ABSTRACT
In this essay, Stoic consolation is presented by help of Seneca and his treatises on consolation addressed to two women, his mother Helvia and his relative Marcia. Consolation according to Seneca consists in arguments taken from the rhetorical genre of consolation embedded in Stoic philosophy. By excluding the passions and effects from the philosophical soul, by criticizing conventional opinion of what is important in life, and by accepting determinism, Stoic consolation aimed at preventing grief from invading the mind of the mourner. It was a proactive strategy, preparing the soul for hardship rather than mitigating grief after misfortune has hit the individual. In theory, the Stoic would be in no need of consolation. In practice, however, as in the cases of Helvia and Marcia, the consolatory arguments are applied after the calamity. Stoic consolation differs from Christian consolation in that the category of hope is excluded. Since affects are ruled out, compassion and pity on the part of the consoler are excluded as well. Stern and severe, Stoicism has not made itself popular in history; however, Stoic arguments are recognized in modern coach literature, where »acceptance«, focus on the present, »carpe diem«, and mindfulness are current prestige words.

Bo Lindberg is emeritus professor, History of ideas, University of Gothenburg.

Keywords: therapy, adiaphora, preparation of the soul, fate, death, amor fati

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In antiquity, consolation was a rhetorical genre, developed by Greek sophists and philosophers during the Hellenistic era. Crantor, who lived around 300 BC, is said to have set the genre. Only fragments of pre Roman consolations are extant; surviving consolations belong to Roman antiquity. Cicero introduced consolation in Latin language, other important texts are by Seneca, Plutarch (in Greek), and the Christian Boethius who wrote his famous *De consolatione philosophiae* in jail, facing his death by execution in 524 AD.

As a rhetorical genre, consolation had a number of recurrent topics, in the strict rhetorical sense of that word, which were taught at school. Fortuna is not to be trusted; be prepared to meet her strikes. All men are mortal; the important thing is to have led a virtuous life. Time heals all ills. Everything, persons and goods, are lent; be happy you had them. Death is the end to all ills. The gods shelter you from ills after death.¹

So consolation was a well-established concept in ancient rhetoric. It infiltrated philosophy too. In fact, the aim of philosophy had much to do with consolation. Modern historians of philosophy have emphasised the therapeutic aim of ancient philosophy, i.e. to alleviate human shortcomings and agony and facilitate the good life. That this was the ambition of practical philosophy is well known but it has been obscured by the dominant interest of historians in the issues of epistemology, logic and metaphysics that belong to theoretical philosophy. Not least did the Stoics endeavour to »lead the soul« to a better way of living.²

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**STOIC FRAMEWORK OF CONSOLATION**

There were Stoic philosophers from about 300 BC to the end of antiquity, but not so much of their texts are extant, especially not of the writings of the first Stoic philosophers in Greece. Here, I will let Stoicism be represented by the Roman politician and philosopher Lucius Annaeus Seneca, who committed suicide in 65 AD by order of Nero. He was a fluent, mostly likable proponent of Stoicism, in writings full of short sentences suitable for quoting.³

In many respects, Stoic philosophy preconceived modern positions and topics. The Stoics were rationalists, believing in reason as opposed to superstition and prejudice. They criticized conventional values and institutions, partly using a constructivist approach by distinguishing between the thing itself and the concept of it. Furthermore, they were universalistic, believ-
ing in the unity of mankind and the equality of human beings
by virtue of their common reason. Important ideas and topics
in the Western tradition, not least cherished in our time, can
be traced back to Stoicism: natural law and natural rights,
criticism of slavery, equality between the sexes, and
cosmopolitanism.

But these embryos of modern thought were secondary in
Stoic philosophy, or at least embedded in a context that differs
fundamentally from that of the modern world. Seneca’s aim
was not to change the world but to harmonize man with the
deterministic order of the universe called Logos, i.e. Reason.
The target of his criticism was only indirectly the social order;
instead it aimed at neutralizing the emotions that cause the
misery of life and promote the integration of man in the rati-
onal order of the universe. As for universalism, Seneca talked of
the brotherhood of all men and played down the importance
of patriotic love for one’s country. But his cosmopolitanism
tended to be transcendent and metaphysical, referring rather
to a cosmic citizenship together with divine entities in the
universe than with fellow human beings on the earth.

The immediate aim of Stoic philosophic therapy was to make
reason control the affects and passions that emerge out of fear
and desire. From the Stoic point of view, anger, greed, envy,
grief, anxiety and fear of death were deleterious passions, and
so were hope and compassion too, together with feelings of
unclear origin like boredom and nausea. The method to prevent
the passions from entering one’s mind was the critique of our
conventional rating of pleasure and pain. Money, career, corpo-
real pleasures that arouse emotions of longing and hope are
indifferent things (adiaphora). The same holds true for those
things you fear and shun: the loss of friends, relatives, social
position and life. By help of critical reasoning you can see
through the appearances and the conventional connotations of
words, gradually understanding that what you desire and fear
is only the concepts of things, not the things themselves. It is
not the facts, for instance that of death, that make people
worried, it is the opinions about them. He who manages to
keep out the passions in this way acquires Stoic calmness that
makes him capable of mastering envious Fortuna and meeting
the agonies and vicissitudes of life, including, nota bene, cases
of deceptive triumph and prosperity which cause immodest
exultation that is doomed to be followed by disappointment
and adversity. The complete Stoic is liberated from fear but
also from the emotional disturbance caused by expectations on
the future. He is free from hope and fear. He is also virtuous,
which means that he practices virtue for the sake of virtue
itself and without regard to strategic motives. Few human
beings, if any, reach Stoic perfection; at best, they are sedulous
adepts, while the majority are fools.

Bo Lindberg, »Stoicism and consolation«}

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Much of Seneca’s advice and precepts aim at teaching the Stoic adept how to endure the disappointments and misfortunes of life and how to face death. Indirectly, such passages deal with consolation since the aim of his philosophy is to eliminate the need for it. The word consolation is not particularly frequent, but three of his texts deal explicitly with consolation and are addressed to particular persons. Two of these are women: his mother Helvia, and a woman called Marcia. The third is written for Polybius, an official in the service of Emperor Claudius. It is probably significant that two of them are addressed to women, who conventionally were considered to be weak and more given to protracted grief.

The following outline of Seneca’s thought about consolation is based on these treatises on consolation and on some of his other writings, especially his letters to his friend Lucilius, the procurator and possibly also the governor of Sicily.

Considering that grief is an affect, one cannot expect it to be held in esteem in Stoic philosophy. Seneca does not want to be hard-hearted and accepts that a man sheds tears immediately after the death of a friend or a relative. But to grief (lugere), meaning that the affect is allowed to occupy one’s mind for a longer time, is definitely a reprehensible weakness. At least in males, with women it is a bit different; they are expected to mourn for a longer time. But they too should control their emotion, and it is Seneca’s conviction that Helvia and Marcia, the two women he consoles, are able to rise above their sex and defeat their affect. Grief is not natural, Seneca argues referring not to rational nature, as is usually the case in Stoic argument, but to animal nature. It is natural to miss a lost son, but only for a short time. Animals do that, which is natural; only human beings persist in longing for their relatives in an unnatural way. Grief is the effect of opinion, Seneca holds, applying Stoic critical analysis, that is, it is a constructed emotion going beyond the natural instinct.

It should be noted that consolation is needed after a misfortune has struck someone. Marcia and Helvia have experienced adversities. Marcia has lost her young son, and Helvia has been hit by the calamity that her son Seneca has been exiled by the emperor and sent to Corsica. However, as just mentioned, most of the consoling arguments presented by Seneca are philosophical precepts which aim to prepare the Stoic adept for adversity and make him or her capable to prevent the passion of grief from overwhelming him. Strictly speaking, the aim of Stoic philosophy is to make the soul immune against deleterious passions and strong enough to confront the difficulties of life, thus eliminating the very need for consolation. In practice, however, Stoic therapy is applied on persons who have already experienced something evil and need to be cured from it.
To Seneca, the uncertainty and unpredictability of life is represented by Fortuna, who is a deceptive, cunning, envious female entity with whom the individual is in constant war. Fortuna strikes the individual when he suspects it the least. Towards Fortuna, Seneca’s attitude is remarkably pugnacious. The defence against her designs is constant *praemeditatio*, that is, to think in advance what might happen and prepare for whatever might happen so that one is invulnerable when calamity comes. It is not so much about taking practical measures to prevent mishaps – the possibility of doing so was comparably small in antiquity – as about mental readiness. When Fortuna hits you, you must not say »I couldn’t think that would happen.« He who has experienced prolonged prosperity is usually lulled into effeminate softness and unable to resist the strike of Fortuna. An unbroken soul, on the other hand, endures both triumph and misfortune. The consolatory strategy of *praemeditatio* is a development of the rhetorical topic that everything we have is lent. In its Stoic setting, it implies an attitude of distance. Commenting on the risk of losing friends and relatives, Seneca remarks: »I have them as if I were going to lose them and lose them as if I had them.« The rationalistic or rather metaphysical attitude makes the sensual and corporeal presence of people less important. The difference between death and temporal absence is not that big. Let’s imagine, he suggests, that the dead are just absent, indeed let us deceive ourselves that we have sent them in advance and will soon come after. Seneca applies the same kind of abstraction talking about friendship. Friendship is important in Stoic philosophy – more important than family, actually – but it is not necessary to be together with a friend. Seneca can enjoy friendship with someone distant; indeed, friendship persists after the friend has deceased.

The argument of *praemeditatio* and Seneca’s fighting spirit against Fortuna indicate that the strikes of Fortuna are really bad things. But according to the idea of *adiaphora*, they are not. For the losses of property, relatives, position and the like that might fall upon you are indifferent. You can have those conventionally good things but you do not need them. They are not essential for your moral welfare. An example of this kind of neutralizing reverses is Seneca’s comments on his exile in Corsica, the cause of his mother’s grief. Exile is really no misfortune, he declares. Exile is nothing extraordinary, Rome is full of immigrants, no country has its original population, and what was Aeneas, the founder of Rome, if not an immigrant? These arguments seem quite modern in their relativizing of nationhood but they are wrapped in the typical Stoic spiritual...
cosmopolitanism. You cannot be dispossessed of the best thing in man, that is, virtue, and the common human nature. The common nature of man constitutes a community that is rather heavenly than human. As long as Seneca can contemplate the moon, the sun, the planets and the stars and their movements, as long as he can associate with them, it is irrelevant where he resides; to the wise man every place is his fatherland. Thus, exile is no problem for Seneca, nor is the ensuing poverty; by consequence, mother Helvia has no reason to grieve for him.  

The argument about the indifference of exile has a double function. To Seneca, it is not really consolatory. It is an ingredient in the Stoic repertoire that gave him the strength to resist depression when exile hit him; he was prepared. To Helvia, who is a brave character above female frailty and tears but not a Stoic trainee – regretfully her husband was too conservative to let her study philosophy – it is a consolatory argument, applied to alleviate the grief that has befallen her because of Seneca’s exile.

**F A T E**

Another consolatory argument, related to the metaphysical character of the cosmopolitanism just mentioned, is based on determinism. What happens occurs by inexorable Fate. Determined Fate is paradoxically connected to unpredictable Fortuna; in fact, fate is Fortuna elevated to serene and rational necessity. In Stoic theory, the universe runs through a cycle of 70,000 years, where every single moment of natural or human activity is predetermined. This poses a problem to the idea of free will that the Stoics did not want to abandon completely, but I will not go into that. From the point of view of consolation, determinism may alleviate grief, considering that what happened could not be avoided. Marcia’s son lived as long as he should, nobody dies too early; Fate does its job. Whatever happens, one should endure it as if one had wanted it to happen. To accept the inevitable is a part of Stoic wisdom, according to the famous saying that *the fates lead the willing and drag the unwilling.* In fact, accepting necessity, that is, the rational law of the universe, is freedom; we live in a monarchy, says Seneca, to obey God is freedom. The wise man should submit to Fate; indeed it is a great solace to be carried away by the universe. In so far as determined events appear to be disasters like the destruction of a town or the downfall of an empire, they are explained as effects of the constant circular processes of ascending and declining that maintain the balance of the universe; Stoic thought harbours a ferment of ecological balance in the Universe. The world is always in change, but it is a salutary change although the individual with limited perspective does not see that. »Inter peritura vivimus,« we live among things doomed to perish, Seneca
observes, consoling a friend on account of the conflagration of Lyon in Gaul.23

VIRTUE

The strategy of Seneca’s consolation is usually to show that what is apparently bad and deplorable is not really so. There are, however, some arguments that do not hide the negative character of misfortunes. One is the not very encouraging remark that one gets used to calamities. Protracted adversity gradually makes a person accustomed to suffering; mother Helvia has already suffered so many reverses that Seneca’s exile is comparably easy to endure.24 Less resigned and more Stoic in spirit is the assertion that misfortune gives an opportunity to show virtue. »Calamitas virtutis occasio est,« is one of Seneca’s efficient one-liners.25 Since virtue is an overarching value – *summum bonum* – in Stoic philosophy, reverses are acceptable or even desirable to the Stoic adept. »Virtue is avid for peril,«26 says Seneca; several times he refers to intrepid gladiators.

DEATH

Finally, the big issue in Stoic consolation – and in ancient philosophic therapy in general – is death. To cure fear of death, and prevent undue mourning for it, is first priority. Seneca regards death as essentially an indifferent thing, although a serious one that causes much anxiety. Seneca’s answers are not quite unequivocal. He is positive about one thing, however: the horrific tales of the realm of Death that have been produced by poets are false: there is no darkness, no streams of fire, no river of Lethe.27 There is nothing to fear. An early death is not to deplore. Death is only the dissolution of all our pains, Fortuna has no power anymore; we evade misfortunes, greed for riches, sensual temptations, anxiety for the future. Nothing is as dangerous and insidious as life. In fact, Marcia’s son is fortunate to have passed away so young, escaping all the misery that is inherent in life. Seneca alludes to the sentence of Sophocles that the best thing is never to be born, the second best to die a youth. He adds, however, that such an early death is a return to one’s original state.28 That suggests some kind of celestial existence before life on earth. Seneca does not expand on the topic. The Stoics were ambiguous about extra mundane existence. Their metaphysic was half materialistic which made them assume that both body and soul are dissolved after death. But there was also a transcendent strain in their thought that opened for the persistence of the soul in celestial regions; unclear however, whether it retained its individuality or just joined an immaterial sphere. Seneca’s cosmopolitanism that consists in contemplation of the celestial phenomena is related to this idea that the real abode of man is transcendent and that
death means a restitution of man in a pre-mundane condition. He holds out that prospect for Marcia’s son and envisages for himself an existence out in the universe among the gods.\textsuperscript{29} However, he is not positive about this and declares that he himself does not need that hope and that he is content with the alternative that death is the dissolution of body and soul and does not mean that the individual can survive.\textsuperscript{30}

In so far as he takes that position, Seneca lives up to the proud and noble attitude that has caused philosophers to admire ancient philosophy as compared with Christian religion: there is no need for a post-existence as the ultimate consolation. This is an important point. Doubts about post-existence go along with the less ambiguous Stoic distrust in expectations and hopes for the future. Christian consolation has a forward-looking dimension that is absent in Stoic therapy.\textsuperscript{31} To the Stoics, leading a virtuous life is enough. It is a secularist position, although not completely modern, since a rational metaphysical order of the universe is presupposed. Nor is it modern, if we ascribe to modern secularism the endeavour to improve the existing world here and now while paying less attention to eternity. The Stoics did not believe that the external conditions of life could be much improved. In that respect they were realists, not to say pessimists, considering how they elated death as compared to life. Their Utopia was internal, located in the soul of man, liberated from fear, hope and passions and open for virtue.

\textbf{CONCLUDING REMARKS}

Stoic philosophy has a stern and pessimistic outlook, especially when accounted for under the heading of consolation.\textsuperscript{32} The endless struggle with Fortuna, the permanent readiness for adversities and the denial of the right to relax in moments of prosperity, gives a gloomy picture of human existence. Seneca states that life is not easy, it is permanent military service.\textsuperscript{33} Stoic rejection of passions and affects confirms the severe impression; not least their critique of pity and compassion that has shocked people ever since antiquity. Likewise, their distrust in expectations and plans for the future seems to question a fundamental element in human nature, that is, hope.\textsuperscript{34} True, the internal utopia of the soul, including the uncertain post-existence of the soul in the universe, is something to hope for, but it is an exclusive bliss obtained not by divine grace but by hard and constant effort. Is consolation efficient, or even possible if it is given without hope and compassion, or as we say today, empathy? Perhaps without hope, for much consolation is practiced with people facing death, who have nothing to hope for (unless they believe in a life \textit{post mortem}). But less likely without empathy; Stoic rationalism not only rejects strong feelings and sharing the feelings of
others, it is also concerned with abstract and universal categories that leave no space for the particular condition of the individual. One might ask whether consolation at all is possible without an emotional relation to him or her who is to be comforted. I come back to the observation above that Stoic therapy focuses on strengthening the soul in advance of misfortunes, whereas consolation is basically therapy for the distressed. Stoics may be good at the former but they do not convince as consolers. On the contrary, as pointed out above, their aim is to eliminate the very need of consolation.

To the modern reader, Seneca’s consolatory efforts run the risk of sounding presumptuous in their heroic style and male frame of reference. On the other hand, time-bound hyperboles and the underlying metaphysic set apart, Stoic fatalism that demands that one should acquiesce and reconcile oneself with the unavoidable is a noble, unsentimental attitude that could meet with the approval of the modern mind. Famous heralds of modernity have felt the attraction. Nietzsche’s coinage *amor fati*, the love of fate, is the Stoic idea of accepting fate carried to the limit of the absurd. Freud thought that science would at length liberate us from religion’s childish promise of heavenly bliss and leave us facing the insight that there is nothing after death. That is an application of Stoic fatalism.

Stoic language of aristocratic virtue makes the modern mind uneasy. The wise man holds the world in contempt; being independent on the indifferent things around him, he is self-sufficient and self-confident. To the Stoic, self-sufficiency is something to strive for; to a modern democrat it connotes indifference to one’s fellow human beings. Furthermore, today, when religion seemingly comes back, when reason is challenged by emotions, when empathy and human vulnerability are prestige words, and when male supremacy is eroded by feminism, Stoic heroism appears to be out-dated.

On the other hand, the Stoic attitude is not unequivocally repelling. It is aristocratic with dignity and modesty. It is not bosting and bragging, but modest, lacking grand airs. It is not morally indifferent. Stoicism may be practised in noble retreat but also in unpretentious action, fulfilling obligations in the service of others. The Stoic is helpful without fuss. And indeed, if we turn to the field of individual psychic well-being, Stoic therapeutic measures do not seem out of fashion at all. Today’s handbooks for a better life exhort people to concentrate on what is present, not to worry so much about the future, to modify their expectations and to learn to accept what is here and now. Adversity intelligence is a cognitively founded method of preparing oneself for misfortunes. Immediacy, mindfulness, slowness, and *carpe diem* are other keywords reminding of Stoic strategies for a better life.

These recommendations are adapted to the modern world of
chased consumers and risk-running entrepreneurs rather than Roman politicians in retreat, and the contempt of the world they perchance may bring about is not of the modest, Stoic sort. Nevertheless, the basic endeavour is the same, persistent over the millennia. Obviously, Stoic topics and methods, due to their universal applicability, have a potential for re-use and re-cycling.

END NOTES
2 This interpretation has been proposed in particular by Pierre Hadot, What is ancient philosophy (Cambridge Mass. 2002). See also Ilsetraut Hadot, Seneca und die griechisch-römische Tradition der Seelenleitung (Berlin 1969) and Martha Nussbaum, The therapy of desire: theory and practice in Hellenistic ethics (Princeton 1994);
7 Not surprisingly, there is a male bias in Seneca’s texts, in spite of the recognition that women and slaves in principle are capable of being virtuous. Friends, who are always men, are obviously more important than wives and the loss of sons is worse than that of daughters. Furthermore, he takes it for granted that women are more deeply hurt by grief then men, barbarians more than cultivated nations, and uneducated people more than educated (Ad Marciam chap. 7:4).
8 Ad Marciam chap. 7:1–2.
9 Still, I think this difference within the concept of consolation is noteworthy. A more rational and proactive therapy differs from an emotional cure that is applied on him who has already been struck by calamity. Etymology may shed some light on this. Consolatio is related to words meaning solid, firm, unbroken (solidus, sollus; see Lewis & Short, A Latin dictionary, [1879] (London 1984), 1719), which is in accordance with the proactive Stoic strategy to prepare the individual for...
misfortunes. In comparison, the Swedish word tröst, German Trost, suggests alleviating measures applied after a calamity has occurred. Swed. tröst and förtröstan, like. Germ. Trost include trust, in the sense of confidence, especially in God, which in turn connotes hope, an affection not approved of by the Stoics. A Stoic may have confidence, but only in himself (fiducia sui). On the other hand, trust is something that makes you endure expected hardships, which it has in common with Stoic therapy.

10 On meditation, Epistle 99:32; Ad Marciam chap. 9.
12 Ad Helviam chap. 5:3–5
13 Epistle 63:7: »Habeo enim illos (sc. amicos) tamquam amissurus, amisi tamquam habeam.«
14 Ad Marciam chap. 19.
15 Epistle 35.
16 Ad Helviam chap. 8:6 and 9:7.
17 Ad Helviam chap. 17:3.
18 Ad Marciam chap 21:4 and 7: »Agunt suum opus fata.«
20 Epistle 107:11: »Ducunt volentem fata, nolentem transitur.«
22 De providentia, Moral essays vol. II, chap. 5:7–8: »Grande solatium est, cum universo rapi.«
23 Epistle 91:12.
24 Ad Helviam chap. 2:3.
25 De providentia chap. 4:6.
26 De providentia chap. 4:4: »Avida est virtus periculi.«
27 Epistle 82:16, Ad Marciam chap. 19. An example of a horrifying poetic account of life after death that Seneca may have had in mind is Virgil’s description of Aeneas’s descent into the underworld in Aeneis VI.
28 Ad Marciam chap. 22:3: »Itaque si felicissimum est non nasci, proximum est, puto, brevitate vitae defunctos cito in integrum restitui.«
29 Ad Marciam 25; Epistle 102.
30 Epistle 71:16 and 93:16.
31 Compare the Christian position in this respect, as described in the article by Cavallin in this volume.
32 Admittedly, Seneca is not done full justice in this essay. Apart from the social aspects of Stoicism – brotherhood of men, humanity, critique of slavery – which surface in his texts as an effect of Stoic virtue, he has quite a lot to say about the therapy of less dramatic misfortunes in life and of boredom and nausea; much of that is palatable to the modern reader.
33 Epistle 96:5: »Atqui vivere, Lucili, militare est.« Se also Epistle 107:2.
34 The wise man is happy with the present and heedless of the future (praesentibus laetus, futuri securus); De vita beata, in Moral essays vol. II, chap 26:4.