

conflict with the character of philosophy as a general discipline. (With this point we see Ariston in effect offering a defence of what I have stigmatized as vacuity: at least, he thinks, his stripped-down, abstract theory is guaranteed to be true in virtue of its universal character.)

This kind of criticism is what we would expect of Ariston; it is no wonder that he, unlike Zeno, Cleanthes, Chrysippus, and others did *not* devote a treatise to the topic of appropriate actions. His view would seem to be that there is no point in giving general guidelines for ethical decision-making, that one cannot in fact say anything useful about what is generally appropriate. And, if one cannot do that, then the kind of moral guidance which comes via precepts will be just as useless.

Seneca counters that such *praecepta* play a vital role in ethics. Though it is true that our job is to follow nature, and that if we do not acknowledge that fact we will suffer from a form of moral blindness which no *praeceptum* can cure, still, even when the scales fall from our eyes, we do not immediately see what is to be done: nature does not tell us what it is appropriate to do, but *praecepta* are required to point the way (94.18-19). The barrier to doing the right thing is not only our general moral character, he says, 'for it is not only the passions which prevent us from doing praiseworthy actions, but also inexperience in figuring out (*inperitia inveniendi*)⁵⁹ what each situation requires' (94.32).⁶⁰

Some *praecepta* are consequently just as useful to the morally earnest person as they are to the bad person who needs to be encouraged to direct his efforts to the good (94.22-4); and even if the bad cannot be saved by *praecepta* alone, it does not follow that *praecepta* are pointless. Moreover, Seneca says, *praecepta* can remind us of moral facts which we once knew but have

⁵⁹ Cf. *Ben.* 5.25.6 where *bona voluntas* is said to be blocked either by general moral failings (note *deliciae, situs*) or by *officii inscitia*.

⁶⁰ Seneca is in fact choosing to place an educative goal ahead of evaluation here; Ariston stands out as unusual and peculiarly 'rigorous' because of his narrower focus on evaluating. He is prone to emphasize that each action and each person is either right or wrong and that there is little more to be said about the matter. Perhaps that is true from the point of view of assessing the success or failure of the agent in attaining the goal of life, but most Stoics did not limit themselves so narrowly to a single perspective.