

striking consolation for the fear of death; a sober analysis of the relationship between the cosmic order and human life; challenging epistemological reflections, focusing on the ambivalent nature of human knowledge in a cosmos which is rational but not fully open to our enquiring minds; and a sustained meditation on the relationship of man to a rational god, providential but disinclined to reveal the truth except through his orderly and causally determinate works. These are all well-established Stoic themes, and Seneca has to go out of his way to underline his independence from the theories of his school. This he does with critical (and sometimes waspish) argument and debate.

In the end, we have to ask why he chose to pack all of this into a work on what was evidently the driest and least appealing genre in the philosophical repertoire. None of Seneca's central themes *needed* to be embedded in the framework of a *Naturales Quaestiones*. Most of them, in fact, would be better communicated in works on cosmology, ethics, epistemology, or in letters which are free of most thematic constraints. I conclude by repeating the suggestion I made at the beginning of this essay: Seneca chose to work these ideas out in a meteorological treatise for literary reasons. This, he must have thought, was a challenge worthy of his considerable rhetorical talents. If he could pull this off, he would have an even stronger claim to fame as writer, not just as a philosopher. But such challenges are also risks. The judgement of the centuries has been, regrettably, that Seneca failed. And in literary terms that judgement is perhaps correct.<sup>72</sup> Nevertheless, in the background of this literary challenge Seneca developed independent ideas about physics, theology, and philosophical method of considerable interest and sophistication.

<sup>72</sup> Though tastes differ, and some parts of the work, such as book 6, are masterpieces.

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## Moral Judgement in Seneca

We are all familiar with the notion of a moral judgement. In the vocabulary of ethical debate, this term is so common as to be a cliché. While we have different theories about how we make such judgements, it would seem distinctly odd to observe that 'judgement' is a term transferred from another semantic domain and to attempt to sort out its meaning by scrutinizing its source or to impugn the clarity or usefulness of the term on the grounds that it began its conceptual career as a mere metaphor. Whatever origins the term may have had, they now seem irrelevant.

But is this really so? I want to argue that moral judgement has not always been taken as a bland general synonym for moral decisions and that it need not be; to see that we can consider uses of the terminology of moral 'judgement' in which the original semantic sphere for such language (the judicial sphere) is still relevant to understanding how it is used.<sup>1</sup> One such use comes from the Stoic Seneca, and I will argue that he did take the notion of moral judgement as a live metaphor,

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<sup>1</sup> As Janet Sisson reminds me (in correspondence), the judicial metaphor is also used in relatively straightforward epistemological contexts as well, as by Plato at *Theaetetus* 201. But the issues involved with moral judgement are markedly different, as we shall see.