

The Hegelian Trajectory of Liberation in Senecan Thought

Seneca's Letter 47 presents a view of slavery that has confounded modern scholars. He offers some grotesque representations of Roman slavery and goes on to argue that it is really the masters who, in indulging their base desires, are the true slaves; the letter ends with a plea for the humane treatment of slaves. Scholars such as Villy Sørensen and K.R. Bradley have taken stances on either side of a discourse about whether Seneca's views on slavery can be taken as liberal and pre-humanist, as Sørensen (1984) asserts, or not, as Bradley (2008) counters. Other scholars argue that while the notion of *libertas* is critical to Seneca's philosophy, it must be defined in a radically different way than the common liberal or humanist definition, which centers on free will. Edwards (2009) points out that Seneca emphasizes the individual's metaphorical slavery to the body and its desires. Like Edwards, Inwood (2005) also focuses on Seneca's assertions that freedom from desire is the only true freedom, and expands Seneca's idea of freedom to include agency. It is agency that allows the individual to improve himself morally and spiritually by recognizing a higher purpose to life than the satisfaction of desire and the pursuit of externals, and it provides the possibility of attaining a transcendent spiritual freedom through the work of philosophy.

This paper analyzes the Senecan notion of freedom using the Hegelian dialectic of abstract, negative, and concrete and his discussion of the Lord and Bondsman in *Phenomenology of Spirit* to untangle the various strands of Seneca's thoughts on the subject. I argue that a Senecan cosmogony would begin with a divine unity corresponding to the abstract stage of the dialectic. Then the individual person is plunged into the negative state of a chaotic world of difference governed by Fortune, but, by living in accordance with his Nature as a rational being, he is able to work towards a reunification with his original divine state in the concrete stage as

the Stoic sage. This dialectical trajectory is most evident in Letter 44 where Seneca writes to Lucilius: *omnes, si ad originem primam revocantur, a dis sunt*, “all men, if they are recalled to the first source, are from the gods.” He goes on to describe a fall from that unitary state where *omnia ista longa varietas miscuit et sursum deorsum fortuna versavit*, “that extended difference mixed all things and fortune turned up downward,” until that moment when through the work of philosophy, *animus facit nobilem cui ex quacumque condicione supra fortunam licet surgere*, “the soul makes noble the one who is allowed to rise above fortune out of whatever condition” (*Ep.* 44.1-5).

This paper not only aims to illuminate aspects of Seneca’s thought on freedom, but also suggests that, despite all of his often excessively heavy-handed moralizing, Seneca still has something to teach us about freedom and ethics. In our modern world where the prevailing notion of freedom consists of being free to do whatever we want, Seneca reminds us that it is precisely the pursuit of our own desires that not only enslaves us by directing our thoughts and actions, but also leads to the exploitative use of human, animal and natural resources.

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