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Asceticism and the Younger Seneca

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A modern vegetarian in the Western world is a person who eats only foods obtained without slaughter, and usually does so for humanitarian, moral, aesthetic, political, or health reasons. In Great Britain the number of vegetarians is increasing: a survey conducted in 1993 estimated that one in ten of the population usually avoided meat, although only 4.5% were strict vegetarians¹. A vegan is a particular kind of vegetarian, refraining from using any animal product whatever for food, clothing, or any other purpose.

A world-renouncing asceticism was a mark of some Greek religious movements. Pythagoreanism is a very notable example. By contrast, ascetical practices in the Old Testament are not at all common. A vigorous grasp of the doctrine of creation as being something 'very good' (*Genesis 1.31*) prevented the adoption of a negative attitude amongst the Jews, and in post-biblical Judaism to turn one's back on the gifts of God present in his creation seemed truly blasphemous. This non-ascetical approach is particularly evident with respect to sex and marriage. In the teachings of Jesus himself there are 'world-affirming' and 'world-renouncing' elements. But he is neither dualistic nor Gnostic in his view of the material or the sexual (*cp. Mark 7. 15f.*) His asceticism was practical and empirical, not metaphysical, and was directed towards the eschatological nature of the kingdom. Historically, the incarnational emphasis of Catholic Christianity has been offset by Protestant austerity.

Western European capitalism (itself either the result or the cause of Protestantism) has with its 'conspicuous consumption' and heavy drain on natural resources given rise within the past quarter of a century to the green movement, a general term for the individuals and organisations collaborating in efforts to protect the environment. The Green Party and

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¹ See *The Times* (London), 20 September, 1993, p. 3.

such organisations as Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace are important representatives of this movement. The Green Party's aim is to 'preserve the planet and its people'; incessant economic growth, it argues, is not sustainable. Formal leadership is not a feature of party structure, for there is a strong commitment to decentralisation. Green parties came into existence in Western Europe in the 1970s and in Eastern Europe from 1988. Parties in different countries are linked to one another but are unaffiliated to any pressure group. Lack of some central direction has led to internal disputes that reduce effectiveness and popular support.

Greenpeace is an international pressure group, founded in 1971, with a policy of non-violent direct action supported by scientific research. In 1985 during a protest against French atmospheric nuclear testing in the South Pacific, its ship *Rainbow Warrior* was sunk by French intelligence agents, with the death of a crew member. A near-repeat of this incident occurred in 1995.

The closing decades of this century have witnessed an appreciable increase in the moral sensibility of many in the West, leading not infrequently to a stern disapproval of the lifestyles, eating habits, and material wastefulness found in modern societies. Proponents of this new austerity or Puritanism are often extremely dogmatic in their stance, and sometimes will not hesitate to break the law in their anxiety to check the behaviour that they find objectionable in others. 'Political correctness' (a dictatorial '*Gleichschaltung*'), often of a truly ludicrous kind, has become rife in the USA and is present in varying degrees elsewhere in the English-speaking world. Vegetarianism has achieved a vogue in many quarters and is seemingly developing a militant strain.

But it is easy to be condemnatory or supercilious. The fact is that sensitive and intelligent people in many parts of the Western world (and beyond) appear to be developing a new kind of conscience in relation to the earth and mankind's use of it. The needs of future generations (if there are to be any) must be borne in mind by those alive today. What we have we hold in trust.

Conservation has become a severe moral imperative for large numbers in the West, even though they may appear to their fellow citizens as grimly austere figures, often practising a personal asceticism of an impressive type. Their fears and intuitions about the rape of nature perhaps find a certain mystical support in the Gaia theory of Professor J. E. Lovelock which suggests that the earth and everything on it constitute a single self-regulating entity which is alive and demands care and reverence. Empodocles and Posidonius would find this interesting since they held similar views themselves.

Simplicity of diet and lifestyle was not infrequently regarded as an ideal in classical times—see H. Kier and R. Vischer, *Das einfache Leben* (Göttingen, 1965), and B. Németh, "Die bescheidene Hütte (parva casa) bei Catull und Ovid", *Acta Class. Univ. Sc. Debrecen* 16 (1980), 34-47. Cp. too R. Nisbet and

M. Hubbard (edd.), *Horace, Odes 1* (Oxford, 1970), p. 355f. (on *Ode* 31, line 15). Ancient asceticism of a principled kind usually had religious, moral, or hygienic reasons. About the first century before Christ, Pythagorean ideas began to experience a revival. Posidonius himself held this school in respect, grafting on (quite illogically) the transmigration of souls to the Stoic notion of impersonal immortality.

The most important philosophical name of the period is Sextius the elder who 'philosophised in Greek words but with a Roman character' (Seneca *ep.* 59. 7: *Graecis verbis Romanis moribus philosophantem*). Most of our information about Sextius comes from the younger Seneca, the chief sources being *ep.* 64. 2ff.; 73. 12ff. and 108. 17ff. The tenets of his school were eclectic: its ethics drew considerably on Stoicism; its theory of the soul as an incorporeal entity came from Plato; and its belief in vegetarianism was borrowed from the Pythagoreans. By declining Julius Caesar's offer of a place in the Senate (Seneca *ep.* 98. 13) and thus ignoring a central Stoic doctrine on the need for participation in public life, he showed a certain independence of outlook. Sextius' son, Sextius Niger, had scientific leanings, writing on *materia medica*, but his work is now lost, though it was used liberally by Pliny and Dioscorides.

In autobiographical mood, Seneca (*ep.* 108. 17ff.) tells how when young he was powerfully impressed by Pythagorean teaching² and turned vegetarian, but that after a year he abandoned the practice for fear that he might become suspect to the authorities by seeming to be associated with certain foreign rites then being established at Rome (in A.D. 19 during Tiberius' reign —cp. Tacitus, *Annals* 2. 85: *actum de sacris Aegyptiis Iudaicisque pellendis*). In this same letter (section 17) he relates that Sotion (of Alexandria, one of his early teachers and a philosopher of Stoic-Pythagorean orientation) used to tell him why Pythagoras abstained from animal food, and why, in later times, Sextius did also. In each case, the reason was different, but it was in each case a noble reason. Seneca continues (section 18ff.): 'Sextius believed that man had enough sustenance without resorting to blood, and that a habit of cruelty is formed whenever butchery is practised for pleasure. Further, he thought that we should curtail the sources of our luxury; he argued that a varied diet was contrary to the laws of health, and was unsuited to our constitutions. Pythagoras, on the other hand, held that all beings were interrelated, and that there was a system of exchange between souls which transmigrated from one bodily shape into another. If one may believe him, no soul perishes or ceases from

² Seneca was much addicted to reading Ovid whom he held next to Virgil in his esteem; he has nearly as many quotations from Ovid as from all other poets, Greek and Latin, apart from Virgil in his prose writings, and the influence of Ovid on the tragedies is palpable. *Metamorphoses* 15. 60ff. gives a lengthy account of Pythagorean philosophy which Seneca must have known, along with other sources.

its function at all, except for a tiny interval —when it is being poured from one body into another. We may question at what time and after what seasons of change the soul returns to man, when it has wandered through many a dwelling-place; but meantime, he made men fearful of guilt and parricide, since they might be, without knowing it, attacking the soul of a parent and injuring it with knife or with teeth —if, as is possible, the related spirit is dwelling temporarily in this bit of flesh. Sotion, when he had set forth this doctrine, supplementing it with his own proofs, would say: 'You do not believe that souls are assigned, first to one body and then another, and that our so-called death is merely a change of abode? You do not believe that in cattle, or in wild beasts, or in the creatures of the deep, the soul of him who was once a man may linger? You do not believe that nothing on this earth is annihilated, but only changes its haunts? And that animals also have cycles of progress and, so to speak, an orbit for their souls, no less than the heavenly bodies, which revolve in fixed circuits? Great men have put faith in this idea; therefore, while holding to your own view, keep the whole question in abeyance in your mind. If the theory is true, it is a mark of purity to refrain from eating flesh; if it is false, it is economy. I am merely depriving you of food which sustains lions and vultures.'

I was imbued with this teaching, and began to abstain from animal food; at the end of a year the habit was as pleasant as it was easy.'

In the same letter (108. 13-16; and see also 110. 14-20) Seneca recalls how he was greatly impressed by the lectures of Attalus, the Stoic, on 'sin, error, and the evils of life', as well as on moderation in diet, which he heard when he was young. Seneca states that he often wished to leave those lectures as a poor man, so moved was he, and that as a result of Attalus' teaching he gave up oysters and mushrooms for life, as well as perfumes, wine and the bath: *ostreis boletisque in omnem vitam renuntiatum est* —of the fifteen instances of *renuntiare* in Seneca's prose ten refer to renunciation in a moral or ascetic sense; it has for him become a technical term.

Compassion was not an obvious trait of the older Stoics, nor was the school's great exemplar Socrates notable for it³. By contrast, Seneca is often not afraid to 'wear his heart upon his sleeve'. He seems to have possessed an intelligently sympathetic disposition, as is seen, for example, from his approval of Sextius' views on 'blood and cruelty' above. His asceticism had a strong ethical content. A feeling for the animal creation was part of his character. Though it is brief, sorrow in animals is deep and real, he says (*ep.* 99. 24; *ad Marciam* 7. 2). Animals know when they have eaten sufficiently (*ep.* 59. 13). They are gentle to one another, and do not prey upon their own kind (*ep.* 95. 31; *de ira* 2. 8. 3; *de clem.* 1. 26. 4). Nothing ever incites them to do harm except when necessity drives them to it (*ep.* 103. 2; *n.q.* 5. 18. 9).

³ The emotions or passions had to be ruthlessly eradicated, according to the older Stoics, who saw them as mental sickness. Here, as elsewhere, Seneca shows a more relaxed approach.

Mankind shares to some extent all qualities, except reason, with animals and plants (*epp.* 76. 9-10; 87. 19), while no animal is more capricious or needs greater skill when being handled than man (*de clem.* 1. 17. 1). Cruel treatment makes beasts of burden disobedient (*de clem.* 1. 16. 5). Wild beasts show no favouritism among their offspring; they lie down so as to suckle all alike; birds make fair distribution of their food (*ep.* 66. 26). The insight and sympathy in these examples could not be paralleled amongst the writers of classical antiquity.

A similar degree of humane understanding is to be found in Seneca's attitude to old age. It is, he says, a time of life well suited to the attainment of wisdom (*epp.* 68. 14; 76. 3), and it brings a tranquillity of mind and moderation of character (*ep.* 26. 3). The faults of youth diminish with age (*ep.* 68. 13), and the old lose their power to do what they should not wish to do anyway (*ep.* 67. 2). Age, too, enables us to bear many troubles more courageously (*ep.* 104. 2), and sets us free from the cares of self-preservation (*ep.* 104. 4). But he can recognise its drawbacks —e.g. querulousness (*de ira* 1. 13. 5; 2. 19. 4; 3. 9. 4); the fact that it is an incurable disease (*ep.* 108. 28); the fact that childish follies are often a mark of it (*ep.* 4. 2; 22. 4; 99. 10).

The neo-Stoicism as developed by Seneca shows the themes and methods of the diatribe formally adopted to serve the purposes of a philosophy which had as its targets luxury and extravagance and human pride but which attacked them with humour, irony and good nature, these qualities being seasoned by a certain underlying seriousness and didacticism.

Non pudebit fateri quem mihi amorem Pythagorae iniecerit Sotion (*ep.* 108. 17). The Pythagoreanism of Seneca's early days appears to have left an indelible impression on him, joining with Stoic principles to confirm him lastingly in the ways of self-discipline. At *de brev. vitae* 14. 5 he cites Pythagoras along with Zeno, Democritus, Aristotle and Theophrastus as ideal guides for ethical behaviour. At *ep.* 73. 15 he commends the teaching of Sextius as the way to virtue in these terms:

credamus itaque Sextio monstranti pulcherrimum iter et clamanti 'hac itur ad astra!' hac secundum frugalitatem, hac secundum temperantiam, hac secundum fortitudinem.

A few other such passages out of many are:

invitant ut divitiae, voluptates, forma, ambitio, cetera blanda et adridentia; fugat labor, mors, dolor, ignominia, victus adstrictior. debemus itaque exerceri, ne haec timeamus, ne illa cupiamus. in contrarium pugnemus et ab invitantibus recedamus, adversus potentia concitemur (*ep.* 123. 13). *omnes sensus perducendi sunt ad firmitatem; natura patientes sunt, si animus illos desit corrumpere, qui cotidie ad rationem reddendam vocandus est. faciebat hoc Sextius, ut consummato die, cum se ad nocturnam quietem recepisset, interrogaret animum suum: 'quod hodie malum tuum sanasti? cui vitio*

obstitisti? qua parte melior es? (de ira 3. 36. 1). 'quid ergo? non erit aliquis qui sapienti facere temptet iniuriam?' temptabit, sed non peruenturam ad eum; maiore enim intervallo a contactu inferiorum abductus est, quam ut ulla vis noxia usque ad illum vires suas perferat. etiam cum potentes et imperio editi et consensu servientium validi nocere intendunt, tam citra sapientiam omnes eorum impetus deficient, quam quae nervo tormentisque in altum exprimuntur, cum extra visum exsilierint, citra caelum tamen flectuntur (de const. sap. 3. 4). multum tibi esse animi scio. nam etiam antequam instrueres te praeceptis salutaribus et dura vincentibus, satis adversus fortunam placebas tibi, et multo magis, postquam cum illa manum conseruisti viresque expertus es tuas, quae numquam certam dare fiduciam sui possunt, nisi cum multae difficultates hinc et illinc apparuerunt, aliquando vero et propius accesserunt; sic verus ille animus et in alienum non venturus arbitrium probatur. haec eius obrussa est: non potest athleta magnos spiritus ad certamen adferre, qui numquam suggillatus est; ille, qui sanguinem suum vidit, cuius dentes crepuere sub pugno, ille, qui subplantatus adversarium toto tulit corpore nec proiecit animum proiectus, qui quotiens cecidit, contumacior resurrexit, cum magna spe descendit ad pugnam (ep. 13. 1-2). And see ep. 56. 15; 64. 4f.; 67. 10; 82. 2; de prov. 1 6; 2. 1f. and 7; 3. 3; 4. 8, 12; 16; 6. 6. etc., etc.

Seneca is no systematic philosopher. Modern commentators on radio or television like to use in their reports 'sound bites' or short pithy sentences or phrases extracted from a longer speech delivered by some public personage. Often Seneca proceeds in his writings by means of 'sound bites' or quotable utterances. The favourite unit of meaning is the brief but memorable *sententia*⁴. Philosophy for Seneca is something existential, applicable to daily living; his literary style is therefore largely homely, conversational and direct—except for occasional dithyrambic passages where his spirit rises in keeping with the exalted theme he is handling (see his words on Demetrius in the next paragraph but one).

Astral fatalism started with the Chaldeans who were the first to conceive of Necessity as ruling the universe. Whether Seneca was *au fond* an absolute determinist, the idea is present in his work from time to time. The concept of heroic and total submission to the rule of fate appealed to his imagination. For him, as for many others of his school, fatalism was not incompatible with a manly and active virtue.

(Compare here the words of a Christian hymn:

*Make me a captive, Lord,
So that I shall be free.)*

⁴ See for Seneca's style H. MACL. CURRIE, *Bulletin of the Institute of Class. Studies*, London, 13(1966), 76ff. From time to time Seneca expresses himself with a certain unctuousness of tone which arises perhaps from rhetorical opportunism, but such a habit need not imply insincerity of heart. Socrates was certainly capable of brusquerie, delivering severe reproaches which must have hurt interlocutors' feelings badly!

Seneca could be deeply moved by the picture of someone who has completely delivered himself up to the divine will even though this means suffering and loss. In ep. 64. 3-4 he is stirred by hearing the reading of a book by Sextius, the Stoic with Pythagorean leanings mentioned above, and he thus vigorously challenges Fortune (often by this time loosely interchanged with *Fatum*):

libet omnes casus provocare, libet exclamare: 'cessas, Fortuna? congregere! paratum vides!'

Paratum vides! Preparedness, ἀσκησις: spiritual asceticism (what in the Christian tradition means 'the practice of the presence of God') is just as important as the physical kind in Seneca's teaching. Complete surrender in body and mind to destiny, however capricious its intention may seem, can make the harshest servitude tolerable. (Today some Christian theologians consider that true religion centres on the creature's sense of utter dependence on the Creator of the universe.) At *de prov.* 3. 3 Seneca quotes with admiration Demetrius of Sunium, a Stoic philosopher who taught in Rome under the emperors Gaius and Nero: 'No man is more unhappy, in my view, than one who has never had misfortune...'. And then (*ibid.* 5. 4-6): 'Good men labour, spend, are spent—and gladly so. They are not dragged along by Fortune; they follow and keep pace with her. If they had known how, they would have preceded her. This is another inspiring speech which I remember Demetrius, that most stalwart man, made: 'There is just one complaint I can make against you, immortal gods: you did not sooner make known your will to me. I would myself have anticipated what, at your call, I offer to submit to now. Would you take my children? It is for you that I have reared them. You want some part of my body? Take it: it is only a slight sacrifice which I make, since I must leave it altogether soon. Do you want my life? Why not? I shall make no protest against your taking back what once you gave me. With my free consent you shall have whatever you may ask of me. What is my problem, then? I should have preferred to offer than to hand over. What need was there to take by force? You could have had it as a gift. Yet even now you will not take it by force, because nothing can be wrenched away from someone unless he withholds it.'

'I am under no compulsion, I suffer nothing against my will, and I am not God's slave but his follower, and the more so because I know that everything proceeds according to the law that is fixed and enacted for all time. Fate leads us, and it was settled at the first hour of birth what length of time remains for each. Cause is linked with cause, and all public and private issues are directed by a long sequence of events. Therefore everything should be endured with fortitude, since things do not, as we suppose, simply happen—they all come.'

'With fortitude' (*fortiter*). For the Stoics the greatest of all virtues was fortitude, since none of the others could be practised without it. Anyone who

submitted himself to this iron regime of mind and will (which involved rigorous astrological study) could aptly be described as sternly ascetic.

The words of renunciation ascribed to Demetrius by Seneca are not unlike the prayer of St Ignatius de Loyola at the end of the *Contemplatio* for the fourth week in his *Spiritual Exercises*. Each man is making his oblation with a sense of total dependence and devotion. Ignatius' words are: 'Take, Lord, and receive my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my whole will —whatever I have and own. You gave me all these things; to you, Lord, I restore them. They are all yours. Make use of them in accordance with your total will. Give me your love and grace, for this is sufficient for me.'

Self-examination was a regular part of Seneca's private spiritual discipline, as he relates at *de ira* 3. 36. 3-4 (a review of each day at bedtime). Moral reformation and progress were his main aims in his life (see *epp.* 6. 1-4; 8. 2-3; 55. 3). Philosophy he saw as a practical matter, concerned with self-improvement; we must always be alert to any lessons which it can teach us (*ep.* 58. 26; *n. q.* 2. 59. 2). His great eagerness to enlighten others is not something which he is anxious to conceal (cp. *epp.* 6. 4; 8. 2-3; 20. 1; 25. 1-3; 29. 1-9; 34. 1-2; 121. 4; *n. q.* 3, prol. 1). Introspective preoccupation with one's moral state of health was a cardinal virtue for the Stoic sage. One always had to be 'in training'.

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RÉSUMÉ

La tradition ascétique commence en Grèce —on pense à Pythagore. Parmi les Juifs de l'Ancien Testament elle ne se montre guère, mais pour Jésus lui-même les éléments simples de son sacrement sont le pain et le vin; par la matière l'esprit s'exprime. Aujourd'hui à l'Europe de l'ouest nous avons des organisations politiques (par exemple, les Verts) fondées pour protéger la Terre et l'environnement naturel. Il y a 2.000 années les idées de Pythagore se sont ranimées un peu à Rome, et Sénèque fils est devenu végétarien, mais pas pendant longtemps. Néanmoins, comme philosophe stoïque, il s'est réjoui de la pratique morale qu'il a apprise de cette école austère.