

# Seneca - General Background

Post by "Cassius" of July 20, 2024 at 11:35 AM

It appears Seneca learned his eclecticism very early. Wikipedia has this information on Seneca's early teachers, who were of the eclectic school known as the "School of the Sextii":

## School of the Sextii

The **School of the Sextii** was an eclectic [Ancient Roman school of philosophy](#) founded around 50 BC by [Quintus Sextius the Elder](#) and continued by his son, [Sextius Niger](#), however it went extinct shortly after in 19 AD due to the ban on foreign cults.<sup>[1]</sup> The school blended elements of [Pythagorean](#), [Platonic](#), [Cynic](#), and [Stoic](#) philosophy together<sup>[2]</sup> with a belief in an elusive incorporeal power pervades the body in order to emphasize asceticism, honesty, and moral training through nightly examinations of conscience as a means of achieving [eudaimonia](#).<sup>[3]</sup> The primary sources of information on the school are [Seneca the Younger](#), who was taught by one of its members named [Sotion](#), and the 5th century writer [Claudianus Mamertus](#).<sup>[3]</sup> Other members of the school included [Papirius Fabianus](#), [Crassicius Pasicles](#), [Celsus](#).<sup>[3]</sup> While [Seneca the Younger](#) often conflates the school with Stoicism, the Sextians were not as inclined to rigorous logical exercises or any abstruse abstract thinking, and unlike the [Stoics](#), advocated avoidance of [politics](#), engaging in the correspondence between words and life, and vegetarianism.<sup>[4]</sup>

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Post by "Cassius" of July 20, 2024 at 11:42 AM

Seneca was extremely wealthy to have been a promoter of asceticism:

In AD 58 the senator [Publius Suillius Rufus](#) made a series of public attacks on Seneca.<sup>[28]</sup> These attacks, reported by [Tacitus](#) and [Cassius Dio](#),<sup>[29]</sup> included charges that, in a mere four years of service to Nero, Seneca had acquired a vast personal fortune of three hundred million [sestertii](#) by charging high interest on loans throughout Italy and the provinces.<sup>[30]</sup> Suillius' attacks included claims of sexual corruption, with a suggestion that Seneca had slept with Agrippina.<sup>[31]</sup> Tacitus, though, reports that Suillius was highly prejudiced: he had been a favorite of Claudius,<sup>[28]</sup> and had been an embezzler and informant.<sup>[30]</sup> In response, Seneca brought a series of prosecutions for corruption against Suillius: half of his estate was confiscated and he was sent into exile.<sup>[32]</sup> However, the attacks reflect a criticism of Seneca that was made at the time and continued through later ages.<sup>[28]</sup> Seneca was undoubtedly extremely rich: he had

properties at [Baiae](#) and [Nomentum](#), an [Alban](#) villa, and Egyptian estates.<sup>[28]</sup> Cassius Dio even reports that the [Boudica](#) uprising in [Britannia](#) was caused by Seneca forcing large loans on the indigenous British aristocracy in the aftermath of Claudius's [conquest of Britain](#), and then calling them in suddenly and aggressively.<sup>[28]</sup> Seneca was sensitive to such accusations: his [De Vita Beata](#) ("On the Happy Life") dates from around this time and includes a defense of wealth along Stoic lines, arguing that properly gaining and spending wealth is appropriate behavior for a philosopher.<sup>[30]</sup>

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## Post by "Cassius" of July 20, 2024 at 3:34 PM

So both Tacitus and Cassius Dio record significant information about Seneca's personal activities. Looking for links to research these, I see that the Cassius Dio material can be found at LacusCurtius starting here. I've linked to 60 to be sure to capture the period leading up to Nero - apparently the heart of the Seneca material is in 62:

[Cassius Dio — Book 60](#)

[Seneca encouraging Nero to kill Nero's mother:](#)

12 Sabina on learning of this persuaded Nero to get p63 rid of his mother, alleging that she was plotting against him. He was incited likewise by Seneca (or so many trustworthy men have stated), whether from a desire to hush the complaint against his own name, or from his willingness to lead Nero on to a career of unholy bloodguiltiness that should bring about most speedily his destruction by gods and men alike.

[Seneca leading on the false flatterers of Nero:](#)

20 As a fitting climax to these performances, Nero himself made his appearance in the theatre, being announced under his own name by Gallio. So there stood this Caesar on the stage wearing the garb of lyre-player. This emperor uttered the words: "My lords, of your kindness give me ear," 2 and this Augustus sang to the lyre some piece called "Attis" or "The Bacchantes,"<sup>5</sup> while many soldiers stood by and all the people that the seats would hold sat watching. Yet he had, according to report, but a slight and indistinct voice, so that he moved his whole audience to laughter and tears at once. 3 Beside him stood Burrus and Seneca, like teachers, prompting him; and they would wave their arms and togas at every utterance of his and lead others p81 to do the same.

Seneca the loan-shark:

2 An excuse for the war was found in the confiscation of the sums of money that Claudius had given to the foremost Britons; for these sums, as Decianus Catus, the procurator of the island, maintained, were to be paid back. This was one reason for the uprising; another was found in the fact that Seneca, in the hope of receiving a good rate of interest, had lent to the islanders 40,000,000 sesterces that they did not want,<sup>7</sup> and had afterwards called in this loan all at once and had resorted to severe measures in exacting it.

The Death of Seneca, committing suicide after claiming to be ill but nevertheless leaving his entire property to the same Nero who had ordered him to die:

25 1 It would be no small task to speak of all the others that perished, but the fate of Seneca calls for a few words. It was his wish to end the life of his wife Paulina at the same time with his own, for he declared that he had taught her both to despise death and to desire to leave the world in company with him. So he opened her veins as well as his own. 2 But as he died hard, his end was hastened by the soldiers; and she was still alive when he passed away, and thus survived. He did not lay hands upon himself, however, until he had revised the book which he was writing<sup>15</sup> and had deposited his other books with some friends, fearing that they would otherwise fall into Nero's hands and be destroyed. 3 Thus died Seneca, notwithstanding that he had on the pretext of illness abandoned the society of the emperor and had bestowed upon him his entire property, ostensibly to help to pay for the buildings he was constructing. His brothers, too, perished after him.

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## Post by “Cassius” of July 20, 2024 at 3:37 PM

Here are the Lacus Curtius Links to the Senecan period as recorded by Tacitus:

- [11.1-15](#) Claudius is emperor. In Rome, Suillius prosecutes many. Turmoil in Armenia.
- [11.16-38](#) Corbulo settles a Frisian revolt. Senatorial rights extended to the provinces. Debaucheries and execution of Messalina.
- [12.1-40](#) Claudius remarries. Adjustments with Parthia. Nero adopted. The pomerium enlarged. War in Britain against Caratacus.  
The young Nero groomed to succeed Claudius. Disorders in Armenia.
- [12.41-69](#) Extravagant inauguration of the draining of Lake Fucinus, which turned out a massive failure. Death of Claudius, maybe by poison.
- [13.1-30](#) Nero becomes emperor and starts his slide into lust and cruelty; the murder of Britannicus. Continued trouble with Parthia over Armenia.

[13.31-58](#) Disaster to Roman arms in Armenia, partly saved by Corbulo. Revolts and wars among the Germans.

Nero murders his mother Agrippina. Nero exhibits himself as a charioteer.

[14.1-28](#) Institution of the Neronia. Corbulo composes Armenian difficulties in favor of Rome, at least for the time being.

[14.29-39](#) In Britain, the Icenian revolt under Boudicca.

[14.40-65](#) Criminal trials and political purges in Rome. Murder of Rubellius Plautus and of the 20-year-old Octavia.

[15.1-32](#) Roman defeat in Armenia, although "spun" as a victory; followed, however, by a further adjustment with Parthia in which the Parthian king Tiridates travels to Rome to become a nominal vassal of Rome.

[15.33-47](#) Nero exhibits himself as a singer and a harpist. The Great Fire of Rome; Christians are executed as scapegoats.

[15.48-74](#) Piso's conspiracy: it fails.

[16](#) Nero seeks to destroy the Stoic opposition: murder of Paetus and Soranus.

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## Post by "Cassius" of July 22, 2024 at 4:11 PM

[Here's a middle-of-the road article on Seneca well worth reading](#), and it starts with this stark example of Seneca's willingness to deceive. Thanks to Kalosyni for this **very humorous article -- Highly Recommended!**:

Such a Stoic  
By Elizabeth Kolbert  
January 26, 2015

New Yorker

Quote

Sometime in the spring of the year 59, the emperor Nero decided to murder his mother. As you can imagine, the two were not on good terms. In a gesture designed to

appear conciliatory, Nero invited his mother, Agrippina, to join him at a festival in Baiae, a resort town near present-day Naples. During the festivities, he treated her with great affection. Then, when it was time for her to leave, he presented her with a gift—a beautifully appointed boat to ferry her up the coast.

The gift was supposed to be a death trap. But just about everything that should have gone wrong didn't. The deck of the ship fell in, yet, rather than killing Agrippina, it crushed one of her attendants. The hull, too, had been crafted to break apart; in all the confusion, though, it failed to do so. The rowers tried to overturn the ship. Once again, the effort fell short. Agrippina and a second attendant, Acerronia, swam free. Acerronia—"rather unwisely," as Tacitus puts it—kept screaming that she was Agrippina and needed help. The rowers rushed over and bashed her on the head with their oars. The real Agrippina slipped away. She was picked up by a fishing boat and deposited safely onshore. When Nero learned that his mother had survived, he sent his minions to stab her.

This series of unfortunate events put the emperor in a pickle. The whole point of the affectionate display and the gift of the boat had been to make Agrippina's death look like an accident. (Even in imperial Rome, matricide was, apparently, bad P.R.) Now this was impossible. And so Nero turned to the man he had always relied on, Lucius Annaeus Seneca, better known as Seneca the Younger, or just plain Seneca.

If poets and philosophers dream of influencing those in power, Seneca was uniquely positioned to do so. He was a celebrated rhetorician, a satirist, the author of several books of natural history, and a playwright. He was also what today might be called an ethicist. Among his many works of moral philosophy are "De Ira" ("On Anger"), "De Providentia" ("On Providence"), and "De Brevitate Vitae" ("On the Shortness of Life"). Seneca had been Nero's tutor since the younger man was twelve or thirteen, and he remained one of his closest advisers.

After the botched boating accident, Seneca set to work. Writing in the voice of the emperor, he composed a letter to the Senate explaining what had happened. Hungry for power, Agrippina had been planning a coup. Once the plot was revealed, she'd taken her own life. As for the shipwreck, that was a sign that the gods themselves had tried to intervene on the emperor's behalf.

At least in public, the response of Rome's elite to the letter was jubilation. Tacitus reports that there was "a marvelous rivalry" among the senators in celebrating Nero's narrow escape; they held games, made offerings at shrines, and proposed that "Agrippina's birthday should be classed among the inauspicious days."

Most of the letter comes down to us in paraphrase, but one line has survived verbatim. It is considered an example of Latin rhetoric at its finest, though clearly it loses something in translation. "That I am safe, neither, as yet, do I believe, nor do I rejoice," Seneca had the newly orphaned Nero declare.

All writers' reputations have their ups and downs. In the case of Seneca, the highs have been very high and the lows pretty low. Early Christians so revered him that they faked an exchange of edifying letters between him and St. Paul. During the Reformation, both Calvin and Zwingli turned to his writings for inspiration. Montaigne wrote a "defense" of Seneca, Diderot an essay on his life.

Then Seneca fell out of favor. Among the Romantics, he was regarded as a poor philosopher and a worse playwright. Even his brilliant epigrammatic style was ridiculed; the British historian Thomas Macaulay once observed—epigrammatically—that reading Seneca was "like dining on nothing but anchovy sauce."

These days, Seneca is again on the upswing. In the past year, two new biographies have appeared: "Dying Every Day: Seneca at the Court of Nero" (Knopf), by James Romm, a classicist at Bard College, and "The Greatest Empire: A Life of Seneca" (Oxford), by Emily Wilson, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania. The two volumes are admiring of Seneca's talents and, to varying degrees, sympathetic to his pedagogical predicament. Romm and Wilson, both teachers themselves, suggest that Nero was, from the start, a lost cause. But they also acknowledge that this leaves a tricky question unresolved. The letter "explaining" Agrippina's murder is just one of the ways Seneca propped up Nero's regime—a regime that the average Julius, let alone the author of "De Ira," surely realized was thoroughly corrupt. How to explain the philosopher-tutor's sticking by his monstrous pupil?

Display More

Also, and this is a cute turn of phrase:

Quote

When Seneca was in his thirties, his writing against "chattels, property, and high office" began to attract admiring notice from those with lots of chattels, property, and high office. Among his rich and powerful friends was Julia Livilla, a sister of the emperor Caligula.

In 41 A.D., Caligula was assassinated and replaced by his uncle Claudius. The new emperor accused Julia Livilla of adultery with Seneca. Whether the two were actually lovers or whether they were just unlucky is not known. (Claudius was, all evidence

suggests, less benign than Robert Graves makes him out to be.) Julia Livilla was exiled to an island—probably Ventotene, off Naples—where she died within a few years. Seneca was sent to Corsica.

So it was AGRIPPINA who had Seneca recalled for him to end up as Nero's tutor -- hard to imagine a more disreputable sponsor:

#### Quote

Seneca ended up spending the better part of a decade in exile, and he would have spent even longer were it not for one of those episodic mate swaps which make the imperial family tree such a thicket. In 48 A.D., Claudius had his third wife killed and took as his fourth bride Agrippina—Caligula and Julia Livilla's sister, and Claudius' niece. It was she who persuaded Claudius to bring Seneca home.

The scheming wife is a fixture of Roman history. As bad as the men are, the women are worse—ruthless, cunning, and often sex-crazed. Many of the stories that come down to us are difficult to credit; for example, before Claudius had his third wife, Messalina, whacked, she was reported to have held a twenty-four-hour sex competition with a hooker. (According to Pliny, she won.)

The dishonorable acts of Seneca keep coming:

#### Quote

Agrippina had Seneca recalled nominally so that he could educate the adolescent Nero. (At the back of her mind may have been the model of Aristotle and Alexander the Great.) But she also found other uses for his talents. In 53 A.D., Agrippina arranged for Nero to marry one of Claudius' daughters. A year after that, the story goes, she had Claudius murdered, using a poisoned mushroom. (Tacitus reports that Claudius recovered from the initial poisoning after his bowels "were relieved." The quick-thinking Agrippina then had him poisoned again, using a feather that was stuck down his throat, ostensibly as an emetic.) Within hours of Claudius' death, Nero claimed power in a speech to the Praetorian Guard. The speech, which promised the loyal soldiers a huge bonus, was written for him by Seneca.

And get worse and worse:

## Quote

Claudius' murder set off a round of bloody housekeeping. Anyone whom the new regime perceived as a threat was polished off. Britannicus met his end within six months of his father. This time, the poison was delivered in a pitcher of water. When the boy dropped dead at the dinner table, Nero told the other guests that he was having a fit and they should just keep eating. According to Tacitus, most did.

Britannicus' murder prompted one of Seneca's most famous moral treatises, "On Mercy." The work is addressed to Nero, who is also its subject. Seneca's conceit is that the philosopher has nothing to teach the emperor about clemency; the essay is merely a "mirror" to show the young ruler his own virtues. He is beneficent and kindhearted, and can honestly say that he has "spilt not a drop of human blood in the whole world."

Romm and Wilson acknowledge that the juxtaposition of the adulation and the murder looks pretty bad. "On Mercy," Wilson observes, can be read as a sign that Seneca was "willing to praise this violent, dangerous, and terrifyingly powerful young ruler even to the extent of absolutely denying the reality of his behavior."

And what looks even worse is that Seneca grew rich from Nero's crimes. Following Britannicus' murder, the boy's wealth was divvied up, and Seneca, it seems, got a piece. By the end of the decade, the philosopher owned property not just in Rome but also in Egypt, Spain, and southern Italy. And he had so much cash on hand that he loaned forty million sesterces to Rome's newest subjects, the British. (The annual salary of a Roman soldier at that time was around nine hundred sesterces.) The recall of the loans purportedly prompted the British to revolt.

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## Post by "Cassius" of July 22, 2024 at 4:24 PM

This "On The Happy Life" is one of the first and major sources used to turn Epicurus into a devout ascetic:

Yet Seneca's defenders find a way to defend his hypocrisy.

## Quote

Seneca's fortune made possible a life style that was lavish by Roman or, for that matter, Hollywood standards. According to Dio, at one point the Stoic ordered "five hundred tables of citrus wood with legs of ivory, all identically alike, and he served banquets on them." In an essay entitled "On the Happy Life," composed around 59 A.D., Seneca addresses the strains between his philosophical commitments and his conspicuous consumption.

"Why do you drink wine that is older than you are?" he demands of himself. "Why does your wife wear in her ears the price of a rich man's house?" Seneca's answer, if it can be counted as such, is metaphorical: "The wise man would not despise himself, even if he were a midget; but he would rather be tall." Around the time that Seneca composed "On the Happy Life," a former consul named Publius Suillius had the temerity to accuse him in public of hypocrisy and of sucking the provinces dry. Shortly thereafter, Suillius found himself exiled.

One way to sort out the contradictions of Seneca's life is not even to try. The art critic Robert Hughes labelled Seneca "a hypocrite almost without equal in the ancient world," and left it at that. Romm and Wilson—and the new wave of Seneca scholars more generally—resist such reductive judgments. It is possible, in their view, to see Seneca as a hypocrite *and* as a force of moral restraint. In the most generous account, Seneca might even be regarded as a kind of Stoic martyr: to prevent worse from happening to Rome, he stayed on with Nero and, by doing so, sacrificed his good name.

#### Quote

This reading of the plays makes sense but, as Wilson acknowledges, runs the risk of "circularity": Seneca's dramas must reflect a hidden moral anguish, because nowhere else in his writings is this moral anguish expressed. Another way to approach the plays is as genre pieces trafficking in the outré—the Roman equivalent of "Reservoir Dogs" or "Django Unchained." In this reading, what the tragedies reveal is how lightly Seneca took his writings. Plays, treatises, speeches—all were to him just clever phrases strung together, so many "words, words, words."

#### Quote

Seneca's own tragic end came in 65 A.D., when he was implicated in a plot to assassinate Nero and install in his place a good-looking nobleman named Gaius Piso. (By some accounts, there was within this conspiracy a sub-conspiracy to kill Piso, too,

and make Seneca emperor.) The plotters bungled things, and Nero cut them down one after another. To the end, Seneca maintained his innocence, and he may even have been telling the truth. But, as no one knew better than he, truth was not the issue. He was ordered to commit suicide. He cut his wrists, and when that didn't work he tried the veins behind his knees. Supposedly, as he died, he called in his secretary, so he could dictate one last speech. ♦

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## Post by “Bryan” of January 10, 2025 at 10:34 AM

### [Quote from Cassius](#)

with a belief in an elusive incorporeal power pervades the body in order to emphasize asceticism, honesty, and moral training

In Catholic/Christian thinking, "honesty" is something that a person should extend to *everyone* else. It seems this idea (that an "honest" person is honest to everyone), mostly survives as an expectation for the general modern individual.

Of course, other groups (with a social strategy) see honesty as something that should be extended *only within* their group -- and they see extending honesty *beyond* their group as foolish and harmful.

As Epicureans, we each organize our life to spend most of our time among our *in-group* -- and an Epicurean has very high incentives to be honest with a friend in *all* cases. Still, I cannot see why an Epicurean would be honest in all cases with someone who is not a friend (particularly if being honest may cause consequence, or if being dishonest may cause benefit).

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## Post by “Cassius” of January 10, 2025 at 11:07 AM

I completely agree, Bryan, and I see in this one of the most obvious problems with stoicism and all sorts of rationalism. Setting up "virtue" (in this case honesty) as an end in itself, never to be secondary to any other goal, is a prescription for disaster if what you value is a human life of pleasure rather than some arbitrarily selected abstract goal. It is absurd to think that you must be honest with the burglar who asks for the location of the keys so he can invade your house and murder your family.

"Pleasure" is not an arbitrarily selected abstract goal because it is based on a feeling given by nature, and even when the term "pleasure" is used as an abstraction, it can be immediately tested against the feeling.

And the whines of the past and current Ciceros and Senecas who push asceticism and virtue are especially easy to see through once you demolish their "pleasure = sex drugs and rocknroll" definition and realize that pleasure is *everything* in life that is desirable.

Both Cicero and Seneca preserved some important information about Epicurus so I give them credit for that, but I see in Cicero a greater willingness to be frank even in disagreement. And toward the end of his life Cicero maybe even made a few steps in the right direction by giving credit to Cassius for showing Cicero more vigor in Epicureanism than Cicero had expected to see. I would trade a hundred Senecas for one Cicero any day of the week.