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Lessons for the Heart: Loving Reason and Embracing Loss (Letter 74)^{1*}

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Abstract – The arguments Seneca articulates in Letter 74, in support of his claim that only the *honestum* is to be regarded as good and that this is the key to a happy life, are for the most part highly exhortatory. In particular, Seneca urges the reader to love reason: *ama rationem*. This instruction, pairing love and reason, might seem paradoxical. *Amor* in Stoic thought is generally classified as one of the emotions, *adfectus*, apt to disturb and distract us from the achievement of Stoic calm. What kind of love might be at stake here? Seneca seems to suggest in this letter that an attachment to reason is analogous to and indeed can take the place of our attachment to friends and family members. Can we really hope to refocus the feelings we might have developed for our fellow humans onto the abstract ideas of virtue or reason? This letter, on my reading, makes a bold attempt to harness the emotion embedded in human interdependence (where love is always precarious, alert to the threat of loss) and to refocus it on a secure and lasting object.

The opening sentence of Letter 74 evokes the friendship between Seneca and his addressee Lucilius in emotionally charged language (*Ep.* 74.1):

¹ * I am tremendously grateful to Francesca Romana Berno for inviting me to the fine conference on love in Seneca's Letters, held at La Sapienza in October 2021, from which I learned so much. Particular thanks, too, are owed to Margaret Graver for her very helpful comments on a draft and to the anonymous referees for some significant fine-tuning of my argument.

Epistula tua delectauit me et marcentem excitauit, memoriam quoque meam, quae iam mihi segnis ac lenta est, euocauit.

Your letter has given me pleasure, and has roused me from sluggishness. It has also prompted my memory, which has been for some time slack and nerveless.²

The stimulating qualities of Lucilius' writing play a prominent role in several letters earlier in the collection, particularly Letter 46.³ In Letter 74, as in 46, the effect of Lucilius' writing is presented in vividly physical terms; his words have a rousing effect on Seneca. But despite this ostensibly personal opening, Letter 74 is, for the most part, little concerned with the particularities of the relationship between Seneca and Lucilius. In this respect it resembles many letters in the latter part of the *Epistulae morales*. All the same, personal elements, though few, do, I want to argue, have a real significance for the argument of this letter. Indeed, the emotional dimension of the relationship between Seneca and Lucilius, their mutual affection, as it is represented in the letters, is, I shall suggest, an essential constituent of the Stoic education they model.

The letter Seneca received with such enthusiasm from Lucilius was, it seems, concerned with the Stoic claim that, if one wants to attain the happy life (*uita beata*), only the *honestum*, 'the honourable', is to be regarded as good (a claim already explored in a number of earlier letters). But doubts remain on Seneca's part as to whether Lucilius is fully convinced, or so we are to infer from what follows.⁴ The arguments Seneca articulates in Letter 74, in further support of his claim that only the *honestum* is to be regarded as good and that this is the key to a happy life, are for the most part highly exhortatory.⁵ In particular, Seneca urges the reader to love reason: *ama rationem*. This instruction, pairing love and reason, might seem paradoxical. *Amor* in Stoic thought is generally classified as one of the emotions, *adfectus*, apt to disturb and distract us from the achievement of Stoic calm.⁶ What kind of love might be at stake here? Seneca seems to suggest in this letter that an

² Translations are adapted from Gummere's Loeb edition.

³ See Edwards (2019) *ad loc.*

⁴ On the characterisation of Lucilius' position and Seneca's response here, see Wildberger (2010) 215.

⁵ On the exhortatory character of Letter 74, see Inwood (2007) 182. He sees this as balanced by the emphasis on proofs in Letter 76.

⁶ See e.g. Chrysippus, quoted by Galen *PHP* 4.6.24-34.

attachment to reason is analogous to and indeed can take the place of our attachment to friends and family members. Can we really hope to refocus the feelings we might have developed for our fellow humans onto the abstract ideas of virtue or reason? This letter, on my reading, makes a bold attempt to harness the emotion embedded in human interdependence (where love is always precarious, alert to the threat of loss) and to refocus it on a secure and lasting object.

I. Articulating Stoic values

Letter 74 is the final letter of Book 8 and picks up on preoccupations explored earlier in the book, focusing, as I have noted, on the *honestum* as the key to the *uita beata*. Brad Inwood (2007) 182 characterises Letter 74 as the second in ‘a trio of letters dealing explicitly with Stoic value theory’, the trio being 71, 74 and 76, though of the three it is the only one Inwood does not include in his own selection. Letter 71, acknowledging the difficulty of offering usable advice on individual problems, given the time-lag of long-distance communication, had urged Lucilius to make decisions for himself with reference to the *honestum* as *summum bonum*. Letter 71, too, characterises the attachment we ought to develop to virtue in terms of love. At 71.4 Seneca declares that which is honourable (*honestum*) is the only good, while *cetera falsa et adulterina bona sunt*, ‘all other goods are false and debased’. Seneca then enjoins Lucilius (71.5) to develop an intense love of virtue: *hoc si persuaseris tibi et uirtutem adamaueris, amare enim parum est, quicquid illa contigerit... faustum felixque erit*. ‘If you convince yourself of this and if you come to love virtue with devotion (for just loving is not enough), anything that has been touched by virtue will bring blessing and happiness’. Among the things ‘touched by virtue’ he explicitly includes such apparent evils as torture and illness. Only the *honestum* is *bonum*, Seneca insists.

The verb to love, *amare*, is not strong enough to convey the ideal disposition toward virtue, Seneca suggests here; it must be reinforced by the intensifying prefix *ad-*. The *summum bonum* should, it seems, inspire a passionate devotion. The adjective *adulterina*, ‘debased’, ‘adulterous’, is used to characterise apparent goods to which one should not attach oneself. This casts the love of virtue, by contrast, as ideally monogamous; marital love serves in this context as a potent analogy for the love of virtue the would-be wise should strive to develop. We

might compare the marriage analogy of Letter 53, where Seneca urged his reader to view a personified Philosophy as a worthy consort (53.8); *dignus illa es, illa digna te est*, 'you are worthy of her and she is worthy of you'.⁷ Philosophy and the *proficiens* are then exhorted to embrace one another: *ite in complexum alter alterius*.⁸

Love of virtue is also central to Letter 74. Devotion to an earthly spouse, by contrast, is a hostage to fortune.⁹ Letter 74 insists that we ourselves can only love reason fully if we are able to transcend the ties of the flesh. To make one's happiness dependent on anything – or anyone – else is to put oneself under the power of Fortune. Seneca touches on a range of situations where individuals subject themselves to the vagaries of chance, as a consequence of this, experiencing emotions which undermine or disturb their mental tranquillity; the goal is to become *intrepidus* 'undaunted' (74.5).

II. Attachments as distraction

An individual who mourns for lost children is Seneca's first example of one who is emotionally exposed (74.2). Children may also provoke anxiety or shame. Seneca also touches on erotic desire (described as 'to be tormented by love' *amore excruciar*i, whether for a wife or for a mistress), on ambition for office – and of course (at greater length) on the fear of death. Here, as often elsewhere, personified, Fortune is imagined as a provider of lavish games, who showers the spectators with gifts of different value, causing them to fight among themselves (74.7):

hanc enim imaginem animo tuo propone, ludos facere fortunam et in hunc mortalium coetum honores, diuitias, gratiam excutere, quorum alia inter diripientium manus scissa sunt, alia infida societate diuisa, alia magno detrimento eorum, in quos deuenerant, presa.

⁷ A phrase curiously reminiscent of Sulpicia's love-elegy, [Tib.] 3.13.10: *cum digno digna fuisse ferar*.

⁸ She later goes on to play the role of exigent mistress. See Edwards (2019) *ad loc.* and Dressler (2016) 83–85. In his now fragmentary *De matrimonio* (esp F 27 Vottero), Seneca does however warn against the wrong kind of love for one's spouse: *nihil est foedius quam uxorem amare quasi adulteram*.

⁹ *Ep.* 104, discussed by Chiara Torre (2022), presents a more positive view of conjugal love. See also Dressler (2016) on *Ep.* 104.

Picture now to yourself that Fortune is holding a festival, and is showering down honours, riches, and influence upon this mob of mortals; some of these gifts have already been torn to pieces in the hands of those who try to snatch them, others have been divided up by treacherous partnerships, and still others have been seized to the great detriment of those into whose possession they have come.

I cannot help noting – if I may be forgiven for deviating from the theme of love – that this vividly evoked scene (which Seneca goes on to develop in considerable detail) resonates suggestively with stories told about the emperor Nero. At his games, according to Suetonius, ‘Every day, gifts of all kinds were thrown to the crowds: a thousand birds each day of every kind, different sorts of food, tokens to be exchanged for grain, clothes, gold, silver, jewels, pearls, pictures, slaves, working animals and even some tame wild ones and finally ships, blocks of apartments and farmland’ (*Nero* 11).¹⁰ In Letter 74, as in most other letters, imperial politics remain firmly in the background. The relationship between the philosopher and those wielding political power is, however, a significant, if somewhat elliptically developed, theme in the preceding Letter 73.¹¹ This perhaps gives an additional bite to the comment in the opening section of Letter 74 that: *qui alia bona iudicat, in fortunae uenit potestatem, alieni arbitrii fit*, ‘anyone who deems other things [i.e. than the supreme good] to be good, puts himself in the power of Fortune, and goes under the jurisdiction of another’. The phrases *in fortunae... potestatem* and *alieni arbitrii* suggest the situation of one who has lost their independence, lost control over their own position and has become subject to the whims of another.¹²

Accepting gifts places one under another’s power. Seneca uses the first-person plural (not unusually) to characterise those fighting over the prizes. He himself, indeed, had (according to Tacitus and Dio) received many gifts from the emperor – and was accused by critics of

¹⁰ *sparsa et populo missilia omnium rerum per omnes dies: singula cotidie milia auium cuiusque generis, multiplex penus, tesserae frumentariae, uestis, aurum, argentum, gemmae, margaritae, tabulae pictae, mancipia, iumenta atque etiam mansuetae ferae, nouissime naues, insulae, agri*. My translation. Nero was by no means the only emperor to distribute gifts at the games. Cf. on Caligula, Suet. *Cal.* 18 ‘he threw gifts of various kinds and distributed a basket of savouries to each man’; D.C. 69.8.2 on Hadrian.

¹¹ On the Letters’ general reticence in relation to Nero, see Edwards (2021) (170–171 on *Ep.* 73).

¹² Seneca uses this legal phrase several times in the letters, e.g. *Ep.* 13.1, 59.18 (also with reference to Fortune), 83.22, 110.20 (also of Fortune).

excessive attachment to his worldly possessions.¹³ The merciless politics of the emperor's gift-giving is played out brilliantly in Tacitus' staging of the dialogue between Seneca and Nero, in which Seneca attempts to return the emperor's gifts but is not permitted to do so (*Ann.* 14.53-56). We might note the wry observation in Letter 74: *prudentissimus quisque cum primum induci uidet munuscula, a theatro fugit et scit magno parua constare*, 'The most sensible man, therefore, as soon as he sees the dole being brought in, runs from the theatre; for he knows that one pays a high price for small favours' (74.7). Seneca's own withdrawal from the theatre of Neronian court life had taken place at a much later point in the proceedings.

If my comments here seem something of a diversion, this is also true of Seneca's arresting vignette. Evocative though his vividly developed image of toxic imperial largesse might be, we may well feel, reading the central section of the letter, where Seneca moves from parental bereavement to unseemly scrapping for material goods, that he has been somewhat disingenuous. The brilliant portrait of the frenzied crowd, fighting for prizes, all of them ultimately disappointed, whether or not they manage to lay hands on what glitters most (a scene which he continues to develop at 74.8-10), is, we might think, a most unsatisfactory analogy for individuals devastated by the loss of a child, a spouse, a friend, whom they had loved dearly. And yet such losses were the starting point at 74.2.

III. The dangers of attachment

Bereavement, rather than political ambition and its rewards, remains the key challenge in this letter, I want to argue, even if Seneca does not return explicitly to this topic until rather later. At 74.12-13, Seneca articulates an austere Stoic credo. In devoting ourselves to *uir-tus* (which here embraces *pietas* and *fides*), we must let go of our attachments to the things the world calls good. He focuses at this point on the appetite for food, for sex, and for material possessions. Such appetites do not pertain to the divine (74.14). Many of these appetites for apparent goods are, instead, characteristic of animals: *multa, quae bona uideri uolunt, animalibus quam homini pleniora contingunt* (74.15). And

¹³ Cf. D.C. 61.10.2 on Seneca's hypocrisy under Claudius, 62.2 on his wealth and Tac. *Ann.* 13.42 (the accusations of Suillius).

yet, he concedes, animals are also untroubled by many of the emotions which plague human life (shame, regret, for instance). Later in the letter, indeed, animals may be positive models, as we shall see.

The supreme good, nevertheless, is that which humans share with the divine, rather than with the animal. Hence, Seneca argues, the *summum bonum* is in the soul, not the body (74.16):

summum bonum in animo contineamus; obsolescit, si ab optima nostri parte ad pessimam transit et transfertur ad sensus, qui agiliores sunt animalibus mutis. non est summa felicitatis nostrae in carne ponenda; bona illa sunt uera, quae ratio dat, solida ac sempiterna, quae cadere non possunt, ne decrescere quidem aut minui.

Let us limit the Supreme Good to the soul; it loses its meaning if it is taken from the best part of us and applied to the worst, that is, if it is transferred to the senses; for the senses are more active in dumb beasts. The sum total of our happiness must not be placed in the flesh; the true goods are those which reason bestows, substantial and eternal; they cannot fall away, neither can they grow less or be diminished.

Seneca insists here on the distinction between true goods and preferable indifferentes (*commoda*), such as health and prosperity.¹⁴ While he sometimes, in line with earlier Stoics, underlines the corporeal nature of the soul, Seneca, particularly in the letters, often writes in terms of what can look like a mind-body dualism; the mind should be our sole concern, while the body is to be disdained.¹⁵ Embodiment frequently seems to constitute a problem for Seneca. His instruction not to entrust our happiness to the flesh (*caro*) is, on one level, an exhortation not to be distracted by the needs and desires of our own bodies. As he puts it in a later letter, *corpus in honorem animi coli*, ‘it is out of regard for the soul that the body is cherished’ (92.1). At 92.10, indeed, Seneca cites Posidonius’ characterisation of the body: *inutilis caro et fluida, receptandis tantum cibis habilis*, ‘the useless and fleeting flesh, fit only for the reception of food.’ Posidonius was a Stoic, of course, but such exhortations to abjure the flesh both here and in Letter 74 might seem to show us Seneca in strongly Platonising mode, picking up on a theme already developed at length in Letter 65.¹⁶ At 65.21, in particular, he rails against the shackles

¹⁴ See Seal (2021) 157 on Seneca’s terminology.

¹⁵ Cf. e.g. 23.6, 53.5-7, 54.7, 71.27, 78.27. See Reydam-Schils (2010).

¹⁶ On the disgusting and useless nature of the flesh, see also 102.27. Wildberger (2010)

of corporeality: *maior sum et ad maiora genitus, quam ut mancipium sim mei corporis, quod equidem non aliter aspicio quam uinclum aliquod libertati meae circumdatum*, 'I am above such an existence; I was born to a greater destiny than to be a mere chattel of my body, and I regard this body as nothing but a chain which manacles my freedom'. The word *caro*, 'flesh', features here also, again with regard to the individual's own body: *numquam me caro ista compellet ad metum*, 'Never shall that flesh make me feel fear!' (65.22). The needy flesh and its distractions, then, have already been insistently disparaged in the letters.¹⁷

Following the injunction not to invest our happiness in the flesh, the next sections of Letter 74 underline the need to use apparent goods, *commoda*, sparingly, and with the understanding that they may be at any time be lost to us. Seneca gives no specific examples here, however. *Felicitas*, prosperity, must not be relied on, he reminds his reader (74.18); this is a lesson for cities as much as for human individuals. We must develop inner defences, he insists. The key weapon in the wise person's defensive arsenal (this military imagery is, of course, a highly characteristic feature of Seneca's writing) is the acceptance of whatever has been determined by the order of the universe: *placeat homini, quicquid deo placuit*, 'Let man be pleased with whatever has pleased god' (74.20).¹⁸ At the heart of Seneca's argument in Letter 74, I would like to argue, is the association he seeks to forge between this acceptance (the traditional Stoic position) and the passionate intensity of love, of attachment to another human being.

IV. Learning to love reason

It is above all the love of reason which will serve as our shield, Seneca insists (74.21):

ama rationem! huius te amor contra durissima armabit. feras catulorum amor in uenabula inpingit feritasque et inconsultus impetus praestat indomitas; iuuenilia nonnumquam ingenia cupido gloriae in contemptum tam ferri quam

in her insightful discussion of Seneca's reception of Plato in Letter 102, sees Letter 74 as a significant precursor.

¹⁷ Though as Inwood (2007) 154 underlines, Seneca also presents the body as a kind of buffer or shield here; 'harm' done to the body can be accepted as not harming the person.

¹⁸ On the operation of Seneca's military imagery in this kind of context, see Gazzarri (2020) 222-232. See also Berno (2006) *ad Ep.* 53.12 and Edwards (2019) *ad Ep.* 53.12.

ignium misit; species quosdam atque umbra uirtutis in mortem uoluntariam trudit. quanto his omnibus fortior ratio est, quanto constantior, tanto uehementius per metus ipsos et pericula exhibit.

Love reason! The love of reason will arm you against the greatest hardships. Wild beasts dash against the hunter's spear through love of their young, and it is their wildness and their unpremeditated onrush that keep them from being tamed; often a desire for glory has stirred the mind of youth to despise both sword and stake; the mere vision and semblance of virtue impel certain men to a self-imposed death. In proportion as reason is stouter and steadier than any of these emotions, so much the more forcefully will she make her way through the midst of utter terrors and dangers.

Later in Letter 71, Seneca had asserted that the wise person loves himself most when he is embracing the opportunity for virtuous action, even at the cost of pain, poverty or other misfortunes: *beatus uero et uirtutis exactae tunc se maxime amat, cum fortissime expertus est, et metuenda ceteris, si alicuius honesti officii pretia sunt, non tantum fert, sed amplexatur*, 'But the happy man, whose virtue is complete, loves himself most of all when his bravery has been submitted to the severest test, and when, if that is the price he must pay for the performance of a duty which honour imposes, he not only endures but embraces that which other men regard with fear' (71.28).¹⁹ The embrace there might remind us of the embrace (*complexus*) between Philosophy and the would-be wise person at 53.8. In Letter 74, as in the earlier passage from 71.5, the love, which Seneca evokes in such rousing terms, is focused rather on the abstract – Virtue itself (at 71.5), or (at 74.21) *ratio*.

This section of Letter 74 is in several ways a slippery one. The would-be wise person is urged to develop an intense love of *ratio*, a love which is compared first to the selfless devotion of an animal to her young, then to the love of glory on the part of young men valiant in the face of the battlefield's perils and then to the readiness of other individuals to take their own lives through commitment to virtue, even when virtue is incompletely apprehended. It is striking that love shifts from verb (*ama*) to subject (*amor*). Indeed, picking up on the military imagery of 74.18, love (*amor*) arms (*armabit*) reason; Seneca's word-play might call to mind the Augustan love elegists' preoccupation with

¹⁹ See Inwood (2007) 198.

militia amoris, where love serves as both form of, and substitute for, mortal conflict.²⁰ At this point in Seneca's argument, however, *ratio*, previously the object, takes over from *amor* to become the subject. *Ratio* is the one defying dangers: *per metus ipsos et pericula exhibit*; the phrase *his omnibus fortior* too might suggest that the potency, the capacity to protect, lies with *ratio* itself, rather than with the love of which *ratio* is the object. What role then does love serve here?

The animal analogy at 74.21 is, I think, significant. As often elsewhere, of course, Seneca argues *ex maiore*. If a lesser being can show such death-defying commitment, why should not a greater?²¹ Our human capacity for rationality, shared with the divine, distinguishes us from animals, who are characteristically instinct-driven. Nevertheless, the protective love of a mother animal toward her vulnerable young, a love that prompts her to face the deadliest peril, serves as a striking parallel for the would-be wise person's love of *ratio* and *uirtus*.²² This is, we might note, one of the relatively rare moments when Seneca deploys a female agent – and offers a version of maternal love arrestingly different from the stereotype of the pampering mother he sometimes offers elsewhere.²³ But Seneca's analogy also serves to reintroduce the troublingly intense attachment of parents to their offspring which he has for the most part kept just out of view in this letter. At 74.16 the reader was encouraged not to locate their happiness in the flesh. That section was ostensibly concerned with the individual's own flesh. But we might also think of the fragile flesh of others to whom we are attached, flesh in which we are all too liable to invest our own happiness.

²⁰ I am grateful to an anonymous referee for this suggestion. On *militia amoris* (a motif prominent particularly in the Elegies of Propertius and Ovid), see e.g. Drinkwater (2013).

²¹ We might compare the example of the German beast-fighter at *Ep.* 70.20-23. Wilcox (2006) 75 suggests we might see the examples of women controlling their grief in Seneca's consolations as rhetorically powerful in admonishing a male readership to do likewise.

²² Curiously at *Ep.* 99.24 (advising Marullus not to mourn his young son to excess) Seneca suggests that not to mourn at a funeral is to behave like wild beast.

²³ *Prov.* 2.5. Unsurprisingly, the Consolations to Marcia and Helvia also include positive characterisations of (bereaved) mothers.

V. Consoling the bereaved

Let us return to the issue of bereavement and the fear of bereavement. The Stoic position on bereavement was regarded by many in antiquity as impossibly harsh. Cicero wrestles with it in *Tusculan Disputations* Book 3.²⁴ Seneca himself returns to the topic repeatedly, not only in his Consolations (to Polybius, Marcia and Helvia) but also through his exploration of the figure of Stilbo in Letter 9, as well as in his consolatory Letters 63 and 99.²⁵ Only in Letter 99, the last of his consolatory pieces, addressed to a bereaved father (Marullus), who apparently claimed a commitment to philosophy, does Seneca perhaps fully espouse the tough doctrine of Cleanthes.²⁶ This letter has been read as a thinly veiled critique of consolatory arguments addressed by the Epicurean philosopher Metrodorus to his sister when she had recently lost a child, a text Seneca mentions he has been reading in the previous letter (98.9).²⁷ In Letter 99, Seneca declares to the bereaved father that he is offering not consolation but rather reprimands (*conuicia*, 99.2) to one who has given in to grief.²⁸ Seneca argues in that letter that it is, in Graver's words ((2009) 237), 'not consistent with virtue to experience at all the emotion properly called grief'.²⁹ Elsewhere, even if he is on the alert for misguided persistence in grief, his position is generally more moderate. Yet Letter 74 does, I think, even if only fleetingly, anticipate the hardline approach of Letter 99.

²⁴ See Graver (2002).

²⁵ On Letters 63 and 99, see Wilson (1997), Graver (2009). As Rimell (2020) emphasises, Seneca's consolations are often neglected in more general studies of his work, though see Fantham (2007) on the *Ad Helviam*, and, on his consolations to Marcia and Helvia, Wilcox (2006), Gloyn (2017) ch.1. Manning (1974), Wilson 2013 and now Ker (2022) offer insightful comments on Seneca's treatment of bereavement more generally. Wilson (2013) plays down the philosophical content of Seneca's consolatory writing, seeing these texts as serving rather 'to counteract the sort of personal isolationism espoused by much Stoic psychotherapeutic advice' ((2013) 113).

²⁶ Graver (2009) 236. Cf. Wilson (2013); Ker (2022). For the doctrine of Cleanthes, see Cic. *Tusc.* 3.76.

²⁷ Metrodorus is criticised explicitly at 99.27. See Wilson (1997). Graver (2009) 237 emphasises rather the particularity of Marullus as addressee.

²⁸ The letter concludes with a repeated emphasis on Seneca's intention to chastise (99.32).

²⁹ For Marullus' philosophical commitment, see 99.14, 32.

In the latter part of 74, Seneca at last tackles explicitly, if briefly, the particular challenge posed by bereavement. At 74.22, he imagines the interjection of a critic:

‘Nihil agitis,’ inquit, ‘quod negatis ullum esse aliud honesto bonum; non faciet vos haec munitio tutos a fortuna et immunes. dicitis enim inter bona esse liberos pios et bene moratam patriam et parentes bonos; horum pericula non potestis spectare securi. perturbabit uos obsidio patriae, liberorum mors, parentum seruitus.’

Someone says to us: ‘You are mistaken if you maintain that nothing is a good except that which is honourable; a defence like this will not make you safe from Fortune and free from her assaults. For you maintain that dutiful children, and a well-governed country, and good parents, are to be reckoned as goods; but you cannot see these dear objects in danger and be yourself at ease. Your calm will be disturbed by a siege conducted against your country, by the death of your children, or by the enslaving of your parents’.

Seneca responds to this criticism with what he describes as the usual Stoic points, but supplemented by a further argument of his own.³⁰ Having a good country or a good friend are to be classified as ‘external goods’ in Zeno’s Stoicism (D.L. 7.95). The standard Stoic position is set out – the death of a friend or a child is to be regarded merely as the removal of their bodies, *corpora* (74.24).³¹ Again the flesh is disparaged here.

In Letter 63, Seneca advised Lucilius, devastated by the loss of a friend, that he should seek out a replacement: *quem amabas, extulisti; quaere quem ames*, ‘You have lost one whom you loved; seek out someone to love’ (63.11).³² In Letter 74, too, Seneca advises his reader to find a replacement for what is lost. *deinde etiam si amici perierunt, etiam si probati respondentisque uoto patris liberi, est quid eorum expleat locum*, ‘Again, even if friends have perished or children of approved character who fulfil their father’s hopes for them, there is something that can take their place’ (74.24). Rather than suggesting a replacement human here, as he had in his earlier works, Seneca strikingly enjoins the bereaved

³⁰ As Wildberger (2010) 125 notes, it is striking that Seneca here treats his interlocutor’s objections as well known.

³¹ Compare the arguments set out at 66.8–10.

³² Cf. *Marc.* 16.7–8; *Helv.* 18–19.

to regard *uirtus* itself as a solace. Whoever we have lost, *uirtus* ‘takes possession of the soul and removes all sense of loss’, *totum animum tenet, desiderium omnium tollit*.³³ Seneca continues in this vein: ‘as long as your *uirtus* is unharmed, you will not feel that you have lost anything’, *quamdiu uirtus salua fuerit, non senties quidquid abscesserit* (74.25). We are to see *uirtus* (or try to) as taking the place of beloved friends or children of good character.

We might perhaps read *uirtus* here as a reference not only (as Gummere seems to do) to the *uirtus* of the bereaved person (‘your *uirtus*’) but also as a reference to the *uirtus* of those who have died. It is, after all, *uirtus* which made the friends, the children good (while the relationship to the friend or family member should itself be regarded as an indifferent, though one which accords with nature).³⁴ A short life, Seneca contends, may be just as virtuous as a long one. This argument, which he often deploys in relation to the fear of death, is also relevant to the fear – and experience – of bereavement. Seneca uses the analogy of circles (74.27), which have exactly the same shape, he points out, no matter what their area or their duration. A small circle is just as much of a circle as a large one. Seneca concedes that sometimes virtue has a wide scope, governs kingdoms, creates laws – and fosters friendships. But it can be equally exercised in more constrained circumstances, even in a tiny corner.³⁵ There is something appealing in this approach to valuing the life of an individual. A quiet humble life may exhibit as much virtue as that of a philosopher king, a life of just a few years, as much virtue as one of many decades. Nevertheless, the individual’s life imagined as a circle, complete and self-sufficient, serves at least partially, I would suggest, to occlude any dependency between individuals, any attachments to others, as having potential significance for one’s own flourishing.³⁶

The additional argument Seneca offers as his own follows on, he suggests, from the standard Stoic line (74.30):

³³ The term *desiderium* often has the sense of longing for a dead friend or beloved family member (OLD 1b). See e.g. Cic. *Laelius* 10.6, 23.8, Hor. *Odes* 1.24.1.

³⁴ Seneca (as at 74.16, discussed above) often uses *commoda* for these preferred indifferents.

³⁵ See Rimell (2015) 113–136 on the significance of the *angulus* in Seneca.

³⁶ As Rimell (2020) underlines, some of Seneca’s other consolatory writing, notably the *Ad Helviam matrem*, comes closer to acknowledging the significance of human interdependency. See also Dressler (2016) on the role of care-giving in Seneca’s work generally.

non adfligitur sapiens liberorum amissione, non amicorum. eodem enim animo fert illorum mortem, quo suam expectat.

The wise man is not distressed by the loss of children or friends. For he endures their deaths in the same spirit that he awaits his own.

Conformity to nature is a key facet of virtue. Death, one's own or of those one loves, is in conformity with nature and is not in itself a bad thing.³⁷ Grief is a threat to the mind's naturally exalted disposition (*quem excelsum esse oportet*). Like longing (*desiderium*), grief subdues the mind and must thus be excluded. Yes, he concedes, the wise man will sometimes experience phenomena that resemble emotions but such natural impulses will never undermine his readiness to undertake whatever virtue requires.³⁸ The militaristic language of the final sections of the letter once again encourages us to rouse ourselves, taking on the role of ever-alert warriors for virtue: *honestum... in procinctu stat*, 'that which is honourable... stands girt for action'.³⁹

VI. Love sublimated

We seem here to have moved far beyond the love of individual humans for one another (and the vulnerability such love entails). And yet Seneca's exhortations at the heart of this letter, to love reason, as a mother animal loves her offspring, and to see virtue as able to offer consolation for lost children, suggest an attempt to sublimate the potency of intense emotions which have their origin in our relations with those close to us. Such feelings, once sublimated, though intense, would (unlike feelings for vulnerable mortals) be constant, since they relate to objects, reason and virtue, which are themselves unchanging – 'substantial and eternal' (Seneca's phrase at 74.16).⁴⁰ This kind of

³⁷ Cf. e.g. 99.12.

³⁸ On such involuntary reactions, see also 11.1, 71.29. Graver (2009) explores the further development of this argument in Letter 99, where the distinction between the disruptive force of *dolor* and the tolerable 'bite' (*morsus*) of loss is explored at 99.14 (cf. Cic. *Tusc.* 3.82-83). The involuntary nature of some tears features at 99.18. Cf. the references to the *sapiens'* experience of loss at *Ep.* 9.3, and *Const.* 10.4 discussed below.

³⁹ The *honestum* here channels the behaviour of heroic bereaved fathers who despite their recent loss carry out their duties without faltering. Cf. 99.6.

⁴⁰ Clark (2016) argues that Augustine draws on both Platonic and Stoic traditions to articulate his message of *bona uoluntas* as defining a life in which humans are led to

emotion would surely qualify as an instance of Stoic *eupatheia*, a positive and consistent kind of desire or *boulēsis*.⁴¹ But how exactly do we make the move from the love of fragile, corporeal beings who depend on us to loving what is intrinsically self-sufficient and invulnerable?

Perhaps I am placing too much weight on Seneca's analogies. One might argue that the key element in the series of parallels at 74.21 is that the mother animal, the young soldiers and the elderly philosophers are ready to face their own annihilation motivated by their attachment to something beyond themselves. In exhortative mode, Seneca seeks to generate an equally intense and selfless attachment to reason and to virtue, and to convey the thrilling nobility of this commitment. Yet we could also see a connection with another strand in Stoic discourse, one concerned with the nature of love (here Eros), which characterises it not as a kind of desire but rather as 'an effort to form a friendship because of an impression of beauty', in the words of Diogenes Laertius.⁴²

The model of a loving and mutually beneficial attachment suggested here bears some resemblance, I think, to the relationships advocated by Diotima in Plato's *Symposium*, relationships which have the potential to be sublimated into a more profound attachment to the form of beauty and a love of wisdom.⁴³ Some have criticised the account of Eros in the *Symposium* for its cold-hearted egotism; relationships with others, it appears, are merely the means to an end.⁴⁴ And yet, as Frisbee Sheffield underlines, while the would-be philosopher's ascent toward contemplation of the form of the beautiful is predominantly motivated by the quest for his own happiness, it also involves care and concern for others along the way. These others are loved insofar as they instantiate the form of beauty in body and (particularly) soul. Similarly, in Seneca's Stoic model, insofar as individuals exemplify virtue, they can be loved for their own sakes (even if we might not feel this model provides a comprehensive account of the nature of human attachments).⁴⁵

love (*amare*) God and to love their neighbours as themselves. Cf. *Civ. Dei* 14.28 on the two *amores*.

⁴¹ See Graver (2007) ch. 9. *Cic. Tusc.* 4.12-14.

⁴² See Graver (2007) 185, citing D.L. 7.130; Alexander of Aphrodisias *On Aristotle's topics* 2.2.139 (= *SVF* 3.722); *Cic. Tusc.* 4.72; Stobaeus, *Ecl.* 2.7.IIS (=115W).

⁴³ Persons as love-objects are steps in the lover's progress, 211c1-d1 (the *scala amoris*). See Sheffield (2006) esp. ch. 5.

⁴⁴ Vlastos (1981) 3-34.

⁴⁵ Cf. D.L. 7.129-130 on the Stoic wise man 'who will fall in love with young persons

We might remember that the challenge Seneca puts in the mouth of his unnamed interlocutor at 74.22 does not refer simply to parents, children and *patria* but to *liberos pios et bene moratam patriam et parentes bonos*. This is not just about attachment to parents *qua* parents, children *qua* children or one's country as the place one happens to live.⁴⁶ In each case, the moral goodness of what may be lost is also emphasised. We might note as a parallel here Seneca's preoccupation in Letter 99, so disconcerting to modern readers, with the question of whether his addressee's recently dead child would have grown up to be virtuous or not. *decessit filius incertae spei*, 'You have lost a child of unknown promise,' he observes (99.2). This uncertainty over the child's character makes self-indulgent grief all the less justifiable, he suggests (cf. 99.13).

VII. The bonds of community

An attachment to *uirtus* itself is not incompatible with – indeed, in Seneca's view, derives from – recognition of the manifestation of *uirtus* in others.⁴⁷ While the virtuous life does not absolutely require one to be part of a community, the Stoics, for whom virtue was an integral part of a complex, interconnected philosophical system, recognised the difficulty of attaining virtue in isolation and the importance of developing one's capacity for moral discrimination within a community, even an imperfect one.⁴⁸ There is a significant contrast here with the Cynic position, as Seal (2021) 24-73, esp. 30-32, has recently emphasised; for the Cynics, a life of social isolation offered the ideal circumstances for the pursuit of virtue. We should certainly connect the lack of value the Cynics placed on community with their extreme position in relation to grief. The position espoused, chillingly, by Stilbo, who in Seneca, Letter 9, is apparently unmoved by the loss of homeland, children and wife (9.18, *capta patria, amissis liberis, amissa uxore*), is a recognisably

who through their form give an impression of good natural endowment for virtue.' See Graver (2007) 186-187.

⁴⁶ Though the Stoics did recognise the natural disposition to love one's offspring, as Cato is made to comment at Cic. *Fin.* 3.62, quoted below.

⁴⁷ Seal (2021) 24-73 brings this out very clearly, particularly in relation to Letter 120.

⁴⁸ On the relationship between friendship and community in Seneca – and the contribution made specifically by epistolary communication – see Edwards (2018).

Cynic one.⁴⁹ *Apatheia* was a hallmark of Cynicism, as Graver underlines.⁵⁰ Seneca differentiates the Stoic from the Cynic positions in the following terms (*Ep.* 9.3):

Hoc inter nos et illos interest: noster sapiens uincit quidem incommodum omne sed sentit, illorum ne sentit quidem. illud nobis et illis commune est, sapientem se ipso esse contentum. sed tamen et amicum habere uult et uicinum et contubernalem, quamuis sibi ipse sufficiat.

There is this difference between ourselves and the other school: our ideal wise man feels his troubles, but overcomes them; their wise man does not even feel them. But we and they alike hold this idea,—that the wise man is self-sufficient. Nevertheless, he desires friends, neighbours, and associates, no matter how much he is sufficient unto himself.

Seneca's Stoic wise man does not lack feeling. Seneca mentions here friends rather than family (the letter takes the desirability of friends as its point of departure). But the example of Stilbo, as Letter 9 will soon make clear, focuses on his response to the loss of homeland, wife and children. Elsewhere, too, in his treatise on the constancy of the wise person (where the same example of Stilbo's impassivity is offered, *Const. Sap.* 5.6), Seneca explains that for Stoics even the *sapiens* will feel such losses, though he will not be overthrown by them (*Const.* 10.4):

alia sunt quae sapientem feriunt, etiam si non peruertunt, ut dolor corporis et debilitas aut amicorum liberorumque amissio et patriae bello flagrantis calamitas: haec non nego sentire sapientem; nec enim lapidis illi duritiam ferriue adserimus. nulla uirtus est quae non sentias perpeti. quid ergo est? quosdam ictus recipit, sed receptos euincit et sanat et comprimit.

Quite different are the things that do buffet the wise man, even though they do not overthrow him, such as bodily pain and infirmity, or the loss of friends and children, and the ruin that befalls his country amid the flames of war. I do not deny that the wise man feels these things; for we do not claim for him the hardness of stone or of steel. There is no

⁴⁹ Stilbo (or Stilpo) seems to have been a pupil of Diogenes of Sinope (D.L. 6.76; 2.113, 117-118, 119). See Goulet-Cazé (1996) 403-404. Seneca's handling of the encounter between Stilbo and the enemy king Demetrius Poliorcetes, who sacked Megara, is discussed by Baraz (2016) 162-164. In the version which appears in *Const.* 5.6, Stilbo's daughters are described as violated rather than lost (*filias rapuerat hostis*).

⁵⁰ On this see Graver (forthcoming), (citing e.g. D.L. 6.2, 6.15, 4.51) which offers particular insights into Seneca, Letter 9. I am very grateful to Margaret Graver for sharing her draft with me.

virtue that fails to realize that it does endure. What, then, is the case? The wise man does receive some wounds, but those that he receives he overcomes, arrests, and heals.

Here, Seneca refers to the loss of both friends and children as serious blows, even for the wise man.⁵¹ Elsewhere indeed Seneca asserts that the loss of a friend is the worst kind of loss (99.3). This is a particular preoccupation of Letter 63. But relations between parents and children also have a distinctive value, for they play a quite specific role in Stoic accounts of the development of human community, through the process sometimes termed *oikeiōsis*.⁵²

Despite his often expressed disdain for the flesh, Seneca acknowledges as natural our inborn concern for our own bodies (14.1) – even if there is a fine line between this natural concern for one’s own person and ‘excessive love’, *nimius amor* (14.2).⁵³ This attachment, indeed, is, according to the Stoics, a crucial basis for extending one’s sphere of concern to embrace other people. The Stoics recognised an essential link between self-preservation, parenthood and human sociability. This connection is set out explicitly in Cicero’s *De finibus* at 3.62–64.⁵⁴ While humans share with animals their attachment to their own offspring, this is also the starting point for the move from self to other, as Cicero’s Cato underlines (Cic. *Fin.* 3.62):⁵⁵

Pertinere autem ad rem arbitrantur intellegi natura fieri ut liberi a parentibus amentur; a quo initio profectam communem humani generis societatem persequimur.

Again, it is held by the Stoics to be important to understand that nature creates in parents an affection for their children; and parental affection is the source to which we trace the origin of the association of the human race in communities.

⁵¹ This passage is also discussed in Graver (forthcoming).

⁵² Reydam-Schils (2005) ch. 2.

⁵³ On Seneca’s treatment of ‘ownness’ particularly in Letter 121, see Dressler (2016) 167–204, Porter (2020) 273–275.

⁵⁴ See LS 57A–H (the Hierocles fragment is included as 57G). See Reydam-Schils (2005) 55–59 on the connection between personal *oikeiosis* and the social kind, also Graver (2007) 151–153.

⁵⁵ See Reydam-Schils (2005) 57.

Nature plays a crucial role; there is a parallel, of course, between the affection felt by a human parent for their offspring and that of an animal towards her own young. In humans, however, this bond of sociability is founded in reason and shared with the divine.⁵⁶ Hence, argues Cicero's Cato, the wise man should want to play a part in governing the state. And for one who has attained wisdom, the demands of reason ultimately take precedence over blood ties. Cato goes on to pronounce that: *uir bonus et sapiens et legibus parens et ciuili offici non ignarus utilitati omnium plus quam unius alicuius aut suae consulit*, 'a good, wise and law-abiding man, conscious of his duty to the state, studies the advantage of all more than that of himself or of any single individual' (Cic. *Fin.* 3.64). Ultimately, Seneca, too, argues, one must wean oneself off attachment to any particular individual, no matter how virtuous, and be ready to recognise virtue more generally, wherever it may be found.

VIII. Care for others

All the same, Seneca is, I think, fully alert to the rebarbative character of Stoic teaching on loss, to the challenge involved in embracing virtue as a substitute for the beloved dead. It is notable that the austere conclusion of Letter 74 is succeeded by the intimate and affectionate opening of the following letter (75), the first in Book 9. Here, Seneca, reflecting on the character of his own letter-writing, presents as his model the spontaneity and particularity of face-to-face conversation. Such an approach is the best way to communicate his own conviction (75.3):

hoc unum plane tibi adprobare uellem; omnia me sentire, quae dicerem, nec tantum sentire sed amare.

I should like to convince you of this one thing: that I feel whatever I say, that I not only feel it but am wedded to it.

Gummere's Loeb translation nicely offers 'be wedded to' as a translation of *amare*. Here, too, we find Seneca using the vocabulary of feeling and of love to convey both philosophical commitment and sincerity. In this instance, he is referring to the particular mode of his communication with his friend; Seneca's point is that the language

⁵⁶ Cf. Sen. *Ep.* 124.9.

of low-key, intimate conversation between two individuals is no less suited to communicating what one truly believes than is the emphatic and elaborate language of the public speaker, who raises his voice and stamps his foot (75.2). Indeed, Seneca goes further than this. Picking up on the use of *amare* in relation to his own disposition toward the things he believes, Seneca offers a rather surprising analogy to illustrate the point about different approaches to communicating philosophical conviction (75.3):

aliter homines amicum, aliter liberos osculantur; tamen in hoc quoque amplexu tam sancto et moderato satis apparet adfectus.

It is one sort of kiss which a man gives his mistress, and another which he gives his children; yet in the father's embrace also, holy and restrained as it is, plenty of affection is disclosed.

One approach to communication is likened to a man's relations with his mistress, another to a father's affection for his child. Particularly given what Seneca has to say elsewhere concerning erotic love (we might think of the pejorative use of *adulterina* at 71.4), there is a significant value judgement in this distinction. Analogous here to the father's loving concern for his offspring, low-key conversation, Seneca suggests, is far superior to more obviously demonstrative ranting and gesticulation. Despite the occurrence of the term *adfectus* in this passage, Stoic critique of the passions is not, within the context of this analogy, a matter for concern. Seneca seeks rather to characterise the advice he offers Lucilius in the letters in terms of the love and care shown by a parent who has his child's best interests at heart. Letter-writing, intimate, personal, grounded in the extended and continuously developing relationship between two individuals, is the ideal medium for such advice.

The father's loving embrace of his child takes on, I think, a particular poignancy in the light of the previous letter's concern with parental bereavement.⁵⁷ It also perhaps suggests a way in which the love of virtue can after all offer a kind of solace to the bereaved parent, as he devotes himself to the care of others, offering them advice on how to live a good Stoic life. This is an idea present to a degree in Seneca's earlier consolation to Marcia on the loss of her son (*Marc.* 16.7-8), where it is

⁵⁷ Seneca himself had lost at least one child (*Helv.* 2.5).

developed in relation to the figure of the farmer who, when some of his trees are destroyed, focuses on cultivating the remainder rather than on bemoaning his loss.⁵⁸ The skill the parent had developed in recognising, teasing out and reinforcing the child's scope for virtue may still be applied, even when the child is no longer living, in the context of other human relationships. Parental love may expose us to the risk of loss but perhaps we can learn, no matter what bereavements we suffer, to put our love to work for larger ends.

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⁵⁸ See too *Ep.* 9.4. These passages are discussed in Graver (forthcoming) in relation to the writings of Stilpo.

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