

The paradox of time in Stoic education

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Abstract.

This paper aims to analyse the relation between education and time in the writings of Seneca. The Roman philosopher distinguishes real life (*vita otiosa*) and unreal life (*vita desidiosa*). In this way, he associates time with virtue or with vice. But the time of virtue isn't in fact eternity? And is time of vice nothing, non-existence? Education represents a transition from vice to virtue, and in this process the really important is the scope. Education, since it represents transition, should evolve in time. Given the fact that the end of the educational process at Seneca is virtue, as likeness to God, the situation could be different.

Key words: education, time, virtue, ontological consistency, divinity

Resumen. *La paradoja del tiempo en la educación estoica.*

En este artículo me propongo analizar la relación entre educación y tiempo en la obra de Seneca. El filósofo romano distingue entre la vida real (*vita otiosa*) y la vida imaginaria (*vita desidiosa*). A este respecto, Seneca relaciona el concepto del tiempo con la virtud o con el vicio. Mientras que el tiempo de la virtud no es realmente eternidad? Y lo del vicio no es nada, inexistencia? La educación es el paso del vicio hacia la virtud y, en este proceso, lo que es realmente importante es el objetivo. La educación, por ser transición, tendrá que realizarse con el paso del tiempo. Dado que, según Séneca, el fin del proceso educativo es la virtud, proveyendo analogía con la Deidad, la situación podría resultar diferente.

Palabras clave: educación, tiempo, virtud, consistencia ontológica, divinidad.

The philosophical concept of time (chronos) in ancient times

The idea, according to which time is duration, interval and change, is not only the result of a laborious philosophical research that exists since antic philosophy, but is also a spontaneous idea of the human mind. When we use the word "time" in common speaking, we always refer to duration. Time is a dimension of the Universe, according to which irreversible successions of phenomena and of actions organize themselves. It is a period measured in hours, weeks, years etc, that corresponds with the evolvement of an action, a phenomenon, an event; succession of moments; interval, lapse, leisure. In pre-philosophic cosmogonies

time is a powerful figure that lays at the basis of the entire process of creation. It equally governs and leads the *Kosmos*.

Philosophical speculation brings about an additional profundity in shaping the concept of time. At Empedocles and Anaximander, time is situated outside the Cosmos. But even if it is outside the Cosmos, it does not represent anything but the unlimited. The Cosmos means order, and everything that is outside it lacks order. We have here a nonreciprocal relation: what is not order (time) as an assembly, it comes to bring order to the world (to the Cosmos). Time has influence on the Cosmos, but the Cosmos doesn't influence time.

According to Heraclitus time really exists only as a perpetual transition but Parmenides says that only eternity and persistence really exist. Plato maintains the distinction between the unlimited, extra cosmic time and limited, countable and cosmic time. Significantly new dimensions will be now associated with both of the categories of time. Unlimited time is no longer an indefinite *apeiron* but a static way of the *eide-s*. Cosmic time is similar to movement and plurality and extra-cosmic time (now in fact eternity) is identical with stability and unity. At Plato, *chronos* is an *eikon*, "an eternal image (*eikon*) that moves according to the number, of the eternity (*aion*) that rests in the One ¹". Shortly, time has the ontological consistency given its special relationship with eternity. But time is movement and plurality (*chronos* is countable) while eternity is static and is characterised by unity. Eternity is characteristic to creature and time is characteristic to creation.

The Stoics replace the number (used by Plato and Aristotle) with the interval, and the interval is corporal. Zenon said that "time is the dimension of any movement²". Chrysippos as well considered that "time is an interval of movement, meaning, it opposes sometimes with being the measure of swiftness and of slowness; or the interval that accompanies the motion of the Cosmos³". We don't find the Platonic distinction between eternity (*aion*) and time (*eikon*) in the texts of Greek Stoics.

Seneca's Stoicism is an original one. He takes over and borrows some of the concepts of the Greek Stoics without being dogmatic. Further on I will try to determine whether Seneca shows originality when he tackles the problem of time.

Time or eternity?

By analyzing Seneca's work my main objective is to answer the following questions:
 Is there a unitary use, a single meaning of the term "time" (*tempus*) in Seneca's writings?
 Is there a reference of time with eternity, do we have an ontological sub-layer of time?
 By researching the existence of an internal duration of time, we are faced, at least at the beginning with a contradictory situation. First of all, in the *De brevitate vitae*, Seneca

1 *Timaios*, 37d

2 Simplicius, *In Aristot. Categorias*, 80, a, 4

3 Stobaeus, *Eclogae*, I. p. 106 ,5 W

dissociates between a well lived time and badly lived time, meaning time that has life and time that is lifeless. We might be tempted to consider that the simple presence of this distinction offers us already an answer to our first question. But we cannot deduce the essence of this time by the simple enumeration. It is possible, that the same time, with the same meaning, is sometimes associated with life and sometimes with the absence of life. This situation might seem, for the beginning, perhaps, contradictory. But there might be an explanation that would determine us to affirm that in fact it is a false contradiction.

But how does the Corduban philosopher characterize the time of vice? I will expose for this purpose some sentences that describe this time: “the present time is so short that it seems to some of us as if it didn’t exist at all⁴” or “this life of yours, even if it will pass one thousand years, will be limited by a too narrow space; your vice will swallow any time⁵” or “this time is only time, it has no life⁶”.

A superficial approach of the subject could determine us to affirm that by accumulating time with vice, time would be compressed. The time of vice is “too short” it shows man an insufficiency of his life.

But for all that it still exists, it has duration. But the presence of the expression “it has no life” justifies our attempt to understand differently the time of vice. Does the above mentioned expression refer to the absence of an ontological sub-layer of the time of vice? In order to answer this question it is also necessary to analyse the time of virtue. The situation would have a simple solution if time lived according to virtue, the time that has life, was in the other category. If in this case time means essential change, duration. Time of virtue should be associated with the interval, and should be a favourable environment for change accomplished by stages.

Referring to time of virtue, Seneca affirms that: “Life is long enough, and a sufficiently generous amount has been given to us for the highest achievements if it was all well invested⁷” or “our life lasts long for that sets it out well⁸”.

Here as well, we might have an initial and a superficial impression. This would oppose the first impression we would have by passing through the texts about the time of vice. Initially, we have the impression that there is an extended time, a time with a duration that is “long enough”. For all that, it is inevitable for us to observe that in this case as well, the word “life” appears in both paragraphs. But here we have “with life” and not “without life”. May we deduce that this is about the ontological consistent time?

In order to elucidate this problem, I consider it useful to exhaustively go through the text. On this way, we observe that in the second part of the paper mentioned here the

4 Seneca, *De brevitate vitae*, 10,6

5 Ibidem, 6,4

6 Ibidem, 2,2

7 Ibidem, 1,3

8 Ibidem, 1,4

distinction between the time of vice and time of virtue are more and more developed. And I don't believe it is about a simple rhetoric exaggeration.

The Roman philosopher says about the vicious that by the end of their life (which is anyhow very short) they will understand that "they were so busy not doing nothing for such a long time⁹". And perhaps just Nothing could have characterised the time of vice. It is not problematic only because of the psychological appearance of its lack: "the time that I love is short and quick and it becomes shorter because of their vice¹⁰". This time is problematic, and sometimes by an extended but negative presence "any deferred thing he hoped for it seems for them long" and "days are not long for them but ugly¹¹".

No matter if it is long or short, in this time of vice nothing happens. In this case we have only an apparent modification, change. The man with no authentic life records automatically a false transition. He knows he was born in a more or less far off past, but he doesn't explain to himself how this time passed. Here, time has no ontological consistency, it is only a useless transition because nothing essential changes. At the limit of the time of vice, there is nothing.

Seneca's text further explains us "they (the philosophers) add all ages to theirs ... no age forbids their entry, we have access to all ... we have a lot of time to go through¹²". Only "people who have time for philosophy live truly¹³". The time of the wise isn't only the time of his own life but the past of the entire manhood as well, if this past refers all that thinkers obtained on the field of wisdom. Besides the fact, as we earlier ascertained, effectively, the wise lives more during the time of his life, he has access to the life, experiences and thoughts of its famous ancestors: "no one will waste your years, on the contrary, he will add his to yours¹⁴".

The life of the philosopher, Seneca textually affirms, it is not restrained by limits, at not by the same limits as those of other people. The past is for them a fecundated memory; the present is life in the real sense of the word and the future is anticipated: "the wise come ahead". More than this, "by gathering all times in a single one, the philosopher makes his life long¹⁵". These last words cannot impede us to think about eternity. First of all, this thing happens because of denying the distinction among past, present and future and the affirmation of their simultaneity.

All in all, in *De brevitate vitae* Seneca applies two meanings of the word time. But it does not refer to time as an interval, but as the time of vice, that is lost and the time

9 Ibidem, 16,1

10 Ibidem, 16,4

11 Ibidem, 16,3-16,4

12 Ibidem, 14,1

13 Ibidem, 14,1

14 Ibidem, 15,1

15 Ibidem, 15,5

of virtue that is eternal. The paradox is that the two times are being distinguished and neither of them is time. Sometimes we can find the use of “time” as a synonym for the word “eternity” and some other time in the sense of nothing. Although the Roman thinker affirms “Nothing ... is ours, except time.¹⁶”, for him the time as an ontological sub-layer does not exist. We have nothing, i.e. the vice and what is supposed to be time, but it does not attain its goal and then it is not time. And we have the eternity of virtue. Or, given the fact that education assumes a successive character, time should be present as an interval, an interval that in the same time is also ontological consistent. On the contrary, the education of the man, his transition from the vice to the virtue, cannot be explained. But in this text there is the existence and non-existence. There is no creation.

Time as past, present and future

In order to offer a solution for the problem of time it might be useful to take a look at the texts of other Roman Stoics. By considering that time is among the things that are in our power or among the things that are not in our power, the Stoic interpretation gives us an answer. This way, the Roman Stoics are eminent by the fact that they have privileged the present in relation with the past and the future. The past and the future are not in our power, they do not depend on us, and therefore, they do not represent a legitimate preoccupation. Only present depends on us and we must concentrate about this, the Stoic Romans affirms. This point of view is specific to the texts of Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius. Epictetus would affirm that “laziness, the fear of what might happen¹⁷” lies under the dignity of the wise. By fearing from the future, we have only the sign of a deficient presence of judgement. The self relies on an illusion. In the same time he despises this way the only reality worth considering: the present. Marcus Aurelius recommends a spiritual exercise where consciousness is entirely ascribed to the present. He affirms: “Do not allow the future to trouble your mind; for you will come to it, if come you must, bringing with you the same reason that you now apply to the affairs of the present¹⁸”. But the exploitation of the present must coincide with its reduction to the dimensions that are specific to it, giving the event, the happening its own specificity:

Do not disturb yourself by picturing your life as a whole; do not assemble in your mind the many and varied troubles which have come to you in the past and will come again in the future, but ask yourself with regard to every present trouble: ‘What is there in this which is unbearable and beyond endurance?’ You would be ashamed to confess it! And then remind yourself that it is no the

16 Seneca, *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium*, Epist. I, 3

17 Epictet, *Diatribes*, II, 7,9

18 Marcus Aurelius, *Meditationes*, 7.8

future or what has passed by that afflicts you, but always the present, and the power of this is much diminished if you take in isolation, and call your mind to task if it thinks that it cannot stand up to it taken on its own.¹⁹

Searching an answer to our problem, we must highlight the fact that at Seneca time is positive; time associated to virtue does not tend to reduce limits. On the contrary. As we have seen, the time of the wise extends, it becomes a unique time of the unified present, past and future.

We might be tempted to consider that the text of Seneca, by which he claims living the past of the wise ancestors, the lively present and the anticipated future, a text cited at the end of the anterior part of the work, which is similar but not identical with the not less famous text of Chrysippos: "only the present time exists; the past and future exist only in the present time"²⁰. But the difference here is a significant one: at Seneca, there is also present and past and future, but at Chrysippos only the present without past and future.

Surely it is about a reduction of the dimensions of time at the earlier mentioned Stoic philosophers. This must not coincide with giving a more restraint value to time. The explanation is logical given the fact that Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius address to the man willing to live the authentic existing that tends to be disturbed because of its past or future. And Seneca talks about the complete wise that will raise and end up living with no stress.

Time as an opportune moment

I found no solution for the problem of time at Seneca, by limiting to the text *De brevitae vitae*. It is true that this paper mainly deals with senecan meditation about time. But there is the possibility that dimensional text is present in Seneca's work at a different level, maybe in other writings. Anyhow, we find reference and definitions in other writings as well of the Roman philosopher.

In *De brevitae vitae* we have a scission of the text, where the extreme of the human, the vicious and the wise human is dealt with. For the first one time doesn't exist yet because he doesn't exploit. For the later, time is already eternity. Only that the Stoic believes in the possibility of passing from vice to virtue. But we have no answer concerning the modality of this transition.

The last of Seneca's works, *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium* is known for its educative value. It would be natural that in his work about the educative excellence we found reasoning about the nature of time at someone who aims wisdom. He cannot live the time of vice, because in this case he wouldn't be aspiring wisdom anymore. He cannot live the time of

¹⁹ Ibidem, 8.36

²⁰ Stobaeus, *Eclogae*, I,p.106, 5W

virtue, eternity, neither because he is not entirely wise yet. Is time an ontological consistent interval characteristic to someone who aims wisdom?

Perhaps it is not accidental how this paper begins by exposing the problem of time. Seneca advises his followers to cherish time. Indirectly, he advises the student to go from vice to virtue, in order to avoid wasting himself as a vicious man: “gather and keep the time that has been taken or stolen from you ²¹”. If time were considered here as interval, the expression could be considered inadequate. You cannot keep something that passes anyway, and you cannot collect something that is essence is transition.

The one who aims wisdom, situated between the wise and the vicious man, can for all that overpass his state: ” you will be less at the future’s own sweet will if you man yourself in the present ²²”. Here we have an incentive for wisdoms. Up to this point all we can find are incentives towards a superior being. The time towards which Seneca advises his follower is in fact eternity. Here we have the same characteristics presented and associated with the time of virtue as in *De brevitae vitae*.

But by the end of the first epistle, Seneca affirms that time is ”received” and might be ”lost”. He says” man should be kept responsible for the time received” and should equally know what he lost from what he had received ²³.

The association of time with the idea of what had been given to one, was received and lost determined me to search another meaning for the one aspiring to wisdom. At Greeks there is another word to name time besides *chronos*. This word is *kairos*. This is an appropriate time or a supreme moment, the moment. This concept doesn’t refer to the sequential time but to an undefined moment as a period. It is a moment when something important happens.

Is time at Seneca dimensional or is an appropriate time, an opportune moment? There is a dissociation of time at Seneca, dissociation due to the incompatibility of virtue-vice. Therefore, senecan reflexion on time goes on two separate levels: there is a time of virtue and a time of vice.

The time of virtue is a time of life that has its place every time it is essential and vital for the human existence. But since the one aspiring to wisdom cannot permanently have virtue, he has only the proper time to pass from vice to virtue, a time when inspiration produces that can contaminate him with virtue.

This is the qualitative time, when, by authentically living the moment, the one aspiring the wisdom gives a meaning to his life. On the other hand, the time of vice is apparently inconsistent, discontinuous, where the past is refused, the present is uselessly passing and the future cannot be something else but an anxious waiting.

21 Seneca, *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium*, 1,1

22 Ibidem, 1,2

23 Ibidem, 1,4

Time and education

Education does not evolve in an interval of time, it is not discursive, but besides the duration of time, is intuitive.

At the solution found for the problem of time in the texts of Seneca we can receive a strong argument, what we could call the senecan theory of the educative text. In his view, the wise man is a teacher of the human nation who builds his discourse by using moral principles (*decreta*). But he must also use less general rules of behaviour that make out the particular and apply for different fields of life principles (*praecepta*) as well as examples, moral examples, real happenings, or at least presented as real (*exempla*).

Precepts are useful because they make the particular, help less talented spirits with the principles or keep the one who aims wisdom concentrated on the moral teaching. Precepts do not attain their goal without principles.

If somebody received specific teaching and not general teaching, he could not apply them. Specific precepts have no efficiency by themselves, and so to say without roots. General principles are those that strengthen us and dominate our silence and piece: they comprise the entire life and the entire essence of things²⁴.

Examples are cultivated only with the scope of proving the functioning of moral principles in particular situations of life. We have here the same idea as earlier: what applies for a man can be applied for all. The philosophy of Seneca is one conforming to principles. And principles are obvious, are intuitions of man, discovering of the essence of things.

As a conclusion, in the texts of Seneca the wise plunged into eternity, the one aspiring for wisdom uses every "opportune moment" of his life to attain eternity and the vicious makes nothing of every "opportune moment" of his life.

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