

**General Background to the Project**

What exactly are the liberal arts and what specifically is their purpose? Further, what is the relationship of the liberal arts to philosophy, or should philosophy itself be considered to be a liberal art? These are perennial questions that have been posed and answered in various fashions since the very inception of the notion of the liberal arts, and such uncertainties continue to be raised by members of the contemporary academic community—both students and educators alike. Indeed, the development of the concept of the liberal arts has a most curious and somewhat convoluted history. What is now properly considered to be the canonical division of the three arts of the trivium (viz., logic, grammar, and rhetoric) and the four arts of the quadrivium (viz., arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy) was not the achievement of any single individual, as it took literally centuries of philosophic discussion to arrive at the existence of, and the distinctions between, these seven liberal arts. ¹

In the broadest sense, the root notion of the liberal arts tradition can be traced back to the Pythagoreans in the sixth century B.C., who emphasized, in a quasi-mystical fashion, the
importance of harmonizing one’s soul through a contemplative understanding of the mathematical structure of the cosmos. Indeed, Pythagorean influences are distinctly evident in Book VII of the Republic, wherein Plato (c. 428–348 B.C.) emphasizes the need for the studies of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music in the proper education of the philosopher-kings. Although indisputably Hellenic in their ultimate origins, the Greeks themselves did not call such non-vocational studies “liberal arts,” however. The actual phrase artes liberales was used for the first time centuries later in the first century B.C. by the Roman authors Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 B.C.) and Marcus Terentius Varro (116–27 B.C.). For both of these writers, however, the nature and number of these arts were matters of uncertainty. It was not until the fifth century A.D. that the first written record of the seven liberal arts appeared, in a work by Martianus Cappella. Even after these general formulations were made, however, incessant discussion continued throughout the Middle Ages, and indeed continues today, as to the precise nature and goals of the septem artes liberales.

Historically speaking, arguably one of the more seminal figures in this ongoing discussion of the nature of the liberal arts is Lucius Annaeus Seneca (ca. 4 B.C.–A.D. 65), the Roman Stoic philosopher who lived contemporaneously with Jesus Christ during the advent of Christianity. Writing during this formative time of discussion of the liberal arts in late antiquity, Seneca the Philosopher offered provocative and continuously relevant insights as to the nature, unity, and purpose of the liberal arts. Notable for the fact that he is the earliest Stoic philosopher whose writings have remained throughout history extant in their entirety, Seneca wielded enormous influence not only in classical antiquity but throughout the Middle Ages and into modern times. One of the many avenues of Senecan philosophic influence has been Epistle LXXXVIII of his 124 Moral Letters, which is devoted to the topic of the nature and purpose of the liberal arts. During the Middle Ages, this letter later became a separate treatise that was disseminated independently of his other letters under the specific
Purpose and Methodology of the Study
The thesis of this paper maintains that Seneca the Philosopher’s historically innovative perspective on the liberal arts—which reflects the Hellenistic tradition in general and Stoicism in particular—seemingly paradoxically both depreciates and exalts the intrinsic value of knowledge. Recognizing a need for a teleological unification of the various liberal arts in the specific study of philosophy, Seneca understands the perfection of human nature in the virtuous activity of contemplation through which the soul is free to rationally roam within the realm of divine nature (or Logos). However, Seneca’s understanding of the unification of the liberal arts comes at the cost of potential dogmatism. Insofar as each discipline must be understood as being oriented primarily toward wisdom alone, the Senecan perspective apparently neglects the inherent integrity of each field of study. Philosophy thus becomes a type of architectonic and rather \textit{a priori} discipline, rather than an \textit{a posteriori} method of investigation, and the relationships of the other branches of knowledge to each other and to wisdom itself is thereby obfuscated.

The focus of this essay is centered on Seneca’s view of the liberal arts as expressed specifically in his Epistle LXXXVIII, with supplementary references being made periodically to other pertinent works of the Senecan corpus as required for further illumination; explicit attention is given throughout to the manners in which Seneca elaborates upon, as well as differs with, general notions of Hellenistic thought. The first section presents an examination of the philosopher’s specific view of the liberal arts and investigates his general classification scheme, his reasons for his deprecating them, and his view of their propaedeutic value. The second section considers Seneca’s exalted conception of the nature of philosophy and the virtue and freedom that wisdom secures. At the close of the paper, summarizing conclusions are rendered concerning both the weaknesses and the strengths of the Senecan perspective.
SENeca’S DEPRECIATORY CONCEPTION
OF THE LIBERAL ARTS

Seneca’s Distinctive View of the Liberal Arts
Throughout essentially all of his numerous writings, Seneca emphasizes the role of proper philosophical education in the formation of virtuous character. However, within the entire Senecan corpus, Epistle LXXXVIII stands as the \textit{locus classicus} for Seneca’s unique and influential view of the status of the liberal arts.\textsuperscript{12} Seneca emphatically proclaims in this letter his novel interpretation of the subject, requesting, “In this discussion you must bear with me if I do not follow the regular course,”\textsuperscript{13} asserting that his view of the characteristics of the liberal arts—which was a subject of discussion at his time—will not follow precisely in the footsteps of previous thinkers.

Written, as are all of Seneca’s moral letters, to Lucilius, his Epicurean friend who was at the time the procurator of Sicily, Epistle LXXXVIII begins: “You have been wishing to know my views with regard to liberal studies. My answer is this: I respect no study, and deem no study good, which results in money-making. Such studies are profit-bringing occupations, useful only in so far as they give the mind a preparation and do not engage it permanently. One should linger upon them only so long as the mind can occupy itself with nothing greater; they are our apprenticeship, not our real work.”\textsuperscript{14} Like many modern educators, Seneca opens the question of the nature of liberal arts inducing the specific criterion of utility: What is the use of the liberal arts? The striking difference is what Seneca understands to be “useful.” Unlike many contemporary thinkers, Seneca professes that the liberal arts cannot be oriented toward the goal of making money or material profit, which is not the true good or proper function of human beings.

In fact, he continues to enumerate several types of studies, including sculpture, marble-working, wrestling, and cooking, that others might deem to be included among the liberal studies, but
which he affirms should rather be regarded as non-liberal pursuits, since they are conducive to luxurious living. In listing the various teachable skills which people have considered arts, Seneca discerns that certain studies (or fields of human endeavor) have as their *telos* a type of servile orientation; intrinsically, such studies serve the goal not of human perfection but of wastefulness and luxury. Leisure time, which is a necessary requirement of pursuing the liberal arts, also is a prerequisite for luxurious living, and for this reason, as well as their association with pleasure, the liberal arts in the proper sense and those arts that are oriented toward luxury may be confused with each other.

Seneca then proceeds to classify the various types of arts which are found in the world, following closely the four-fold division recommended by the Stoic master Posidonius (c. 135–c. 50 B.C.)16; Seneca affirms that there exist four basic types of arts, *viz.*, firstly, the common (literally “vulgar”) arts, which are those made for the fundamental needs of life, such as cooking and metal-working; secondly, the arts of amusement, such as those which might be considered today to include many of the “fine arts”; thirdly, the arts of general instruction, the so-called “puerile” arts which the Greeks termed *enkuklios paideia* (literally, “the cycle of studies”), such as grammar and arithmetic; and, fourthly, those arts that are properly called “liberal.” In this quadripartite classification of the arts, Seneca is suggesting that the liberal arts not only are to be distinguished from those arts that are oriented directly toward utility and those arts that are oriented directly toward pleasure but also should be differentiated from other educational arts.

What is the distinction between what Seneca is calling the properly “liberal arts” and those arts that he states pertain to the education of youth? In this answer reside Seneca’s novel insights regarding the status of the liberal arts.

Seneca’s innovative definition of the liberal arts is the following: “Hence you see why ‘liberal studies’ are so called; it is because they are studies worthy of a free-born gentleman. But there is only one really liberal study,—that which gives a man his liberty. It is
the study of wisdom, and that is lofty, brave, and great-souled. All other studies are puny and puerile.” 18 Thus for Seneca the liberal arts are not only those that are practiced by people with free time, as are the traditional studies for youth in the general curriculum. This view of the liberal arts reflects the traditional, etymologically derived definition of the liberal arts, viz., arts studied by those who, because of time and material resources, are free to pursue them. Most importantly, in his novel definition of the artes liberales, Seneca declares that the liberal arts should be oriented to man’s very liberation and have the explicit goal of making a person in some sense free. Seneca thus views these arts liberal not with regard to their origins but to their ends. Although this view of the liberal arts as inherently freeing to an individual is manifestly latent in the thought of earlier philosophers (such as Plato and Aristotle),19 Seneca historically appears as the first author to connect the concept of the liberal arts explicitly with the goal of human freedom—in what now has become an almost commonplace understanding of the concept (often, however, with wildly misguided notions of freedom).20 As will be discussed further hereafter, for Seneca the freedom to which the liberal arts are oriented is not primarily or even necessarily a political freedom, and much less is it a freedom for the mind to think whatever it finds pleasing. Indeed, for the Stoic philosopher, freedom consists in the ability of the virtuous mind to comprehend, and thus mirror, the truths of the universe and to commune with Nature (identifiable with Reason and God) through the action of contemplation.

Aside from his emphasis on the teleological orientation of the liberal arts toward freedom, the other striking aspect of Seneca’s view of the liberal arts is precisely that they are not, strictly speaking, many, but one! Only the art of wisdom, which is identified with philosophy, adequately can be considered “liberal” in the Senecan view. Seneca had a general disdain for any pursuit, including academic studies, that was undertaken for anything other than the perfection of human nature culminating in a state of virtue.21 Not only were the vulgar or pleasure-oriented arts
such as painting and sculpture viewed with a certain degree of
disdain with regard to the ultimate goal of humanity, but Seneca
discerned that even the intellectual pursuits that were tradition-
ally considered to be “liberal arts” could actually impede the
actualization of virtue. During the course of Epistle LXXXVIII,
Seneca specifically mentions the inherent deficiencies (and po-
tential moral difficulties) that pertain to the oft-considered
“liberal” studies of grammar, music, geometry, arithmetic, and
astronomy. Logic and rhetoric are the disciplines that later
would become canonical liberal arts which Seneca does not
mention specifically in this letter, although he does speak of poets
(particularly Homer) and litteratura throughout, both of which
would reflect the rhetorical discipline (of which Seneca’s father
was a renown practitioner). The study of logic was considered by
the Stoics to be a part of philosophy itself; however, elsewhere in
his works, Seneca avows that the study of logic cannot be an end
in itself.

What are the essential deficiencies of these so-called “liberal
arts” that Seneca deems as “puerile”? Seneca recognizes at least
three manners in which the liberal arts cannot be deemed as ends-
in-themselves, namely: (1) epistemologically (lacking first-order
principles of knowledge), (2) teleologically (lacking direct orien-
tation toward moral goodness), and (3) temporally (lacking time
in which to pursue them). The first two deficiencies may be
considered intrinsic, while the third is extrinsic, but nonetheless
of great import for Seneca.

Epistemological Deficiencies
The first (or “epistemological”) deficiency in the liberal arts is due
to their very nature as second-order disciplines. According to
Seneca in another one of his letters, each of the various academic
disciplines possesses its own definitive principles (decreta) which
distinguish it from each of the other liberal arts. Seneca does not
explicate further what are the specific principles that define each
of these arts; this would seem to be essential to complete a
coherent and comprehensive theory. Seneca does, however,
emphatically maintain what these doctrines are not—they are not the most rudimentary, or first, principles of knowledge. The commonly called “liberal” arts do not relate directly to the causes of things but only to the categorization and assessment of phenomena. Philosophy alone, according to Seneca, directly investigates the causes of things, especially regarding the principles of good and evil, and it serves as the foundational principle of the other intellectual disciplines. Thus Seneca conceives of knowledge to have a hierarchical structure, with some studies being subordinated to others and philosophy being the discipline that pertains to the most basic aspects of existence and action.

Teleological Deficiencies
Arising directly out of their lack of first principles, the liberal arts have another inherent shortcoming, namely a teleological insufficiency (or deficiency of ultimate purpose). By themselves, with regard to their intrinsic principles, each liberal art fails to have a notion of the true human good. Seneca questions the central principle that all subjects of learning are of equal value and insists that many who profess to be educators lack the core concept of the purpose of education; with seemingly Platonic inspiration in his insistence on the essential notion of a universal good that underlies all knowledge, in Epistle LXXXVIII Seneca avers:

Certain persons have made up their minds that the point at issue with regard to the liberal studies is whether they make men good; but they do not even profess or aim at a knowledge of this particular subject. The scholar busies himself with investigations into language, and if it be his desire to go farther afield, he works on history, or, if he would extend his range to the farthest limits, on poetry. But which of these paves the way to virtue? Pronouncing syllables, investigating words, memorizing plays, or making rules for the scansion of poetry, what is there in all this that rids one of fear, roots out desire, or bridles the passions?

Thus Seneca recognizes that there exist many varieties of
“knowledge” that have little or nothing to do directly with human perfection. As if in answer to the Socratic question whether virtue can be taught, Seneca affirms the traditional Stoic perspective that virtue can in fact be instilled through education, and that philosophy alone is the discipline which is potentially capable of understanding the notion of the good that underlies both truth and virtue. Seneca speaks of the instructors of the liberal arts in this manner:

The question is: do such men teach virtue, or not? If they do not teach it, then neither do they transmit it. If they do teach it, they are philosophers. Would you like to know how it happens that they have not taken the chair for the purpose of teaching virtue? See how unlike their subjects are; and yet their subjects would resemble each other if they taught the same thing. It may be, perhaps, that they make you believe that Homer was a philosopher, although they disprove this by the very arguments through which they seek to prove it.  

Seneca’s comments about the disparately wide range of subject matter taught by different instructors in the same discipline unfortunately has a modern resonance. For Seneca, it is not the specific facts comprising the curriculum of any of these particular studies that is at issue. It is a question of the integration of information with a view toward human fulfillment. Moreover, Seneca’s specific mention of the poet Homer in opposition to the philosopher is evocative of the continuous debate concerning the nature of the liberal arts which has been a perpetual struggle in interpretation between poets and philosophers as to what constitutes the core of the tradition: effective communication and advancement in society or the pursuit of truth itself? This is a struggle in which, following ultimately Plato and more immediately Posidonius, Seneca avers the definitive hegemony of philosophy. In fact, the potential abuse of pursuing an academic discipline without reference to the true good, Seneca acknowledges to be a possibility within the study of philosophy itself,
he maintains that in principle, philosophy is the only discipline that is inherently ordered toward such a broad and encompassing investigation.

**Temporal Deficiencies**
In addition to these intrinsic epistemological and teleological limitations of the liberal arts, there exists a third, extrinsic deficiency, namely that regarding time. For Seneca, there is the distinct implication that the reason why these various studies should not be pursued exclusively, or aside from the guidance of philosophy, is due to our extremely circumscribed temporal existence as mortal beings. Man can only understand so much within the parameters of a limited lifetime. If human beings were to have an unlimited lifespan, perhaps in principle such studies could be pursued *ad infinitum* in an ever-increasing understanding of the minute features of the universe. As human nature is intrinsically confined by time, however, people do not have the means to achieve knowledge of everything, but merely of what is most important. Reflecting upon this time-limited aspect of learning, Seneca proclaims in Epistle LXXXVIII that one should be prudent with the use of time and asserts that as pleasant as pursuing many different studies may be one should be acquainted only with as many arts as are useful to life; he warns that overindulgence in the liberal arts can make people pretentious bores who fail to understand the essential truths of existence because of intemperately involving themselves in trivial mental pursuits. 37

**The Propaedeutic Value of the Liberal Arts**
Because of the inherent deficiencies of the liberal arts regarding their derivative and secondary starting principles, their indirect orientation toward goodness, and their temporal constraints, are people to categorically avoid these traditional avenues of intellectual investigation and cultivation? On the contrary, Seneca does not consider these studies to be intrinsically pernicious, and in fact he understands that they are capable of being preparatory for
virtuous living. He insists that they do in fact contribute to human welfare by preparing the soul for the reception of virtue, although they are incapable of leading the soul all the way toward its ultimate goal. Indeed, the worth of the liberal arts as being a stage toward leading the soul toward virtue is elsewhere echoed in a Senecan dialogue written to console his mother during his time of exile; he reminds his mother of her earlier acquaintance with the liberal arts and suggests that they may serve as a foundation for a properly philosophical understanding of her lonely circumstances. Thus for Seneca the liberal arts potentially possess an important, though not necessarily essential, propaedeutic value. Seneca suggests that the mind can become strengthened in its powers of understanding through the more elementary arts. The study of grammar or music can aid in enhancing the mind’s ability to comprehend more profound subject matter with greater facility. It would seem obvious that a person would be incapable of studying the deepest truths of nature without first being equipped with the mental tools to do so. It is for this reason that Seneca wishes to designate such arts as boyish and puerile—as preparations for the manly and virile liberal art oriented toward *virtus* itself, *i.e.*, philosophy.

**SENeca’S EXALTED CONCEPTION OF PHILOSOPHY AND FREEDOM**

**The Divisions of Philosophy**

The reduction of all the liberal arts into the single art of philosophy calls for a clarification as to what precisely for Seneca constitutes *philosophia*. Understanding philosophy in the classical sense as the “love or pursuit of wisdom,” in accordance with the doctrines of the Stoic school, Seneca separates the field of philosophy into three distinct parts, namely: (1) logic, which involves questions of epistemology and includes both dialectic and rhetoric, (2) physics, which investigates nature with regard to its ultimate principles, and (3) ethics, which involves the principles of the human good and virtuous action. Essentially, in the
perspective of the Hellenistic thinkers, the discipline of philosophy was considered to be an all-encompassing field. This is true not only for the Stoics, who arguably were among the first thinkers to systematize philosophy in a definitive fashion, but also for the Epicureans, who regarded philosophy alone as the only subject worthy of pursuit—to the exclusion of all other liberal studies.

Since Seneca was a Stoic who had a strong appreciation for the teachings of Epicureanism, it is perhaps not surprising that he maintained such a truncated view of the liberal arts in a reductionistic subordination to philosophy. With his Stoic background, what would later become known as the trivium (logic, grammar, and rhetoric) would be subsumed completely by the Stoic division of logic and the quadrivium arts (arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy) would fall under the province of physics. There would seem to be no need for further partitioning or articulation of the artes liberales from the Stoical perspective. And, with the added Epicurean injunction that philosophy alone should be pursued, it is possible to view Seneca's self-avowedly unique position as being fundamentally conformable to the customary Hellenistic notions of his time.

In his work *Naturales Quaestiones*, Seneca clarifies the distinction between philosophy and the other arts by making a comparison between moral philosophy, which deals specifically with human action, and natural philosophy, which concerns even the nature of God:

\[\text{T}he\ great\ difference\ between\ philosophy\ and\ other\ arts\ is\ matched,\ I\ think,\ by\ the\ equally\ great\ difference\ in\ philosophy itself,\ between\ that\ part\ which\ pertains\ to\ man\ and\ that\ which pertains\ to\ the\ gods.\ The\ latter\ is\ loftier\ and\ more\ intellectual, and\ so\ has\ permitted\ a\ great\ deal\ of\ freedom\ for\ itself.\ It\ has\ not been\ restricted\ to\ what\ can\ be\ seen;\ it\ has\ presumed\ that\ there\ is\ something\ greater\ and\ more\ beautiful\ which\ nature\ has\ placed beyond\ our\ sight.\ In\ short,\ between\ the\ two\ branches\ of philosophy\ there\ is\ as\ much\ difference\ as\ there\ is\ between\ man and god. One\ teaches\ us\ what\ ought\ to\ be\ done\ on\ earth: the\]
other what is to be done in heaven. One dispels our errors and furnishes a light for us to see through the uncertainties of life; the other rises far above this fog in which we wallow, and rescuing us from darkness, leads us to the place whence the light shines.45

The imagery in this particular passage resonates with Platonic thought. Seneca asserts that there is a realm beyond the visible in which philosophy can operate in order to grasp the greatest and most sublime truths of existence. 46

For Seneca, philosophy concerns the human mind’s understanding of the basic principles of the universe and the practical moral response to such understanding. Ordered to the essential causes of truth and goodness, philosophy is the subject of utmost importance; the supreme form of intellectual pursuit, it should be the main priority in one’s life. He even exhorts: “One must therefore take refuge in philosophy.” 47

The Nexus between Philosophy and Virtue
Keeping with the tradition of his Greek and Roman philosophical predecessors, Seneca gives immense prominence to the pursuit of wisdom throughout his writings and identifies wisdom with the entirety of virtue itself. 48 The goal of philosophy as being oriented toward virtue and the mutual dependence between the two is proclaimed when he states in Epistle LXXXIX: “For philosophy cannot exist without virtue, nor virtue without philosophy.” 49 The intimate connection between virtue and philosophy was grounded in the Stoic’s view of the human soul as being equivalent to reason itself. Indeed, though obviously indebted to Platonic and Aristotelian thought, the Stoic Seneca is the first ancient author to explicitly define man as the “rational animal.” 50 For Seneca, philosophy as the pursuit of wisdom stands as the architectonic art. He even goes so far as to call wisdom the “art of life” (in Epistles XXIX and CXVII). 51 Seneca perceives wisdom both as an instrumental art for attaining the highest good and as the telos of the perfected mind itself. 52
Contemplative Dimensions of Wisdom and Freedom

Quite often Hellenistic thought in general, and Senecanism in particular, are characterized as being interested primarily in the practical dimensions of philosophy rather than in its theoretical aspects. It has been maintained that the schools were concerned with dogmatism more than pursuit of truth and the ultimate explanations of things were viewed for the sake of action, rather than being sought for their own sakes. Although there is a degree of truth in this assertion, it fails to take into account the theoretical dimensions of philosophy that were emphasized by Seneca throughout his works.

According to Seneca, the cosmos is governed by rationality and human beings participate in the pervasive providence of nature. For Seneca, the nature of the universe was a subject of immense importance and a source of great intellectual satisfaction. Indeed, philosophical meditation itself has intrinsic worth, and it becomes an end in itself when one realizes that the contemplation of the universal reason that constitutes and permeates Nature is itself the highest function of the human mind and soul.

In conformance with the tradition of the ancient Stoics who preceded him, since Seneca viewed nature as the manifestation of the divine, an investigation into the reality of nature, especially on the most theoretical level, was in fact an inquiry into the essence of God. For him, natural science and theology tend to converge within the highest levels of intellectual examination, and philosophy is concerned with discovering the causes of things from the most profound perspective. He maintains that the theological sciences reign supreme and that the studies of human conduct should be subordinated to this investigation of the highest questions concerning the nature of the universe. Extolling the investigation into the highest principles of being, he perceives severe difficulties in a reductionistic account of nature.

It is precisely in the act of contemplation of Nature and God that Seneca identifies the true meaning of freedom. In Epistle XCII, he makes the assertion that the contemplation of nature is
a goal of humanity that should not be impeded, when he declares: “For the mind is free from disturbance when it is free to contemplate the universe, and nothing distracts it from the contemplation of nature.” 59 Philosophy itself, in its aspiration for attaining wisdom, is recognized by him as being a fundamental goal for humankind; to be sure, he emphatically insists in Epistle VIII that “the very service of Philosophy is freedom.” 60 Unlike the Epicureans, who deemed that the contemplation of nature was necessary to free the soul of its anxiety, 61 the Stoical Seneca insists that the freedom of the soul from pain is itself instrumental to the higher human function of investigating the universe. As expressly enumerated in Epistle LXXXVIII, the examination of the nature of the universe involves questions about its first cause, the essence of time, and the potential immortality of the soul. According to the Stoic view, only the virtuous soul is capable of such immortality and is free in an even stronger respect—free to aspire to the starry heavens themselves after mortal existence on earth.

In fact, in this unceasing theoretical pursuit of knowledge of the universe, Seneca emphatically recommends the study of the great minds in history, most notably Socrates, who have gone before and investigated the universe:

Of all men they alone are at leisure who take time for philosophy, they alone really live; for they are not content to be good guardians of their own lifetime only. They annex every age to their own; all the years that have gone before them are an addition to their store. Unless we are most ungrateful, all those men, glorious fashioners of holy thoughts, were born for us; for us they have prepared a way of life. By other men’s labours we are led to the sight of things most beautiful that have been wrested from darkness and brought into light; from no age are we shut out, we have access to all ages, and if it is our wish, by greatness of mind, to pass beyond the narrow limits of human weakness, there is a great stretch of time through which we may roam. We may argue with Socrates, we may doubt with Carneades,
find peace with Epicurus, overcome human nature with the Stoics, exceed it with the Cynics. Since Nature allows us to enter into fellowship with every age, why should we not turn from this paltry and fleeting span of time and surrender ourselves with all our soul to the past, which is boundless, which is eternal, which we share with our betters? 63

It is through the study of works of the greatest thinkers of history that the soul can achieve its ultimate freedom, according to Seneca, and one is capable of communing with these sages merely through the contemplative reading of their texts; this truly timeless freedom is afforded to each person regardless of one’s period in history, whether it be the first century or the twenty-first century A.D.

CONCLUDING CONSPECTUS

Recapitulation
Embedded within the traditions of Stoic thought, Seneca the Philosopher maintains a unique perspective on the liberal arts, as he both devalues such arts in the traditional sense yet emphatically extols the intrinsic value of knowledge. Not surprisingly, then, Seneca’s provocative suggestions concerning the nature of the liberal arts have both weaknesses and strengths.

Limitations of the Senecan View of the Liberal Arts
When assessing Seneca’s perspective regarding the liberal arts, there exist manifest weaknesses. In the debate as to the number of the liberal arts, Seneca provides no clarification, as his reduction of all liberal arts to one does not take into consideration any possible intrinsic value of the various areas of knowledge. Potential metaphysical unity between truth and goodness is not addressed specifically by him. Although Seneca states that there exist distinct first principles (decreta) that serve to differentiate the various arts, he offers no insights as to what the nature of these principles may be. In theory, Seneca’s position with regard to the
distinction of the arts by way of principles is both tenable and promising, but since his suggestions are so elusive, they offer no positive elucidation on the matter.

Furthermore, despite his insistence that the traditionally termed “liberal arts” can serve as preparations for the philosophical pursuit and the virtuous life, he does not specify the manner in which this may occur. In fact, his formal position is that such arts are not essential to virtue, yet philosophy is deemed a necessary component of the virtuous life. As Newman suggests in *The Idea of a University*, it is questionable whether the study of philosophy is in fact sufficient for the virtuous life, as Seneca and other Stoics profess; however, this issue pertains to the broader matter of the Stoic view of human nature as being essentially purely rational. Also, there arises the further difficult question of whether it is even possible to have a holistic understanding of first principles, as philosophy is asserted to possess, without having prior comprehension of particular facts derived through other branches of human learning. Philosophy for Seneca appears as a seemingly *a priori* discipline that proceeds before the other sciences both in the order of being (*ordo essendi*) and in the order of knowing (*ordo cognoscendi*). This view of the absolute priority of philosophy seems to anticipate an almost modern (even Cartesian) approach. It is surely distinct from more inductive methodologies envisioned for philosophy by Socrates, Plato, or Aristotle. Certainly for both Plato and Aristotle, philosophy (particularly “first philosophy” or “metaphysics”) deals with questions about the most fundamental principles in the order of being, yet philosophy does not originate with these in the order of knowing. Seneca appears to suggest a collapsing of these distinctions; for Seneca, *philosophia* both derives from, and remains primarily focused upon, the first-order principles of the cosmos.

**Strengths of the Senecan View of the Liberal Arts**

Despite the difficulties implicit in Seneca’s view of the liberal arts, however, it is arguable that on the whole his view is rather sound. According to the Senecan perspective, the educational process
requires more than merely simple inculcation of rudimentary truths in young people. As important as it is for youth to be instructed in fundamental areas of learning, it is the study of philosophy that is required to synthesize their education in such a way as to be conducive to a truly virtuous life.

Indeed, especially when considering the circumstances of the debate concerning the essence of the liberal arts, Seneca demonstrates clarity of thought when attempting to understand them with regard to their end and not their origins. By realizing that education has a purpose, Seneca offers a beacon of light even to modern times, which are clouded by the specters of relativism, pragmatism, and progressivism—which hold that there are no such definitive ends. That this end corresponds with the actualization of human nature as rational animals further gives power to Seneca’s educational philosophy, as this view is entirely consistent with two of the essential characteristics of a proper understanding of education according to Jacques Maritain. 65 By understanding the various arts as being unified in a common end, Seneca is correct in perceiving philosophy to have a key role. Indeed, in the centuries following Seneca in the Middle Ages, philosophy would have such a function as a master of all of the liberal arts. His understanding of the sapiential aspect of knowledge is also extremely provocative. Following the general principles of Stoicism, Seneca understands human nature to be fulfilled in contemplation of Nature. For the pantheistic Stoics, such a study was identified with theology. The distinction between the pagan and Christian view of theology is thus illuminated through examining Seneca’s perspective; because there is no transcendent God who discloses Himself through divinely revealed faith, there is no basis in the pagan view for a differentiation between philosophy and theology. 66 As a system, this pagan perspective is perhaps at least consistent, although undoubtedly defective.

The Senecan view of freedom as being intimately related to contemplation is also extremely promising, as it underscores the truest manner in which human nature is able to be free. 67 His view
of the contemplative end of man fits well within the classical tradition, as he both understands and illuminates how the noetic powers of the soul are able to transcend time and place.

In conclusion, when considering the Senecan view in its entirety, one can begin to comprehend how the seminal thoughts of this philosopher exercised immense influence to posterity in this continuous discussion as to the nature and value of the liberal arts. Indeed, Seneca’s essential insights can continue to provide guidance as to the proper ends, if not means, of the education of future generations of humanity.

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NOTES
1. It is interesting to note that the seemingly reciprocally related terms *trivium* and *quadrivium* were not originally conceived by one thinker to describe the division of the liberal arts. The term *quadrivium* was first applied by the Christian philosopher Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (A.D. c. 480–524) during the fifth century A.D. to designate the four higher, mathematically based arts. Moreover, it was not until several more centuries thereafter that followers of Alcuin (A.D. c. 755–804), Charlemagne’s scholarly advisor and theologian, used the term *trivium* to apply to the three “lower” arts of logic, grammar, and rhetoric. According to Bruce Kimball, who has researched extensively the development of the concept of the liberal arts: “Acknowledging the leadership of Pythagoras, Boethius cites the four mathematical disciplines—‘like a place where four roads meet’ (*quasi quadrivio*)—as the sole path to philosophy. In this way, while relying on an antecedent root, he coined the term *quadrivium* for future masters of the liberal arts.” [Cf.] Boethius, *De institutione arithmetica, libri duo*, *De institutione musica, libri quinque. Accedit geometria quae fertur Boetii* G. Friedlein (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1867) 1:1.” Bruce A. Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education* (New
York: College Board Publications, 1995), 47. “The term *trivium* for the three language arts came into use among Alcuin’s circle of scholars in the Carolingian era. . . . [A]n earlier association between these words and the *artes* can be found in the fact that Roman teachers would stand at a streetcorner—*trivio* or *quadrivio*—to gather and teach their students.” Ibid., 51.

2. The Pythagorean inspiration for the liberal arts tradition is recounted by David Knowles as follows: “The Hellenistic education . . . was a more schematized version of that of Isocrates. . . . This curriculum was a descendant of the original Pythagorean ‘quadrivium’ or fourfold exercise of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and acoustic.” David Knowles, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought*, ed. D. E. Luscombe and C. N. L. Brooke (London: Longman Group Limited, 1988), 56. That the Pythagoreans are at the foundation of the tradition of the liberal arts is accentuated by the fact that they also were the first thinkers to emphasize systematically the philosophical notion of *yevrÔa*. “Life, he [Pythagoras] said, is like a festival; just as some come to the festival to compete, some to ply their trade, but the best people come as spectator, so in life the slavish men go hunting for fame or gain, the philosophers for the truth. (Diogenes Laertius VIII.8) . . . Pythagoras turned geometrical philosophy into a form of liberal education by seeking its first principles in a higher realm of reality. (Proclus, *in Eucl.* 65 Friedl.).” Reginald E. Allen, *Greek Philosophy: Thales to Aristotle* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 36.

3. Plato, *The Republic*, Vol. 2, Books VI–X, trans. Paul Shorey (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1946), 146–208. (521C–534E). In addition to the four aforementioned disciplines, Plato also states the need for the study of stereometry (the science of three-dimensional solids), and he stresses that these various disciplines be unified through the study of dialectics, which he calls the “coping stone” of the other studies.

4. The development of the concept of the liberal arts has been researched in great depth by Bruce Kimball, who concludes: “It is probably true to say that all seven arts—the three language and the four mathematical—were known to and developed by the
This is not to say that these disciplines had been fully elaborated" (Orators and Philosophers, 23). According to Kimball: "[There] is the effort to find an etymological bridge between liberalis and the Greeks. Here three possibilities are commonly advanced. One is skholê, the Greek word denoting 'leisure, rest, ease,' which came to mean 'that in which leisure is employed... especially learned discussion, disputation, lecture.'... Skholê passed into Latin as schola and eventually into English as 'school,' and some take it to be a significant link to Greek education for leisure or 'liberal education.' Another oft-cited etymological bridge is eleutherios, which can be literally translated as 'fit for a free man, liberal'; and this is precisely the rendering made in the standard translations of Aristotle’s discussions on education relied upon by many modern commentars on 'liberal education.' Eleutherios—especially when applied to tekhnai, the Greek word for artes—has thus been considered the most direct link to Athenian 'liberal education.' Lastly, artes liberales has sometimes been regarded as a translation of the Greek term enuklios paideia, meaning general education, prior to professional studies. The curious thing, however, about the last etymological approach is that enuklios paideia can in no way be literally translated as artes liberales." Ibid., 15.

5. Dr. Kimball professes: “The Roman Republic provides unambiguous etymological evidence, at least from the first century B.C. By that time, Cicero and others were employing the term artes liberales and the like, all clear antecedents for 'liberal arts' and 'liberal education' in English.” Ibid., 29.

6. “Varro and Cicero do not themselves list seven arts. Varro, whose encyclopedic treatise was widely read, listed nine arts: medicine, architecture, philosophy, plus six of the later seven. In works of Cicero, one must conflate scattered listings in order to arrive at a list of seven, a fact reflecting the variability in programs of Roman education. Masters still roamed around teaching their subjects individually, and Cicero himself wrote that Roman education was neither ‘fixed by law, publicly supported, nor standardized.’ (De Republica 4.3)" Ibid., 30.
In this following passage of Cicero (De Oratore, III.xxxii.127), which is one of the first instances of the literal use of the phrase *artes liberales*, the disciplines delineated are not precisely those which would later constitute the canonical tradition: “Hippias of Elis, visiting Olympia on the occasion of the quadrennial celebration of the famous games, boasted before an audience containing virtually the whole of Greece that there was not a single fact included in any system of encyclopaedic knowledge with which he was not acquainted; and that he had not only acquired the accomplishments that form the basis of the liberal education of a gentleman, mathematics, music, knowledge of literature and poetry, and the doctrines of natural science, ethics and political science, but had made with his own hand the ring he had on, the cloak he was dressed in and the boots he was wearing.” The Latin reads: “Eleus Hippias cum Olmpiam venisset maxima illa quinquennali celebritate ludoru, gloriatus est cuncta paene audiente Graecia nihil esse ullla in arte rerum omnium quod ipse nesciret, nec solum has artes quibus liberales doctrinae atque ingenuae continerentur, geometriam, musicam, litterarum cognitionem et poetarum, atque illa quae de naturis rerum, quae de hominum moribus, quae de rebus publicis dicerentur se tenere, sed anulum quem haberet, pallium quo amictus, soccos quibus indutus esset, se sua manu confecisse .” Marcus Tullius Cicero, De Oratore, Book III, together with De Fato, Paradoxa Stoicorum, De Partitione Oratoria , trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948), 98–101. Cf. Oxford Latin Dictionary , ed. P. G. W. Glare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 1024.

7. Although it is a matter of scholarly debate as to whether the seven arts were specified categorically before this time, Martianus’s work De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii (On the Marriage of Philology and Mercury) exercised a tremendous influence on the subsequent thinkers from late antiquity onwards. “De nuptiis relates the story, told by an old man to his son, of how the god Mercury woos and wins Philology, an erudite young woman. At the wedding banquet in the heavens, Mercury presents his bride
with seven handmaidens, each personifying one of the seven liberal disciplines, which are described in separate discourses during the banquet. Relying heavily on Varro and extolling Cicero, Martianus warns against a too intense or lengthy study of dialectic, which precedes that of rhetoric. . . . Fundamentally, the allegory teaches that the seven liberal arts are the means to bring eloquence (Mercury) and learning (Philology) together, an aim sanctioned by the gods. [Cf.] Martianus Capella, *De nuptiis Philologie et Mercurii*, ed. Adolfus Dick (Stuttgart: B. G. Teubner, 1925, I-2, 423, 588–704.” Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers*, 31.

8. The definite account of the liberal arts was articulated in the thirteenth century by St. Thomas Aquinas. Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas’ *Commentary on Boethius’* De Trinitate, Question V, Article 1, ad. 3; *Commentary on Aristotle’s* Metaphysics, Lect. 3, n.59; and *Summa Theologiae* I-II, Question 57, Article 3, reply ob. 3., wherein he states: “Hence whatever habits are ordained to such works of the speculative reason are, by a kind of comparison, called arts indeed, but liberal arts, in order to distinguish them from those arts that are ordained to works done by the body; for these are are, in a fashion, servile, inasmuch as the body is in servile subjection to the soul, and man, as regards his soul, is free [liber]. On the other hand, those sciences which are not ordained to any such work are called sciences absolutely, and not arts. Nor, if the liberal arts be more excellent, does it follow that the notion of art is more applicable to them.” *Introduction to St. Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Anton C. Pegis (New York: Random House, Inc., 1948), 572.

A contemporary, yet classical formulation of the distinction amongst the seven liberal arts has been rendered succinctly by Sister Miriam Joseph, C.S.C. as follows: “The trivium includes those aspects of the liberal arts that pertain to the mind, and the quadrivium, those aspects of the liberal arts which pertain to matter. Logic, grammar, and rhetoric constitute the trivium; and arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy constitute the quadrivium. Logic is the art of thinking; grammar, the art of inventing symbols and combining them to express thought; and
rhetoric, the art of communicating thought from one mind to another, the adaptation of language to circumstance. Arithmetic, the theory of number, and music, and application of the theory of number (the measurement of discrete quantities in motion), are the arts of discrete quantity or number. Geometry, the theory of space, and astronomy, an application of the theory of space, are the arts of continuous quantity or extension.”  


9. Seneca was well acquainted with the Roman educational system and studied extensively both the arts of rhetoric and philosophy. Born under the dominion of the Roman Empire in Corduba, Spain, to parents of an equestrian family, Seneca was brought to Rome as a youth, where, along with his two brothers, he studied the liberal art of rhetoric under the tutelage of his father—who is referred to in history as Seneca the Elder or Seneca the Rhetor. In addition to his rhetorical education, Seneca fervently studied philosophy as a youth (against the expressed wishes of his father), and, through various influential teachers and self-instruction, delved into Pythagorean and Stoic thought, as well as the classical philosophy of Plato and Aristotle. Seneca became an eclectic Hellenistic philosopher steeped not only in the teachings of the Stoa as represented by its original adherents but also in the continuing Platonic and Peripatetic traditions. However, his early philosophical training would have to wait many years before coming to full fruition, as he became involved with the political machinations of the early Roman Empire, where in which he would pursue the cursus honorum first as a quaestor and ultimately as the tutor and personal advisor to Emperor Nero. Before his death (at direct the command of Nero), Seneca produced numerous philosophical works, including twelve Diologi (on topics ranging from the nature of Providence to the role of leisure and the shortness of life), a seven-book treatise concerning the nature of reciprocal social relationships (De Beneficiis), a seven-book work on physics titled the Naturales Quaestiones, and, arguably his most famous philosophical work, the 124 Epistulae
Moreover, in addition to his philosophical works, Seneca also is notable for writing ten Roman tragedies (based on the Greek models of Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles).

10. The significance of Seneca’s influence on the medieval mind has been expressed by José Antonio Fránquiz: “It was during this period of optimistic horizons and broadening new perspectives, cosmopolitanism, wealth, social enlightenment, national expansion, and joie de vivre, that a need for a spiritual coordinator and critical assessor or interpreter of the times arose and was fulfilled in the life and thought of Lucius Annaeus Seneca. . . . A fairer and clearer understanding of . . . [the] content [of the Liberal Arts] could easily be discerned from an objective analysis of the thought of Cato, Plautus, Cicero, Tacitus, Ennius, Virgil, Pliny the Elder, and the Younger, Juvenal, Marcus Aurelius, but especially Lucius Annaeus Seneca. It was the thought of these men, and of Seneca in particular, that formed the educational subject matter of the curriculum during the Middle Ages.” “The Place of Seneca in the Curriculum of the Middle Ages,” in *Actes du quatrième congrès international de philosophie médiévale: Arts libéraux et philosophie au moyen âge* (Montreal: Institut d’Études Médévales, 1969), 1065–066.

It has been further remarked by Richard Mott Gummere that “Seneca was a Stoic, and Stoicism was the porch to Christianity. Then, as now, it was the thought-force that lay nearest to our inspirational religion. It was Stoicism which made the Christian fathers claim Seneca as one of their own.” *Seneca the Philosopher and His Modern Message* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1963), 54.

11. Étienne Gilson discusses the historical import of Seneca the Philosopher with regard to Christian tradition of the liberal arts (specifically in relation to Epistle LXXXVIII) in the following manner: “Pour m’en tenir à un exemple remarquable, je rappellerai le nom de Sénèque le Philosophe. Dans ses *Lettres à Lucilius*, il avertit son correspondant de ne pas faire de l’étude des arts libéraux la fin ni l’essentiel de ses études. . . . Nous passerions facilement une heure en compagnie de cette lettre [*Ad. Luc.*., 88],

Moreover, it is interesting to note in passing that the Epistle LXXXVIII was the last letter contained in the first volume of the two-volume medieval transmission of the *Epistulae Morales*; Senecan scholar L. D. Reynolds, the modern authority on the text of Seneca’s letters, has professed that: “The fundamental fact which we must bear in mind when studying the text of the *Letters* is that we are dealing, not with one manuscript tradition, but with two, and that these two traditions must be treated as separate problems. For the extant corpus of letters was divided at an early date into two volumes, one containing letters 1–88, the other letters 89–124, and the fact that both volumes are found in one tenth-century manuscript and commonly in later manuscripts should not be allowed to obscure this division.” *The Medieval Tradition of Seneca’s Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 17.

12. Martha C. Nussbaum summarizes the importance and essence of this letter in the following manner: “The fullest expression of Seneca’s complex position on books and reverence is in Letter 88, the famous letter on liberal education. Here he attacks traditional Roman methods of education for young gentlemen, which focused on the close and reverential study of certain canonical texts. Seneca expresses grave doubts about the traditional notion of *studia liberalia*, if interpreted in its convention meaning of ‘studies suited to a freeborn gentleman’ (88.1–2). If such studies serve only to augment one’s income, they are no good at all. And even where they do have some use, they are useful only as a basis, not as the noble activity of the mind itself. The only study truly worthy of the name *liberalis* is philosophy: for that *liberates* the mind. It is good to have had the basic education
embodied in conventional liberal studies, but philosophy is the only study whose activity is itself an exercise of human freedom.”


The most notable proclamation of Seneca’s self-professed philosophic originality is in Epistle LXXX: “Do I then follow no predecessors? Yes, but I allow myself to discover something new, to alter, to reject. I am not a slave to them, although I give them my approval.” Epistles, 66–92, vol. 2, 213 (Ep. LXXX.1). “Non ergo sequor priores? facio, sed permitto mihi et invenire aliquid et mutare et relinquere; non servio illis, sed assentior.” Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales, Tomus I, 260.


Seneca thus begins the letter addressing Lucilius’ question of the nature of the liberal arts, perhaps in response to Seneca’s emphatic position in the previous epistle that the arts of medicine and navigation contribute nothing to virtue. Cf. Seneca’s Epistle LXXXVII.15–17.

Throughout this study, the original Latin quotations of Seneca from the definitive Oxford Classical Texts are provided in footnotes, and the corresponding English translations of Seneca’s writings are rendered in the text from the Loeb Classical Library editions.
15. “For I do not consent to admit painting into the list of liberal arts, any more than sculpture, marble-working, and other helps toward luxury. I also debar from the liberal studies wrestling and all knowledge that is compounded of oil and mud; otherwise, I should be compelled to admit perfumers also, and cooks, and all others who lend their wits to the service of our pleasures. For what “liberal” element is there in these ravenous takers of emetics, whose bodies are fed to fatness while their minds are thin and dull?” Seneca, *Epistles*, 66–92, vol. 2, 359; 361 (Ep. LXXXVIII.18–19). “[Non] magis quam statuarios aut marmorarios aut ceteros luxuriae ministros. Aequo luctatores et totam oleo ac luto constantem scientiam expello ex his studiis liberalibus; aut et unguentarios recipiam et cocos et ceteros voluptatibus nostris ingenia accommodantes sua. Quid enim, oro te, liberale habent isti ieiuni vomitores, quorum corpora in sagina, animi in macie et veterno sunt?” *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales, Tomus I*, 316–17.

16. According to two renown scholars on Hellenistic philosophy, Drs. Long and Sedley: “Seneca in our extract is answering an anonymous objection that the *liberales artes*, because they assist philosophy, should be included as one of its parts. Posidonius has already been named in section 21 of the same letter, and [I. G. Kidd in “Philosophy and Science in Posidonius,” *Antike und Abendland* 24 (1978), 8–10] gives strong reasons for taking him to be Seneca’s source.” A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, vol. 2, *Greek and Latin Texts with Notes and Bibliography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 165.

17. “Posidonius divides the arts into four classes: first we have those which are common and low, then those which serve for amusement, then those which refer to the education of boys, and, finally, the liberal arts. The common sort belong to workmen and are mere hand-work; they are concerned with equipping life; there is in them no pretence to beauty or honour. The arts of amusement are those which aim to please the eye and the ear. To this class you may assign the stage-machinists, who invent scaffolding that goes aloft of its own accord, or floors that rise silently into the
air, and many other surprising devices, as when objects that fit


together then fall apart, or objects which are separate then join
together automatically, or objects which stand erect then gradu-

tally collapse. The eye of the inexperienced is struck with amaze-


ment by these things; for such persons marvel at everything that
takes place without warning, because they do not know the causes.


The arts which belong to the education of boys, and are somewhat
similar to the liberal arts, are those which the Greeks call the ‘cycle
of studies,’ but which we Romans call the ‘liberal.’ However, those
alone are really liberal—or rather, to give them a truer name,
‘free’—whose concern is virtue.” Seneca, *Epistles*, 66–92, vol. 2,
362; 363 (Ep. LXXXVIII.21–23).

Concerning the originality of this division, W. Tatarkiewicz
has discerned: “The division of arts into the vulgar and liberal (or
encyclic) arts had several variants in ancient times, and there were
some additions which enriched it. One of them has come to us
through the works of Seneca. Its origin goes back to the philoso-
phy of Poseidonius. To vulgar and liberal arts Seneca added those
those which instruct (pueriles) and those which amuse (ludicrae).
Thus he fused two different classifications: that of Galen and that
of the Sophists. The new division was fourfold; it was more
complete, but it lacked unity.” “Classification of Arts in Antiq-

liberalia studia dicta sint vides: quia homine libero digna sunt.
Ceterum unum studium vere liberale est quod liberum facit, hoc
est sapientiae, sublime, forte, magnanimum: cetera pusilla et
puerilia sunt.” *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales, Tomus I*, 312.

19. Cf. Plato’s *Meno* (82B–85E) and *Republic*, Book VII
(514A–518C); cf. Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, Book I, Chapter 2
(982b11–27).

20. The view of the liberal arts as having the goal, rather than
merely having its origins, in freedom, has a modern resonance, as
many contemporary thinkers view the liberal arts in this fashion.
Kimball remarks: “With the rise of experimental science and the
dawning of the Enlightenment, the catalysis for renewing philo-
sophical activity and precipitating a different ideal that would come to be linked with the words ‘liberal education’ commenced as well. . . . [There was an] individualistic, open-ended sense of freedom popularized in the Enlightenment.”

Orators and Philosophers, 115.

21. The authoritative scholar of Roman Stoicism, Edward Vernon Arnold, has discerned that for the Stoics in general the liberal arts were thought to have a subordinate, though helpful, role in realizing the human goal of virtue: “But the Stoics generally held that all wisdom must justify itself by practical results. The study of the so-called ‘liberal arts’ has a value for children, for it prepares the way for virtuous training. Logic is needed to protect us against fallacious reasoning, and physics that we may rightly understand the universe and its providential government, upon which the conception of duty depends; in this sense we may speak of logic and physics as virtues, that is, as subdivisions of the virtue of wisdom. The study of physics is also admirable because it elevates the soul. Geometry, law, and astrology are useful in the several professions. But study when carried to excess, as by antiquarians, bookworms, and other learned time-wasters, is nothing but folly.” Roman Stoicism: Being Lectures on the History of the Stoic Philosophy with Special Reference to Its Development within the Roman Empire (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1911), 306–7.

22. Michael Frede contextualizes Seneca’s interest in the question of the value of the liberal arts as follows: “Later Stoics, of course, could not fail to realize that there were grammarians pursuing a particular discipline. And since there is no doubt that some Stoics had considerable interest in grammatical questions, one might think that they simply joined the grammarians in their own pursuits, either for ulterior philosophical reasons or merely out of interest in the subject itself. So we would have Stoic grammar in the sense that there were Stoics who also happened to be engaged in grammatical studies. This is, in fact, a view one might obtain from a superficial reading of Seneca’s letters. In Epistle 88 Seneca considers the liberal studies or arts, among
which he includes grammar (88.3). But he wonders whether they are genuinely liberal, that is, whether they really help make us virtuous and hence truly free, as philosophy supposedly does (88.2).” “Principles of Stoic Grammar,” in Essays in Ancient Philosophy (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 303.

23. “And even in the letter to Lucilius on the *artes liberales*, there is one notable omission. Literature, music, geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, painting, sculpture, athletics; all these are examined in turn, and rejected. Not a word is said about rhetoric. Elsewhere Seneca definitely ranks eloquence beneath philosophy, [in Ep. 40.12] but here rhetoric, the most conspicuous of all the arts, is passed by in silence.” Gwynn, Roman Education, 178–79.

24. George G. Strem comments specifically upon Seneca's perspective of rhetoric: “Seneca does not condemn the study of the humanities per se, only the mercenary purpose for which they were taught. The selfless study of the humanities will foster Seneca's supreme aim, the improvement of human nature, the creation of better men and a better society. . . . [S]uch studies should constitute the basis of further learning. As a philosopher examining whether such and such a study is useful for the formation of the character, Seneca had to come to grips with a subject that was vital to him and to so many Romans: the study of eloquence. Public speaking, the debating of a given question from both the affirmative and the negative side, or from the point of view of both the accuser and of the defendant, was regarded as the most desirable skill to be acquired for the career of a noble Roman. Lucius and his brother[s] . . . had received intensive preparation in this art of eloquence, which was highly praised by their father, Seneca the Elder. Yet, little by little, the younger Seneca came to condemn oratory for its own sake, the skill of juggling words, as a waste of man’s intellectual potential, though he never could completely rid himself of his father’s influence.” The Life and Teaching of Lucius Annaeus Seneca (New York: Vantage Press, Inc., 1981), 126–27.
25. Sophistical word-play and syllogistic bantering, which is a perversion of the field of philosophy in every age, was condemned by Seneca as being inimical to the pursuit of virtue and anathema to the very practice of philosophy. Cf. Epistles CXI and CXVII.

26. Seneca clarifies in Epistle XCV that: “Furthermore, many arts, aye and the most liberal of them all, have their special doctrines, and not mere precepts of advice—the medical profession, for example. There are the different schools of Hippocrates, of Asclepiades, of Themison. And besides, no art that concerns itself with theories can exist without its own doctrines; the Greeks call them dogmas, while we Romans may use the term ‘doctrines,’ or ‘tenets,’ or ‘adopted principles,’—such as you will find in geometry or astronomy. . . . Philosophy, therefore, being theoretic, must have her doctrines. . . . There is the same difference between philosophical doctrines and precepts as there is between elements and members; the latter depend upon the former, while the former are the source both of the latter and of all things.”


27. “No art, however, is sufficient unto itself, if the foundation upon which it rests depends upon mere favour. Now philosophy asks no favours from any other source; it builds everything on its
own soil; but the science of numbers is, so to speak, a structure built on another man’s land—it builds on everything on alien soil. It accepts first principles, and by their favour arrives at further conclusions. If it could march unassisted to the truth, if it were able to understand the nature of the universe, I should say that it would offer much assistance to our minds; for the mind grows by contact with things heavenly and draws into itself something from on high. There is but one thing that brings the soul to perfection—the unalterable knowledge of good and evil. But there is no other art which investigates good and evil.


29. The question of whether on the metaphysical level there is any direct relation between truth and goodness is apparently ignored by Seneca.


32. “Ever since Plato’s *Meno* the question of how virtue is
acquired was central to ethics—and it was recognized that it might be unteachable and yet still humanly attainable (Meno 91a–100b, esp. 96c–d, 98d–99c; Aristotle, Nic. Eth. 2.1, 1103a14–b25).” R. J. Hankinson, The Sceptics (New York: Routledge, 1995), 253.


34. Brad Inwood and Pierluigi Donini state that the essential aims of education from the Stoical perspective, would be opposed to all emotional expression (such as that recommended by the poets): “The aim of moral education would therefore, according to the Stoics, have been attained when there is established in the mind a complex of correct opinions, perfectly mutually coherent and coinciding with the propositions of right reason and according to the will of Zeus. But there is a threat to any such conception of education, dominated by emphasis on cognitive processes: passion, interpreted as incorrect opinion.” Brad Inwood and Pierluigi Donini, “Stoic Ethics,” The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy, ed. Keimpe Algra, Jonathan Barnes, Jaap Mansfeld, and Malcolm Schofield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 711.

35. Long and Sedley note that: “Posidonius is probably the immediate authority for Seneca’s distinction between the parts of philosophy and the purely instrumental status of special sciences. The latter are not a part of the Stoic’s philosophical curriculum, but he will make use of their findings. Underlying this distinction is the Platonic difference (Republic 6.510) between the mathematician’s total dependence upon hypotheses, and the philosopher’s quest for unhypothetical first principles. A Stoic sage, like the Platonic dialectician, is concerned with general
principles of explanation rather than the accumulation of data or answers to specific questions of fact. Posidonius, who had particular interest in Plato, may be responsible for adding ‘causes’ to the definition of wisdom as ‘knowledge of the divine and the human.’ But there is no reason to think that the addition altered the substance of what was meant by ‘scientific knowledge of the divine and human’, or that Chrysippus would have dissented from the doctrine. Instead of distinguishing different kinds of philosophy, as Aristotle had done (theoretical, practical, productive), the Stoics stressed the practical utility of the subject in all its parts. Virtue pertains to each of these, with physics, which gives ‘knowledge of the divine’, a cardinal requirement for ‘wisdom’, and logic no less so. As to what the three parts are practically useful for, and constitutive of, the Stoic answer must be, ‘living a well reasoned life’. For all three parts of a particular kind of -logos—philosophical discourse, where discourse includes the mind’s dialogue with itself, or its rational character.” A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, eds., The Hellenistic Philosophers, vol. 1, Translations of the Principal Sources, with Philosophical Commentary (Cambridge University Press, 1987), 161.

36. Cf. Plato’s Republic, Books III and X, in which respectively Homer’s hero, Achilles, and Homer himself are the subjects of philosophic dispute with regard to the proper understanding (and communication) of truth. According to Bruce Kimball: “The history of liberal education is the story of a debate between orators and philosophers. . . . The story is, first of all, very old . . . because it begins with Isocrates and Plato.” Orators and Philosophers, 2.

37. Seneca warns against the abuses of philosophy in this manner: “I have been speaking so far of liberal studies; but think how much superfluous and unpractical matter the philosophers contain! Of their own accord they also have descended to establishing nice divisions of syllables, to determining the true meaning of conjunctions and prepositions; they have been envious of the scholars, envious of the mathematicians. They have taken over into their own art all the superfluities of these other arts; the result
is that they know more about careful speaking than about careful living. Let me tell you what evils are due to over-nice exactness, and what an enemy it is of truth!” Epistles, 66–92, vol. 2, 375 (Ep. LXXXVIII.42–43). “De liberalibus studiis loquor: philosophi quantum habent supervacui, quantum ab usu recedentis! Ipsi quoque ad syllabarum distinctiones et coniunctionum ac praepositionum proprietates descenderunt et invidere grammaticis, invidere geometricis; quidquid in illorum artibus supervacuum erat transtulere in suam. Sic effectum est ut diligentius loqui scirent quam vivere. Audi quantum mali faciat nimia subtilitas et quam infesta veritati sit.” Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales, Tomus I , 322.

38. According to Seneca: “[I]t is a pleasure to be acquainted with many arts.’ Therefore let us keep only as much of them as is essential. Do you regard that man as blameworthy who puts superfluous things on the same footing with useful things, and in his house makes a lavish display of costly objects, but do not deem him blameworthy who has allowed himself to become engrossed with the useless furniture of learning? This desire to know more than is sufficient is a sort of intemperance. Why? Because this unseemly pursuit of the liberal arts makes men troublesome, wordy, tactless, self-satisfied bores, who fail to learn the essentials just because they have learned the non-essentials.” Epistles, 66–92, vol. 2, 369; 371 (Ep. LXXXVIII.35). “At enim delectat artium notitia multarum.’ Tantum itaque ex illis retineamus quantum necessarium est. An tu existimas reprehendendum qui supervacua usibus comparat et pretiosarum rerum pompam in domo explicat, non putas eum qui occupatus est in supervacua litterarum supellectile? Plus scire velle quam sit satis intemperantiae genus est. Quid quod ista liberalium artium consecratio molestos, verbosos, intempestivos, sibi placentes facit et ideo non discentes necessaria quia supervacua didicerunt?” Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales, Tomus I , 321.

Indeed, the correct use of one’s time, particularly one’s leisure time, is a theme throughout Seneca’s works, particularly his treatises De Brevitate Vitae and De Otio. Seneca both recom-
ments that time be spent in study and recognizes the vice of *curiositas* as being a type of concupiscence of the mind to desire to be acquainted with all possible knowledge.

39. Seneca speaks of the foundational function of the liberal arts in the following manner: “‘What then,’ you say, ‘do the liberal studies contribute nothing to our welfare?’ Very much in other respects, but nothing at all as regards virtue. For even these arts of which I have spoken, though admittedly of a low grade—depending as they do upon handiwork—contribute greatly toward the equipment of life, but nevertheless have nothing to do with virtue. And if you inquire, ‘Why, then, do we educate our children in the liberal studies?’ it is not because they can bestow virtue, but because they prepare the soul for the reception of virtue. Just as that ‘primary course,’ as the ancients called it, in grammar, which gave boys their elementary training, does not teach them the liberal arts, but prepares the ground for their early acquisition of these arts, so the liberal arts do not conduct the soul all the way to virtue, but merely set it going in that direction.”  

*Epistles, 66–92*, vol. 2, 349 (Ep. LXXXVIII.20). “‘Quid ergo? nihil nobis liberalia conferunt studia?’ Ad alia multum, ad virtutem nihil; nam et hae viles ex professo artes quae manu constant ad instrumenta vitae plurimum conferunt, tamen ad virtutem non pertinent. ‘Quare ergo liberalibus studiis filios erudimus?’ Non quia virtutem dare possunt, sed quia animum ad accipiendam virtutem praeparant. Quemadmodum prima illa, ut antiqui vocabant, litteratura, per quam pueris elementa traduntur, non docet liberales artes sed mox percipiendis locum parat, sic liberales artes non perducunt animum ad virtutem sed expedient.”  

*Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales, Tomus I*, 317.

40. Writing to his mother, Helvia, Seneca advises: “And so I guide you to that in which all who fly from Fortune must take refuge to philosophic [liberal] studies. They will heal your wound, they will uproot all your sadness. Even if you had not been acquainted with them before, you would need to use them now; but, so far as the old-fashioned strictness of my father permitted you, though you have not indeed fully grasped all the liberal arts,
still you have had some dealings with them. Would that my father, truly the best of men, had surrendered less to the practice of his forefathers, and had been willing to have you acquire a thorough knowledge of the teachings of philosophy instead of a mere smattering! In that case you would now have, not to devise, but merely to display, your protection against Fortune. But he did not suffer you to pursue your studies because of those women who do not employ learning as a means to wisdom, but equip themselves with it for the purpose of display. Yet, thanks to your acquiring mind, you imbibed more than might have been expected in the time you had; the foundations of all systematic knowledge have been laid. Do you return now to these studies; they will render you safe. They will comfort you, they will cheer you; if in earnest they gain entrance to your mind, nevermore will sorrow enter there, nevermore anxiety, nevermore the useless distress of futile suffering. To none of these will your heart be open; for to all other weaknesses it has long been closed. Philosophy is your most unfailing safeguard, and she alone can rescue you from the power of Fortune.” Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Moral Essays*, vol. 2, trans. John W. Basore, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 447; 449 (Ad Helviam Matrem De Consolatione, XVII.3–5). “Itaque illo te duco quo omnibus qui fortunam fugiunt confugiendum est, ad liberalia studia: illa sanabunt ulnum tuum, illa omnem tristitiam tibi euelellent. His etiam si numquam adsuesses, nunc utendum erat; sed quantum tibi patris mei antiquus rigor permisit, omnes bonas artes non quidem comprehendisti, attigisti tamen. 4. Vtinam quidem uirorum optimus, pater meus, minus maiorum consuetudini deditus uoluisse te praeceptis sapientiae erudiri potius quam inbui! non parandum tibi nunc esset auxilium contra fortunam sed proferendum. Propter istas quae litteris non ad sapientiam utuntur sed ad luxuriam instruuntur minus te indulgere studiis passus est. Beneficio tamen rapacis ingenii plus quam pro tempore hausisti; iacta sunt disciplinarum omnium fundamenta: nunc ad illas reuertere; tutam te praestabunt. 5. Illae consolabuntur, illae delectabunt, illae si bona fide in animum tuum intrauerint,

41. Later in the letter, Seneca seems to further denigrate the\nliberal studies as being incidental to virtue: “‘But,’ one says, ‘since\nyou declare that virtue cannot be attained without the ‘liberal\nstudies,’ how is it that you deny that they offer any assistance to\nvirtue?’ Because you cannot attain virtue without food, either;\nyet food has nothing to do with virtue. Wood does not offer\nassistance to a ship, although a ship cannot be built except of\nwood. There is no reason, I say, why you should think that\nanything is made by the assistance of that without which it cannot\nbe made. We might even make the statement that it is possible to\nattain wisdom without the ‘liberal studies’; for although virtue is\na thing that must be learned, yet it is not learned by means of these\nstudies.” Seneca, *Epistles*, 66–92, vol. 2, 369 (Ep. LXXXVIII.31–\n32). “‘Cum dicatis’ inquit ‘sine liberalibus studiis ad virtutem non\nperveniri, quemadmodum negatis illa nihil conferre virtuti?’ Quia\nnec sine cibo ad virtutem pervenitur, cibus tamen ad virtutem non\npertinet; ligna navi nihil conferunt, quamvis non fiat navis nisi ex\nlignis: non est, inquam, cur aliquid putes eius adiutorio fieri sine\nquo non potest fieri. Potest quidem etiam illud dici, sine liberalibus\nstudis veniri ad sapientiam posse; quamvis enim virtus discenda\nsit, tamen non per haec discitur.” *Ad Lucilium epistulae morales, Tomus I*, 319–20.

42. The most definitive passage of Seneca with regard to his\nview of philosophy occurs in Epistle LXXXIX: “In the first place,\ntherefore, if you approve, I shall draw the distinction between\nwisdom and philosophy. Wisdom is the perfect good of the human\nmind; philosophy is the love of wisdom, and the endeavour to\nattain it. The latter strives toward the goal which the former has\nalready reached. And it is clear why philosophy was so called. For
it acknowledges by its very name the object of its love. Certain persons have defined wisdom as the knowledge of things divine and things human. Still others say: ‘Wisdom is knowing things divine and things human, and their causes also.’ This added phrase seems to me to be superfluous, since the causes of things divine and things human are a part of the divine system. Philosophy also has been defined in various ways; some have called it ‘the study of virtue,’ others have referred to it as ‘a study of the way to amend the mind,’ and some have named it ‘the search for right reason.’ One thing is practically settled, that there is some difference between philosophy and wisdom. Nor indeed is it possible that that which is sought and that which seeks are identical. As there is a great difference between avarice and wealth, the one being the subject of the craving and the other its object, so between philosophy and wisdom. For the one is a result and a reward of the other. Philosophy does the going, and wisdom is the goal. . . . The Romans also were wont to use this word in the sense in which they now use ‘philosophy’ also.”


In a manner which evokes Plato’s view of the philosophical endeavor in his Symposium, this text illuminates the fact that Seneca too perceives philosophy to be concerned with things which transcend the merely human level. He views philosophy as being focused primarily upon the level of the divine, in which human activities are subsumed. His differentiation between the object of love (namely wisdom) and the activity of the lover (philosophy) is also highly suggestive of Platonic imagery.

43. “The greatest authors, and the greatest number of authors, have maintained that there are three divisions of philosophy—moral, natural, and rational. The first keeps the soul in order; the second investigates the universe; the third works out the essential meanings of words, their combinations, and the proofs which keep falsehood from creeping in and displacing truth.” Epistles, 66–92, vol. 2, 383 (Ep. LXXXIX.9). “Philosophiae tres partes esse dixerunt et maximi et plurimi auctores: moralem, naturalem, rationalem. Prima componit animum; secunda rerum naturam scrutatur; tertia proprietates verborum exigit et structuram et argumentationes, ne pro vero falsa subrepant.” Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales, Tomus II, 327.

44. According to Long and Sedley: “Of all ancient philosophies, Stoicism makes the greatest claim to being utterly systematic. Arguably, the Stoics invented the notion of philosophy as ‘system’, though they may have been precede in this by the post-Platonic Academy of Xenocrates, who probably first authorized the division of the subject into the three parts—logic, physics, and ethics.” Long and Sedley, The Hellenistic Philosophers, vol. 1, 160.

45. “Epicurus views true philosophy as the antithesis of ‘culture’ (paideia). This term represents the educational curriculum much prized in ancient Greece, including rhetoric, literary and musical theory, and mathematics. He apparently sees these things as bogus sciences, more a matter of ostentation than of true enlightenment, and hence as positive obstacles to the pursuit of true philosophical values.” Long and Sedley, The Hellenistic...
Philosophers, vol. 1, 156–157. The primary evidence for this is: “In his letter to Pythocles Epicurus writes: ‘My fortunate friend, hoist your sail and steer clear of all culture [paideia].’” (Diogenes Laertius 10.6) Long and Sedley, The Hellenistic Philosophers, vol. 1, 156.


47. In regard to the practical and theoretical aspects of the Senecan view of philosophy, A. Robert Caponigri states that: “Philosophy is not for discourse, but for action, Seneca tells us; and the action he has in mind is not the paltry action of daily life, in the first instance, but the supreme act of life by which the individual human existent unites himself to the life and soul of the world. This union is the work of speculative philosophy, the path to wisdom.” “Reason and Death: The Idea of Wisdom in Seneca,” Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association 42 (1968): 149.


49. According to Seneca, “Virtue is nothing else than right reason.” Epistles, 66–92, vol. 2, 23 (Ep. LXVI.32). “[N]ihil enim alium est virtus quam recta ratio.” Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales, Tomus I, 188. Seneca clearly identifies the interconnection of truth and virtue in the philosophical tradition with Socrates; in
Epistle LXXI, Seneca recalls that: “Socrates used to say that verity and virtue were the same.” Epistles, 66–92, vol. 2, 83 (Ep. LXXI.16). “Idem esse dicit Socrates veritatem et virtutem.” Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales, Tomus I, 213.

50. Seneca, Epistles, 66–92, vol. 2, 383 (Ep. LXXXIX.8). “[N]am nec philosophia sine virtute est nec sine philosophia virtus.” Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales, Tomus II, 326. The Senecan view of the relationship between virtue and philosophy has been described by George G. Strem as follows: “Virtue, we have said, is the effort to attain wisdom. One can say the same about philosophy. A lover of philosophy will by definition also love virtue. Wisdom is the ultimate goal of both. Philosophy, however, is not equivalent to virtue. Philosophy is the study of values one should adopt to reach that state. Philosophy is the highest of studies because it deals with the most important questions that affect man’s life and helps him understand himself and the world.” The Life and Teaching of Lucius Annaeus Seneca (New York: Vantage Press, Inc., 1981), 146–47.

The close identification of wisdom with both virtue in general and with the highest good is expressed in Epistle XCVIII, wherein he states: “For the real Good does not perish; it is certain and lasting, and it consists of wisdom and virtue.” M.L. III, L.C.L., 123 (Ep. XCVIII.9). “[N]am illud verum bonum non moritur, certum est sempernumque, sapientia et virtus.” Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales, Tomus II, 408.

51. The Senecan definition of human being is found in Epistle XLI, wherein he declares: “Rationale enim animal est homo.” Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales, Tomus I, 110 (Ep. XLI.8). Cf. Lucius Annaeus Seneca, Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales, vol. 1, trans. Richard M. Gummere (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 277. More precisely, Seneca is the earliest author from antiquity whose writings have been preserved wherein this definition may be found. For the Peripatetic inspiration behind the Stoic definition, cf. Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, I.7 (1098a5–9).

52. “That which takes effect by chance is not an art. Now
wisdom is an art; it should have a definite aim.” Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, vol. 1, 205 (Ep. XXIX.3). “Non est ars, quae ad effectum casu venit. Sapientia ars est; certum petat.” *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales, Tomus I*, 81–82. “Now wisdom is Mind perfected and developed to the highest and best degree. For it is the art of life.” *M.L. III, L.C.L.*, 345 (Ep. CXVII.12). “Sapientia est mens perfecta vel ad summum optimumque perducta; ars enim vitae est.” *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales, Tomus II*, 497. The former passage of Seneca is reminiscent of Aristotle’s distinction between works of art and virtuous action in Book II of his *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle agrees that both works of art and deeds of virtue must proceed from knowledge, but he states that works of art do not need to be done for their own sake (as do virtuous actions) nor do they have to arise from a fixed disposition of character. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.4.1105a26–b9.

53. Seneca explains that this virtue should be the first and most important thing to be sought in one’s life, as when he pronounces in Epistle LXXXVIII that: “Thus, whatever phase of things human and divine you have apprehended, you will be wearied by the vast number of things to be answered and things to be learned. And in order that these manifold and mighty subjects may have free entertainment in your soul, you must remove therefrom all superfluous things. Virtue will not surrender herself to these narrow bounds of ours; a great subject needs wide space in which to move. Let all other things be driven out, and let the breast be emptied to receive virtue.” Seneca, *Epistles*, 66–92, vol. 2, 369; 371 (Ep. LXXXVIII.35). “Quamcumque partem rerum humanarum divinarumque comprehendis, ingenti copia quaerendorum ac discendorum fatigaberis. Haec tam multa, tam magna ut habere possint liberum hospitium, supervacua ex animo tollenda sunt. Non dabit se in has angustias virtus; laxum spatium res magna desiderat. Expellantur omnia, totum pectus illi vacet.” *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales, Tomus I*, 320–21. Seneca expresses here the converse of the deficiencies of too much time being devoted to the traditional liberal arts; such studies and
pursuits must be cleared in order to make way for the pursuit of philosophy.

54. This perception that Seneca and other Hellenistic philosophers of the Roman period were interested wholly in the practical aspects of knowledge is reflected in these statements by Clarence W. Mendell: “’Philosophic’ to the Roman had a different meaning from that which it held for the Greek. The Roman was never much of an abstract philosopher. . . . At best, only a few Romans were ever interested in abstract philosophy; it was only the practical, concrete branch of ethics that was generally tolerated and, in the first century, a philosophic tone means rather a moralizing tone, the atmosphere of wise maxims.” Our Seneca (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1941), 154. It is because of this orientation toward practical action, in part, that the Hellenistic philosophical schools were thought to possess religious overtones.

Even the renowned historian of philosophy Frederick Copleston clearly perceives Seneca as being interested almost entirely in practical philosophy and claims: “[Seneca] does not seek intellectual knowledge for its own sake, but pursues philosophy as a means to the acquirement of virtue. Philosophy is necessary, but it is to be pursued with a practical end in view.” A History of Philosophy. vol. 1, Greece and Rome (1946. Reprint, New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc., 1993), 428.

Brad Inwood discusses the Stoic perspective of the theoretical and practical dimensions of wisdom in relation to the views of Plato and Aristotle as follows: “Surely the most important facet of rationality for any Greek would be its role in the acquisition and contemplation of theoretical knowledge.” This is certainly true of Plato and arguably true of Aristotle (at least some of the time). Antiochus of Ascalon, an Academic philosopher of Cicero’s day who argued for the essential unity of Platonic, Aristotelian, and Stoic philosophy, claimed Aristotle as his inspiration for a view of human nature which gave equal weight to the practical and theoretical side of our nature. Later Peripatetics gave more or less weight to the active and contemplative sides of human nature,
but these were arguments about which should predominate within a framework which gave an important role to both. Is it reasonable to look exclusively at the practical side of rationality in the Stoic discussion of human nature? It is impossible to deny that contemplation was a part of the good life according to the Stoics, and that, correspondingly, an important part of rationality is the ability to seek out and achieve a grasp of theoretical truths. . . . It should at least be uncontroversial to claim that the Stoics were frequently inclined to de-emphasize the value of purely theoretical knowledge in a way that Plato and Aristotle were not.” *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 2–3.

55. The high regard which Seneca held for theoretical investigations into nature is characterized by Josiah B. Gould as follows: “Seneca is eloquent in his affirmation of the beauty of disinterested scientific research: to the question, what advantage is to be derived from his labor, he replies: the greatest of all—to know Nature. Investigations such as these can render many useful services; but what they give us of more value is that of retaining the attention of man by reason of the marvels they unfold rather than that for the profit that one might derive from their disclosure. . . . Another of Seneca’s characteristic views about knowledge of the nature of things is that there is in science an indefinite progress.” “Reason in Seneca,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 3 (1965): 16–17.

56. For example, in Epistle LXV, he affirms the importance of theoretical investigations into the first cause of the cosmos when he asks: “Do you forbid me to contemplate the universe? Do you compel me to withdraw from the whole and restrict me to a part? May I not ask what are the beginnings of all things, who moulded the universe, who took the confused and conglomerate mass of sluggish matter, and separated it into its parts? May I not inquire who is the Master-Builder of this universe, how the mighty bulk was brought under the control of law and order, who gathered together the scattered atoms, who separated the disordered elements and assigned an outward form to the elements that lay...

57. The meditative aspect of philosophy in the model of the Hellenistic world is illuminated especially well by the twentieth-century French philosopher Pierre Hadot. Hadot has described eloquently the manner in which Seneca considered the theoretical discovery of the universe to be a form of meditative prayer in his statements that: “Seneca was equally stupefied by the spectacle of the world (which he contemplated *tamquam spectator novus*), and by the spectacle of wisdom. By ‘wisdom,’ he meant the figure of the sage, as he saw it personified in the personality of the philosopher Sextius. This is a very instructive parallel. There is in fact a strict analogy between the movement by which we accede to the vision of the world, and that by which we postulate the figure of the sage. In the first place, ever since Plato’s *Symposium*, ancient philosophers considered the figure of the sage as an inaccessible role model, whom the *philosopher* (he who loves wisdom) strives to imitate, by means of an ever-renewed effort, practiced at each instant. To contemplate wisdom as personified within a specific personality was thus to carry out a movement of the spirit in which, via the life of this personality, one was led toward the representation of absolute perfection, above and beyond all of its possible realizations. Similarly, in considering a partial aspect of the world, contemplation discovers the totality of the world, going beyond the landscape glimpsed at a given moment, and transcending it on the way to a representation of totality which surpasses every visible object. The contemplation mentioned by Seneca is, moreover, a kind of unitive contemplation. In order to *perceive* the world, we must, as it were, perceive
our *unity with* the world, by means of an exercise of concentration on the present moment. Similarly, in order to recognize wisdom, we must so to speak, go into training for wisdom. We can know a thing only by becoming similar to our object. Thus, by a total conversion, we can render ourselves open to the world and to wisdom. This is why Seneca was just as stupefied and filled with ecstasy by the spectacle of wisdom as he was by the spectacle of the world. For him, in both instances, it was a case of a discovery obtained by dint of an interior transformation and complete change in his way of seeing and living. In the final analysis, both the world as perceived in the consciousness of the sage, and the sage’s consciousness itself, plunged in the totality of the world, are revealed to the lover of wisdom in a single, unique moment.”


58. Due to the fact in the pantheistic perspective of the Stoics the subject of physics investigated Nature which was perceived to be divine, it was essentially equivalent to theology, and even to be called such at times by Chrysippus himself: (Chrysippus from his *On Lives* book 4) “First of all, in my opinion, which corresponds to the correct statements by the ancients, there are three kinds of philosopher’s theorems, logical, ethical, and physical. Secondly what should be ranked first of these are the logical, next the ethical, and third the physical; and what should come last in the physical theorems is theology. Hence the transmission of theology has been called ‘fulfillment.’” Plutarch, *On Stoic Self-Contradictions* 1035A (*SVF* 2.42, part). Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, vol. 1, p. 159.

59. Emphasizing the atemporal aspect of knowledge which is derived through the investigation of the basic causes in nature, A.R. Caponigri discerns the contemplative dimensions of the Senecan view of wisdom as follows: “Man contemplates from the vantage point of the present both past and future, and the mediation of the present both unites past and future into one living whole and imparts the quality of present to this whole in
turn. Man’s past belongs to his present, his future forms an essential part of his present and his present is both one and manifold because it meditates past and future to create a present which is not a void, like that of an animal, but a plenum, a plenum which eventually becomes the seat of eternity itself. Through this form of the perfect time of the full and authentic present, man creates within his own life a microcosm of the eternal present which is the perfect time of the whole of nature.” “Reason and Death,” 149.


This freedom which philosophy affords, he views as both theoretical and practical. On the theoretical level, philosophy provides the opportunity for the mind to commune with the supreme rationality in nature, which is equivalent to god. On the practical level, philosophy allows a person to apply the principles of natural law to specific circumstances so that irrational fears can be disarmed and unfounded desires eliminated. Philosophy provides freedom in the dimension of justice both in a corporeal sense of condemning slavery (on the basis of the rationally based dignity of all human beings) and on the intellectual level of viewing oneself as a citizen of the universe, transcending, although not necessarily disregarding, the legal statutes of any particular civil society.

Analogous to the manner in which Senecan perspective upholds that freedom is accomplished through the practice of philosophy, true freedom in the Christian sense is to obey the will of God. Indeed, John K. Ryan has noted concerning this particular passage of Seneca: “Various prayers in the Latin liturgy refer to God with the words ‘cui servire regnare est’: whom to serve is to reign. This derives from Seneca’s words on philosophy.”

Seneca was indubitably inspired by Epicurus for this conception of philosophy, as he quotes him in the same letter (Frag. 199, Usener): “‘If you would enjoy real freedom, you must be the slave of Philosophy.’” *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, vol. 1, 41 (Ep. VIII.7). “‘Philosophiae servias oportet, ut tibi contingat vera libertas.’” *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales, Tomus I*, 16.


63. The freedom of which philosophy affords in contemplation is resounded in Epistle LXXXVIII in the following fashion: “Wisdom is a large and spacious thing. It needs plenty of free room. One must learn about things divine and human, the past and the future, the ephemeral and the eternal; and one must learn about Time. See how many questions arise concerning time alone: in the first place, whether it is anything in and by itself; in the second place, whether anything exists prior to time and without time; and again, did time begin along with the universe, or, because there was something even before the universe began, did time also exist then? There are countless questions concerning the soul alone: whence it comes, what is its nature, when it begins to exist, and how long it exists; whether it passes from one place to another and changes its habitation, being transferred successively from one animal shape to another, or whether it is a slave but once, roaming the universe after it is set free; whether it is corporeal or not; what will become of it when it ceases to use us as its medium; how it will employ its freedom when it has escaped from this present prison; whether it will forget all its past, and at that moment begin to know itself when, released from the body, it has withdrawn to the skies.” Seneca, *Epistles*, 66–92, vol. 2, 369; 371 (Ep. LXXXVIII.33–34). “Magna et spatiosa res est sapientia; vacuo illi loco opus est; de divinis humanisque discendum est, de praeteritis de futuris, de caducis de aeternis, de tempore. De quo uno vide quam multa quaerantur: primum an per se sit
aliquid; deinde an aliquid ante tempus sit sine tempore; cum mundo coeperit an etiam ante mundum quia fuerit aliquid, fuerit et tempus. Innumerabiles quaestiones sunt de animo tantum: unde sit, qualis sit, quando esse incipiat, quandomu sit, ahhunde alio transeat et domicilia mutet in alias animalia formas aliasque coniectus, an non amplius quam semel serviat et emissus vagetur in toto; utrum corpus sit an non sit; quid sit facturus cum per nos aliquid facere desierit, quomodo libertate sua usurus cum ex hac effingerit cavea; an obliviscatur priorum et illinc nosse se incipiat unde corpori abductus in sublime secessit.” Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales, Tomus I, 320.

Furthermore, in the passage Seneca alludes to the Delphic Oracle’s injunction to “know thyself.” Seneca himself directly quotes the Delphic Oracle’s statement in Latin, “Te nosce,” in Epistle XCIV.28. In order to truly know oneself, one must understand one’s own nature, which participates in the nature of the very universe; as typified by Socrates, the pursuit of this quest for self-knowledge is itself a type of freedom.


65. Indeed, in his remarks concerning the problematic position of proclaiming that philosophy is necessary for the virtuous life, John Henry Newman mentions Seneca by name: “And then I may be reminded that the professors of this Liberal or Philosophical Knowledge have themselves, in every age, recognized this exposition of the matter, and have submitted to the issue in which it terminates; for they have ever been attempting to make men virtuous; or, if not, at least have assumed that refinement of the mind was virtue, and that they themselves were the portion of mankind. This they have professed on the one hand; and on the other, they have utterly failed in their professions, so as ever to make themselves a proverb among men, and a laughing-stock both to the grave and the dissipated portion of mankind, in consequence of them. . . . In a word, from the time that Athens was the University of the world, what has Philosophy taught men, but to promise without practicing, and to aspire without attaining? . . . Did Philosophy support Cicero under the disfavour of the fickle populace, or nerve Seneca to oppose and imperial tyrant?”

The Idea of a University (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 87.

66. Jacques Maritain understands the essential characteristics of education in a manner with is in great general conformance with what could be considered Senecan principles: “Thus the chief tasks of education is above all to shape man, or to guide the evolving dynamism through which man forms himself as man. . . . Education is an art, and an especially difficult one. Yet it belongs by its nature to the sphere of ethics and practical wisdom. Education is an ethical art (or rather a practical wisdom in which a determinate art is embodied). Now every art is a dynamic trend toward an object to be achieved, which is the aim of this art. There is no art without ends, art’s very vitality is the energy with which it tends toward its end, without stopping at any intermediate step. Here we see from the outset the two most general misconceptions against which education must guard itself. The first misconcep-
tion is a lack or disregard for ends. If means are liked and cultivated for the sake of their own perfection, and not as means alone, to that very extent they cease to lead to the end, and art loses its practicality; its vital efficiency is replaced by a process of infinite multiplication, each means developing and spreading for its own sake. This supremacy of means over end and the consequent collapse of all sure purpose and real efficiency seem to be the main reproach to contemporary education. . . . Thus the fact remains that the complete and integral idea of man which is the prerequisite of education can only be a philosophical and religious idea of man. I say philosophical, because this idea pertains to the nature or essence of man; I say religious, because of the existential status of this human nature in relation to God and the special gifts and trials and vocation involved. . . . In answer to our question, then, ‘What is man?’ we may give the Greek, Jewish, and Christian idea of man: man as an animal endowed with reason, whose supreme dignity is in the intellect; and man as a free individual in personal relation to God, whose supreme righteousness consists in voluntarily obeying the law of God; and man as a sinful and wounded creature called to the divine life and to the freedom of grace, whose supreme perfection consists of love.”

