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Seneca's Use of *Exempla* as Therapeutics for Fear of Death in *Moral Epistles*

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Abstract: This paper analyses the role of exemplarity in Stoic philosophical preparation for death called *meditatio mortis* and systematized in Seneca's *Moral Epistles*. The author mainly focuses on how Seneca represents the death of Roman politician Cato the Younger to put forth three modes of exemplary therapeutics. First, Seneca uses the admirative sentiment of Roman exemplarity to instill courage against death by contemplating Cato's brave stand. Second, the paper examines how the familiar exemplary figure becomes a source of imaginative spiritual exercise against the fear of death akin to Pierre Hadot's contemplation of the ideal sage. The following discussion uses Martha Nussbaum's ideas on the therapeutic potential of ethical theory and demonstrates how Seneca uses exemplary discourse and theory to combat a passionate response to the possibility of death. Finally, the discussion ends with the reconstruction of the outlined process within the literally and philosophical intentions of the *Epistles*. In this way, the different moments of exemplary therapeutics are presented as a coherent didactic progression while also supplying and, at times, replacing the essential modes of philosophical discourse that Seneca outlines in the *Epistles*.

Keywords: exemplarity, Cato, spiritual exercises, Stoicism, Seneca, *Meditatio Mortis*

Introduction

Seneca's *Epistles* include a variety of references to renowned historical and philosophical figures, known as *exempla* in the Roman tradition, that serve to pursue different philosophical ends. For instance, the works of R.G. Mayer, Rebecca Langlands, and Matthew B. Roller showcase that Seneca's tactful reflection on the exemplary tradition turns *exempla* into rhetorical or argumentative ornaments and deliberate tools of clarification for moral discourse.[1] Acknowledging the general philosophical utility of exemplary ethics, I wish to examine how Seneca uses *exempla* specifically in the context of Stoic preparation for death, known as *meditatio mortis*. In *Epistles,* Seneca examines the topic of death predominantly in connection to the *exemplum* of the Roman statesman Cato the Younger. His suicide during the Civil War of 46 BC was highly received in the Roman tradition, with certain authors such as Plutarch[2] and most definitely Seneca glorifying Cato's death as one of the highest achievements of Stoic sages.[3] Besides the thematic scope of death, Cato also enjoys a prevailing number of references in the *Epistles*.[4] Thus, because of these two essential elements, Cato's *exemplum* provides a viable scope for tracing a coherent, yet extensive process of exemplary education aimed at facing the fear of death.

In the study, I shall consider three forms of exemplary therapeutics and explain their relation to the overall project of the letters. Initially, I will look at *Epistle* 13, *Epistle* 24, and *Epistle* 70 which combat the negative perception of death through forms of traditional Roman exemplarity, utiliz-

[1] R. G. Mayer: "Roman Historical Exempla in Seneca." *L'Antiquité Classique*, 36 (1991), pp. 141–169; R. Langlands: *Exemplary Ethics in Ancient Rome*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2018; M. B. Roller: *Models from the Past in Roman Culture: a World of Exempla*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2018.

[2] See: Plutarch: *Lives, Volume VIII: Sertorius and Eumenes. Phocion and Cato the Younger*. Trans. B. Perrin. Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1919, pp. 65–70.

[3] See: F. K. Drogula: *Cato the Younger: Life and Death at the End of the Roman Republic*. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2019, pp. 26–28. Here Drogula argues for an alternate view that explains Cato's acts in relation to his natural inclinations and political ambition instead of philosophy. Then, on pp. 52–53; p. 297, Drogula provides instances of other Roman authors who perceive Cato predominantly as a Roman politician.

[4] When citing letters from Seneca's *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, I will list the number of the *Epistle* (from now on "*Ep.*") followed by the number of a section. References to Cato appear in the following letters: *Ep.* 7, 6; *Ep.* 11, 10; *Ep.* 13, 14; *Ep.* 14, 12–13; *Ep.* 24, 6–8; *Ep.* 24, 11; *Ep.* 25, 6; *Ep.* 58, 12; *Ep.* 58, 16; *Ep.* 64, 10; *Ep.* 67, 7; *Ep.* 67, 13; *Ep.* 70, 19–22; *Ep.* 71, 8–11; *Ep.* 71, 15–16; *Ep.* 79, 14; *Ep.* 82, 12–13; *Ep.* 95, 69–73; *Ep.* 97, 1–3; *Ep.* 97, 8–10; *Ep.* 98, 12; *Ep.* 104, 21; *Ep.* 104, 29–33; *Ep.* 117, 13; *Ep.* 118, 4.

ing a cultural recognition of Cato's persona as their source. Next, I shall examine Seneca's proposed way to face the fear of death by appropriation of exemplary perception in *Epistle* 67, and *Epistle* 71 in relation to what Pierre Hadot apprehends as ancient spiritual exercise of contemplating the ideal sage. Then, I will explain the exemplary comparison of *Epistle* 82 in the light of Martha Nussbaum's understanding of philosophical therapeutics as rational reformations of false judgments. Finally, the paper will conclude with a reconstruction of the discussed exemplary didactics in the context of literary intentions of the *Epistles*. The argument will retrace the different stages of the discussed process in a coherent chronological progression, and underline how the exemplary formats relate to traditional forms of philosophical discourse.

Therapeutic Use of Roman Exemplarity

A novice-friendly approach to employing *exempla* in the process of *meditatio mortis* appears in *Epistle* 13 and *Epistle* 24. In these two letters, Seneca portrays how different forms of exemplary discourse can serve to instill courage, a mild remedy for the fear of death. Seneca's proclaimed goal in *Epistle* 13 is to provide "safeguards" (*auxilia*), and "fortify" (*munire*)[5] Lucilius against worries about possible misfortunes. Seneca introduces the exemplary approach in contrast to the therapeutic use of hope (*spe metum tempera*)[6], which is at this point too mild for Lucilius's case:

> Alius dicat: "Fortasse non veniet." Tu dic: "Quid porro, si veniet? Videbimus uter vincat. Fortasse pro me venit, et mors ista vitam honestabit." Cicuta magnum Socratem fecit. Catoni gladium adsertotem libertatis extorque; magnam partem detraxeris gloriae.
>
> Let another say: "perhaps the worst will not happen." You yourself must say: "well, what if it does happen? Let us see who wins. Perhaps it happens for my best interest; it may be that such a death will shed

[5] Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 13, 3; Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume I: *Epistles 1–65*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere. Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1917, p. 74.

[6] Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 13, 12: "temper your fear with hope." Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume I: *Epistles 1–65*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere. Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1917, p. 81.

> credit upon my life." Socrates was ennobled by the hemlock draught. Wrench from Cato's hand his sword, the vindicator of liberty, and you deprive him of the greatest share of his glory.[7]

This passage gives us a pretty good insight into how Seneca adapts exemplary discourse to pursue a specific therapeutic end. Formally, the *exemplum* appears as a symbolic reference to Cato's sword, a conventional way of directing readers, as participants in Roman culture, towards the established meanings of *exempla*.[8] Moreover, the force that Seneca utilizes for the shift in perception towards death seems to lie in the sentiment of admiration and traditional recognition of Cato's moral excellence. Such inspirational procedure was a common aspect of traditional exemplary education. As Rebecca Langlands argues, exemplary education was initiated with what she calls "the arousal stage." At this point, Langlands insists, the *exemplum* produces an "affective element of admiration" and shows "why these qualities are worth pursuing … almost always consisting of fame and immortality."[9] In this case, by a quick reference to Cato's famous death, Seneca encourages Lucilius to consider any hardship, even a mortal one, as an opportunity to prove himself morally. Consequently, Seneca reframes the feared challenges as something potentially attractive since, as noted in the beginning of the letter, *verus animus* comes forth only after meeting with *difficultates*.[10]

In *Epistle* 24, which continues this theme, Seneca responds to Lucilius's intimate admission of fear in the face of an upcoming lawsuit. Seneca, immediately recalling the previous stage, recommends *alia… ad securitatem via*[11] rather than hope or inspiration. First, Seneca tells Lucillius to "assume that what he fears may happen will certainly happen at any event" (*quicquid*

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[7] Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 13, 14–15; Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume I: *Epistles 1–65*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, pp. 81–83.

[8] The symbol is, according to Langlands, "a visually evocative and memorable feature that can be preserved in tradition both textually and visually as an aide-memoire." R. Langlands: *Exemplary Ethics in Ancient Rome*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2018, p. 24. Moreover, as Langlands explains later, such cross-referencing was possible because Romans possessed a shared site of exemplary meanings. See: R. Langlands: *Exemplary Ethics in Ancient Rome.* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2018, pp. 169–171.

[9] R. Langlands: *Exemplary Ethics in Ancient Rome*, pp. 88–89.

[10] Seneca: *Ep.* 13, 1: "For our powers can never inspire in us implicit faith in ourselves except when many difficulties have confronted us… It is only in this way that the true spirit can be tested" Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume I: *Epistles 1–65*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere, p. 78. Additionally, for discussion on necessity of moral challenges, see also: *Ep.* 67, 7; *Ep.* 66, 49; *Ep.* 74, 12–13; *Ep.* 82, 2.

[11] Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 24, 1–2: "But I shall conduct you to peace of mind by another route." Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume I: *Epistles 1–65*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere, p. 167.

vereris ne eveniat, eventurum utique propone).[12] Then to take the specific perils recall *exempla* of those who overcame them (*contemptores eorum cita*).[13] The naming of potential misfortunes is matched with respective *exempla*: Metellus and Rutilius with *exilium*, Socrates with *mortis et carceris*, and Mucius with *uratur*.[14] Seneca then expands on death by recalling Cato's final moment:

> "Decantatae," inquis, "in omnibus scholis fabulae istae sunt; Iam mihi, cum ad contemnendam mortem ventum fuerit, Catonem narrabis." Quidni ergo narrem ultima illa nocte Platonis librum legentem posito ad caput gladio? Duo haec in rebus extremis instrumenta prospexerat, alterum ut vellet mori, alterum, ut posset. Compositis ergo rebus, utcumque componi fractae atque ultimae poterant, id agendum existimavit, ne cui Catonem aut occidere liceret aut servare contingeret. Et stricto gladio, quem usque in illum diem ab omni caede purum servaverat: "Nihil," unquit, "egisti, fortuna, omnibus conatibus meis obstando. Non pro mea adhuc sed pro patriae libertate pugnavi, nec agebam tanta pertinacia, ut liber, sed ut inter liberos viverem. Nunc quoniam deploratae sunt res generis humani, Cato deductatur in tutum." Inpressit deinde mortiferum corpori vulnus. Quo obligato a medicis cum minus sanguinis haberet, minus virium, animi idem, iam non tantum Caesari sed sibi iratus nudas in vulnus manus egit et generosum illum contemptoremque omnis potentiae spiritum non emisit, sed eiecit.
>
> "Oh," say you, "those stories have been droned to death in all the schools; pretty soon when you reach the topic ‚On Despising Death' you will be telling me about Cato." But why should I not tell you about Cato, how he read Plato's book on that last glorious night, with a sword laid at his pillow? He had provided these two requisites for his last moments, – the first, that he might have the will to die, and the second, that he might have the means. So he put his affairs in order, – as well as one could put in order that which was ruined and near its end, – and thought that he ought to see to it that no one should have the power to slay or the good fortune to save Cato. Drawing the sword, – which

[12] Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 24, 2; Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume I: *Epistles 1–65*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere, p. 167.

[13] Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 24, 3: "Name such penalties one by one, and mention the men who have scorned them." Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume I: *Epistles 1–65*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere, p. 167.

[14] Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 24, 3–5: "Exile was endured by Metellus with courage, by Rutilius even with gladness… Socrates in prison discoursed, and declined to flee… in order to free mankind from the fear of two most grievous things, death and imprisonment. Mucius put his hand into the fire." Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume I: *Epistles 1–65*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere, pp. 167–69.

> he had kept unstained from all bloodshed against the final day, – he cried: "Fortune, you have accomplished nothing by resisting all my endeavours. I have fought, till now, for my country's freedom, and not for my own; I did not strive so doggedly to be free, but only to live among the free. Now, since the affairs of mankind are beyond hope, let Cato be withdrawn to safety." So saying, he inflicted a mortal wound upon his body. After the physicians had bound it up, Cato had less blood and less strength, but no less courage; angered now not only at Caesar but also at himself, he rallied his unarmed hands against his wound, and expelled, rather than dismissed, that noble soul which had been so defiant of all worldly power.[15]

In terms of the form, the dramatization exhibits many features of what Langlands calls "archetypical Roman exemplum."[16] First, it includes a short and memorable narrative focusing only on particular aspects of the story. Second, Cato's defeat at the hands of Caesar provides us with a clear sense of situatedness in Roman time and space. The *exemplum* is also endowed with striking symbolism, arming Cato with the traditional sword (*gladio*) and Plato's book (*Platonis librum*). Finally, at the heart of the story is a real hero, a historical person who embodies traditional Roman values, such as *animi* and *patriae libertate*. The narrative reveals his moral character and the decisions he makes. So, it seems that Seneca, once again, follows the domestic tradition when contesting the topic of the letter with *exempla*. If this is the case, let us ponder a bit more about how such a traditional form of exemplary narrative transforms into a philosophical exercise that combats the fear of death.

If Lucilius perceives all perils, including death, as something inevitable, it is necessary to start stripping these events of their appearance as great evils. On the one hand, as Seneca claims, naming different *exempla* is a way to measure one's fear (*timorem taxa*)[17] against various perils. A progressor is confronted with great but perceptibly, feasible and actual instances of spiritual resilience, demanding a revaluation of what one can achieve and overcome.[18] In this case, the intimate narration of Cato's last moment, furnished by the exemplary narrative, aims to deflate the apparent gravity

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[15] Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 24, 6–8: Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume I: *Epistles 165*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere, pp. 169–71.

[16] R. Langlands: *Exemplary Ethics in Ancient Rome*, pp. 29–33.

[17] Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 24, 2: "whatever the trouble may be, measure it in your own mind, and estimate the amount of your fear." Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume I: *Epistles 1–65*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere, p. 167.

[18] Both R. G. Mayer: *Roman Historical Exempla*, p. 166, and R. Langlands: *Exemplary Ethics*, pp. 92–93, recognize that *exempla* served as an efficient way to pre-meditate hard-

of death. On the other hand, Cato's *exemplum* communicates the idea that while death is inevitable, it can also be, in a sense, freeing. Seneca says that Cato, dying in this manner, is carried away to safety (*Cato deductatur in tutum*) from the nexus of external dangers, such as sickness (*aegrotare*), imprisonment (*alligari*), and death (*mori*) that are part of human existence.[19] Additionally, by choosing to die by his own hand, Cato takes a decisive step against fortune, remaining free from the influence of others on his destiny.[20]

The freeing aspect of Cato's mortal *exemplum* is expanded upon in *Epistle* 70, where Seneca explores the topic of proper time to die. The topic of freedom becomes the central theme of upcoming passages where Seneca introduces contrasting *exempla* of *magnis viris*, such as Cato and people of lower social status (*sortis homines*) killing themselves.[21] For example, Seneca insists that a story of a German gladiator using a bathroom sponge (Roman *xylospongium*) to commit suicide by choking demonstrates that "great freedom" (*magnam libertatem*) and "tranquility" (*securitas*)[22] are always at hand because life has "many exits" (*exitus multos*).[23] This means that death is an ever-present possibility regardless of one's particular situatedness. It is important to note that, as Brad Inwood suggests, such death must not be understood as a form of fearful resignation.[24] To take control of one's own life in this manner signifies a radical affirmation of moral autonomy, an essential philosophical act that derives significance from agents' will rather than external circumstances. In other words, the therapeutic relevance of

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ships one may face in life and recognize the possibility of their overcoming in reference to the success of exemplary figures.

[19] Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 24, 17–18: "'I shall die,' you say; you mean to say 'I shall cease to run the risk of sickness; I shall cease to run the risk of imprisonment; I shall cease to run the risk of death.'" Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume I: *Epistles 1–65*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere, p. 177.

[20] Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 24, 6–7: "He had provided these two requisites for his last moments… and thought that he ought to see to it that none one should have the power to slay or the good fortune to save Cato." Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume I: *Epistles 1–65*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere, p. 169.

[21] Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 70, 19: "You need not to think that none but great men have had the strength to burst the bonds of human servitude… Nay, men of the meanest lot in life have by a mighty impulse escaped to safety." Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume II: *Epistles 66–92*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere. Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1920, p. 67.

[22] Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 70, 16; Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume II: *Epistles 66–92*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere, p. 65.

[23] Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 70, 15; Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume II: *Epistles 66–92*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere, p. 65.

[24] See: B. Inwood: *Reading Seneca: Stoic Philosophy at Rome*. Oxford University Press, New York 2005, p. 306. Inwood explores the topic of Stoic suicide as a way to affirm moral autonomy in harsh external circumstances.

Cato's mortal *exemplum* strains from exposing that there are worse things that death, namely, a life without freedom, and that such preservation of moral liberty cannot be alienated.

Cato's *Exemplum* and Spiritual Exercises

Another significant moment of exemplary *meditatio mortis* occupies *Epistle* 67, which caters to Lucillius's question of "whether every good is desirable" (*an omne bonum potabile sit*)[25], even the one that leads to misery. The question implies, albeit at a deeper philosophical level, Lucillius's continued aversion against hardships that arise when pursuing the good life. As a response, Seneca explains that goods, at least for philosophers engaged in a moral practice, are only instances of virtue, and as such they must always be desirable. Moreover, since virtues, such as courage (*fortitudo*), usually require suffering hardships, for example a voluntary pursuit of death, one must admit that those unfortunate instances are likewise "desirable" (*potabile*).[26] To strengthen this point, Seneca recalls few familiar *exempla*,[27] including Cato tearing up his stitched-up wound (*Catonis scissum manu sua vulnus*),[28] and situates them among desirable manifestations of courage. Nonetheless, *exempla* are presently not exhausted as modes of demonstration. Close to the end of the letter, Seneca introduces an imaginative exercise that aims to convince Lucillius of the uncompromising merit of pursuing virtue. As Seneca puts it, to extinguish the opinions of the "common man" (*opinionibus volgi*) and to purify oneself from fears and desires imposed by the crowd,[29] Lucillius should "clothe" (*indue*) himself, or better yet, appropri-

[25] Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 67, 3; Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume II: *Epistles 66–92*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere, p. 37.

[26] Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 67, 6; Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume II: *Epistles 66–92*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere, p. 39.

[27] The list in Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 67, 7; Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume II: *Epistles 66–92*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere, p. 39, is similar to that of *Epistle* 24, this time including Regulus, Cato, Rutilius and Socrates.

[28] Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 67, 7: "the wound of Cato which was torn open by Cato's own hand." Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume II: *Epistles 66–92*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere, p. 39.

[29] Seneca often talks about how the majority of people impose their false beliefs onto us, and leads us towards misguided passions. For passages on this topic, see: Sen. *Ep.* 7, 6; *Ep* 32, 2; *Ep.* 44, 1.

ate the mind of a great man (*magni viri animum*).[30] Seneca tells Lucillius to behold Cato's noble sacrifice (*adspice M. Cato*)[31] and reconsider whether harsh acts, done for virtue's sake, are undesirable from such a point of view.

At first glance, it seems that *Epistle* 67 introduces something akin to the spiritual exercise of contemplating the ideal sage that we find in Pierre Hadot's philosophy. Hadot explains that when philosophical discourse takes the form of spiritual exercise, as it often does in Antiquity, it becomes a means of existential transformation and directive force towards a particular chosen form of life. [32] One of such fundamental discursive procedures was meditation on the ideal sage, a model of perfected wisdom that appears among different schools of Antiquity. It involved asking what the sage would do when faced with different situations and provided a directive force of philosopher's conduct.[33] In this case, appropriating Cato's perspective would rely on one of the essential characteristics of the stoic sage that Hadot identifies – the absolute will to pursue virtue.[34] The proposed exercise in *Epistle* 67, much like when meditating on the disposition of the ideal figure, allows Lucillius to change his perspective on the good and perceive that the attainment of virtue, rather than avoidance of hardships, ought to guide one's desires.

Nonetheless, while Hadot admits that some individuals, including Seneca's Cato, were taken as personifications of the sage, it is crucial to observe that Hadot understands the exercise of contemplating the ideal sage as an abstract endeavor.[35] However, it appears that in *Epistle* 67 Seneca transcends the abstract nature this procedure and pursues a more efficacious spiritual exercise by including the relatable force of Roman exemplarity. While the *Epistles* do employ the traditional abstract discourses on the sage,[36] the case

[30] Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 67, 12: "Clothe yourself with a hero's courage, and withdraw for a little space from the opinions of the common man." Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume II: *Epistles 66–92*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere, p. 43.

[31] Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 67, 13; Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume II: *Epistles 66–92*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere, p. 43.

[32] See: P. Hadot: *What is Ancient Philosophy*? Trans. M. Chase. Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2002, pp. 179–233.

[33] Hadot insists that the exercise of contemplating the ideal philosophical sage was present among many ancient philosophical schools. See: P. Hadot: *The Selected Writings of Pierre Hadot: Philosophy as Practice*. Trans. M. Sharpe. Bloomsbury Publishing, London 2020, p. 195.

[34] For Hadot, one of the essential traits of the stoic sage is a radical determination towards virtuous conduct. See: P. Hadot: *What is Ancient Philosophy*, p. 221–22.

[35] Hadot says that it "was less important to trace the features of concrete figures of particularly noteworthy philosophers or sages… than to define the sage's ideal behavior…" P. Hadot: *What Is Ancient Philosophy*, p. 224.

[36] For Seneca's discourse on the sage, see for instance: *Ep.* 9, 3; *Ep.* 28, 6–7; *Ep.* 42, 1–2; *Ep.* 55, 4; *Ep.* 73, 13

of *Epistle* 67 puts forward a unique personal and concrete format that likely draws on the admiration for exemplary figures and familiarity with their narrative rather than the status of moral perfection attributed to an abstract ideal. Consequently, we are left with an imaginative exercise that serves the traditional purpose of moral transformation but draws on pre-existing emotional attachments and familiarity to reinforce its persuasive strength.

The exemplary thematization of spiritual exercise with Cato in the center reappears in *Epistle* 71. In the letter, Seneca examines how Cato arrived at the resolute (*forti*) and undisturbed (*aequo*)[37] spiritual disposition that turned his mortal stand into a virtuous act. Seneca insists, that Cato was reading "the night wherein he intended to die" (*qua nocte periturus fuit, legit*)[38], probably recalling the reference to Plato's book in *Epistle* 24. However, the following passages also provide a closer characterization of the philosophical activity that reading represents. Seneca uses a form of literalized direct speech to endow Cato with a particular mode of inner philosophical discourse.[39] The letter invites Lucillius to approach death like Cato engaged in *aevum animo*[40] contemplating the eternity of time with the inevitable destruction of "cities" (*urbes*), "empires" (*imperiorum*), and "dynasties" (*opibus*).[41] Cato then exclaims: "Why should I be angry or feel sorrow, if I precede the general destruction by a tiny interval of time?" (*Quid est ergo quare indigner aut doleam, si exiguo momento publica fata praecedo?*).

In this exemplary dramatization of Cato's contemplative efforts, one finds an intriguing synthesis of two spiritual exercises. On the one hand, Seneca introduces a spiritual exercise fundamentally connected to *meditatio mortis*

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[37] Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 71, 12: "Why should he not suffer, bravely and calmy, a change in the government?" Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume II: *Epistles 66–92*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere, p. 79–81.

[38] Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 71, 11; Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume II: *Epistles 66–92*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere, p. 79.

[39] See: R. G. Mayer: *Roman Historical Exempla*, p. 154. Mayer here showcases a couple of instances of how direct speech may be used to introduce *exempla*. See also: R. Langlands: *Exemplary Ethics*, p. 144. Langlands argues that it was a common practice to re-structure the perceived inner motivation of *exempla* and posit different moral stances.

[40] Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 71, 15: "Therefore the wise man will say just what a Marcus Cato would say, after reviewing his past life…" Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume II: *Epistles 66–92*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere, p. 81. I wish to note that the Latin term "*aevum animo*" should be understood as Cato reviewing an eternity of time rather than only his life. This translation is much more fitting in regards to the exclamation that comes in following lines.

[41] Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 71, 15; Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume II: *Epistles 66–92*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere, pp. 81–83.
Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 71, 15–16; Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume II: *Epistles 66–92*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere, p. 83.

that Hadot calls the "view from above."[42] The essential goal of this exercise is to look at the world from a depersonalized vantage point, in order to see all things from "the perspective of universal reason,"[43] which the Stoics posit as the organizing world principle. When confronted with the ordered eternity of time, the constant dissolution and renewal, all personal concerns seem unimportant and petty. Consequently, one can view death, which otherwise appears personal and frightening, with a detached attitude as an inevitable part of the cosmic order. Nonetheless, since the exercise is personified as Cato's particular viewpoint, it likewise refers back to the contemplation of the sage mentioned earlier. This time, however, it is the sage's perfected awareness of the universal order[44] when faced by the final necessity of mortal life that ought to inspire Lucillius. Therefore, similarly to the previously considered letter, rather than undertaking an abstract philosophical procedure, Lucillius may internalize a specific mode of inner discourse exemplified by a familiar Roman hero to conquer the fear of death.

Exempla as a Therapy for False Beliefs

Another approach to using *exempla* as a form of therapeutics appears in *Epistle* 82, where Seneca insists that *metus mortis*[45] cannot be conquered unless one's judgment about death's nature undergoes a fundamental shift. Seneca then proposes that a person can understand (*cognitio*) the true nature of things and gain freedom from ill desires (*cupiditatum insania*)[46] that motivate misguided passions by engaging in philosophical activity. The main

[42] The "view from above" is, according to Hadot, a fundamental philosophical exercise that frees one from egoistic concerns by appropriating a sort of universal perspective on the world and its occurrences. See: P. Hadot: *What is Ancient Philosophy*, p. 206.

[43] P. Hadot: *What is Ancient Philosophy*, p. 136.

[44] See: P. Hadot: *The Selected Writings*, p. 194. Hadot insists that the Sage possesses such universal consciousness of the world at each moment.

[45] Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 82, 4: "…what hiding place is there, where the fear of death does not enter?" Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume II: *Epistles 66–92*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere, p. 242.

[46] Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 82, 6: "Therefore, grid yourself about with philosophy, an impregnable wall… This will be possible for us only through knowledge of self and of the world of Nature… The soul should know… what is that reason that distinguishes between the desirable and the undesirable, and thereby tames the madness of our desires…" Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume II: *Epistles 66–92*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere, pp. 243–45.

goal of *Epistle* 82 is to argue in favour of the canonical stoic position that death, or any other external event, is not good or evil in nature and, as such, should not be the object of fear or desire. In this way, Seneca introduces the stoic technical language of *indifferentia*[47] and embarks on considering which medium can effectively illustrate the concept.

Immediately, Seneca criticizes logical syllogisms[48] that attempt to argue for death's indifference as largely ineffective in fostering an authentic transformation of one's judgment concerning this issue. For one, as Seneca demonstrates, a similar syllogism can express an opposite proposal with a simple linguistic twist.[49] Furthermore, logic actually misses the point because, as Seneca puts it, "one praises not death, but the man whose soul death takes away before it can confound it" (*nemo mortem laudat, sed eum, euius mors ante abstulit animum quam conturbavit*).[50] Since death is not an abstract concept analyzed by logic but a concrete event happening to an actual person, Seneca suggests looking towards individual instances of virtue – *exempla* – to tackle the present issue.

In particular, Lucillius is asked to compare Cato's glorious death with the "base and disgraceful" (*turpis… et erubescenda*) death of Brutus,[51] whose last moment is shortly narrated in the letter:

> Hic est enim Brutus, qui cum periturus mortis moras quaereret, ad exonerandum ventrem secessit et evocatus ad mortem iussusque praebere cervicem: "praebebo," inquit, "ita vivam." Quae dementia est fugere,

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[47] Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 82, 10: "I classify as 'indifferent' – that is, neither good nor evil, – sickness, pain, poverty, exile, death." Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume II: *Epistles 66–92*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere, pp. 247.

[48] See: B. Inwood: *The Importance of Form in Seneca's Philosophical Letters*. In: *Ancient Letters: Classical and Late Antique Epistolography*. Eds. R. Morello et al. Oxford University Press, New York 2007, p. 140. Inwood says that Seneca's apparent critique of logic may relate to the confinement of epistolary genre rather than to a problem with the method itself.

[49] Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 82, 10: "For the refuter himself proposed a counter-syllogism based on the proposition that we regard death as 'indifferent'…" Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume II: *Epistles 66–92*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere, p. 247.

[50] Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 82, 11–12; Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume II: *Epistles 66–92*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere, p. 247.

[51] Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 82, 12; Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume II: *Epistles 66–92*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere, p. 249. Decimus Junius Brutus Albinus (85–43 BC) was a Roman politician and a military leader active during the civil war of 49–46 BC. Brutus was initially favored by Caesar, enjoying the status of a governor of Transalpine Gaul. However, his later participation in Caesar's assassination made him an enemy to Marcus Antonius (83–30 BC), an early supporter of Caesar, who began a campaign to punish the conspirators. Seneca's reference recalls the story of Brutus's defeat and capture by Antonius.

> cum retro ire non possis? "Praebebo," inquit, "it vivam." Paene adiecit: "vel sub Antonio."
>
> For this Brutus, condemned to death, was trying to obtain postponement; he withdrew a moment in order to ease himself; when summoned to die and ordered to bare his throat, he exclaimed: "I will bare my throat, if only I may live!" What madness it is to run away, when it is impossible to turn back! "I will bare my throat, if only I may live!" He came very near saying also: "even under Anthony!"[52]

Seneca presses on a theme familiar from *Epistle* 70 – Brutus's willingness to live[53] even under Anthony's rule. The comparison stresses that Cato and Brutus found themselves in similar external circumstances. Both were fighting for republican ideals and were defeated by enemies who were to become their tyrannical rulers. Nonetheless, they differed significantly in their determination to stand by their values. Cato showed no sign of hesitation after being defeated by Caesar but exhibited exceptional courage. However, when Brutus is captured in Gaul, and ordered to be executed, he meets his demise unwillingly, and would prefer to live under tyrant's rule. Brutus then exemplifies a person whose judgment is faulty and still considers death as something evil in itself. Such existential incoherence of inner discourse is morally decisive because, as Seneca insists, virtue manifest only through harmony of the spirit (*concordi animo*).[54] Thus, because of such incoherence, Brutus' otherwise similar fate ends up as moral vice in comparison to Cato's courageous final moments.

The lively and particular nature of *exempla* allows for a unique comparative operation that adequately portrays death's moral indifference. Lucillius can effectively infer that a virtuous character disposition, rather than particular circumstances, points death towards the possible ends of moral spectrum. Nonetheless, as I have suggested, the exemplary comparison is not only effective when it comes to the demonstration of this piece of stoic theory but also

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[52] Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 82, 12; Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume II: *Epistles 66–92*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere, p. 249.

[53] Seneca's story seems to follow an account of Brutus's death provided by Valerius Maximus. However, Bernard Camillus Bondurant warns that such accounts were "probably invented by some flatterer of Augustus to cast shadow over the name and fame of Decimus Brutus." Other reports do not seem to support the image of Brutus's cowardice. B. C. Bondurant: *Decimus Junius Brutus Albinus: A Historical Study*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1907, pp. 109–110.

[54] Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 82, 18: "For virtue accomplishes its plans only when the spirit is in harmony with itself." Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume II: *Epistles 66–92*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere, p. 253.

therapeutic. I believe that we can better explain the therapeutic benefit of this procedure by referring to Martha Nussbaum's re-evaluation of ethical theory in Hellenistic philosophy as medication for the soul. According to Nussbaum, Hellenistic philosophers understood ethical theory as a set of beliefs about good life that determine our desires and innermost wishes.[55] These desires, when unfulfilled, create the nexus of negative emotions changing life into suffering. The role of philosophers is, by means of argument, to eradicate the faulty beliefs and guide their pupils towards more worthwhile concepts of good life.[56] To rephrase this idea into our current discussion, Seneca assumes the role of a doctor of the soul and seeks to convince Lucillius of a particularly stoic perception of the good. According to the Stoics, external conditions of virtue, such as death, are theoretically indifferent and, as such, must also be met with indifference rather than passion.

Epistle 82 demonstrates that *exempla* can serve as a compelling device to establish this essential part of ethical theory that drives out the fear-motivating belief in death's status as something evil. Still, it is important to note that, as Nussbaum insists, the Hellenistic accounts of the good life are always "value-laden,"[57] and their therapeutic potency depends on a generalization of human nature which conditions the ideal of human flourishing. For the Stoics, it is only the life in accordance to reason – the life of virtue – that deserves the attention of ethical deliberation. Without such a concession, it would be futile to (rationally) convince Lucillius that death is indifferent in relation to virtue. A person, after all, may very well value life just in itself, or for reasons unrelated to virtue. This means that the posited interpretation of *exempla* in *Epistle* 82 and their therapeutic efficacy would be largely lessened if we did not assume some philosophical preparedness of the receiving pupil. I believe that the following section, which reflects on assumed coherency and chronology of Lucillius's exhibited development in the *Epistles*, will demonstrate the presence of such philosophical preparation.

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[55] Nussbaum suggests that her proposed medical analogy "claims not only that ethical reality is not altogether independent of human theories and conceptions but also that ethical truth is not independent of what human beings deeply wish, need, and (at some level) desire…" M. Nussbaum: *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics.* Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford 1994, p. 23.

[56] Nussbaum insists that medical "moral philosophy… deals with people whose beliefs, desires, and preferences are themselves the problem. For according to the Hellenistic philosophers, society is not in order as it is; and, as the source of most of their pupils' beliefs and even of their emotional repertory, it has infected them with its sicknesses." M. Nussbaum: *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*, p. 26.

[57] According to Nussbaum, ancient "accounts of 'nature,' especially of 'human nature,' are value-laden accounts." M. Nussbaum: *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*, p. 30.

Exempla and the Epistolary Format

In the preceding discussion, I discussed three different facets of *meditatio mortis* as separate instances to outline different modes of exemplary therapeutics. However, one must admit that such strict separation is not authentic. In fact, every letter assimilates some aspects of Roman exemplarity, provides an impetus for contemplative exercise and seeks transformation of judgment to some degree. Furthermore, I think that the fragmentary approach likewise does not capture the essential literarily framework of the *Epistles*. As some authors have suggested,[58] Seneca's *Epistles* are best studied as a coherent set that constructs a chronological didactic progression with different discussions presupposing the existence of previous letters. I believe that re-examination of the outlined process with this in mind will further our understanding of the present issue. The educational chronology becomes apparent when looking back at the initial reference in *Epistle* 13.

Seneca not only suggests abandoning hope on account of Lucillius's philosophical advancement but posits the possibility of facing death by means of more radical *stoica lingua*.[59] This format, however, does not actualize until *Epistle* 82, when Seneca introduces the Stoic idea of indifference after professing renewed confidence in Lucillius's philosophical progress.[60] The different methods of exemplary cultivation considered in our discussion are gradual steps towards this therapeutic apex. The exercise of naming *exempla* against different perils in *Epistle* 24 is consciously introduced as a "different road to safety" (*alia… ad securitatem via*) that posits certainty (*utique*)[61] of misfortunes, as opposed to hope and ambivalence of "if it comes" (*si*

[58] Miriam Griffin in M. Griffin: "Seneca's Pedagogic Strategy: Letters and De Beneficiis." *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, 94 (2007), pp. 89–113, argues that Lucillius's entries in Seneca's *Epistles* exhibit traceable signs of chronological didactic progression. See also, J. Schafer: *Ars Didactica: Seneca's 94th and 95th Letters*. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht GmbH & Co. KG, Göttingen 2009, pp. 67–77, who expands on this idea and insists that the didactic chronology is not only intentional but even essential for our understanding of the *Epistles*.

[59] Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 13, 4: "I am not speaking with you in the Stoic strain but in my milder style." Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume I: *Epistles 1–65*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere, p. 75.

[60] Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 82, 1: "I have already ceased to be anxious about you." Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume II: *Epistles 66–92*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere, p. 241.

[61] Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 24, 1–2: "But I shall conduct you to peace of mind by another route: if you would put off all worry, assume that what you fear may happen will certainly happen…" Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume I: *Epistles 1–65*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere, p. 75.

veniet)[62] characteristic of *Epistle* 13. In this way, Seneca shifts from a novice-friendly and inspirational therapeutic approach to a more advanced form of pre-meditation. Furthermore, while the early letters establish a significant admirative sentiment towards Cato in terms of the Roman tradition, the following sequence of *Epistle* 67, 70, and 71 philosophically molds Lucillius's values, and the *exemplum* for the exemplary therapeutics in *Epistle* 82.

The imaginative appropriation of Cato's perception in *Epistle* 67 pushes Lucillius towards acceptance of virtue as the fundamental value of life which is, as I have already mentioned, necessary for the therapeutic effect of *Epistle* 82. *Epistles* 70, and 71, on the other hand, work on a reformulation of Cato's reception necessary for the comparison with Brutus introduced in *Epistle* 82. In the socially contrasting narrative of *Epistle* 70, we can see that *exempla* ought to be judged on account of their philosophical significance, which is their commitment to freedom common to Cato and the gladiators, rather than traditional esteem. Further, the sage-like contemplation of *Epistle* 71 is a testimony to Cato's developed inner discourse – a moment Seneca perhaps anticipated in *Epistle* 24 by symbolically equipping Cato with *platonis librum*. As was shown above, comparing Cato's exemplary willingness to die, which strains from a consistent philosophical disposition, with Brutus's moral inconsistency was the crucial aspect that allowed Lucillius to rationally categorize death as morally indifferent.

Moreover, the discussion presented above also illustrates how *exempla* relate to the traditional forms of philosophical discourse Seneca works with. In *Epistle* 94, Seneca explains that philosophical life requires both contemplative theorizing (*contemplationem veri*) and practical orientation (*actionem*)[63], which respectively correspond to two modes of discourse: truth-seeking principles (*decreta*) and action-oriented precepts (*praecepta*). Now, in *Epistle* 24, and 13 the exemplary references amount to forms of courage inspiring exhortations (*exhortatione*)[64], which is one of the fundamental functions of precepts. So, in terms of exemplarity as a form of philosophical discourse,

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[62] Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 13, 4: "You yourself must say: 'Well, what if it does happen? Let us see who wins'." Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume I: *Epistles 1–65*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere, p. 75.

[63] Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 94, 45: "Virtue is divided into two parts – into contemplation of truth, and conduct." Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume III: *Epistles 93–124*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere. Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1925, p. 41.

[64] See: Seneca: *Epistles*, 94, 39; Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume III: *Epistles 93–124*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere, p. 37. Here Seneca enumerates "advice" (*monitiones*), "consolation" (*consolationes*), "warning" (*dissuasiones*), "exhortation" (*adhortationes*), "scolding" (*obiurgationes*), and "praising" (*laudationes*) as roles of precepts.

at this moment, *exempla* seem to supply and fully appropriate the role of precepts.[65]

However, this is not all because, as Griffin argues, the second part of the *Epistles* presents Lucillius as a more active learner who asks theoretical questions that demand a more dialectical approach.[66] By looking at *Epistle* 82, for instance, one can conclude that exemplarity, in fact, reflects this didactic shift. The comparison introduced in the letter serves to clarify the concept of indifference, a vital piece of stoic theory. What is more, the lively nature of *exempla* actually makes them indispensable, rather than supplicatory, for this rational procedure. Therefore, Seneca seemingly turns Roman exemplarity into a dynamic didactic tool that supplies and, at times, replaces traditional forms of discourse in all crucial moments of *meditatio mortis*.

Conclusion

As the present study has indicated, it is possible to delineate the philosophical utility of *exempla* in relation to the Stoic preparation for death – a central theme of Seneca's philosophy. In the paper, I have analyzed the potential of exemplary therapeutics concerning traditional Roman exemplarity and the methodology of two contemporary philosophers – Pierre Hadot and Martha Nussbaum. Such an approach allows to extract three crucial formats of exemplary cultivation. First, Seneca relies on the Roman sentiment of admiration towards Cato to instill courage into his learner on account of death's possible gloriousness. Moreover, in later sections, the *exemplum* becomes a base for an imaginative spiritual exercise that Hadot connects with the practice of *meditation mortis*. Forms of exemplary cognition can also engender a discursive and rational reformation of one's beliefs, unfastening one from ill desires. Martha Nussbaum defines this property as the essence of Hellenistic therapeutics.

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[65] Indeed, Seneca admits that an *exemplum* "acquires the force of precepts." Seneca: *Epistles*, *Ep.* 94, 40; Seneca: *Epistles*, Volume III: *Epistles 93–124*. Trans. Richard M. Gummere, p. 37.

[66] For more evidence see: M. Griffin: *Seneca's Pedagogic* Strategy, pp. 92–93. Griffin explains how further letters start with Lucillius asking Seneca difficult doctrinal questions that are explored within the letters.

Further, I argued that the apparent fragmentation of the considered exemplary education does not fully capture the essence of Seneca's epistolary project. The final sections of the discussion show that the *Epistles* portray the process of dealing with the fear of death as a coherent element of exemplary didactics. By re-examining the different stages of the journey, the paper has shown that the chronological composition of the given letters depicts a gradual educational process towards reaching a therapeutic apex of stoic indifference to death. The early letters establish an emotional connection to Cato's *exemplum,* while later passages focus on a reformative process of exemplary and value judgments. They are necessary for introducing the traditional stoic approach. Finally, I have shown that *exempla* respond to two modes of traditional philosophical discourse needed in this process as forms of philosophical exhortation and theory establishing tools.

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