputation not just as an orator and writer but also as an adroit political operative. But apart from tutoring Nero, what Seneca actually *did* over the next five years is unknown. There is no hard evidence that he aided and abetted Agrippina in various bloody schemes—and no evidence that he did not. Agrippina supposedly regarded philosophical studies as a complete waste of time and banned them from Nero's curriculum. And Seneca is said to have "hid the works of the early rhetoricians" from Nero, "intending to be admired himself as long as possible." (If these stories are true, it would mean that Seneca did not train Nero in the two subjects, rhetoric and philosophy, that he was perhaps most suited to teach.)

Some scholars speculate that Seneca composed most of his plays in these years. Eight tragedies survive—the only extant tragedies in Latin, which reflects the relative unimportance of this form of drama within Rome's political culture. The staging of new tragedies was not a defining civic event in Rome, as it had been in classical Athens. Instead, plays were either declaimed or staged privately, in the villas and palaces of the rich and powerful. Some modern scholars thus suggest that Seneca's plays were originally meant, in part, to edify young Nero and other spectators from the imperial court.

As a group, the plays stand in stark contrast to Seneca's moral essays. In general, Seneca does not stage virtue, nor does he portray Stoic heroes. Of course, what characters say in a play need not reflect a playwright's personal views, but the views expressed by many of Seneca's dramatic characters pose a sufficient challenge to the Stoic views he expressed elsewhere that modern accounts of his philosophy often avoid them altogether.

Rehearsing sagas from Greek mythology previously recounted by Greek poets and playwrights, Seneca in his tragedies dramatizes a world gone mad, in which the central obsession is the acquisition of arbitrary power. Although a chorus interrupts the action to issue episodic moral exhortations to tame destructive passions, the principal characters are unbridled in their sound and fury, as if the collapse of reason is inevi-

table, and we in the audience must bear witness to the inevitable result—a chaotic world of infinite cruelty.

The young Nero was an aspiring singer and actor who had a passion for poetry and drama, as well as for chariot races, gladiatorial contests, and lavish parties. Perhaps Seneca hoped that his plays might capture the young man's imagination and so supplement his moral instruction, though one can only wonder what an artistically inclined young man like Nero might take to be the moral of Seneca's gory dramas.

It is true that his tyrants invariably come to grief. Anger unleashed leads to misery, as one would predict from reading Seneca's moral essays. To that extent, the plays can be understood as cautionary tales, meant to warn an omnipotent sovereign of the wretchedness suffered by those who would exercise power unlimited by either law or conscience.

But in a tragedy like *Thyestes*, there is an odd imbalance between the tepid and sometimes incoherent moralizing of the chorus and the stunning acts of cruelty on display. When the king wreaks vengeance on his nasty brother Thyestes by feeding him the organs and entrails of his children, evil has rarely seemed so radical—or so entertaining.

Claudius's rule, at first mild, devolved into a reign of terror as fearful as that of Caligula, or Tiberius before him, as suspected enemies were tried behind closed doors or simply murdered. Agrippina meanwhile convinced Claudius, who had a young son, Britannicus, by his marriage to Messalina, to adopt Dometius as his own, and then persuaded Claudius to give Octavia, his daughter by Messalina, in marriage to Domitius. The wedding, held in 52 or 53, strengthened the claim that Domitius, rather than Britannicus, should succeed Claudius as emperor.

In these years, Seneca secured his reputation as Rome's most famous living writer of verse and prose. His moral essays advising readers how to search for wisdom and attain tranquillity were widely distributed and widely read, and his tragedies were well known. "Finally, Rome had a thinker of a scope to rival those of Greece," remarks one modern historian. "Sometimes, to soothe the Roman inferiority complex, Seneca would drop a xenophobic phrase, granting that the Greeks were not perfect, and could even be childish, so laying claim to intellectual independence from the founders of his own sect," Zeno and Chrysippus.

In October 54, someone slipped Claudius poisonous mushrooms—the work of Agrippina, rumor had it. She lost no time in having the seventeen-year-old Nero swiftly named the new emperor, amid general relief that a reign of terror was ending and a renewed hope that the young man would prove wiser than his unlamented predecessor.

Seneca rose along with his pedagogical protégé, becoming one of the three most powerful people in the Roman Empire. As an officially appointed *amicus principis*, or "friend of the emperor," Seneca functioned as a confidant, speechwriter, and in-house intellectual rolled into one. At first, he worked closely with Nero's other key *amicus*, Burrus, the prefect in charge of the Praetorian Guard, the emperor's personal unit of armed bodyguards. Together, Seneca and Burrus for the next several years promulgated the emperor's policies, and—perhaps more important—protected his public image. According to Tacitus, Seneca had a penchant for straight talk and a dislike of sycophancy, which meant that Nero "more often experienced free speaking from Seneca than servitude." No one knows if Nero actually listened, but for the first few years of his reign, it is certainly true that Nero implemented relatively prudent public policies.

The growing influence of Seneca and Burrus over Nero displeased Agrippina. Angling to find another base of power, she shifted her allegiance to Britannicus and started to promote him as of "true and worthy stock," a direct descendant of the Claudian line, unlike Nero—and therefore a more legitimate emperor (as well as someone she might be more able to manipulate). Aware of Agrippina's plans for Britannicus, and evidently unable to keep his anger and fear in check according to sound Stoic precepts, Nero secretly had aides slip poison to Britannicus at a public banquet held in 55.

Tacitus reports that Nero impassively witnessed the boy's death rattle, remarking that there was no cause for alarm, that it was probably just an epileptic seizure. The murder at a stroke dispatched his chief rival and foiled Agrippina's ambitions.

Seneca and Burrus carried on as if nothing had happened: "to begin a reign with the murder of a potential rival had become a dynastic tradition." And a few months later, neither Seneca nor his Roman readers evidently thought it odd that he dedicated an essay on mercy to the emperor Nero.

This was not a new theme for Seneca. It was highly desirable that the emperor appear clement, and Seneca had already composed several speeches for Nero to deliver before the Senate, promising a policy of mercy, to distinguish the new emperor from his predecessor. The speeches helped Seneca, too, to "testify to the honorableness of his precepts (or for vaunting his talent)," as Tacitus acidly remarks.

Seneca's essay begins with the image of a mirror—a familiar rhetorical device, since (as Seneca writes elsewhere) "mirrors were invented in order that man may know himself, destined to attain many benefits from this: first, knowledge of himself; next, in certain directions, wisdom." His essay on clemency will, like a mirror that flatters, display the sovereign in an edifying light by describing how a good ruler wisely uses his unrestricted powers (a trope that inspired the "Mirror for Princes" genre of Renaissance court literature).

The good ruler is "chosen to serve on earth as vicar of the gods," an absolute arbiter of life and death, with all things at his disposal—and, yet, he shall also become a paragon of monumental self-restraint, "sparing to the utmost of even the meanest blood." "It is the rarest praise," writes Seneca, "hitherto denied to all other princes, that you have coveted for yourself—innocence of wrong."

Coming in the wake of Nero's infamous murder of his younger half brother, this fawning admonition is a breathtaking blend of realpolitik and moral exhortation—a plea that the young sovereign persist in a public policy of mercy, precisely because of his discretionary authority: "In a position of unlimited power this is in the truest sense self-control and all-embracing love of the human race even as of oneself."

Throughout the essay, Seneca implicitly endorses a form of rule without accountability, addressing his remarks to a *Rex*, or King—a taboo idea in Rome ever since the Republic had made monarchy, never mind tyranny, suspect in theory. In effect, Seneca was dangling the prospect that Nero might become a "true" king, an exemplar of philosophical self-restraint, bound not by laws but rather by his own manifest goodness.

According to Tacitus, Seneca and Burrus did for a while block "the general trend toward slaughter" during Nero's reign. The second of Rome's "five good emperors," Trajan (53–117), is even said to have

argued that no Roman princeps had ever matched the "five good years" of Nero.

But Seneca's service to the emperor left him open to the charge of hypocrisy, an opening seized by Publius Sullius Rufus, a defendant accused of venality under Claudius. Taking the stand in his trial, Sullius rounded on the *amicus principis*, accusing him of dangerous liaisons with *both* of Caligula's sisters—not just Julia Lavilla but also Agrippina herself. And one by one he enumerated the apparent contradictions between Seneca's words and his conduct, starting with the most unforgivable of all: "For while denouncing tyranny, he was making himself the teacher of a tyrant."

In response to Sullius's attack on his reptuation, Seneca likely composed a veiled apologia, in the form of the essay *De Vita Beata* (The Happy Life). In composing this response, certain facts had to be conceded in advance: In return for his services to the emperor, Seneca had been rewarded liberally with estates, lands, villas. Because he was a principal friend of the emperor, he was also in a position to extend loans to various imperial subjects, including the chiefs of Great Britain, recently brought under Roman rule. He worked assiduously at "increasing his mighty wealth," as Tacitus writes, loaning money at interest and investing in land, amassing one of the greatest fortunes of his age.

Implicitly acknowledging these facts, Seneca's rejoinder was disarming: "I am not wise nor . . . shall I ever be. Require me not to be equal to the best, but better than the worst. I am satisfied if every day I reduce my vices and reprove my errors."

Moreover, what the moralist says in his essays "is not said of myself—I am sunk deep in vice of every kind—but said for someone who may actually achieve something great."

Apparently unable to defend straightforwardly the integrity of his own words and deeds, Seneca tries to shift the terms of the argument. It is too easy, he suggests, to "taunt Plato because he sought for money, Aristotle because he accepted it," and easier still to "bring up Alcibiades as a reproach." It would be foolish, Seneca implies, to blame Socrates or any of the other great philosophers—never mind Seneca himself—for honestly trying to transform Alcibiades, Dionysius the Younger, and Alexander the Great into good rulers. Critics who carped about the

shortcomings of the great philosophers when they attempted to bridle absolute sovereigns would do better to examine their own consciences and to heed the advice of the author, "who, looking from a height, foresees the storms" that threaten to turn the souls who populate imperial Rome upside down, "whirled and spun about as if some hurricane had seized them." In other words, if a philosopher has access to a powerful ruler, it is better to try taming him, and fail, than never to try restraining him at all.

Seneca certainly had his hands full. Despite the death of Britannicus, Agrippina remained so intent on trying to exercise power over her son that "in the middle of the day, at a time when Nero was warm with wine and with banqueting, she quite often offered herself to him in his drunken state, smartly made up and prepared for incest."

Hoping to prevent the emperor from turning himself into a hopelessly compromised and "perverted prince" who could no longer command the loyalty of his troops, Seneca, according to Tacitus, "sought from a female some defense against these womanly allurements," soliciting a concubine to distract Nero from his mother's amorous advances.

Finally, in 59, the twenty-two-year-old sovereign put his foot down. He concluded that the only sure way of ending the unwelcome advances of his mother was, in the words of Tacitus, "to kill her, debating only whether by poison or the sword or some other violence." He planned to set her afloat in a boat booby-trapped to sink. The boat sank, but Agrippina swam to safety—and Nero, in a panic, summoned Burrus and Seneca to solicit their advice about what to do next. There was a long silence, reports Tacitus, and then Seneca joined Nero and Burrus in mulling over how best to finish the botched murder. The emperor in the meantime decided to make it seem as if he had foiled a plot by a lone assailant sent by Agrippina to have *him* assassinated, in order to make it plausible that she would subsequently take her own life upon hearing that her treason had been discovered. He then dispatched a trio of assailants to make sure a sword was sunk into her belly.

As Nero's public relations expert, Seneca was left to put the best possible spin on this new turn of events. In the speech he composed for Nero to deliver to the Senate, the emperor accused Agrippina of many acts of treachery and treason, laying the tyranny of Claudius at her feet

and also explaining how he had thwarted her scheme to usurp his legitimate authority. He retailed the story of Agrippina's shipwreck and her subsequent attempt to kill the emperor.

Unfortunately, as Tacitus puts it, "Who could be found so dull as to believe that [the shipwreck] had been a chance occurrence? Or that a shipwrecked woman had sent a single man with a weapon" to kill the emperor? "Therefore it was no longer Nero, whose monstrousness outstripped the complaints of all, but Seneca who was the subject of adverse rumor, because in such a speech he had inscribed a confession"—in effect, he had condoned a matricide.

Nero's "five good years" were now at an end. The emperor continued to affect generosity of character, in 62 going so far as to drum up a phony charge of treason in order to commute the death penalty, in a parody of the moral principles championed by Seneca. In the spring of that year, Seneca's longtime ally, Burrus, died in murky circumstances—some say of ill health, others say of poison slipped into his food on Nero's orders.

The death of Burrus left Seneca dangerously isolated. More vulnerable to public criticism than ever, he had to contend with mounting complaints from some of Nero's companions that the philosopher was still increasing his wealth beyond the limits appropriate to a private person, that he was living in unseemly luxury in villas and estates more suitable to an emperor, and that he was unjustly taking credit for everything brilliant and honorable that the emperor said or did.

It was under these circumstances that Seneca pleaded with Nero to let him retire from public life. It was an extraordinary speech, at least as represented in the pages of Tacitus: "You have surrounded me with immeasurable favor, with money uncountable," the philosopher acknowledges, expressing his gratitude for his good fortune but also expressing a personal anxiety. "Where is that spirit contented with modesty?" Why has he compromised his Stoic ideals?

"I am confronted with only one defense," Seneca continues, "that I was obliged not to defy your gifts"—a real concern for an *amicus principis*, for whom the possession of wealth would be a conventional sign of authority, an expected concomitant of the good fortune enjoyed by truly great men, and hence a kind of duty.

Seneca formally asks Nero to release him from this duty. "Every

surplus creates resentment," he points out, and the luxuriousness of his life has become a burden "that hangs over me," filled as it is with too many possessions that "dazzle me by their flash." The philosopher is at risk of being corrupted by the perquisites of his position. Still, Seneca concedes that Nero has absolute power over him, can do with him whatever he wants. So he begs his sovereign for his help and asks him please to "order my estate to be administered by your procurators and accepted as part of your fortune," suggesting that such a gesture will add to the emperor's glory.

Nero is unmoved. He proudly points out that he is no longer susceptible, as he once was, to his old tutor's seductive rhetoric. He disagrees with Seneca's assertion that he has received too much from him, saying that rather the opposite is true: "More has been held by men who are in no way equal to your artistic skills." Above all, he sharply disputes the assertion that allowing Seneca to pursue a more philosophical way of life will enhance his ruler's reputation: "It will be neither your moderation, should you return the money, nor your retirement, should you abandon your princeps, but my greed and the dread of my cruelty that will be on the lips of all; and, however much your self-denial may be praised, it will certainly not be appropriate for a wise man to accept glory from the same circumstances as procures infamy for his friend."

This would not be the last time that Seneca tried to distance himself from the increasingly odious acts of his erstwhile protégé. In 64, after Nero had looted precious objects from temples throughout the empire in order to fill the imperial coffers in the wake of Rome's Great Fire, Seneca, hoping to avoid being associated with the sacrilege, again "pleaded for retirement to the distant countryside and, when that was not granted, fabricated ill health and, as if with a muscular disease, did not leave his bedroom." Once again, Nero refused Seneca's request to retire (though he did accept Seneca's offer of money).

For three years after the death of Burrus, the emperor steadfastly insisted that Seneca maintain the pretense that he was still an *amicus principis*, even if he was out of the public eye and no longer consulted on matters of policy and preferment. Unable to retire in any formal way, Seneca in these months retreated instead to a kind of inner exile, devoting his time to writing a treatise on natural questions and simultaneously

reinventing himself by writing the series of *Moral Letters* that represent his finest philosophical achievement.

These letters are ostensibly addressed to Lucilius, one of Seneca's oldest friends. A self-made man who had reached the equestrian census, Lucilius had risen to become a procurator in Sicily before retiring from politics around the time Seneca took to feigning illness in order to stay in his study. Younger than Seneca by several years, Lucilius wrote poetry and pursued philosophy in addition to his career in politics; their convergent interests made Lucilius a natural interlocutor once Seneca turned his energy to writing, and he evidently asked Lucilius to work his way through his book *Natural Questions*, and also—perhaps—drafts of some of his *Moral Letters*.

From the start, Seneca meant to publish these letters. A means of redeeming his good name and securing the esteem of posterity, the collected letters represented his last will and philosophical testament. The particulars of his friendship with Lucilius offered him a pretext for staging a conversation with himself in an epistolary epic that is completely one-sided (we never see a single letter from Lucilius himself).

In the earliest letters, Lucilius is still a procurator, and Seneca warns him of the blandishments of public life. His correspondent is depicted as challenging Seneca's own inconsistencies as a Stoic and also trying to decide whether to commit himself to following the Stoic program for achieving peace of mind. In subsequent letters, Seneca becomes more adamant about the corrosive effects of politics on the pursuit of wisdom and the cultivation of a good will—and he praises his friend's eventual decision to retire gradually from politics, in order to take up philosophy as his new way of life.

The remainder of the letters concern what form of philosophy to pursue and how best to pursue it.

Modern scholars have noted the inconsistent persona that Seneca adopts, sometimes lecturing Lucilius in a patronizing manner, at other times presenting himself as an imperfect student just like his addressee. The moral progress ascribed to Lucilius is also improbably rapid. In effect, Seneca seems to describe a number of episodes from his own convoluted quest for wisdom and organize them into an artfully arranged series of essays. Written as if off-the-cuff, and initially concerned with quotidian experiences, the letters gradually rise from the particular to

the universal, finally rehearsing core Stoic arguments about the power of reason, the art of self-control, and the strength of the wise man's will.

Along the way, Seneca commends *otium*, or "retirement," a retreat into the peace and quiet appropriate to self-examination, while urging the philosopher to avoid untoward displays of either arrogant censoriousness or ostentatious humility that might provoke the jealousy of his sovereign. At the same time, the letters bristle with scarcely veiled criticism of vices and cultural trends that a contemporary reader would naturally associate with Nero. For example, in one passage, Seneca describes walking past a Neapolitan theater that is jammed with people who want to hear a musical show, on his way to a nearly empty hall where a handful of people are discussing "how to be a good man." (His former student now fancied himself a singer, and Nero had in fact appeared at a Neapolitan theater.) "I am ashamed of mankind," writes Seneca.

Under the pretext, not wholly false, of ill health, he calls himself a "sick man." He had wagered that he could use philosophy in practice to teach his sovereign to curb his impulses to behave badly—but that wager was lost. His king was a tyrant, and this tyrant was a fool. His tutor had been a fool, too. The educator must be educated. The sick soul can, and must, heal itself—by reflecting, day after day, on how to become better, healthier, more upright and firm, more free and just. The free time that Seneca now took for himself, over Nero's objections, was a time to take stock, and the *Moral Letters* are the written record of that self-examination.

As was the custom in those days, Seneca probably dictated his letters to a secretary, and probably published at least some of them while still in the midst of composing the series. "His last years," remarks a modern historian, "were those of a writer fully occupied with writing, of a meditator fully occupied by his interior life, of a subject of Nero knowing that his days were numbered, and of a citizen confronted by a political drama that demanded he take a stand."

Again and again in the course of these letters, Seneca returns to the topic of integrity: "Nature weds us to no vice," he writes in one letter. "She brought us forth whole and free [*integros ac liberos*]." But still struggling, as he is, to purge himself of bad habits based on false opinions about what a good life really involves, Seneca himself is obviously unable

to realize what Nature intends: he is not yet free and whole. Unable (yet) to achieve integrity, Seneca tries to understand what his manifold shortcomings might mean.

"Hasten to find me," he writes early in the correspondence, "but hasten to find yourself first. Make progress, and before all else, endeavor to be consistent with yourself. And when you would find out whether you have accomplished anything, consider whether you want [*voles*] the same things today that you wanted [*veils*] yesterday. A shifting of the will [*voluntatis*] indicates that the soul is at sea, blown by the wind." Constancy and resoluteness are hallmarks of integrity in this account: being good hinges on the cultivation of a will sufficiently strong and unwavering to be consistently effective in practice.

"Let this be the kernel of my idea," Seneca writes later in the correspondence: "say what we feel, and feel what we say; harmonize talk with life." That this is easier said than done is proved by Seneca's own daily examination of himself: "I will watch myself continually, a most useful habit, and review each day." A key motive for moral progress is shame at one's inconsistency: "It is a great thing to play the role of man. Only the wise man can; the rest of us slip from one character to another."

Read with an open mind, and as a whole, the *Moral Letters* leave a striking impression: although we scarcely glimpse Seneca as a public figure, we do find a three-dimensional personality, a changeable self, an individual who is recognizably human—all too human—because imperfect, inconstant, in conflict and contradiction with himself, someone, in short, utterly unlike the stick-figure representation of perfect integrity we find on display in Plato's *Apology*.

This is something new. Seneca's representation of inner experience in his *Moral Letters* occupies a pivotal place in the histories of autobiography and self-examination. As Michel Foucault put it, "The task of testing oneself, examining oneself, monitoring oneself in a series of clearly defined exercises, makes the question of truth—the truth concerning what one is, what one does, and what one is capable of doing—central to the formation of the ethical subject." Because a Stoic is aiming for perfect integrity and often falling short, one is constantly reminding oneself of one's failings. The result is an intransigently conflicted self, someone who must struggle to become better—someone worthy of comparison with Socrates.

And that is not all. By choosing to write a serious work of philosophy in Latin, and by choosing, unlike Cicero, to *think* in Latin, Seneca elaborates a new vocabulary for analyzing this protean self. It is Latin that allows him to link *voluntas* (the noun for "will," "wish," and "inclination") and *voluntarium* (a noun for what is done by free choice) to *volo* (the verb for "willing," "wanting," and "wishing"), and to link all these terms to the philosophic quest for rational unity and moral perfection. Similarly, consistency of character, the cultivation of conduct that hangs together logically, is linked to *constantia*, perseverance (or constancy) in willing one thing, or, to gloss it differently, a resolute adherence to principle no matter the consequences, even death.

For the first time in Western thought, the concept of a *will* that is naturally *free* comes to play a central role in philosophy. In voluntary action, body and soul commingle, and in a good will, bodily impulse becomes subordinated to self-conscious purpose, in order to create (or forestall) physical motion; hence, the will is that part of the human being that one must struggle most mightily to control, by purging the body of irrational impulses, of needless desires, passions, and emotions, so that one becomes able to act, instead, only on reasonable impulses. "Conduct cannot be right unless the will is right, for the will is the source of action"—what we want determines how we conduct ourselves. "The will cannot be right unless the soul is right," for *animus*, the soul, is what animates our being and what becomes manifest in what we want.

A life conducted according to the dictates of reason can be virtuous. And virtue becomes a synonym for a will that is strong, and healthy, and resolutely effective—the good will.

Such a will, according to the *Moral Letters*, ought to be good enough to be applied effectively in any, and every, conceivable circumstance. "So the wise man will develop virtue, if he may, in the midst of wealth, or, if not, in poverty . . . Whatever fate hands him, he will do something memorable."

Here is a good example of Seneca applying a general rule of morality in specific circumstances. The particulars of a situation will alter the challenges that a man of virtue will face in his conduct of life: someone who is poor must steel his will to withstand privations serenely; someone who is lucky enough to be rich must develop the strength to resist the temptations of luxury. Whether he is pitiably poor or, like

Seneca himself, enviably rich, does not finally matter, for a man with a good, strong will can be virtuous in *any* circumstances. Ergo, being rich is not, in principle, incompatible with philosophy as a way of life. This is how a good casuist proves consistency where others might perceive only a contradiction.

Anyone inclined to find fault with Seneca will probably hear in such passages special pleading or—to use another pejorative term given currency in the twentieth century by Freudian psychoanalysis—a rationalization.

To complicate matters, Seneca frequently confesses that though he praises virtue, and can describe the kind of life a wise man ought to live, he is *not*, like Socrates, a man whose talk harmonizes with his life. By his own account, he doesn't yet hang together; he is still inconsistent in word and deed: "Listen to me as you would if I were talking to myself. I am admitting to you my inmost thoughts and, with you as my guest, I'm taking myself to task." Whereas the reader of Plato's *Apology* may behold Socrates as a model of perfect integrity, the reader of Seneca's *Moral Letters* is invited to evaluate the author's moral character against the backdrop of his conscious struggle to forge a rationally unified self, in part by writing letters that lay out his manifold shortcomings.

But this means, paradoxically, that anyone inclined to credit Seneca is liable to see him as one version of a real philosopher: a man of authentically Socratic *aspirations*, who knows that he does not know, who concedes, over and over again, that he is *imperfectus*—incomplete, unfinished, imperfect.

However one judges the character of Seneca as the author represents himself in his *Moral Letters*, one is liable to be struck by the evenness and serenity of his tone, which suggest that a calm, composed mood had settled over the seeker of wisdom. And while Seneca acknowledges the insurmountable obstacles that fate may sometimes place in a philosopher's path, just as he sometimes acknowledges his frustration at his failure to make more moral progress, as a last resort he takes heart from Socrates and the example he set at the end of his life: "If you like, live. If not, return to where you came from." The ability to take one's life proved the power of the will. Suicide was a guarantee of independence—"dying well" was always an option, if living well proved impossible.

Up to the very end, Seneca had tried to make philosophy compatible with imperial politics—but Nero, having marginalized Seneca, regarded him with growing suspicion. One is reminded of how Alexander the Great eventually turned against Aristotle's nephew and protégé, the philosopher Callisthenes.

Eminent philosophers had won the confidence of both Alexander and Nero while they were still young. But both kings rapidly lost their appetite for philosophy after they had tasted the perquisites of power, and they became suspicious of the moralists still in their midst. Whereas Alexander simply placed Callisthenes under arrest, Nero increasingly treated *all* of Rome's philosophers as potential enemies.

"It is a mistake," Seneca writes in the *Moral Letters*, "to believe that those who have loyally dedicated themselves to philosophy are stubborn and rebellious and defiant towards magistrates or kings or those who administer affairs." Though this missive amounted to an open letter to the emperor, begging him to change his mind, Nero was evidently unconvinced. He had resolved to make Seneca an early victim of his campaign against Rome's philosophers.

According to Tacitus, Nero had first tried to poison Seneca, but the plot was foiled when Seneca refused a drink offered by a visitor in order to adhere to his modest diet of wild fruit and spring water. But then, in 65, Nero got wind of a plot to assassinate him, organized in part by Calpurnius Piso, a popular descendant of the Republican nobility who was relatively unsullied by the court intrigues that had engulfed the Julio-Claudian dynasty from Caligula on. His coconspirators included senators, imperial administrators, officers of the Praetorian Guard, and one of the imperial prefects. The plot fell apart when the conspiracy was revealed. Nero's paranoia, already pronounced, now became florid, and he condemned a great many innocent men to death, Seneca the most prominent among them.

The fullest account of Seneca's final hours appears in the *Annals* of Tacitus. When Nero's emissaries conveyed the charges against him, and asked if the philosopher was intending a voluntary death, he showed "no signs of panic; nothing gloomy had been detected in his language or look." When a soldier refused to let him compose a final testament, Seneca "turned to his friends and testified that, since he was prevented from rendering thanks for their services, he was leaving them the image

of his life, which was the only thing—but still the finest thing—he had; if they were mindful of it, men so steadfast in friendship would carry with them the reputation for good qualities." When some of those present started to weep, Seneca reminded them of Stoic precepts and "recalled them to fortitude."

Seneca embraced his wife, Pompela Paulina, who begged to be allowed to take her life simultaneously, and the philosopher said, "'In such a brave outcome as this, let equal steadfastness be within reach of us both—but the greater brilliancy in that ending of yours.' After that they sliced their arms with the same blow of the sword."

The philosopher was frail, and the blood seeped slowly from the veins that he had sliced open on his arms, his legs, and the back of his knees. When Nero learned that Paulinus, too, was taking her life, he ordered his servants to keep her from dying, worried that it might provoke resentment at his cruelty. While slaves and soldiers bound her wounds and stanched the bleeding, Seneca begged his friends to produce the poison that he had previously prepared, "by which those condemned by the Athenians' public court had their lives extinguished."

He asserted his freedom. He drank hemlock, gave thanks to Jupiter the Liberator, the god of the Stoics, and then asked to be carried to a hot tub.

And there he died, "asphyxiated by the steam," according to Tacitus.

In the years that followed, the practice of philosophy generally, and Stoicism specifically, came under harsh attack at Rome. In 65, Nero exiled the Stoic Musonius Rufus, and in 66 banished Demetrius the Cynic from Rome as well. For the next forty years, philosophy was virtually outlawed in Rome. The ban was lifted only when the emperors Nerva (r. 96–98) and Trajan became friends of the philosopher Dio Chrysostom. This rapprochement laid the basis for a reversal in the fortunes of Stoicism at Rome and the apotheosis of the first and only real philosopher-king in the annals of ancient history, Marcus Aurelius (r. 161–180)—the last of Rome's "five good emperors" and the author of the *Meditations*, the most important expression of Roman Stoicism apart from the *Discourses* of Epictetus (55–135) and the *Moral Letters* of Seneca.

In later centuries, scholars and writers naturally linked Seneca with Socrates, given the obvious similarities in their way of dying.

"Both were men most zealous for wisdom, the most extraordinary philosophers of their time," writes Giannozzo Manetti in the paired biographies of Socrates and Seneca that he dedicated to King Alfonso of Aragón. "Both were extremely temperate and just; and both eventually suffered utterly unjust deaths because of the envy and enmity of some extremely powerful men."

Philosophy had produced another martyr—and perhaps its most cunning courtier yet.