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It's Not the End of the World: Exile and Apocalypse in Seneca *Moral Epistles* 9.16

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Abstract – This paper investigates the analogy Seneca makes between the life of the sage when forced into solitude through exile or incarceration and the contemplative state of Jupiter after the *ekpyrosis* and before the rebirth of the cosmos. I argue that this passage is innovative and important for several reasons. Rather than using the end of the world to accept death as Seneca does in other texts, in this letter Jupiter's solitude after the world conflagration is employed as a model for how to live well and self-sufficiently while being alone. Jupiter's solitary contemplation takes place in a period outside of the regular workings of nature, an idea that is not found in other Stoic texts. This vision of Jupiter as the contemplative last being in the cosmos anticipates the modern apocalyptic trope of 'The Last Man.'

Exile and apocalypse are two key themes that run throughout Seneca's writings. He lived through and survived the former. The end of the world was solely a topic of intellectual exploration. But like Lucretius before him, Seneca also surmised that the end could be close at hand.[1] In *Moral Epistles* 9.16 Seneca brings these two topics together to provide a unique perspective on the experience of exile, as well as other forms of solitude, and imaging the end of the world.[2] In this article, I

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[1] Seneca states at *Q. Nat* 3.30.5: 'The destruction will not be long delayed; concord is being tested and torn apart' (*nec longa erit mora exitii, temptatur, divelliturque concordia*). Lucretius states that he and his contemporaries might witness the end of the world, but he hopes that *fortuna* will prevent it from happening, so that the event can be considered from a purely intellectual standpoint, *DRN* 5.104-109.

[2] The early reception history of Seneca also brings these two themes together. At the

will explore this passage from a variety of angles. First, I will consider its place within the letter itself. This vision of the end of the world is a lesson not simply in Stoic physics, but also in ethics. As is the case with Seneca's other world-catastrophe scenarios, the vision of the end is also part of a lesson in how to live and thrive in the world despite the much smaller catastrophes that afflict us. In his consolations to Marcia and Polybius, for example, Seneca discusses the end of the world in order to help cope with the death of a beloved family member. In *Epistle* 9, however, the topic is solitude and how to still live the good life despite being separated from family and friends. Secondly, this vision of the conflagration innovates Stoic ideas. In addition to the two stages involved in the *ekpyrosis*, conflagration and rebirth, Seneca posits an intermediate period during which nature ceases and Jupiter engages in quiet contemplation. Finally, I will consider how Seneca's vision relates to later accounts of the *ekpyrosis* in Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus, as well as the modern trope of 'The Last Man.' By situating Seneca's letter in its ancient and modern context, we can fully appreciate its unique and innovative vision of the solitary survivor of the end of the world.

The 'apocalyptic' nature of Seneca's works has long been noted by scholars.[3] Scripting end of the world scenarios was a theme that Seneca engaged with throughout his career, beginning with his early consolations to Marcia and Polybius. This theme seems to have particularly interested Seneca during the final years of his life when he wrote several accounts of the end of the world. Two lengthy and elaborate descriptions are found in the vision of cosmic collapse in the final chorus of *Thyestes* and the vision of the flood-to-come at the conclusion of *Natural Questions* 3. Unlike these detailed apocalypses, however, the one in *Epistles* 9.16 is extremely brief.[4] It is also Seneca's only piece of writing on the end of the world that merits inclusion in von Arnim's *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* (*SVF*), as well as in Long and Sedley's (LS) collection of Stoic texts on the *ekpyrosis*.[5] Yet in this letter, Seneca's primary

start of his entrance monologue in *Octavia* (377-396), the character Seneca regrets his return to Rome, praises the life he led while in exile in Corsica, and then moves to considering whether the end of the world is at hand.

[3] Pointed out in 1930 by Regenbogen (1961) 461-462 at the conclusion of his seminal work on Senecan tragedy. See most recently, Star 2021, chapters 4 and 5.

[4] Seneca also wrote brief accounts of the end of the world at *Ep*. 71.11-16 and *Q. Nat* 6.32.4, discussed below.

[5] *SVF* 2.1065 = LS 46O.

goal is not to explain the *ekpyrosis*. Indeed, he does not use this term, either here or elsewhere. Rather, Seneca's brief account of the end of the world is an inset example within the letter's larger exploration of how the *sapiens* can happily live both within society and in solitude.

The Solitude of Jupiter and the Sage

The vision of the end of the world in *Epistle* 9 comes as part of the letter's lengthy discussion of the paradox that, although the *sapiens* is content with himself, nevertheless he will wish to have a friend (*sapiens etiam si contentus est se, tamen habere amicum vult* 9.8). Seneca later clarifies that the sage's self-sufficiency extends to living the good life, but not to the mundane and quotidian aspects of simply living. According to Seneca, 'living' requires 'many things' including friends and community. Living the good life, however, only requires 'a strong and upright soul that looks down upon fortune' (*se contentus est sapiens ad beate vivendum, non ad vivendum; ad hoc enim multis illi rebus opus est, ad illud tantum animo sano et erecto et despiciente fortunam* 9.13).[6]

Despite this clarification, Seneca puts forth the objection of an imaginary interlocutor: 'What sort of life will there be for the sage, if he is left without friends and thrown into jail, or left alone among some foreign people, or kept away on a lengthy sea voyage, or cast upon some deserted shore?' (*qualis tamen futura est vita sapientis, si sine amicis relinquatur in custodiam coniectus vel in aliqua gente aliena destitutus vel in navigatione longa retentus aut in desertum litus eiectus*? 9.16). In response to these scenarios, Seneca places the reactions of the sage within a divine and cosmic perspective: 'The life of *sapiens* will be like that of Jupiter when, after the cosmos has been dissolved and the gods have been mixed together into one, nature stops briefly and Jupiter grows quiet, having given himself over to his thoughts. The *sapiens* does something similar: he hides in himself, he is with himself' (*qualis est Iovis, cum resoluto mundo et dis in unum confusis paulisper cessante natura adquiescit sibi cogitationibus suis traditus. tale quiddam sapiens facit: in se reconditur, secum est* 9.16).

Von Arnim believed that Seneca was quoting Chyrsippus with his description of Jupiter's actions during the *ekpyrosis* (*SVF* 2.1065). This letter is in fact full of quotes and references to other philosophers, including Epicurus, the Stoic Hecaton, as well as a story about the Megarian

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6 The text is Reynolds's (1965) OCT. All translations are my own.

philosopher, Stilbon.[7] In his discussion of how the sage is self-sufficient for living the good life but not for simply living, Seneca mentions Chrysippus by name and quotes him in order to explain this distinction (9.14 = *SVF* 2.674). Yet when Seneca later counters the objections of his imagined interlocutor by comparing the solitary life of the sage to that of Jupiter during the transition between world cycles, he makes no mention of Chrysippus.[8] Indeed, attributing this comparison to Chrysippus rather than to Seneca himself is unwarranted.[9] It deprives Seneca of his own idiosyncratic engagement with Stoic physics and ethics.

The language and ideas in this passage can be found throughout Seneca's works. The description of the sage hiding within and communing with himself (*in se reconditur, secum est* 9.16) has several parallels.[10] The idea that exile and isolation from friends and family is not an evil, but rather an opportunity for philosophical contemplation revisits key themes from his early works from exile, the consolations to his mother, Helvia, and to Polybius.[11] In the context of the *Moral Epistles*, the surrounding letters, 8 and 10, discuss the need for the philosopher to live in seclusion. In *Epistle* 8, Seneca states that his solitary work may make it seem that he has rejected human society, but in fact he is using his time to aid a great number of people. Seneca's seclusion allows him to write works not just for the benefit of the present but also for posterity (*Ep*. 8.1-2). *Epistle* 10 opens with a strong exhorta-

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7 Citations from Epicurus: frg. 174 Us. = 9.2, frg. 175 Us. = 9.8, frg. 474 Us. = 9.20; citation from Hecaton: frg. 27 Fowler = 9.6. This citation-heavy letter concludes with a line of poetry from a comic poet: 'he is not blessed who does not think himself to be' (*non est beatus, esse se qui non putat* 9.21). Scholars have attributed this line variously. See Reynolds's note *ad loc*. in his OCT.

8 Writing after Seneca, Plutarch attributes to Chrysippus the idea that Zeus is the only god to survive the conflagration and withdraws into providence, *On Common Conceptions* 1077E. On Plutarch's limited knowledge of Seneca, see Van Hoof (2010) 91 n. 34: 'Although Plutarch mentions Seneca in his *Life of Galba* 20.1.1 as well as in *On the Control of Anger* 461F, there is no indication that he read his predecessor's works.'

9 Curiously, von Arnim does not include this passage from Seneca in his section on the *ekyprosis* (*mundum esse interiturum*). Rather, it is part of the section on Jupiter and Juno. Long and Sedley correct this by placing Seneca's passage with other texts on the *ekpyrosis*.

10 E.g. Seneca's frequent admonition to 'recede into yourself' (*recede in te ipsum*, *Ep*. 7.8, 25.6, *Q. Nat*. 4 *praef*. 20, *Tranq*. 14.2, 17.3).

11 See *e.g. Helv*. 5-6, 8.6, 11.7; *Polyb*. 9. Indeed, Seneca appears to be revisiting and reworking key themes from these consolations. Both consolations stress that exile enables one to be free to study nature. By contrast, in *Ep*. 9.16, Jupiter's time for contemplation comes when nature has briefly stopped.

tion to live in solitude: 'flee the multitude, flee small groups, flee even from one person' (*fuge multitudinem, fuge paucitatem, fuge etiam unum Ep.* 10.1).[12] Finally, as already noted, accounts of the end of the world can be found throughout the Senecan corpus.[13]

Yet in this passage Seneca also reworks these familiar themes. First, we must note the brevity of *Epistle* 9's account of the end of the world. This mini-apocalypse stands in stark contrast to the elaborate and lengthy descriptions elsewhere in the Senecan corpus, particularly the ones in *Natural Questions* 3.27-30 and *Thyestes* (789-884), which Seneca may have been writing more or less simultaneously. In addition, we may note the divine perspective that Seneca grants the *sapiens*, and by extension, the reader. In some ways, all accounts of the end of the world give the audience a humanly impossible perspective (Horn (2018) 4). For example, Seneca's account at the conclusion of *To Marcia* (26.1-7) lifts the reader up into the heavens and allows communion with the ghost of Cremutius Cordus. The conclusion of *Natural Questions* 3 also allows the reader to witness the full spectacle of the flood, as well as the death of one generation of humans and the birth of another. Only in *Moral Epistles* 9.16, however, does Seneca directly connect the sage with Jupiter.

Elsewhere in Seneca's writings, accounts of the end of the world are typically used as a means to accept death. Even the blessed souls will be consumed in conflagration and turned back into their 'original elements' (*in antiqua elementa vertemur Marc*. 26.7). The death of the individual and the end of the world are both decreed by the power of nature (*in hac naturae necessitate Polyb*. 1.3) and by the 'law of the universe' (*lex universi Ep*. 71.16).[14] Even the Stoic sage accepts his own death as simply a precursor to the end of the world. Seneca imagines Cato accepting his defeat and preparing for his suicide by asking himself: 'Why then should I be angry or feel sorrow if in my death I precede the fate of everything by only a brief moment in time?' (*quid est ergo quare*

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12 On solitude in the ancient world, see the essays in Matuszewski (2022), and Kachuck (2021) on solitude in the Augustan period.

13 See Star (2021), chapters 4 and 5.

14 See also the conclusion of the final chorus of *Thyestes*: 'let all laments be gone, let fear leave: he is too greedy for life, whoever does not wish to die when the universe perishes with him, (*abeant questus, discede timor: / vitae est avidus quisquis non vult / mundo secum pereunte mori*) 882-884.

indignetur aut doleam, si exiguo momento publica fata praecedo Ep.71.15).[15] Elsewhere, Seneca notes that if confronted with the actual end of the world, the sage will rush to meet it.

> The life of a human being is something small, but to hold it in contempt is something great. Anyone who holds their life in contempt will watch without fear the stormy seas, even if all the winds stir them up, even if because of some disturbance in the world the tide turns the whole ocean onto the land. He will look without fear upon the wild and awesome appearance of the sky as it flashes with lightning, even if the sky breaks apart and stirs up fires that will destroy everything, starting with itself. He will look without fear upon the earth as it gapes open and breaks apart its bonds, even if the kingdoms of the underworld were uncovered. He will stand unshaken above that abyss and perhaps will jump into the place where he will have to fall.
>
> *pusilla res est hominis anima, sed ingens res contemptus animae. hanc qui contempsit securus videbit maria turbari, etiamsi illa omnes excitaverunt venti, etiamsi aestus aliqua perturbatione mundi totum in terras vertet oceanum. securus aspiciet fulminatis caeli trucem atque horridam faciem, frangatur licet caelum et ignes suos in exitium omnium, in primis suum, misceat. securus aspiciet ruptis compagibus dehiscens solum, illa licet inferorum regna retegantur. stabit super illam voraginem intrepidus, et fortasse quo debebit cadere desiliet.* (*Q. Nat*. 6.32.4)

As Francesca Romana Berno (2019) 78 notes of this passage, 'Seneca's sage refuses to be a distant observer, rather he wants to engage in the apocalypse.'

By contrast, *Epistle* 9 does not consider death, but rather solitude. Nevertheless, Seneca still looks to the end of the world as a means for modeling behavior.[16] *Epistle* 9, however, encourages an entirely different perspective. In this letter, Seneca moves away from death to survival, as the sage is linked to Jupiter, the sole being who is able to survive the end of the world. Only in *Epistle* 9 are the perspective and actions of human with respect to the end of the world directly connected to a god. Jupiter is the only being to survive the *ekpyrosis*, and thus his solitude

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15 See Berno (2019) 80-81.

16 An interesting parallel can be found in Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians. Paul offers advice on how to live in the remaining time before the end of the world (1 Cor 7:29-31). This letter is traditionally dated to the 50s CE. On Paul's Stoic eschatology see van Kooten (2017) 157-158 and van Kooten (2022) 177.

could not be more complete. By extension, when in a state of solitude occasioned by events such as exile or incarceration, the *sapiens* is likened to the last being in the cosmos. There are key differences, however. As Seneca notes, the sage's contemplation is 'something like' (*tale quiddam*) that of Jupiter's during the interval between cosmic cycles. The sage of course remains on earth and humanity is not destroyed. Yet the sage thinks of himself as having survived the end of the world, as being not simply the last surviving human, but rather, the last surviving deity. In contrast, Jupiter only experiences this solitude in the interval between cosmic cycles. This event presumably only occurs after vast intervals of time. The *sapiens* can experience 'something like' this state during times of enforced solitude. By extension, the reader is encouraged to adopt this Jupiter-like perspective during periods of crisis. Such crises may seem like the end of the world, but from the ultimate perspective of Jupiter the world does not really end. It gives way to a new one. By adopting Jupiter's perspective, the Stoic is able to 'make it through the flames' of whatever crisis he is confronted with and come out unharmed into the new world.

Later in the letter, Seneca gives an example of this attitude in action. He writes of the philosopher Stilbon's reaction to the murder of his wife and children when his city was sacked and burned by Demetrius Poliorcetes.[17] Seneca writes that when Demetrius asked Stilbon if he had lost anything (*num quid perdidisset*), Stilbon replied that he still retained all of his goods (*omnia, inquit, bona mea mecum sunt* 9.18).[18] Seneca praises Stilbon's words and notes that they are suited to the Stoic ideal. The Stoic too may carry all his goods intact even through burned-out cities (*concrematas urbes* 9.19) and still retain his happiness (*felicitatem* 9.19). Indeed, the fire imagery is significant here, as if to suggest a connection to previous discussion of the *ekpyrosis* that only Jupiter survives.[19]

Curiously, however, in his brief account of the end of the world, Seneca makes no mention of fire. Fire could be implied when Seneca notes that 'the gods will be joined together in one place' (*dis in unum*

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17 Stilbon (more properly, Stilpon c. 360-280 BCE) was a Megarian philosopher and reportedly a teacher of the founder of Stoicism, Zeno of Citium.

18 See also Plutarch *Tranq.* 468a, and Diogenes Laertius 2.115. Friedrich Klinger wrote a play on the topic, *Stilpo und seiner Kinder* (1777).

19 'common conflagration,' *incendio publico* 9.18, 'burned-out cities,' (*concrematas urbes*) 9.19. Seneca also mentions the ability of certain animals who are able to pass unharmed (*sine noxa*) through fires (*per medios ignes*) 9.19.

confusis). Given the association between the stars, planets, and the gods, this passage could echo Seneca's vision of 'stars running into stars' (*sidera sideribus incurrent*) in the account of the *ekpyrosis* at the end of *To* Marcia (26.7).[20] Similarly, the image of the cosmos coming undone (*resoluto mundo*) appears to connect with the *ekpyrosis*, as Stoics claimed that this event involved the breaking of the bonds that hold the universe together.[21]

At the same time, Seneca also appears to be giving an innovative account. The idea of nature stopping even for a brief period (*paulisper cessante natura*) is not a concept found in other Stoic accounts of the *ekpyrosis*. As Long and Sedley (1987 vol. 1) 311 note, 'Since god is continually active during all states of the Stoic universe, and especially during the conflagration, time must be presumed to continue even when no world-order in any sense measurable by us exists.' By contrast, Seneca is not describing what Jupiter does during the conflagration. Rather, he appears to be envisioning a period, perhaps outside of time, when Jupiter is not active but becomes quiet and gives himself over to contemplation. Indeed, Seneca's Latin supports the idea of a separate phase between conflagration and rebirth. First, the cosmos breaks apart and the other gods are mixed together into one. The primacy of these events is signaled by the use of perfect passive participles (*resoluto…confusis*), which mark these events as happening prior to the main verb describing Jupiter's growing quiet (*adquiescit*). Seneca describes the stopping of nature with a present participle (*cessante natura*), which implies that it is an event happening at the same time as the verb. Seneca thus seems to be imagining a separate period after the *ekpyrosis* in which nature stops to allow for Jupiter's quiet contemplation. Presumably after this brief pause in the workings of nature the cosmos is created anew. It seems, then, that Seneca is imagining

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20 See also 'and with this sudden confusion in the universe, let stars run into stars' (*subita confusione rerum sidera sideribus incurrant*) *Ben.* 6.22. On the divinity of the stars in Stoic thought, see Cicero *Nat. D.* 2.39 and the discussion of Salles (2005) 62.

21 Lapidge (1979) 361 argues that *solvo* 'was used by Roman Stoics to render *analuo*, a word used by Greek Stoics to connote the 'dissolution' of the universe at *ekpyrosis*.' Seneca's use of the compound *resoluto* at *Ep.* 9.16 can be related to this Stoic technical language. See also, 'let all differences be lost and let everything return into one' (*ex tanta verietate solvantur atque eant in unum omnia*) *Ben.* 6.22, and Lucan 'with the structure [of the universe] dissolved' (*cum conpage soluta*) 1.72.

a three-step process: dissolution, the brief cessation of nature which allows for Jupiter's solitary contemplation, and finally rebirth.[22]

Curiously, Seneca does not explicitly state that the third stage occurs. The rebirth of the cosmos is only implied by Seneca's point that nature stops briefly (*paulisper*) after cosmic dissolution. With these three stages Seneca appears to innovate on Stoic doctrine, which typically only discusses *ekpyrosis* and rebirth.[23] Indeed, surviving accounts envision a mechanistic process that focuses on the elements. First, fire takes over everything. After the conflagration ceases, fire gives way to moisture as the cosmos is reconstituted.[24] Seneca, by contrast, humanizes these cosmic events so that Jupiter may serve as a model for the philosopher. Yet there is slippage between the divine paradigm and the human actor. Does the philosopher act like Jupiter or does Jupiter act like a philosopher?[25] Regardless, envisioning the end of the world takes on a new role in the philosopher's arsenal of spiritual exercises.[26] It expands from being an aid to accept death to a method for accepting and perhaps even enjoying one's solitude. In doing so the sage is able become like Jupiter and exist outside of the flux of nature.

Later Stoic Visions of the End of the World

Unlike Seneca, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius did not write elaborate accounts of the end of the world. When they do briefly consider the topic, their accounts bear some affinities with Seneca's letter. Whether these two were responding directly to Seneca remains an open question. Certainly, neither author ever explicitly mentions Seneca. Nevertheless, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius provide important points of

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22 This three-step process appears to be unprecedented in Stoic thought. For example, Long and Sedley (1987 vol. 1) 279 note that the Stoics typically theorized that the universe 'alternates between conflagration and world-order.'

23 See, for example, the pithy description of Aristocles *SVF* 1.98 = LS 46G = Eusebius *Evangelical Preparations* 15.14.2.

24 See *SVF* 1.102 = LS 46C = Diogenes Laertius 7.142, *SVF* 2.1054 = LS 46H = Origen *Cels.* 4.14 and *SVF* 2.605 = LS 46F = Plutarch *Stoic. rep.* 1053b.

25 An interesting modern parallel can be found in Franz Kafka's short story *Poseidon*. The god looks forward to the end of the world so that he can end his bureaucratic drudgery of being in charge of the seas and finally have a brief moment of peace to take a tour of them.

26 On 'spiritual exercises' see Hadot (1995) 31, 81-144.

contrast that highlight the unique nature of Seneca's comparison of the sage and Jupiter in *Epistle* 9.16.

To take the later and less closely related text first, in his *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius briefly considers what form the end of the world will take: 'Everything in existence will quickly be changed. Either it will be vaporized, if the nature of the universe is one, or it will be scattered' (πάντα τὰ ὑποκείμενα τάχιστα μεταβαλεῖ καὶ ἤτοι ἐκθυμιαθήσεται, εἴπερ ἥνωται ἡ οὐσία, ἢ σκεδασθήσεται 6.4). Marcus's brevity is similar to Seneca's mini-apocalypse in *Epistle* 9.16. Also like Seneca, Marcus writes about the end of the world as part of his spiritual exercises. He is adopting the philosophical perspective and understanding that the end of the world, whatever form it may take, is not really the end, but rather part of the 'changes' of nature. Yet there are also crucial differences. Despite being emperor, Marcus does not directly relate his philosophical contemplation to that of Jupiter. Nor does Marcus imagine himself as remaining the last being in the cosmos. His position is decidedly less exalted than Seneca's. Furthermore, in this passage Marcus is also willing to consider other philosophical scenarios for the end. He remains uncertain whether the Stoics are correct, and that the cosmos will burn, or if the Epicurean theory is correct and the world's atoms will scatter into the void.

Epictetus's sole discussion of the *ekpyrosis* in the surviving reports of his teachings is closer to Seneca's letter. The context of Epictetus's discussion is similar to the theme of *Epistle* 9, the true nature of solitude and the need for self-sufficiency. Like Seneca, Epictetus states that being deprived of friends and family is not to be feared. Also like Seneca, Epictetus considers the ultimate state of solitude. Yet unlike Seneca, Epictetus focuses on what Zeus might do during the conflagration, rather than during the period of nature's cessation following it. As a further point of contrast, Epictetus provides a decidedly different take the god's actions:

> For if being alone is sufficient for solitude, say that even Zeus is solitary during the *ekpyrosis* and laments to himself: "O woe is me, I do not have Hera, or Athena, or Apollo, nor any brother at all, or son, or grandson, or relative." There are those who say that Zeus does these things when alone during the *ekpyrosis.*

ἐπεὶ εἰ τὸ μόνον εἶναι ἀρκεῖ πρὸς τὸ ἔρημον εἶναι, λέγε ὅτι καὶ ὁ Ζεὺς ἐν τῇ ἐκπυρώσει ἔρημός ἐστι καὶ κατακλαίει αὐτὸς ἑαυτοῦ: 'τάλας

> ἐγώ, οὔτε τὴν Ἥραν ἔχω οὔτε τὴν Ἀθηνᾶν οὔτε τὸν Ἀπόλλωνα οὔτε ὅλως ἢ ἀδελφὸν ἢ υἱὸν ἢ ἔγγονον ἢ συγγενῆ.’ ταῦτα καὶ λέγουσί τινες ὅτι ποιεῖ μόνος ἐν τῇ ἐκπυρώσει. (Arr. Epict. 3.13.4)

Judging from Seneca and Epictetus, it appears that what Jupiter/Zeus does during the *ekpyrosis* was a topic of debate in philosophic circles.[27] We cannot know if this question originated with Seneca or if Epictetus and Seneca developed in different ways a common Stoic trope about solitude. Epictetus’s account suggests that ‘some people’ used this question to mock the *ekpyrosis* and the idea that only the supreme god survives. These unknown people could be hostile to Stoicism in general, or even fellow Stoics who rejected the *ekpyrosis* and believed in the indestructability of the world.[28] On the one hand, Epictetus seems to find the whole question of what Zeus does during the *ekpyrosis* ridiculous. Yet Epictetus could also be using these mocking words as a means of correction, as he soon presents a vision of Zeus closer to that of Seneca’s.

According to Epictetus, the people who envision Zeus lamenting the loss of his family during the *ekpyrosis* do not understand how to live alone. Rather, they simply assume that because humans ‘by nature’ wish to live together that solitude and the loss of family and friends are incurable evils. This view is wrong, according to Epictetus. A person must be prepared for solitude and learn to be self-sufficient (3.13.6). Epictetus then returns to the example of Zeus. Although he does not specifically mention the *ekpyrosis*, his description of Zeus’s solitary contemplation recalls that of Seneca. Also like Seneca, Epictetus sees Zeus’s solitary contemplation as a model for humans:

> As Zeus dwells with himself and is quiet with himself and thinks upon the nature of his governance and is engaged in thoughts appropriate to himself, so we too ought to be able to talk to ourselves, not to feel the need for others and not be at a loss for how to pass our lives.

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[27] This question anticipates one that bothered Augustine, what was God doing before He created the world. See *Conf.* 11.12.

[28] Philo, *Aet.* 76-77, notes that Boethus of Sidon and Panaetius rejected the notion of *ekpyrosis* and rebirth. See also Salles (2005) 74.

ὡς ὁ Ζεὺς αὐτὸς ἑαυτῷ σύνεστιν καὶ ἡσυχάζει ἐφ᾽ ἑαυτοῦ καὶ ἐννοεῖ τὴν διοίκησιν τὴν ἑαυτοῦ οἵα ἐστὶ καὶ ἐν ἐπινοίαις γίνεται πρεπούσαις ἑαυτῷ, οὕτως καὶ ἡμᾶς δύνασθαι αὐτοὺς ἑαυτοῖς λαλεῖν, μὴ προσδεῖσθαι ἄλλων, διαγωγῆς μὴ ἀπορεῖν. (Arr. Epict. 3.13.7).

Yet the connection between Zeus's solitude and the *ekpyrosis* is only implied by Epictetus. For Seneca, however, Jupiter's solitude after the end of the world is an explicit model for how to live in solitude in this world. This seems to be an imaginative move almost unprecedented in ancient thought. In fact, Seneca's advice to his readers to imagine themselves as the sole survivor of the end of the world anticipates an important theme in modern visions of the end.

The Last Man

Eva Horn has recently argued that imagining the last man on earth is a key trope of modernity.[29] As she notes (2018) 26, 'the figure of the Last Man emerges in Romanticism, both in literature and in painting.' Examples include Francois Xavier Cousin de Grainville's *Le dernier homme* (1805), Byron's 'Darkness' (1816), Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), as well as John Martin's painting *The Last Man* (1849). This theme is present today in, for example, the novel and film *I Am Legend* (1954, 2007). Seneca's vision of the solitary Jupiter after the cosmic conflagration anticipates this 'modern' trope by centuries. Of course, there are important differences, and these differences help us to highlight some key points of contrast between Seneca's eschatology (at least in this letter) and modern. For Horn (2018) 27, the modern trope of the Last Man sees the end of the world as 'a radically secular event' that reveals the absence of God. The Last Man is 'a figure of radical abandonment' (Horn (2018) 28). Seneca, by contrast, does not picture the last man on earth, but rather the last god in the cosmos. We are encouraged to adopt this divine, contemplative perspective during periods of enforced solitude. Indeed, we

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29 Flood narratives are some of the earliest versions of this trope. Ovid's Deucalion imagines what it would be like if only he or Pyrrha survived the flood, instead of them making it though together, *Met*. 1.358-362. In the *Iliad*, Achilles wishes that he and Patroclus would be the only survivors of the Greeks and the Trojans so that they might sack Troy by themselves (*Il*. 16.97-100). On the theme of the Last Man in Hesiod, see Payne (2020); in Ovid, see Gardner (2022).

are encouraged to imagine our situation as even more extreme than it actually is. The solitude of incarceration, or exile, or even a lengthy sea voyage is reshaped into Jupiter's solitude after the conflagration, the end of the other gods and even cessation of nature. Jupiter is the only being in existence and his thoughts are the only things happening in the cosmos. This is the model for the philosopher. It is not a negative model, however. Rather than demonstrating the absence of God, Seneca's vision allows the philosopher to act at least somewhat like Jupiter (*tale quiddam*). It allows us to come through the fires of loss and personal crises and still remain self-sufficient and keep all our goods with us. It represents not a loss of god but rather communion with god.

According to Horn (2018) 21-25, a key difference between ancient and modern visions of the end of the world is that ancient apocalypses also included an element of hope of renewal, whether it was the promise of a New Jerusalem in Revelation, or the rebirth of the cosmos in Stoicism. By contrast modern secular apocalypses see the future without any hope. There is only a grim world of scarcity for the survivors. There is some truth to Horn's dichotomy, but it does not do justice to the complexity of ancient Greek and Roman thought on the end of the world. The Epicureans did not imagine our world being renewed after its destruction. Seneca himself seems unsure about the Stoic promise of renewal.[30] He states that the world will be destroyed and then reborn at the conclusion of *To Marcia*. In *To Polybius*., however, Seneca acknowledges that some believe that the world will be entirely destroyed, but he cautions that such a view may be 'unholy' (*si fas putas credere* 1.2). *On Benefits.* 6.22 and *Thyestes.* (789-884) contain elaborate descriptions of the end of the world without any mention of renewal. At the conclusion of his lengthy account of the flood, Seneca notes that after this cataclysm humans will be reborn in a new and pure state. Yet Seneca predicts that this purity will not last long. Corruption and vice will quickly destroy it (*Q. Nat.* 3.30.8). *Epistle* 9.16 does not directly mention renewal. It is only implied by Jupiter's survival and by Seneca's statement that nature ceases 'briefly' (*paulisper*). The Stoic may choose to adopt this attitude of hope for a new world after a crisis. As Seneca notes, like Stilbon, a Stoic may carry all his goods through burned out

30 On Lucan's image of cosmic collapse without rebirth in the opening of *De bello civili*, see Roche (2005).

cities and remain happy (*Ep*. 9.19). Seneca does not describe what this new world of solitude will be like, however. He focuses only on the philosopher's internal state. Similarly, in his comparison of Jupiter and the sage, Seneca sets as his model Jupiter's contemplative state after the conflagration but before the renewal of the world begins. Thus, the model for the sage focuses less on the expectation of a new world after crisis, and more on the period, perhaps invented by Seneca, when even nature has ceased, and Jupiter is alone and gives himself over to his own thoughts.

I am not arguing that Seneca's letter had any direct influence on the modern trope of the Last Man.[31] Rather, I wish to demonstrate how the same thought experiment can produce radically different perspectives on the end of the world. These contrasts can help to elucidate Seneca's letter further. As Horn (2018) 21-54 notes, the modern vision of the Last Man focuses on human responses to their own extinction. It is decidedly secular and earthbound. By contrast, Seneca's vision moves the philosopher out of the human realm and into the heavens. We are to become not simply the last human on earth, but the last god in the cosmos. His vision of the end of the world in *Epistle* 9 makes no mention of human suffering and how humans on earth might react to experiencing the end of the world.[32] By adopting Jupiter's perspective, the *sapiens* is able to avoid consideration of the extinction of humanity. And of course, by adopting this cosmic viewpoint, the *sapiens* may realize that the end of the world is not the final event. The world will be reborn and presumably each of us will eventually be able to live our lives again. Yet as we have noted, cyclicality and rebirth remain largely unspoken and unexplored in this letter. Seneca likens the sage to Jupiter in his solitary contemplation after the end of the world and before, presumably, its rebirth. He does not picture the sage enjoying the new and reborn world. Rather, Seneca's portrait is one of radical solitude, but also radical self-sufficiency. The life of the sage in solitary contemplation takes on the impossible perspective of Jupiter who persists without humans, gods or even the working of nature.

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31 Nevertheless, it is fruitful to look for traces of Seneca's influence in Romantic and related authors. See Winter (2014) 289-294, and Star (2017) 165-166 on Seneca and Percy Shelley's play *The Cenci*.

32 Seneca does focus on the human perspective and psychological reactions to the end of the world in the final chorus to *Thy.* 828-834, 875-884 and *Q. Nat.* 3.27.2-6, 3.27.11-12.

Ultimately, Seneca's vision of the end of the world is part of a larger ethical project: how to live the good life even when separated from family and friends. The connection between Jupiter's solitude and the sage's is intended to serve a practical purpose by encouraging the reader to re-evaluate their fear of the social death occasioned by 'catastrophes' such as exile or incarceration. Yet it remains to be seen how effective Seneca's connection between exile and apocalypse really is. We can ask whether there is any comfort in this portrait of solitude. Do we really wish to envision ourselves as the solitary contemplative Jupiter after having lost friends and family? Does Seneca take too radical a step by asking us to envision the solitude of exile as the cessation of all action in the cosmos save Jupiter's contemplation? Indeed, there are differences in chronology and causation that Seneca does not make explicit. Jupiter only 'briefly' (*paulisper*) engages in solitary contemplation. These brief periods are part of the regular workings of the cosmos. For humans, however, the periods of solitude Seneca describes are of unknown duration and are enforced upon us--two harsh realities Seneca himself experienced during his own lengthy exile.

Seneca's letter thus brings up the problem of how we will respond to crises in this world. True, it might help to engage in quiet contemplation like Jupiter when one is incarcerated or exiled or even stranded on a deserted island. But Seneca's letter brings in other fiery tests of our self-sufficiency. Are we really to react like Stilbon to the murder of our family and the razing of our city and declare that we still have all our goods with us? Here, as often happens when we read Seneca and other Stoics, we run into the question of whether in such situations we would want to act like a self-sufficient, contemplative god. Or does such a detached reaction deprive us of our humanity and the humanity of those who have been lost?[33]

This letter highlights the difficulties involved in attaining a Stoic perspective. Indeed, Seneca may be too extreme in his equation of the solitude of exile, incarceration, and even a long voyage at sea with apocalypse. Yet this hyperbolic rhetoric also serves a practical purpose. Seneca hopes to instill resilience and self-sufficiency in his readers (as well as in himself) to allow them to navigate crises that seem like the end of the world. In addition, this letter also seeks to reevaluate the nature of solitude and highlight its divine and creative potential. Solitude does

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[33] On this question see Nussbaum (1994) 429-438.

not hinder the sage from living the good life. Solitude might also be a necessary precursor to production. Seneca uses his solitude to create literary works, just as Jupiter uses his as a prelude to the recreation of the cosmos itself.[34]

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