

# ΣΤΑΤΥΜ / ARTICLES

## “ARS VITAE” IN IAMBlichUS AND IN THE STOIC SENECA

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ABSTRACT. Seneca expounds a theory of therapy and teaching with the ultimate goal of self knowledge and wisdom. Some of his techniques are based on Pythagorean principles or derive ideas from them, among them the focused and constant ascesis of self control. Iamblichus in *De Vita Pythagorica* exhibits great interest on the fact that man's inherent abilities along with the aid of proper education suffice for his attainment of wisdom. For both thinkers, knowledge through practice is considered to be one of the major philosophical demands in the perspective of an “ars vitae”. The human being has to canalize himself into the modeling of a new way of living, an “art of living” which will contribute decisively to the fulfillment of his teleology, to his perpetual eudaimonia (bene vivere). The admittance of individual differences in people's ability to reform themselves only signifies the more intense effort of the teacher towards a purification of their intellect and greater engagement of the individuals' volition but not their inability for correction.

KEYWORDS: Wisdom, *ars vitae*, individual differences, education, volition, soul, right reason

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Despite the theoretical connection that Seneca has with Pythagoreanism, through the teachings of Sotion,<sup>1</sup> there is not an evident or profound relationship of his writings with it.<sup>2</sup> Seneca utilises fragments from a multitude of philosophical dogmas in order to elaborate on his argument but his argument remains always stoic, apart from the times when he enriches it with some innovative element. But clearly, he

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Eleuterio Elorduy (1965, 98): “Adquirida la instruccìon elemental, Sèneca ingresò pronto en la escuela de Sotìon, filòsofo pitagòrico de la escuela de los Sextios”.

<sup>2</sup> Seneca refers directly to Pythagoras and to his school a few times but mostly on general remarks. In *De Brevitate Vitae* (XIV. 5) he claims that Pythagoras is an ideal guide for ethical behavior.

focuses on aspects that have preoccupied the Pythagorean thought all along, such as the survival of the human soul after death.<sup>3</sup> In the philosophical discipline of the Roman Seneca, emphasis is constantly given on self correction as the sole means of returning to the primal and authentic reality of the person, as Seneca actually uses this term, “persona”, for the first time in Latin philosophy. So what is the context within which a comparative analysis of the two theories would hold truth? Seneca in his *Dialogi* and *Epistulae* as well as Iamblichus, through his recording of the Pythagorean life in the *De Vita Pythagorica* bring to light a way of living which has been constructed on the grounds of unlimited credence in man’s inherent abilities for the attainment of wisdom. It is under this prism that practical advice is specified by the two thinkers, and man is guided to a complete metamorphic procedure by means of which life is rendered eudaimonistic.<sup>4</sup> Because actually Pythagoreanism and Stoicism, as Greek currents of thought, aim at the depth of the metaphysical only in order to protect man from the adversities of his own ignorant mistake.

Thus knowledge is considered to be the first philosophical demand in the perspective of an “ars vitae”. And the alienation of man from his nature is the consequent axiomatic acceptance which this art is called to resolve. From that point on, a number of dissimilarities emerge along with a number of significant similarities. As Iamblichus holds in *De Vita Pythagorica*, the contribution of the gods is indispensable in man’s effort to reach perfection. Philosophy can be perceived only with their help because its beauty and grandeur exceed human measure. Consequently philosophy can be approached with gradual steps and only under the firm guidance of a willing god (*VP* I. 1). This means that “βούλησις” is for the god to exert. It is fundamentally by means of his will that man can overcome the insurmountable obstacles that philosophy would otherwise erect before him.<sup>5</sup>

Pythagoras himself adopted a way of living that was characterized by mental balance, fasting, temperance, and immense tranquility. As it is upheld by the philosopher from Syria, Pythagoras was never giving in to laughter, jealousy or obstinacy, therefore living as «δαίμων τις ἀγαθός» (*VP* II. 10). In his trip from Syria to Egypt, the sailors believe that Pythagoras is indeed a divine daemon.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, among his multitude of virtuous habits, as he had been taught by Thales from Miletus, he was aware of how to use his time wisely (χρόνου μάλιστα φείδεσθαι) and he was unalterably abstaining from drinking wine, eating meat and eating in excess (III. 13).

In the case of his ideas and according to the detailed type of life that he described and materialized for the Pythagorean community, the ideal Pythagorean life consisted in the fine connection between the citizen and the Polis, the individual and his friends and the catholic ability of all living together harmoniously. Between the Py-

<sup>3</sup> See also Iamblichus, *De Vita Pythagorica*, XIV. 63 (henceforth Iambl., *VP*).

<sup>4</sup> Iambl., *VP* VI. 30: «ἵνα τὸ τῆς εὐδαιμονίας τε καὶ φιλοσοφίας σωτήριον ἔναυσμα χαρίσῃται τῇ θνητῇ φύσει».

<sup>5</sup> *VP* I. 2: «ἐξαρκεῖ γὰρ ἡμῖν ἡ τῶν θεῶν βούλησις».

<sup>6</sup> *VP* III. 16: «δαίμονα θεῖον ὡς ἀληθῶς ἐπέισθησαν».

thagorean friends everything was common (κοινά τὰ φίλων). Gods were respected and so were those who were dead. Caring for each other, even for the animals, as well as education, continence, secrecy, temperance and all things analogous to them were of high esteem in the Pythagorean society (Iambl., *VP* VI. 32). What was of vital importance in this society according to inveterate Pythagorean principles was the negation of certain things such as: disease of the body, ignorance of the soul, luxury in the stomach, riot in the city, discord in the family and lack of medium, the Greek «μέτρον» (VII. 34). Certain emphasis is given by Iamblichus on the priority that the love for one's parents should have. What parents command ought to be eagerly acceptable by the children (VIII. 40). In accordance with Pythagorean beliefs, benefits to the parents should be primarily compared with benefits to others. As a matter of fact, parents should be receiving benefits no less than the gods, because they are the ones who donate life (VIII. 38). Simultaneously, this expression of gratitude to parents and of good behaviour is generalised unconstrainedly and becomes the foundation for an ecumenical and ample humanitarian approach in this teaching. In view of that, people ought to behave to others by means of the same gnomon: friends should never be made enemies and enemies should become friends as soon as possible. The level of humanitarianism that this approach entails is as deep and overwhelming as the one included in the relationship between brothers (VIII. 40).

The topic of volition returns in the case of the love that children have for their genitors. As Iamblichus upholds, consistent with the Pythagorean dogma, parents should make efforts so as to be loved not due to the natural relationship with them but on the grounds of the children's proairesis so that their good behaviour is voluntary (IX. 47). Similarly, all men ought to abstain from practising evil things but not on account of the fear of punishment by means of the law of the state but because of their own respect for the nobility of their own character. Hence, it is man's character that must be taken into consideration in the political and social matter of conforming with the rules of the state (IX. 48). It is further deduced that the right criterion for proper social behaviour is, as Pythagoras induces, for each person to be himself as in the exact manner that he would like others to perceive him. Under the prism of this heterogenous comparison, man has a measure for himself that keeps him integrated into the social corpus. The gnomon for everything that takes place inside the community is the benefit of the other. In the political aspect it becomes obvious that polis is common as everything is common. Therefore it should be governed under the light of the understanding that this polis is going to be assigned to their descendants. All citizens must be equal and nothing else than justice must be paid more of any tribute (IX. 46).

On the other hand, education is of such importance that it is incorporated dynamically into the Pythagorean scheme. Pythagoras himself incited young people to remember how essential the intellect is. He claimed that it is not possible, on the one hand, to consider "dianoia" the best of things and according to it to make all decisions, but, on the other, not to dispose of any time or effort for focused ascesis that would consolidate it. Paideia of the intellect is the only thing that remains intact in

life, the only indisputable parameter (VIII. 42). Furthermore, it is clarified that education consists in pieces of knowledge that people have gathered progressively. Therefore, as a collective construction, knowledge can be handed over from one person to another but still the one who gives does not lose any of it, while the other who receives gains (VIII. 43). Education is so important and critical due to the fact that it depends on man's proairesis, on his free will. Thus it is rendered the only factor that distinguishes man from beast, and the free from those who are enslaved (VIII. 44).

Iamblichus records the Pythagorean recognition of individual differences as regards the path of men to wisdom. There are people who cannot be corrected easily, also people who are by nature better than others. Thus Pythagoras ends up making a selection among people. He chooses people according to physiognomy, and then he has them observed inside the School before making them familiar with the nucleus of his theory (VP X. 51; see also XVII. 71–72). In his hypothesis what is important at this first stage is the «ἀφανή ἦθη», the character that cannot be seen, actually the real and original make of the person. Furthermore, it is essential to discern the stability and the love for knowledge that the candidate may have. As a consequence, Pythagoras reaches a stage of austere segregation: those who fail have a grave opened in the school of the Pythagoreans as if they were no longer alive and they are also considered as imperfect and spiritually sterile (XVII. 73 and XVIII. 80). The sage from the island of Samos suggests though that it should be desirable to those who are not very capable of learning, to be benefited by what they see him do and by following his example in an undeviating observation of his deeds and words. Thus they can be transferred on the right way of living, simply by pursuing this paradigm (XV. 66). Taking the above into consideration, he remarks that, due to individual differences, the archetypes and the divine knowledge must be exhibited through diverse methods or spectres. By means of a metaphor he explains that it is like desiring to show the sun to someone who cannot look at it directly with bare eyes and as a consequence the only thing that can be used is the reflection on water or on tar, as a kind of speculum. In this way its brightness does not blind the one who looks at it and he certainly can acquire some knowledge of it. It becomes apparent that Pythagoras pensively employs a number of assorted dynamics in order to engage people in learning and to have them integrated in a novel "ars vitae" (XV. 67). In order to have this new way of living it is necessary to achieve the purification or catharsis of the intellect and the soul. When catharsis is successful the person has supreme self control, he has subdued himself to what is better.

Pythagoras attempts a plethora of practical and consistent instructions. They are related with what people eat, what people do, how they live, how they behave to each other, how long to sleep, other recommendations about the worship of the gods, etc. Furthermore, he encourages people to contempt glory or wealth and instead to be orientated towards the internal goods. Practically what he does is initiate a circle of sages, friends who share wisdom and knowledge and undeviatingly adhere to definite and concrete practices. Friendship is by no means limited to a narrow number of entities – it includes all, people and gods (XVI. 69). In this circle of sages it would

seem absurd to indulge in any feeling of envy. One member is fostering the efforts of the other, younger or not, in great respect. In the bond of friendship the soul is purified and enhanced, the fire of the divine is rekindled in it and the individual is guided to the truth of the being.

But what is the core of this theory, what is wisdom and knowledge based on? We don't mean to explore here the gnoseology or the application of Pythagoreanism to sciences. What we intend to stress out with clarity though is the fact that wisdom is the real science that is related with the knowledge of the beautiful and the divine. Philosophy is the untainted zeal for this theory. Therefore, man makes a persistent effort for his education simply because theory leads to his correction.<sup>7</sup> As a corrective science, philosophy works in the ontological level: according to the Pythagorean theory man is related to god with a strong and inescapable bond.

For Seneca, similarly, on a first level, philosophy is all that the human being has in his possession in order to alleviate the pain and anguish of his inauthentic life. This notion is based primarily on his acceptance that philosophy is both an art (*ars*) and a science (*scientia*).<sup>8</sup> As an art, philosophy teaches us how to live well, what the Roman Stoic calls "bene vivere". Contrary to Iamblichus's theory, Seneca considers philosophy to be a moral and rational art.<sup>9</sup> According to the Stoic doctrine, which Seneca – despite the frequent accusations of eclecticism – is carefully guarding, the knowledge of the Good, or "Honestum", is the inevitable parameter for virtue and virtue, in its turn, is rendered an art; to be more specific, an art of living, an "ars vitae".<sup>10</sup> It is under this main prism that the Senecan theory is initiated and established. Unlike Iamblichus and the Pythagorean views which the Syrian philosopher records, Seneca is inclined to uphold that the answer is one with the question as regards the soteriological process of man to perfection.

Philosophy for Seneca is an awakening force: "Sola autem nos philosophia excitabit, sola somnum excutiet gravem" (*Epist.* LIII. 8). By means of philosophy we shake off the deep hypnosis of the mind or nous, a hypnosis caused by the devastating impact of uncontrollable passions and desires. When the individual commences spending his time with philosophy then, Seneca assures, there is an abysmal gap created between him and the other ordinary people; in fact such a person approaches the level of the gods (LIII. 9–10). Under this prism, philosophy acquires therapeutic characteristics and becomes a healing art. One difference with the Pythagorean description of this therapy of the people is that, as the Roman Stoic alleges, the patient is in a position where from he can judge the therapy or the therapist. Thus, the therapist does not have the divine aura of a god and is not approached in awe; how-

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<sup>7</sup> VP XII. 59: «καλή μὲν οὖν καὶ αὕτη παιδείας ἦν ἐπιμέλεια ἢ συντείνουσα αὐτῷ πρὸς τὴν τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἐπανόρθωσιν».

<sup>8</sup> Seneca, *Epistulae Morales*, XXXI. 8 (henceforth Sen., *Epist.*).

<sup>9</sup> Bruhl 1937, 223.

<sup>10</sup> See also S.V.F. III. 214: «τέχνη γάρ ἡ ἀρετή. Πᾶσα δὲ τέχνη σύστημα ἐκ θεωρημάτων συγγεγυμασμένων, καὶ κατὰ μὲν τὰ θεωρήματα ὁ λόγος, κατὰ δὲ τὴν συγγυμνασίαν το ἔθος».

ever he is approached with ultimate seriousness and dedication to the purpose which spring from the gravity of the situation (LII. 9–10).

The Stoic sage, according to Seneca, is like an archer: his healing art must be intended to be successful and precise. Thus he chooses carefully those who can learn and gradually abandons those who cannot but not without having tried rigorously to provide them with a proper remedy.<sup>11</sup> Teaching and therapy are incorporated into one art and thus together aid the formation of an art of living that will dispose of every negative trait. All the above contribute to the fact that whatever does not steer man towards his perfection is a superfluous and futile art. As a consequence, Seneca is led to almost reject all the liberal arts, calling them “deceits”,<sup>12</sup> practically rejecting all education of the form that offers man the necessary skills for a life at work and ordinary avocations.<sup>13</sup> As he upholds, it is a matter of self knowledge practically: where there has accumulated too much redundant knowledge there is no space for the knowledge of virtue, therefore no space for self knowledge. “Ars vitae”, as Seneca understands and proposes it, consists in a practical guide of living but not in the strict outline of the Pythagorean exhortations. Not diverging from the Stoic line of thought, the Roman philosopher accepts that right reason (recta ratio) is the sole rule and gnomon of man’s right actions, of man’s “actio recta”. Like Pythagoras, he affirms that knowledge and understanding need their time to come about and he believes that his doctrine has to permeate the soul in order to be realized completely. Again like Pythagoras, he suggests the company of good people who will act correctively and as exemplars to the new disciple. The knowledge that Seneca proposes consists in this main principle: that virtue is the only good; it is the immediate result of a solid and stable judgment and is located in the «ἡγεμονικόν», the part of reason inside the human being. Hence it is apprehended that awareness of the supreme good is an inherent characteristic. The Senecan art of life is not an advance at this point but a transition to the innate potentiality and capability.

In the Senecan system an “ars vivendi” is equally an “ars moriendi”, an art of dying. Man, by means of this art, conquers the most essential prerequisite of self consciousness. This emphasis on the individual death is an existential core in the thought of Seneca. Actually much of his writing can be characterized as a study of death, just like in the Athenian Plato. The human being must vigilantly discern and distinguish between the things that cause confusion, so that no action is taken unless it can be incorporated into a larger, symmetric and unified system (*Epist.* XLV. 6-7).

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<sup>11</sup> Sen., *Epist.* XXIX. 3: “Hoc non existimo magno viro faciendum; diluitur eius auctoritas nec habet apud eos satis ponderis, quos posset minus obsoleta corrigere”.

<sup>12</sup> *Epist.* LII. 14. See also J. Duque Todolí (1965, 55–67): “en la lògica tampoco tiene Sèneca demasiada devociòn para aplicarla a las cosas humanas, a pesar del medio estoico en que èl mismo se sitúa, y a pesar de la devociòn de los maestros del estoicismo por la lògica. Sèneca màs bien se burla de ellos, en este aspecto, llamàndolos ‘ineptiae’ (estupideces)”.

<sup>13</sup> *Epist.* LXXXVIII. 35: “Non dabit se in has angustias virtus; laxum spatium res magna desiderat”.

This is the reason why man does not lead a eudaimonistic life in the first place: the fact that man sins and commits so many mistakes, while he falls in the abyss of passions, is that he encounters life in a fragmented way, he does not perceive life as an organic whole. For this reason, man becomes a victim to the mutability of Fortune that treats him often with unforeseen cruelty (LXXI. 2). Philosophy is again the shelter from the wrath of Fortune; moreover it is the unifying factor that leads to absolute knowledge and that knowledge in its turn constructs the hypothesis of the teleology of man. Man's plans fall amiss due to the fact that they lack purpose and a fixed orientation but philosophy provides exactly that (LXXI. 3). Seneca's moral theory is a theory of restitution to the authentic being. This is achieved not only with a certain process but also with a definite and decisive method. The philosophical method is the only one that can heal and place man back on the track to wisdom.

In this context, the Roman Stoic is unscrupulously in favor of friendship because even though friendship is not a good but merely a «προτιμητέον», it also becomes the basis for the circle of sages. In Seneca's social prospective the art of friendship, that is an integral part of the art of life, is primarily a free art that does not enslave one to another, nor to anyone's will. Hence the teacher is not the authoritative figure who seizes all knowledge. Philosophy makes all equal, despite rank, race or origin (XLIV. 1–2). The teacher may be similarly a man of passions – just like the student – but one who is better, meaning that he is already on the path to correction. To Seneca's mind, the need for correction is so urgent that everyone is a potential participant in the process of healing, both as a patient and as a therapist. In the circle of sages they mostly resemble wrestlers of the arena who keep one another fit by means of constant practicing. Within the circle all virtues are practiced and one constantly presents another with a new idea about how to act according to virtue (CIX. 3). Furthermore, Seneca admits that everyone has the capability to become a perfect human being but of course there are certain individual differences, he adds without hesitation.

In the Senecan thought, what is directly opposed to the aggregation of the wise men is the “vulgus” or crowd, the mob. The habits of the crowd burden on the stoic sage and cause him mental turmoil when he is at the first stages of wisdom. It is deduced that the sage has to keep out of the crowd, and enjoy the interiority and uniqueness that company with himself, or company with those like him, provides.<sup>14</sup> By no means does that signify that the sage is an antisocial being. Self relationship is the first and indispensable phase before the sage reaches out to society. In his method of living virtuously and symmetrically, the sage does not exclude the other and does not reject anyone on a permanent basis. His “humanitas”, i.e. his philanthropy, is always the criterion for the participation of others on the route to wisdom. As it is alleged by Iamblichus, each man is guided initially by his own noble will to achieve what is best for him, to render himself worthy of true eudaimonia. Therefore, as Seneca maintains, it is an “impetus animi”, an impulse of the soul that guides

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<sup>14</sup> Seneca, *Epistulae Morales*, VI. 7: “Amicus esse mihi coepi”. See also Seneca, *Nat. Quaest.*, IV A. 1.

man in his effort towards right living (*Epist.* XXXI. 1). The internal reading of the functions of his conscience is the right foundation of man's moral attempt.

Conclusively, we would focus on the following points. In the Senecan theory man is not orientated to a "political" conformity with everyday experience but to the urgent and dramatic recognition of the necessity for therapy. The therapy of desire, and of all inadequacy that the human being may suffer from, instantly places him in a frame of new existence, a genuine life experience or an art of living according to unwavering methodological principles. Man now turns to himself and becomes an internal being; in continuation he turns to the fellow human being in order to assist him in being treated and healed but his scope is not a political one. All value in Seneca is a moral value, and concentrates on the human parameter. That is exactly why man exceeds the divine and his behavior is not confined to complying with the role of the god associated creature. In Pythagorean thought, on the other hand, man cannot escape his connection with the gods. The Senecan sage can use it and can be based on it in order to act but he can overcome it up to a point, whereas this is not possible for the Pythagorean person who seeks virtue and eudaimonia.

In the Stoic view of Seneca, there doesn't have to be an exhaustive practical guide that would be followed step by step by those who crave for wisdom. Apart from basically the books of *De Beneficiis*, Seneca does not initiate us in a system of practical norms. This outcome is grounded on his conviction that Logos, the inner reason, will achieve to guide us more properly and more successfully than any external or formalistic guide of a written type. But this art of living is not an autistic and isolative technique. On the contrary, since Reason is common nobody has to wonder anymore or stand aghast at the potential differentiations of personal view that may exist between people about the "actio recta". Logos defines the right action beyond any doubt or vacillation. Whereas in the Pythagorean technique, the teacher is the gnomon for the adherent's effort. The teacher offers certain advice about everything: food, sleep, social relations, political relations, customs, habits, etc.

All in all, man in the Pythagorean ascesis to life has to turn to the gods to request for things while in Seneca's philosophy man turns to himself because everything he requires lies within himself. There is no external source where from to seek the sole Good. The individualism of Seneca's theory has a serious aftermath: man learns to turn to himself for everything, for the supreme good, for eudaimonia, for stability, for knowledge.<sup>15</sup> The sage has personal responsibility for his actions, thus he now contempts Fortune. Life is converted into a wide field of ethical application where the rational Self is the sole master of all things and of all situations. This energy that springs lushly from the self is mobilized through the Senecan "voluntas", which is the volition that man has as an impulse and the force which lies inside before any assent needs to be given (*Epist.* LIV. 7).

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<sup>15</sup> Seneca, *Epist.*, XXXIII. 9: "Iam et praecipe".

In *De Vita Pythagorica* Iamblichus maintains that passions must be cleared out and reason must be liberated from them. The method to do that is the method of science, the way of lessons which will be progressively established in the mind once reason is redeemed from those functional abnormalities (*VP XVII*. 78). At this point there is a profound similarity, perhaps the greatest one with Seneca's thinking. In the thought of the Roman philosopher, the soul or "animus" must be depurated and all passions must be expelled. If this does not happen it is impossible for right reason to be able to function properly. The significance of this becomes even more evident when Seneca admits to Lucilius that life is darkened by the passions and the desire for external goods, and subsequently time and life become relevant values and lose their actual dynamic essence. Only if soul can ascend to its own individuality and release itself from passions will the person accomplish self knowledge and happiness (*Epist.* LXXX. 5).

Among the varied instructions, there is this encouragement in the Pythagorean School for men to resort to tranquil places where they can bring their souls to balance and stability before coming in contact with the people (Iambl., *VP XXI*. 96). In the Senecan theory, in an analogous manner, certain places are to be avoided by the man who is not yet a sage and therefore is still in danger of regressing to bad habits. On the other hand, the Stoic philosopher admits that the sage does not really have to be worried about the place where he might be found since he has a perfect and unaltered composure.<sup>16</sup> Subsequently, he admits that rough places can provide the person with the opportunity and the appropriate conditions that will facilitate him having some further training and toughening on his character (*Epist.* LI. 10–11). There is also a number of other minor similarities and dissimilarities that may be found among the ideas of the two thinkers. What is important, nonetheless, is the contribution of both to the validation of the view that man has to turn back to primary sources in order to reach eudaimonia. As Iamblichus has made it clear, the primary source for the Pythagorean follower is that of the gods whereas in the case of Senecan stoicism the primary source lies within oneself. We won't proceed to an axiological overview of the two theories, based on the conception of these two major discrepancies, but what we would like to stress out conclusively is the profound belief in both dogmas in the restoration of man. This conviction goes through the genesis of new notions about the origin and the nature of the soul which are not to be discussed in this paper. However, we will simply bring to attention the fact that despite the orientation to external authority,<sup>17</sup> as Pythagoreanism advises, and to the inter-

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<sup>16</sup> Seneca, *Epistulae Morales*, XXVIII. 5–6. See also *ibid*, LVI. 5 and LV. 8–9. The place of dwelling does not affect the tranquility of the sage because the mind converts everything it finds into things that it needs.

<sup>17</sup> This was the exact reason, according to Eleuterio Elorduy (1965, 99), why Seneca was not really affected by the Pythagoreanism of Sotion, i.e. the fact that there was obvious in that teaching a morality of a sect: "El pitagorismo no dejò en èl [Sèneca] huella permanente, porque cultivaba una moralidad de secta, propia para unos pocos iniciados".

nal area, as it is sustained in the Senecan theory, life has to be brought to a completely novel measure and the human being has to canalize himself into the modeling of a new way of living, an “ars vitae” where all practice will contribute decisively to the fulfillment of his teleology, to his perpetual eudaimonia.

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