— 4 —

De otio, Chapter 3

Juliette Dross

In chapter 3 of *De otio*, Seneca shows that the wise man can or even should devote himself to *otium* at any age. To do so, he brings together Stoic and Epicurean political doctrines around *otium* in a way that is both original and paradoxical, showing that *otium* is not only a possible choice for the Stoic philosopher, but often the only valuable choice. Far from being an idle retreat from the world, this *otium* is fully active and ultimately represents a higher form of political engagement. Redefined as a *commune negotium*, *otium* becomes the supreme philosophical activity, serving oneself, the others and humanity as a whole.

Introduction*

In chapter 3 of Seneca's *De otio*, following the *diuisio* (chapter 2) and first of the *confirmatio*, Seneca demonstrates the first point announced in the *diuisio*: one can engage in *otium* anytime in life, even from a young age. His demonstration relies on a peculiar presentation of Stoic and Epicurean political doctrines (§ 2), which he juxtaposes and compares to highlight their common point, i.e., the possibility of *otium*, even the priority of *otium*. The main idea of this section is that *otium* is not only a *possible* choice for the Stoic philosopher, but *the most valuable* choice for any (Roman) philosopher, since this *otium* is

---

a form of political action, useful both for the city and for humankind. This chapter makes several interesting and original points, among which are: the idea that the choice of *otium* can occur right from the beginning, even before any career in *negotium* (this is the first point announced in the *diuisio*), and that this *otium* mostly corresponds to a culture of virtues (the *otiosus* is a *cultor virtutium*, § 4); the reconciliation between Epicurean and Stoic political doctrines through a rhetorical parallel and an insistence on the exception clause (§ 3), which allows the wise man to devote himself to *otium*; as Seneca shows, this *otium* is very broad and ultimately becomes almost the rule. It seems to me that this passage of the text echoes *Tranq.* 3, but systematizes it, with a description of the activity of the philosopher withdrawn into *otium,* described as a *cultor uirtutium*, and the emphasis on the utility of this activity. This idea is linked to the Stoic doctrine of *oikeiôsis* and cosmopolitanism but, once again, Seneca provides a singular and quite rhetorical presentation of it (§5) whereby *otium* is conceptualized as a *commune negotium*: the fine lexical work supports a politicization of the doctrine of *otium*.

The purpose of chapter 3: *otium* as an honourable and perfectly Stoic choice

In chapter 3, Seneca wants to show that the position (*hoc*) exposed in the *diuisio* (*Ot.* 2.1) – i.e., the idea that the wise man can devote himself to *otium* from the beginning of his career, is thoroughly Stoic:

> *Hoc Stoicis quoque placere ostendam, non quia mihi legem dixerim nihil contra dictum Zenonis Chrysippiue committere, sed quia res ipsa patitur me ire in illorum sententiam, quoniam si quis semper unius sequitur, non in curia sed in factione est.*[1]

> I will show that this position is also that of the Stoics, not because I have made it a rule never to oppose what Zeno or Chrysippus have said, but because the point itself allows me to share their opinion: always siding with the opinion of a single person is fitting for a sect, not for a senate.

Once Seneca demonstrates that the wise man – or the philosopher– can devote himself to *otium* even from a young age, it will be easy, by

---

[1]   *Ot.* 3.1 – text from Reynolds (1977).

an *a fortiori* argument, to show that he can do so even more following a career of *negotia*. In other words, if Seneca manages to prove this point argument, he effectively shows that *otium* can be a valid choice at any age. On this point, *De otio* goes further than *De Brevitate animi*,[2] in which Seneca invited his father-in-law Paulinus to withdraw after a life of *negotium*. In *Ot.* he shows that *otium* is an honourable choice at any age, even before one faces the storms of political life (*antequam ullas experiatur tempestates*, *Ot.* 3.4).

Seneca, as he often does (for instance in the *Epistulae*), takes care to show that he defends this position freely and consciously, and not because it is the Stoic thing to do. In this regard, there are three texual loci that stand out:

- Firstly, when writing *non quia mihi legem dixerim nihil contra dictum Zenonis Chrysippiue committere*, Seneca furnishes an authoritative and, as it were, embodied representation of the Stoic doctrine. He purposely selects two of the greatest scholars of old Stoicism, whereas in the following paragraph (§ 3), Chrysippus, who is generally considered as the author of the Stoic political doctrine, is no longer mentioned – I shall come back to this point.
- The second noteworthy point is the emphasis on freedom of thought and critical adherence to Stoicism, through what can be described as an "active turn": *res ipsa patitur me ire in illorum sententiam*. By using *me* as subject of *ire*, Seneca stresses the idea that his adherence to Stoic doctrine is not passive obedience, but an active choice. The same idea often recurs in Seneca's work, for instance in E*p*. 33:

> *Iam puta nos uelle singulares sententias ex turba separare: cui illas adsignabimus? Zenoni an Cleanthi an Chrysippo an Panaetio an Posidonio? Non sumus sub rege: sibi quisque se uindicat. Apud istos quidquid Hermarchus dixit, quidquid Metrodorus, ad unum refertur; omnia quae quisquam in illo contubernio locutus est unius ductu et auspiciis dicta sunt. […] "Hoc Zenon dixit": tu quid? "Hoc Cleanthes": tu quid? Quousque sub alio moueris? impera et dic quod memoriae tradatur, aliquid et de tuo profer.*[3]

> Just suppose we did want to separate a few individual sayings from the throng: to whom would we attribute them? To Zeno? To Cleanthes? To Chrysippus? To Panaetius? To Posidonius? We are not under a monarch.

---

2   *Brev.* was probably written in 49 – cf. Grimal (1947), or at least between 49 and 55 – cf. Williams (2003) 19-20, i.e., between Seneca's return from exile and the first year of Nero's reign. The later dating (62), defended by Giancotti (1957) 363-445, is less probable.

3   *Ep.* 33. 4-9 – text from Reynolds (1965).

Each of us asserts his own freedom. Among the Epicureans anything Hermarchus said, or Metrodorus, is attributed solely to one individual; in that camp everything anyone says is said under the guidance and auspices of one man. […] "This is what Zeno said": what do you say? "Cleanthes said this": what do you? How long will you march under another's command? Take charge: say something memorable on your own account; bring forth something from your own store.

- The third notable point is the use of a political metaphor to illustrate this philosophical freedom – in line with Seneca's habit and his emphasis on the role of didactic images, for instance in *Ep.* 59 or in *Ben.*[4] The political metaphor, evident in the opposition between *curia* and *factio* (*si quis semper unius sequitur, non in curia sed in factione est*), runs throughout the treatise and discreetly contributes to politicizing and making the doctrine of *otium* more palatable to a Roman audience. The terms *curia* and *factio* build an implicit polemic against Epicureanism, stressing the opposition between the Stoic school (signified by the Roman Senate, *senatus*) and the other schools, especially Epicureanism (i.e., the illegitimate party, *factio*). By using this metaphor, Seneca suggests that Stoicism provides a space of political freedom not available to other philosophical schools, and which, incidentally, is not to be found in 1st c. Rome. The great Stoic masters are guides rather than rulers, providing a beautiful example of leadership.

Seneca stresses this idea by a paradoxical reminder of human weakness:

Vtinam quidem iam tenerentur omnia et in aperto et confesso ueritas esset nihilque ex decretis mutaremus! nunc ueritatem cum eis ipsis qui docent quaerimus.[5]

If only we could know everything! If only the truth could appear in all its evidence and our principles remain immutable! But in reality we seek the truth in the company of those who teach it to us.

The regret *utinam quidem iam tenerentur omnia* echoes *Ep.* 59, in which Seneca justifies the philosophical use of images.[6] If everything could be

---

[4]   On the didactical use of images in Seneca's works, see *Ep.* 59.6; *Ben.* 4.12.1. Cf. Armisen-Marchetti (1989); Gazzarri (2020).

[5]   *Ot.* 3.1.

[6]   *Ep.* 59.6: *Illi* [*scil. antiqui*]*, qui simpliciter et demonstrandae rei causa eloquebantur, parabolis referti sunt, quas existimo necessarias, non ex eadem causa qua poetis, sed ut inbecillitatis nostrae adminicula sint, ut et dicentem et audientem in rem praesentem adducant.*

understood at once, if truth were clear, images would not be necessary. But in the real world, the philosopher may stoop to using them (*descendere*) for the sake of demonstrating his matter (*demonstrandae rei causa*): in *De otio* as in the *Epistulae*, the use of images is justified by human weakness. Nevertheless, the motive of human weakness is not used here in the same way as in *Ep*. 59: Seneca does not mean that we need the authority (and the metaphors) of the masters to find the truth as much as he insists on the fact that the *decreta*, a term which equals *dogmata* (synonymous with *placita*, *scita*, *principia*)[7] are not fixed for all eternity. This statement paradoxically allows for nuancing the authority of the great Stoic masters, and promotes the idea of a co-construction of knowledge: a theme dear to Seneca.[8] The Stoic masters are experienced companions rather than commanders. This is the core principle Seneca also applies to himself in his relation to Lucilius: both men co-construct knowledge, "housed in the same infirmary," as Seneca says in *Ep*. 27[9] and mutually exhorting one another.[10] Obviously, we can read the remark at *Ot*. 3 as a parenetic stance. By exhorting Serenus in such manner, Seneca takes on an *ethos* of humility and invites his addressee to treasure these lessons in the same way as Seneca treasures the lessons of the old Stoic masters: that is, with critical vigilance and by adhering (or not) to them with a clear head.

An original presentation of Stoic and Epicurean political doctrines

These preliminary remarks introduce the main theme of the chapter, which Seneca presents in par. 2.

Bringing the two political doctrines closer together

The second paragraph aims at reconciling Epicureanism and Stoicism around *otium* to show, in a quite paradoxical manner, that the Stoics promote *otium*.

---

[7]   On the respective roles of principles and precepts in philosophy and the vocabulary of parenesis (mainly developed in letters 94 and 95), Bellincioni (1979), Ioppolo (2000), Hadot (2014) 25-31.

[8]   Cf. *Ot*. 1.1 and the idea of "withdrawing towards the great men" (*secedere ad optimos uiros*), i.e., into their books.

[9]   *Ep*. 27.1.

[10]   *Ep*. 34.2: *iam currentem hortor et inuicem hortantem.*

Duae maxime et in hac re dissident sectae, Epicureorum et Stoicorum, sed utraque ad otium diuersa uia mittit. Epicurus ait: "non accedet ad rem publicam sapiens, nisi si quid interuenerit"; Zenon ait: "accedet ad rem publicam, nisi si quid inpedierit.." [11]

Epicurean and Stoic schools strongly disagree even–and especially–on this point. Yet, both doctrines tend, by opposite paths, toward withdrawal. Epicurus says: "The wise man will not participate in public affairs, except in exceptional circumstances." Zeno says: "He will participate in public affairs, except in exceptional hindrances."

Before I proceed with my analysis, a short reminder is in order. The Epicurean take on politics is summarized by the expression λάθε βιώσας, that is, to live hidden away from cities and not getting enmeshed in political life.[12] On the contrary, the Stoic view is to seek involvement and improve the cities, which are places of sociability, "unless something prevents from doing so."[13] The two doctrines are, therefore, very different, as the first sentence portends: *duae maxime et in hac re dissident sectae.*

However, Seneca will paradoxically demonstrate that both doctrines value *otium* (*ad otium diuersa uia mittit*), by presenting them through a rhetorical parallel, which highlights *otium* as their common focus. Seneca moves from an initial opposition between Stoicism and Epicureanism to a position of substantial proximity: both doctrines are directed towards *otium*.

This passage stands out for three main reasons:

- *Epicurus ait*, Seneca says. This raises a first question: where does the expression *"nisi si quid interuenerit"* come from? It doesn't appear as such in the Epicurean political doctrine,[14] which, according to DL 10.119, recommends that "οὐδὲ πολιτεύσεσθαι [*scil.* τὸν σοφόν], ὡς ἐν τῇ πρώτῃ Περὶ βίων". We can hypothesize that *"nisi si quid interuenerit"* may be an addition by Seneca.

---

[11] *Ot.* 3.2.

[12] On the Epicurean doctrine λάθε βιώσας, see Roskam (2007).

[13] DL 7.121 (=*SVF* 3.697): Πολιτεύσεσθαί φασι τὸν σοφὸν ἂν μή τι κωλύῃ.

[14] Joly (1956) 167.

But this addition is coherent overall, if we compare the Epicurean political doctrine with the Epicurean doctrine of marriage, which stipulates that the sage will not marry, except in exceptional cases. What follows comes from the same passage of DL:

> Καὶ μηδὲ καὶ γαμήσειν καὶ τεκνοποιήσειν τὸν σοφόν […]. κατὰ περίστασιν δέ ποτε βίου γαμήσειν.[15]

> The wise man will not marry and will not have children […]. He may marry under certain circumstances.

We know that the two questions ("should the wise man participate in city life?" and "should the wise man marry?") were related, and this association is also found in the rhetorical tradition and in the *progymnasmata*; in fact, these are two classic *thesis* topics. Such rhetorical background may also explain the mention of the restrictive clause in *Ot*.

- "*Zenon ait*...": yes, this doctrine is indeed referenced by DL 7.121 ("Πολιτεύσεσθαί φασι τὸν σοφὸν ἂν μή τι κωλύη").[16] However Seneca is forcing a connection with the Epicurean doctrine by stylistic means, as the two hypothetical propositions *nisi si quid interuenerit* and *nisi si quid inpedierit* create a parallelism between the two philosophical systems.

- Seneca brings the two doctrines closer together by balancing Epicurus and Zeno, although the Stoic political doctrine is generally attributed to Chrysippus. The mention of Zeno instead of Chrysippus can probably be explained by the idea of "name label," highlighted by Keimpe Algra.[17] The two founders become, by metonymy, the incarnation of the two schools. But there is also, undoubtedly, a rhetorical motivation here: balancing the two founders rather than a founder (Epicurus) and a "simple" chief of school (Chrysippus) allows for a more striking parallel and carves this political doctrine in the marble of the two schools.[18]

This passage is a key one. From here, Seneca will develop this exception clause *nisi si quid inpedierit* (= ἂν μή τι κωλύη) and show that *otium* is, ultimately, the rule. This is the subject of par. 3, which begins

---

[15]   DL 10.119.

[16]   DL 7.121.

[17]   Algra (2002).

[18]   Cf. Williams (2003) 76.

with a peculiar distinction between *otium* by *propositum* (in Stoicism) and *otium* by *causa* (in Epicureanism).

Alter otium ex proposito petit, alter ex causa (Ot. 3.3)

Seneca explains that one [i.e., the Epicurean philosopher] chooses *otium* by *propositum*, whereas the other [i.e., the Stoic philosopher] chooses it by *causa*. Both terms, *propositum* and *causa*, are important: but what do they mean?

As noted by Ivano Dionigi,[19] both terms certainly come from rhetoric, and they translate respectively the technical terms θέσις and ὑπόθεσις. Yet *propositum* also belongs to the philosophical register. Seneca uses it recurrently to translate the Stoic key-term τέλος.[20] Thus, the philosophical connotation of *propositum* allows for a connection between the debate on *otium* and the doctrine of τέλος. The originality of this passage lies in the transposition of both terms from the space of rhetorical discourse to that of philosophical reasoning: while *propositum* takes on the philosophical meaning of τέλος, *causa* seems to take here the meaning of "derogation," "exception."

The idea expressed by *causa* lends itself to two possible interpretations:

- The first hypothesis is that Seneca takes up the Stoic distinction between non-circumstantial duties (ἄνευ περιστάσεως καθήκοντα) and circumstantial duties (περιστατικὰ/κατὰ περίστασιν καθήκοντα), as found in DL 7.109. According to the Stoics, some actions are appropriate regardless of the circumstances, such as taking care of one's health, sensory organs, and similar things. Conversely, others are appropriate only in certain circumstances– for example, self-mutilation and the dispersal of one's wealth. By applying this distinction to the political sphere, we can entertain the idea, as Pearson does,[21] that participation in political life is part

---

[19] Dionigi (1983) 200. On the use of these terms in rhetoric and their transposition to a philosophical context by Seneca, Dross (2021) 139.

[20] The most evident example is at *Ot.* 7.2, where *propositum* translates the Stoic τέλος: *"Plurimum"* inquis *"discriminis est utrum aliqua res propositum sit an propositi alterius accessio."* A larger observation of *propositum* in Seneca's philosophical work reveals that the term is often used as an equivalent of τέλος. See Dross (2021) 139.

[21] Pearson (1889) 205, fr. 170.

of non-circumstantial duties, while withdrawal from political life makes up a circumstantial duty (κατὰ περίστασιν).

- However, I deem more plausible that the term *causa* may here reference the notion of "exception" (*exceptio*), which was widely developed in imperial Stoicism. It is likely that Seneca is applying to the question of life choices the general Stoic idea of an action "subject to reservation," which ensures that the wise man cannot be disappointed, whether he fails or succeeds, since he has preventively foreseen and accepted all possible outcomes. This doctrine is exposed at *Tranq.* 13 where Seneca avers that to achieve tranquillity, Democritus advised to reduce the grip that fortune has on us by limiting our activities. This *exceptio* is couched thus:

> *Nam qui multa agit saepe fortunae potestatem sui facit, quam tutissimum est raro experiri, ceterum semper de illa cogitare et nihil sibi de fide eius promittere: "nauigabo, nisi si quid inciderit" et "praetor fiam, nisi si quid obstiterit" et "negotiatio mihi respondebit, nisi si quid interuenerit".*[22]

> For he who undertakes many tasks often gives fortune power over himself, which is safest to experience rarely, while always thinking about it and having no illusions about the trust he can place in it: "I will sail, unless something happens to prevent it…," "I will become praetor, unless something stands in the way…"; "This business will succeed for me, unless something intervenes…"

Nisi si quid inciderit, nisi si quid obstiterit, nisi si quid interuenerit: *De otio*'s phrases *nisi si quid impedierit/nisi si quid interuenerit* clearly echo these expressions at *Tranq*. It appears that Seneca applies the theory of exception (*exceptio*/ὑπεξαίρεσις) to *otium*, a take that is particularly noticeable in *Ben.*[23] and which will be eventually appropriated by Epictetus in the *Enchiridion*.[24]

The idea behind this development is that the philosopher must take part in public affairs, except for select exceptions (*causa = exceptio*). In lines that follow, Seneca moves on to develop and detail some specific causes of exception to ultimately show that exception constitutes the rule.

---

[22]   *Tranq.* 13.2.

[23]   *Ben.* 4.34.4 (=*SVF* 3.565); Dross (2021) 138.

[24]   Epictetus *Ench.* 2.2.

The broadening of exception clauses

What are these causes of exception? The cases mentioned at par. 3 mark a return to Athenodorus' discourse, as outlined at *Tranq.* 3, with the attendant enumeration of the classical causes of exception:[25]

a) Exception for corruption of the state: *si res publica corruptior est quam adiuuari possit, si occupata*[26] *est malis* ("if the state is too corrupted to be saved, if it is occupied by evil men").[27] *Malis*, here substantivized, can refer to either deeds, or men. The second interpretation seems more plausible, and more consistent with *occupata*: Seneca stresses the idea that corrupt men occupy the field and leave no room for the wise man.

b) Exception for lack of influence or authority, or even for rejection: *si parum habebit auctoritatis nec illum erit admissura res publica* ("if he has a lack of authority or has been rejected from the state"). No doubt that Seneca had his own situation in mind when writing these lines: rejected by Nero, he no longer had any authority at the Court and had withdrawn in 62.

c) Exception for weakness or illness: *si parum habebit uirium, si ualetudo illum impediet* ("if he doesn't have enough strength, if his health hinders").

All these causes of withdrawal are classical ones, but I offer that what is of interest here, is the systematization of Athenodorus' lore (as presented at *Tranq.* 3), something which Seneca had previously rejected by saying that one should not stop at the first obstacle.

In sum, *Ot.* 3 clearly presents an application of the doctrine of *exceptio* to the political field, and systematizes it.

Although this presentation fits into the classical *topos* of corruption of the cities, present since Plato's *Resp.* 6, two points are worth stressing:

- Seneca draws an implicit personalization of the case, with *nec illum erit admissura res publica* (which, in turn, contains is an implicit allusion to his disgrace) and the mention of *ualetudo*: we know from Tacitus that Seneca had withdrawn from public life and invoked, as an "excuse," his health issues.[28]

---

[25]   On the different exception clauses, Graver (2012) 79.

[26]   Ot. 3.3. I take the lectio the *lectio occupata*, as Reynolds does, rejecting *osculata* (manuscript **A**). Waltz (1927) chooses *obscurata*, which is less convincing.

[27]   *Malis* must probably be interpreted as a dative of agent; cf. Dionigi (1983) *ad loc.*

[28]   Tacitus *Ann.* 14.56; 15.45. On Seneca's actual of supposed illnesses, Courtil (2015) 127-146.

- There is no mention here of the danger that involvement in public life may represent; although, since at least the time of Plato, is a common *topos* that the philosopher can withdraw to private life, should public engagement become too dangerous.[29] This very *topos* resurfaces in *Tranq.* when Athenodorus, through Seneca's voice, justifies the wise man's withdrawal on account of the dangers of public life: man can withdraw "because integrity is not safe," *quia* [...] *parum tuta simplicitas est.*[30] Why is this clause not mentioned in *Ot.*? We may find an answer to this question at *Tranq.* 5, where Seneca elects Socrates as a model of courage precisely because he did not fear the danger of the public arena. During the tyranny of the Thirty, he chose to remain in Athens and continued to philosophy, at the risk of his life. In my estimation if Seneca meant that it were possible to withdraw when one is in danger, this could open the door to desertion, which should never be an option. Instead, Seneca wants to enhance *uirtus*, leaving no room for cowardice in the presentation of his doctrine.

A development supported by strong imagery from *negotium*: navigation and the army

To illustrate said idea, Seneca deploys the following comparison:

Quomodo nauem quassam non deduceret in mare, quomodo nomen in militiam non daret debilis, sic ad iter quod inhabile sciet non accedet.[31]

Just as he would not set a damaged ship to sea or enlist in the army while invalid, he [*scil.* the wise man] will not embark on a path he knows in advance to be impracticable.

Beyond the didactic role of images, what is of interest is the nature of the comparisons, drawn from two different kinds of *negotia*: army (*militia*) and sailing (*nauis*), the latter being a classical metaphor for political life.[32] Through these images, *otium* becomes a signifier of political engagement.

---

[29] Platus *Resp.* 6. 496c5-d6.

[30] *Tranq.* 3.2. See also *Ep.* 14.7-8 on the theme of the tyrant to be feared.

[31] *Ot.* 3.3.

[32] On Seneca's interpretation of this classic image, Dionigi (1983) 207.

This process is apparent in the lines that follow immediately after. At the beginning of par. 4, Seneca revisits the first point of the *divisio*, i.e., the idea that *otium* can be an honourable choice not only after a career in public life (which was implied by the various causes of exception in the previous paragraph), but also from the outset of our adult life, since involvement in public life is proven often *de facto* impossible. In other words, sometimes a *general assessment* of the difficulties that public life entails rather than an *observation drawn from* may lead the wise man not to take part in politics:

> *Potest ergo et ille cui omnia adhuc in integro sunt, antequam ullas experiatur tempestates, in tuto subsistere* […].[33]

> Thus, even at the dawn of one's career, without having been harmed in any way, without yet having faced the storms, one can remain sheltered […].

Once again, this idea is supported by a double metaphor which informs and gives unity to the whole section. Notably the passage hinges on the illustrations of sailing (*tempestates*) and the one of physical health (*in integro* probably comes from the medical field).[34] Both metaphors are enlightened by the antithesis *in tuto*, which refers to both security and good health, while the term *tempestates* creates a link with the previous paragraph (*nauem quassam*). Obviously, the images used by Seneca serve a purpose that is not purely didactic and ornamental: they play both a structural and philosophical role and contribute to politicizing the doctrine of *otium*.

The activity of the philosopher retreated into *otium*: towards a politicization of *otium*

After having tackled the many causes of exception and the array of reasons that can lead to withdrawing into *otium*, Seneca now insists on the content of this *otium*, i.e., on the activity that ought to be developed by the wise man in his withdrawal. In particular, he stresses three

---

[33]   *Ot.* 3.4.

[34]   *Integer* and *corruptum* (*si res publica corruptior quam adiuuari potest*) come from the medical field; on the technical use of these terms in medical literature, *ThlL s.v. corrumpo*, 4. 1059. 12 sq. On their metaphorical use, mostly in a political context, *ThlL, ibid.*, 4.1059. 56 ff.

points: the importance of ethics, the utility of the wise man's withdrawal, and the political dimension of *otium*.

Emphasizing ethics

What is it that the activity of the wise man retreated into *otium* ought to be? When answering this question, Seneca stresses the ethical and practical dimensions of philosophical *otium*:

> *Potest ergo et ille cui omnia adhuc in integro sunt* […] *in tuto subsistere et protinus commendare se bonis artibus et inlibatum otium exigere, uirtutium cultor, quae exerceri etiam quietissimis possunt.*[35]

> Thus, even at the dawn of one's career, without having been harmed in any way, […] one can remain sheltered, dedicate oneself immediately to wisdom, and demand a full and complete withdrawal to cultivate virtues, which can be practiced even in the most complete tranquillity.

The dative *bonis artibus* (*commendare se bonis artibus*) confers an ethical and practical dimension to the activity of the wise man withdrawn into *otium*. *Bonae artes* refers to practical ethics, culture, and practice of philosophy. Physics is not the subject here, unlike in the following two chapters.[36] This ethical and practical dimension of the wise man's activity is further underlined by the expression *uirtutium cultor*, where the noun *uirtus* stresses the strong ethical take on wisdom (compared, for instance, to *scientiae cultor*), while *cultor* stands out for its strong practical connotation. The activity to which the wise man dedicates himself in his *otium inlibatum* chiefly corresponds here to practical ethics, as hinted at by the verb *exercere* and the rhetorical operators *bonae artes* and *uirtus*. Similarly, the definition of the philosopher as a *cultor uirtutum*, which subtly echoes the prosopopeia of philosophy as *uirtutis indagatrix* at the beginning of Cicero's *Tusc.* 5,[37] highlights the practical dimension of philosophical activity via a lexical choice that references agriculture. The philosophical activity of *otium* is both ethical and practical.

---

[35] *Ot.* 3.4.

[36] Chapters 4 and 5.

[37] Cicero *Tusc.* 5.6: *O uitae philosophia dux, o uirtutis indagatrix expultrixque uitiorum!*

Being useful: the social role of the wise man retreated into *otium*

Once he has drawn the contours of the philosophical activity conducted in *otium*, Seneca insists on the utility of this activity, not only for the wise man and his fellow citizens, but, more broadly, for humankind. This point is highlighted in the last paragraph of the chapter:

> *Hoc nempe ab homine exigitur, ut prosit hominibus, si fieri potest, multis, si minus, paucis, si minus, proximis, si minus, sibi. Nam cum se utilem ceteris efficit, commune agit negotium. Quomodo qui se deteriorem facit non sibi tantummodo nocet sed etiam omnibus eis quibus melior factus prodesse potuisset, sic quisquis bene de se meretur hoc ipso aliis prodest quod illis profuturum parat.*[38]

> Here indeed, as you know, is the unique duty of man: to be useful to men. To many, if possible; if not, to a few; if not, to his close ones; if not, to himself. For when he makes himself useful to others, he performs an activity beneficial to the community. He who debases himself not only harms himself, but also all those to whom he could have been useful had he become better; similarly, whoever improves himself is useful to others by the very fact that he makes himself capable of being useful to them in the future.

The number of occurrences of the adjective *utilis* and the verbal form *prodesse* is striking. In just three sentences, there are four occurrences of *prodesse*, with a polyptoton, which insists on both present and future benefits (*prodest, prodesse, profuturum*), and on how much they are needed (*exigitur ut prosit*). These four occurrences are further enhanced by the adjective *utilis* (*cum se utilem ceteris efficit*), which underscores the many benefits a wise man withdrawn into *otium* can provide. That which is beautiful, noble, desirable (*honestum*), ought to be useful. The passage is imbued with lexical references to common interest and utility.

Moving to the second key point, Seneca suggests that utility is manifold. To support this idea, Seneca refers to *oikeiôsis* and cosmopolitanism and stresses the movement from the universe to the self, as shown in the enumeration *ut prosit hominibus, si fieri potest, multis, si minus, paucis, si minus, proximis, si minus, sibi*. According to such statement, a man's chief concern must encompass the whole world, and,only if this

---

[38]   *Ot.* 3.5.

is not possible (*si minus*), the movement can turn inwards, as a kind of internal withdrawing. In Seneca's presentation, the concern for the community takes precedence over the concern for oneself.

Yet both concerns are mutually connected, and Seneca stresses this point by saying that being useful for oneself eventually leads to being useful for the city. How does this process work? How is that taking care of oneself, through philosophizing, can benefit the whole community? Here is Seneca's answer: when I take care of myself, I perfect my soul and I make myself able to take care of others. This idea is also reinforced by a comparison *per contrarium* with the man who debases himself, and thereby makes himself unable to take care of the community. The moral progress of humanity is closely related to the moral progress of the self.

Otium as political action

When doing so, the philosopher retired in *otium* makes a common *negotium* (*commune negotium*):

> *Nam cum se utilem ceteris efficit, commune agit negotium.*[39]

> For when he makes himself capable of being useful to others, he performs an activity beneficial to the community.

Seneca plays with words to complete the politicization of *otium*. Well employed *otium* becomes a *commune negotium*, i.e., an activity focused on what is good for the community (Roman or human). The description of *otium* as *commune negotium* echoes various expressions used in other dialogues or in the *Letters*, which always tend to bring *otium* and *negotium* closer together. A case in point is *Ep.* 8, where Seneca defines his philosophical withdrawal as a *negotium posterorum*, i.e., an activity that will benefit posterity;[40] additionally, at *Ep.* 35, he refers to his philosophical withdrawal – i.e., to *otium* – as his *negotium*.[41] Real *otium* is a philosophical withdrawal devoted to the bettering of one's community; as such, it stands out as the ultimate kind of *negotium*.

---

[39] *Ot.* 3.5.

[40] *Ep.* 8.1: *Secessi non tantum ab hominibus sed a rebus, et in primis a meis rebus: posterorum negotium ago.*

[41] *Ep.* 35.1: *Cum te tam ualde rogo ut studeas, meum negotium ago.* On this lexical work about *otium* and *negotium*, Armisen-Marchetti (1996), Dross (2021) 79.

Conclusion

Chapter 3 is a key chapter of *Ot*. Starting from the Stoic political doctrine which considers *otium* an exception, Seneca paradoxically enhances the value of *otium*, which is, above all, conceived as a philosophical withdrawal. In practice, not only is *otium* the choice that often prevails in real life, as Seneca demonstrates by enumerating the many causes of exception, which allow the wise man to disengage from political life (either from the beginning of his adult life, or after a career in *negotium*). *Otium* is also, at least *in theory*,the most valuable choice, since the wise man retired in *otium* can benefit his community–both the small community of his city and the large community of humanity (as Seneca discusses at *Ot*. 4). Thus, *otium* can be defined as a political commitment, and something useful and in service to one's community. This rehabilitation of *otium* is supported by a peculiar interpretation of Stoic doctrine, and one that brings to the fore doctrinal exception rather than received orthodoxy. This work of rehabilitation is further enhanced by a fine lexical and rhetorical work, through which *otium* is showcased as the supreme activity and the *commune negotium*. Having made this point, Seneca will apply himself to explain in detail the double face of the wise man's utility – for his city and for humanity; and this will be the object of chapter 4.

Juliette Dross
Sorbonne université
juliette.dross @sorbonneuniversite.fr

Bibliography

ALGRA, K. "Zeno of Citium and Stoic Cosmology: Some Notes and Two Case Studies". In Scaltsas/Mason 2002: 155–184.

ANDRÉ, J.-M./DANGEL, J./DEMONT, P. (eds) *Les loisirs et l'héritage de la culture classique*. Bruxelles, 1996.

ARMISEN-MARCHETTI, M. *Sapientiae facies: étude sur les images de Sénèque*. Paris, 1989.

ARMISEN-MARCHETTI, M. "L'intériorisation de l'*otium* chez Sénèque". In André *et al.*1996: 411–424.

BELLINCIONI, M. *Lettere a Lucilio. Libro XV: le lettere 94 e 95*. Brescia, 1979.

BENATOUÏL, T./BONAZZI, M. (eds.) *Theoria, Praxis and the contemplative life after Plato and Aristotle*. Leiden/Boston, 2012.

BRANCACCI, B. (ed.) *La filosofia in età* imperiale. Le scuole e le tradizioni filoso-fiche. Napoli, 2000.

COURTIL, J.-CH. Sapientia contemptrix doloris: *le corps souffrant dans l'œuvre philosophique de Sénèque*. Bruxelles, 2015.

DIONIGI, I. *Seneca, De otio* (edizione, traduzione e commento). Brescia, 1983.

DROSS, J. *Sénèque. La tranquillité de l'âme. La retraite* (présentation et traduction). Paris, 2018.

DROSS, J. *Le philosophe dans la cité. Sénèque et l'*otium *philosophique*. Turnhout, 2021.

GAZZARRI, T. *The Stylus and the Scalpel. Theory and Practice of Metaphors in Seneca's Prose*. Berlin/Boston, 2020.

GIANCOTTI, F. *Cronologia dei "Dialoghi" di Seneca*. Torino, 1957.

GRAVER, M. "Seneca and the *contemplatio ueri. De otio* and *Epistulae morales*." In Benatouïl/Bonazzi 2012: 75–100.

GRIMAL, P. "La date du *De breuitate uitae*". *RÉL* 25 (1947): 164–177.

GRIMAL, P. *Sénèque ou la conscience de l'Empire*. Paris, 1978.

HADOT, I. *Sénèque. Direction spirituelle et pratique de la philosophie*. Paris, 2014.

IOPPOLO, A.-M. "*Decreta* e *praecepta* in Seneca". In Brancacci 2000: 13–36.

JOLY, R. *Le thème philosophique des genres de vie dans l'Antiquité classique*. Bruxelles, 1956.

PEARSON, A.C. *The Fragments of Zeno and Cleanthus*. London, 1889.

REYNOLDS, L.D. *Seneca. Ad Lucilium* Epistulae Morales (edition). Oxford, 1965.

REYNOLDS, L.D. *Seneca. Dialogi* (edition). Oxford, 1977.

ROSKAM, G. *'Live unnoticed' (Λάθε βιώσας). On the Vicissitudes of an Epicurean Doctrine*. Leiden/Boston, 2007.

SCALTSAS, TH./MASON, A.S. (eds) *The Philosophy of Zeno: Zeno of Citium and his Legacy*. Larnaka, 2002.

WALTZ, R. *Sénèque. Dialogues* IV: *De la providence; De la constance du sage; De la tranquillité de l'âme; De l'oisiveté* (édition, présentation et traduction). Paris, 1927.

WILLIAMS, G.D. *Seneca. De otio. De breuitate uitae* (Edition, Presentation and Commentary). Cambridge (MA), 2003.