

IV.—Stoic Apatheia and Seneca's *De Clementia*

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This paper is summarized in the last paragraph.

The philosopher Seneca's rather remarkable address to the throne, comprised in the partially extant *De Clementia*, anticipates as a major theme Portia's

'Tis mightiest in the mightiest: it becomes  
The throned monarch better than his crown,<sup>1</sup>

in the ancient writer's enthusiastic and encomiastic recommendation of mercy as a proper attribute for the prince. Est ergo, he says,<sup>2</sup> ut dicebam, clementia omnibus quidem hominibus secundum naturam, maxime tamen decora imperatoribus, quanto plus habet apud illos, quod servet, quantoque in maiore materia apparet. The essay itself, first presented in late 55 or early 56 A.D.,<sup>3</sup> proposes to deal with three topics,<sup>4</sup> graciousness or the remission of penalties, the nature and habit of mercy, and the means of arriving at mercy as a fixed and permanent endowment. The first of these divisions is treated in the extant first book; the second is partially handled in the extant chapters of the second book; it may be presumed that the last was the subject matter of the lost third book.

The treatise itself is attractively written, displaying Seneca at his rhetorical best, and yet embracing within its stylistic adornment a very considerable burden of solid content. The prince is said to hold upon earth the place of the gods;<sup>5</sup> he is to the mass of the citizenry as the human mind is to the body;<sup>6</sup> he shares with the gods

<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare, *Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.187 f.

<sup>2</sup> *Clem.* 1.5.2.

<sup>3</sup> This is the traditional view. Cf. *Clem.* 1.9.1: cum hoc aetatis esset, quod tu nunc es, duodevicesimum egressus annum. Nero's eighteenth birthday was on December 15, 55 A.D. But a date in late summer or early autumn of 58 A.D. is proposed by L. Herrmann, "La date du *De Clementia*," *REL* 7 (1929) 94-103.

<sup>4</sup> *Clem.* 1.3.1. That the treatise was never completed in ancient times is debated by P. Vallette, "Le *De Clementia* de Sénèque est-il mutilé ou inachevé?" *Mél. P. Thomas* (Bruges, 1930) 687-700.

<sup>5</sup> *Clem.* 1.1.2; not a novel idea, as Hor. *C.* 1.12.51 f. shows, the poet saying to Jove: Tu secundo Caesare regnes.

<sup>6</sup> *Clem.* 1.3.5.

the power to save or to destroy;<sup>7</sup> he is so genuinely the parent of the state as to deserve entirely the honorary title of *pater patriae*;<sup>8</sup> he consents to just penalties only with extreme hesitation and reluctance.<sup>9</sup>

That the address was not ineffectual with Seneca's royal pupil, in the early years of the principate, the so-called *quinquennium Neronis*, seems well established. Allan P. Ball<sup>10</sup> quotes Tacitus' remark<sup>11</sup> to the effect that Nero's two mentors or regents prevented him from besmirching the beginning of his reign with murders: *Burrus militaribus curis et severitate morum, Seneca praeceptis eloquentiae et comitate honesta*, where the *praecepta eloquentiae* may well have included the admonitions of the *De Clementia*; noted, too, is Suetonius' testimonial<sup>12</sup> to Nero's eagerness to please his associates: *neque liberalitatis neque clementiae, ne comitatis quidem exhibendae, ullam occasionem omisit*.

## A

Now since Seneca is consistently writing as a confirmed Stoic, the decidedly warm-hearted and humanly sympathetic tone and precepts of the *De Clementia* may appear somewhat at variance with traditional Stoic dogmas. We are likely to think of acts of mercy as proceeding from feelings of pity or compassion, and these feelings, in turn, would seem to be opposed to the traditional Stoic ideal of freedom from emotion, passionlessness, *apatheia*. "Pity," says Edwyn Bevan,<sup>13</sup> in speaking of the Stoic mind, "in the sense of a painful emotion caused by the sight of other men's suffering, is actually a vice." Zeller<sup>14</sup> remarks that "Emotion or passion is a movement of mind contrary to reason and nature, an impulse transgressing the right mean. The Peripatetic notion, that certain emotions are in accord with nature, was stoutly denied by the Stoics."

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 1.5.7.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 1.14.2.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 2.1.2 f.

<sup>10</sup> *Selected Essays of Seneca* (New York, 1908) 151.

<sup>11</sup> *Ann.* 13.2.1 f.

<sup>12</sup> *Nero* 10.

<sup>13</sup> *Stoics and Sceptics* (Oxford, 1913) 67. Yet G. H. Rendall, *Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, To Himself* (London, 1898) lxxi, insists that "In man, impulses and affections are not of necessity irrational; on this point the language of Chrysippus is unmis-takable."

<sup>14</sup> Translated by O. J. Reichel, *The Stoics, Epicureans, and Sceptics* (London, 1870) 229; to be cited hereafter as Zeller's *Stoics*.

Zeno of Citium himself, founder of the system, repeatedly insists upon the doctrine of *apatheia*. Speaking of freedom from the emotions, he teaches that such a state is possible: quibus ad perfectum carere iuxta Stoicos possibile est, Zenonem videlicet et Chrysippum.<sup>15</sup> To Zeno, passion was irrational and an unnatural movement of the soul,<sup>16</sup> while the ideal wise man was himself passionless;<sup>17</sup> only the fool felt pity.<sup>18</sup>

Further, Zeno taught that the major emotions, *πάθη*, *perturbationes*, fell into four great classes, grief, fear, desire, pleasure: *λύπη*, *aegritudo*; *φόβος*, *metus*; *ἐπιθυμία*, *cupido*; *ἡδονή*, *voluptas*; and that pity, *ἔλεος*, *miserecordia*, was a subdivision of grief, roused by undeserved suffering.<sup>19</sup> Such disturbances or perturbations of mind he identified with false judgments, and taught that they should be wholly extirpated by the Stoic sage.<sup>20</sup> For Zeno, as well as for the Stoics of all periods, virtue alone sufficed for true happiness;<sup>21</sup> such virtue, in turn, supposed a freedom from all passion.<sup>22</sup> For it was, again in traditional Stoic teaching, an easier thing to eliminate the passions than to govern them.<sup>23</sup>

Hence the ideal Stoic sage of the Old School — many of whose characteristics naturally persisted in Middle Stoicism and Roman Stoicism — was essentially a somewhat cold, passionless, and “apathetic” individual, living entirely in himself. “To sum up,” says Zeller,<sup>24</sup> “the wise man is absolutely perfect, absolutely free from passion and want, absolutely happy; as the Stoics exclusively assert, he in no way falls short of the happiness of Zeus, since time, the only point in which he differs from Zeus, does not augment happiness at all.”

<sup>15</sup> St. Jerome, *Dialog. adv. Pelagianos*, MPL 23 col. 542: a fragment not included in Von Arnim's *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*, but noted by the Rev. Clemens W. Buetzler, S.C.J., in an unpublished doctoral dissertation, *The Stoic Zeno in the Greek and Latin Church Fathers* (Saint Louis, Saint Louis University, 1945) 69.

<sup>16</sup> Diog. Laert. 7.110.

<sup>17</sup> D.L. 7.117.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Cic. *Mur.* 61: neminem misericordem esse, nisi stultum et levem.

<sup>19</sup> Diog. Laert. 7.110 f.

<sup>20</sup> Cic. *Acad.* 1.38 f.; cf. also *Tusc.* 4.60 for the Stoic view: ipsas perturbationes per se esse vitiosas.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Sen. *Vita Beata* 16.1: in virtute posita est vera felicitas.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 3.4, 4.3. Cf. Cic. *Off.* 1.69: vacandum autem est omni animi perturbatione.

<sup>23</sup> Sen. *Ira* 1.7.2: facilius est excludere pernicioiosa quam regere, et non admittere quam admissa moderari.

<sup>24</sup> *Stoics* 254.

## B

In the face, then, of such apparently anti-social attitudes on the part of the early Stoic sage, the bridge to the highly humanitarian and humane attitude of Seneca in the *De Clementia* with regard to mercy may appear a difficult one to envision. It would appear, however, that four factors, at least, enter into the construction of this bridge, and with these the remaining portion of this study will deal. They are (1) the admission from the earliest days of Stoicism of speculation on man in society and state; (2) the generally dynamic character of Stoicism from its earliest foundations; (3) the growing respect among Stoics in the Middle and Roman periods for Plato and the Platonic school; (4) the accommodation by Panaetius of Middle Stoicism to the philosophical needs of the ruling class at Rome in the second century before Christ.

As to the *first* of these factors, it should be borne in mind that, from the days of Zeno on, Stoicism consistently held as the norm and rule of life a "living in accord with nature," τὸ ὁμολογουμένως τῇ φύσει ζῆν,<sup>25</sup> *secundum naturam vivere*. Here *nature* was interpreted by the second Stoic scholarch Cleanthes as the nature of the universe alone, and by his successor Chrysippus as both universal nature and more particularly human nature.<sup>26</sup> Now since any adequate treatment of the duties and obligations of man necessarily extended to a consideration of man in society, it is not surprising to find in Diogenes Laertius' listing of the books of Zeno<sup>27</sup> works on *The Commonwealth* (reputed to be his earliest), on *Duty*, on *Law*, and on *Greek Education*. Chrysippus affirmed that nothing prevented the sage's entry into political life, since in fact he would thereby restrain evil and advance goodness; and Zeno says in his *Commonwealth* that the wise man will marry and beget children.<sup>28</sup> Again, both Zeno and Chrysippus<sup>29</sup> held that in the state there should be a community of wives among the sages, as a means of stirring paternal love for all the children alike, and as putting an end to the jealousies arising from adultery; simultaneously, they maintained that the best form of government was one representing a fusion of democracy, aristocracy, and kingship.

<sup>25</sup> Diog. Laert. 7.87.

<sup>26</sup> D.L. 7.89.

<sup>27</sup> D.L. 7.4.

<sup>28</sup> D.L. 7.121.

<sup>29</sup> D.L. 7.131, 33.

Yet as if to vindicate the *apatheia* and passionlessness of Old Stoicism in these social speculations, Chrysippus<sup>30</sup> held that the wise, while themselves giving no offense and working no harm, were without compassion or forgiveness for anyone; they never softened the strict penalties of the law, since yielding to pity and considerations of equity characterized a weak mind that made a display of kindness instead of chastisement; nor did they regard chastisements themselves as severe.

Hence these speculations upon man as a social, and particularly a political, being in the teachings of the early Stoic scholars may be regarded as the first in a series of steps towards the ideal concept of the merciful ruler envisioned by Seneca in the *De Clementia*.

The *second* factor, the dynamic character of Stoicism, is obvious from its first inception, if we understand by "dynamic" a lack of fixity and stability in favor of growth, development, and adaptation. Basing its physical teachings upon those of Heraclitus, borrowing generously from the Megarian Euclides for its logic, and resting its early ethical tenets upon the doctrines of Antisthenes and his fellow Cynics, Stoicism yet felt free to reinterpret and augment in all three departments. No one man is identified with Stoicism, in the sense, for example, that Epicureanism is but a projection of Epicurus himself, so that the proudest boast of his ablest successors was that they were walking closely in the footsteps of the master.<sup>31</sup> The very vastness of the Stoic system proved too heavy a tax upon the powers of its founder Zeno, and it remained for the third scholar, Chrysippus,<sup>32</sup> to restate and reformulate, to such a degree that he has been justly styled the second founder of the system. Further, a certain commodiousness within the school allowed considerable variation in the teachings of individual Stoic

<sup>30</sup> D.L. 7.123. Seneca is directly opposed, *Clem.* 1.14.1 f.: nemo ad supplicia exigenda pervenit, nisi qui remedia consumpsit. Hoc, quod parenti, etiam principi faciendum est, quem appellavimus *Patrem Patriae* non adulatione vana adducti.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Lucret. 3.3-6: Te sequor, o Graiae gentis decus, inque tuis nunc Ficta pedum pono pressis vestigia signis, Non ita certandi cupidus quam propter amorem Quod te imitari aveo. According to Diog. Laert. 10.35 f., Epicurus urged his followers to commit to memory epitomes of his own teachings.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Diog. Laert. 7.179, where Chrysippus is said to have differed on most points with Zeno and Cleanthes. Cf. Norman W. DeWitt, "Roman Epicureanism," *TRSC* (Section ii, 1945) 31-41, who asserts that Stoicism even stole choice doctrines from Epicureanism; instancing (p. 38) Cicero's presentation of the thoughts of the *De Amicitia* and the *De Senectute* as Stoic, though "both of these topics are integral elements of Epicureanism."

mentors at any one time, without their incurring a charge of heterodoxy; even in certain seemingly cardinal doctrines of the system, such as that of the periodic conflagration of the universe and its reduction to the primal substance of the Stoic deity, a preceptor might "suspend his judgment" and refuse positive assent.

The *third* factor, seen in an increasing respect among the Stoics for Platonism and similar teachings, appears especially in the period of Middle Stoicism<sup>33</sup> and continues in the subsequent days of Roman Stoicism. That Platonism became increasingly influential with the Porch in these years is suggested in W. W. Tarn's perhaps over-enthusiastic appraisal of the place of Stoicism in the Hellenistic world:<sup>34</sup>

The philosophy of the Hellenistic world was the Stoa; all else was secondary. What we see, broadly speaking, as we look down the three centuries, is that Aristotle's school loses all importance, and Plato's, for a century and a half, becomes a parasite upon the Stoa in the sense that its life as a school of scepticism consists wholly in combating Stoic doctrine; Epicurus' school continues unchanged, but only attracts small minorities; but the Stoa, which meanwhile had taken under its shield both popular and astral religion and many forms of superstition, finally masters Scepticism, in fact though not in argument, and takes to itself enough of a revived Platonism to form that modified Stoicism or Eclecticism which was the distinguishing philosophy of the earlier Roman empire.

Cicero,<sup>35</sup> in speaking of the attitude of Panaetius, dominant figure in earlier Middle Stoicism (as Posidonius was in latter Middle Stoicism), testifies to the same tendency; referring to the excesses of Old Stoicism, he says:

Quam illorum tristitiam atque asperitatem fugiens Panaetius nec acerbiter sententiarum nec disserendi spinas probavit, fuitque in altero genere mitior, in altero illustrior, semperque habuit in ore Platonem, Aristotelem, Xenocratem, Theophrastum, Dicaearchum, ut ipsius scripta declarant.

Similarly, in the professedly Stoic or Panaetian *De Officiis*, Cicero, with reference to the social duties of man, expressly makes

<sup>33</sup> The "Middle School" is commonly thought of as running from the time of the "Philosophers' Delegation" to Rome in 155 B.C. (cf. Gellius 6.14.8-10) until the death of Cicero in 43 B.C.

<sup>34</sup> *Hellenistic Civilization*<sup>2</sup> (London, 1930) 290.

<sup>35</sup> *Fin.* 4.79.

Plato<sup>36</sup> his authority. In brief, Zeller<sup>37</sup> remarks that, while "the speculative portions of Plato's teaching could offer no strong attractions to such practical men and materialists as the Stoics . . ." yet "there were not wanting in Platonism features possessing for them attractions," such as:

the Socratic building of virtue on knowledge, the comparative depreciation of external goods, the retreat from sensuality, the elevation of the purity of the moral ideal, and, in the Older Academy, the demand for life according to nature, the doctrine of the self-sufficiency of virtue, and the growing tendency to confine philosophy to practical questions.

The *fourth* and by far the most important factor was the accommodation by Panaetius and Polybius of Stoicism to the needs of the ruling class at Rome in the second century before Christ, along with the general modifications in the body of Stoic teachings, which, under Panaetius, mark the turn to Middle Stoicism.

The story of Polybius' and Panaetius' connections with the Scipionic Circle at Rome during its most flourishing period under Scipio Aemilianus Africanus Minor, conqueror of Carthage in the Third Punic War, is well known.<sup>38</sup> From a date shortly after the close of that struggle in 146 B.C. until the death of Scipio in 129, Panaetius was closely associated with Scipio, so much so that the Roman was said to have the philosopher and the historian Polybius constantly with him.<sup>39</sup> Thus the *coterie* of Roman intellectuals and enlightened Greeks grouped about Scipio proved the effective means of transplanting a modified Stoicism from Greece to Italy, and of laying the foundations of that sure grasp upon Roman thought that Stoicism was to enjoy for many centuries.

<sup>36</sup> 1.22.

<sup>37</sup> *Stoics* 376. Whether Platonic influence bore directly, for example, on the development of Stoic ideals of *humanitas* has been questioned. I am chiefly concerned here with the acceptance of Platonic influence as a sign of the dynamic character of Stoicism. But see Paul Friedländer, "Socrates Enters Rome," *AJPh* 66 (1945) 337-351, who develops the thesis that Polybius, under Platonic influence, tutored the young Aemilius (later Scipio Aemilianus, head of the Scipionic Circle in its greatest period) in doctrines which were to become distinctive in the Scipionic Circle.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Ruth M. Brown, *A Study of the Scipionic Circle* (Iowa Studies in Classical Philology, No. 1, 1934).

<sup>39</sup> Vell. Pater. 1.13.3: Scipio . . . Polybium Panaetiumque, praecllentes ingenio viros, domi militiaeque secum habuerit. For Polybius' encouragement of Scipio as a very young man, cf. Polybius 31.23.7-24; the story is elaborated in G. C. Fiske, *Lucilius and Horace* (University of Wisconsin Studies, No. 7, 1920) 69 f.

Among the important teachings of Panaetius was a distinction between the *theoretical* and the *practical* virtues; variously designated as ἀρετὴ θεωρητικὴ or κατόρθωμα or *perfectum officium*, as opposed to ἀρετὴ πρακτικὴ or καθήκον or *medium officium*.<sup>40</sup> His emphasis, apparently, was altogether upon "duties" of the second order; it is his *περὶ καθήκοντος* that Cicero is professedly employing<sup>41</sup> in the first and second books of his own *De Officiis*. With Panaetius, too, the stricter *apatheia* of Old Stoicism gave way to *eupatheia*, a kind of "rational disposition" which the Stoics now attributed to the wise man, citing affections like "rational elation," "rational avoidance," and "rational appetency" — in such a way that they theoretically continued to deny them as passions (thus saving a theoretical *apatheia* for the sage) while in actual practice they were hardly to be distinguished from passions as controlled.<sup>42</sup>

But the most influential contribution of Panaetius and Polybius was in the development of that *humanitas* that was to become the distinguishing mark of the Scipionic Circle and its happiest heritage to later generations of Roman thinkers. In brief, *humanitas*<sup>43</sup> meant a whole attitude of life, affecting a man in himself and in all his external relations, setting an ideal and a standard for all social and political activities, as well as for art, literature, and culture generally. It was the motivation of Cicero's recognition of a social order so broad as to include all mankind simply as human beings,<sup>44</sup> and of Seneca's *servi — immo homines* in the letter<sup>45</sup> which is probably in all Roman literature the most significant document on a more humane attitude to the slave. Such "humanizing" attitudes in a developing and dynamic Stoicism naturally worked against the older concept of a sage utterly passionless and utterly unmoved,

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Diog. Laert. 7.92; Cic. *Off.* 1.8, 3.13–20, *Fin.* 3.58–59; Sen. *Epist.* 116.5. Cicero, *Off.* 1.8, seems to confuse rather than to clarify the distinction by speaking of *medium officium* and *perfectum officium* as constituting *alia divisio officii*; yet he is clearer in 3.13–20. See the discussion *ad locum* in Hubert Ashton Holden, *M. Tulli Ciceronis De Officiis Libri Tres*<sup>3</sup> (Cambridge, 1899) 154 f.

<sup>41</sup> *Off.* 1.6 f.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Gellius 12.5.10; Zeller's *Stoics* 273–275; E. Vernon Arnold, *Roman Stoicism* (Cambridge, 1911) 324.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Oscar E. Nybakken, "Humanitas Romana," *TAPhA* 70 (1939) 396–413, where pertinent literature on the subject is called to attention; Fiske (*op. cit.*, see note 39) 73–74, conveniently summarizes the concept.

<sup>44</sup> *Off.* 1.51: latissime quidem patens hominibus inter ipsos, omnibus inter omnes, societas haec est; cf. Sen. *Ben.* 1.10. J. F. D'Alton, *Roman Literary Theory and Criticism* (London, 1931) 31, summarizes the contribution of Panaetius to *humanitas*.

<sup>45</sup> *Epist.* 47.1.



and tended to transform the ideal wise man into a humanitarian public servant whose sympathies were coextensive with mankind, whose inherited "cosmopolitanism" inclined to translate the hazy *cosmopolis* of earlier theory into the actuality of a world ruling Rome.

## C

Under these circumstances Seneca, a practical rather than a theoretical student of Stoicism, a man of wealth and influence, but withal a sincere lover of his fellow man,<sup>46</sup> found no inconsistency in advising, as a Stoic, an attitude of warm kindness and mercy to the young prince for whom he held the precarious office of regent. To be sure, he did pay service to traditional *apatheia* by a distinction, whereby he pronounced *clementia* a virtue but made a vice of its alleged opposite *miser cordia* (a subdivision of *aegritudo*), illustrating his point by the statement that *clementia* is to *religio* (genuine piety) as *miser cordia* is to *superstitio* (debased superstition).<sup>47</sup>

Yet this distinction was hardly necessary, to justify him, as an orthodox contemporary Stoic, in the enthusiastic recommendation to the young Nero of a warm-hearted and thoroughly humane mercy in administration. Stoicism in the Old School had proposed a passionless *apatheia* as the ideal for the wise man. But the Old School likewise admitted speculations on man in society and state and so began a cleavage that would ultimately admit the full stature of Senecan humaneness. Similarly, Stoicism was from the very earliest days dynamic and adaptable, as its later friendliness to Platonic doctrines was to display. Finally, Panaetius and his associates in the Scipionic Circle, by their adaptation of Middle Stoicism to the needs of the ruling class at Rome in the second century, and especially by their development of the concept of *humanitas*, paved the way for Seneca's own application of a plastic Stoicism to the requirements of his day, especially in the ideals which he felt should actuate the Roman prince.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Francis Holland, *Seneca* (London, 1920) 176 f.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. *Clem.* 2.3-5 *passim*.

<sup>48</sup> I wish to express my indebtedness also to the members of my Seminar in Roman Stoicism, at Saint Louis University, in the fall of 1946.