Happiness and the Good in Seneca

Thesis: In *Ep. 120*, one of our most important sources for the Stoic concept of the good, Seneca occasionally layers literary elements over philosophical abstraction. Apart from buttressing Stoic arguments, they also provide moments of respite for the less philosophically inclined reader.

1. Preliminaries of Stoic ethics
   a. rooted in the Socratic school (*eudaimonia*)
   b. the goal of life was to live consistently with nature, both human nature and the nature of the cosmos
   c. the ideal disposition is that of virtue (*arete*); distinction between the good and the valuable/advantageous, parallel distinction between the bad (i.e., vice) and the disadvantageous
      i. preferred and disregarded indifferent are “indifferent” for human happiness
      ii. Socrates and the Stoics agree that only virtue is truly useful: the non-virtuous person can use preferred indifferent badly, for example
   d. once person achieves capacity for rationality, the drive for survival matures into commitment to a life in accordance with reason
   e. human happiness follows from “appropriate” action (*officium*), viz. that which adopts rational justification
      i. no prescribed actions, since circumstances always change; virtue is sufficient
   f. a pair of controversial doctrines: (1) virtue is sufficient for happiness and happiness is all or nothing; (2) passions should be disposed of, not moderated

2. Letter 120
   a. under Stoic theory, human concepts derive from sensory experience, and one of these concepts is the good
      i. acquiring the good requires understanding the good
      ii. truly wise persons are extremely rare
   b. The fundamental question of the letter is (120.1): *quomodo ad nos boni honestique notitia pervenerit*, “How does the notion of the good and of the honest come to us?”
      i. *diversa* vs. *divisa*
ii. natural acquisition and acquisition by chance are ruled out

c. there is a cognitive processing “involved in extracting from our experience of
defectively good deeds a conception of virtue” (Inwood 2005)

d. Fabricius and Horatius, the revealers of virtue

i. we consider their deeds rather than their whole character

ii. not intended to represent perfect exemplars: they have hidden flaws, and they
do not define virtue in the Stoic sense

iii. Nature has inclined people to minimize the defects of examples like these “in
order to give us an essential starting point for the notion of the good” (Inwood
2005)

e. The ability to understand the good also arises from reflection on the close relationship
of vices with their corresponding virtues (120.11):

Ex quo ergo virtutem intelleximus? Ostendit illam nobis ordo eius et decor et constantia et
omnium inter se actionum concordia et magnitudo super omnia effere sese.

From what therefore have we understood virtue? The order of this man, his propriety,
steadfastness, harmony of all actions among themselves, and a greatness raising itself
above everything shows virtue to us.

f. the description of the sage

i. bodily detachment (120.14):

Quod numquam magis divinum est, quam ubi mortalitatem suam cogitat et scit in
hoc natum hominem, ut vita defungeretur, nec domum esse hoc corpus,

sed

hospitium, et quidem breve hospitium, quod relinquendum est, ubi te gravem
esse hospiti videas.

But that is never more divine than when it thinks about its mortality and
understands that man was born to this so that he discharges life, and that the
body is not a home but a lodging—and indeed a brief stay—which is to be
abandoned when you see that you are burdensome to the host.

ii. a Platonic excursus, “the function of which in the letter is not immediately
obvious” (Inwood 2005)

g. Seneca’s use of literary precedents

i. Horatius Cocles appears in Livy 2.10:
Tiberine pater, te sancte precor, haec arma et hunc militem propitio flumine accipias.

“Father Tiber, I beseech you, holy one, that you receive these arms and this solider with a favorable stream.”

Cf. Ennius fr. 22 Skutsch:

tequi pater Tiberine tuo cum flumine sancto

“and you, father Tiber, with your sacred stream...”

Cf. Seneca 120.7:

Postquam respexit et extra periculum esse patriam periculo suo sensit, “veniat, si quis vult,” inquit, “sic euntem sequi.”

After he looked back and saw that his country, by means of his own danger, was outside of danger, he said, “If anyone wishes to pursue me thus going, let him come!”

ii. Seneca at 120.20 cites Hor. Sat. 1.3.11–17 to help visualize fluctuatio, maximum indicium est malae mentis, “the greatest indication of a bad mind”:

Habebat saepe ducentos,
saepe decem servos; modo reges atque tetrarchas,
omnia magna loquens, modo “sit mihi mensa tripes et
concha salis puri, toga quae defendere frigus
quamvis crassa queat”; decies centena dedisses
huic parco, paucis contento; quinque diebus
nil erat.

He used to sometimes have two hundred slaves,
and sometimes ten. Just now speaking of kings and tetrarchs,
and all great things, he then says:
“May I have a three-legged table
and an oyster of pure salt, and a toga which, although coarse,
is able to keep out the cold.” If you’d given him—
frugal, content with little as he was—a million,
within five days there was sure to be nothing.

a. The verses of Horace (1.3.19–20) that immediately follow where Seneca’s citation ends are relevant to one of the main points of Ep. 120:

Nunc aliquis dicat mihi: quid tu?
nullane habes vitia? immo alia et fortasse minora.
Now someone may ask me: “What about you? Do you have no faults?” Indeed, others, and perhaps less bad ones.

Bibliography


