

SENECA ON PHYSICAL FITNESS

ANNA LYDIA MOTTO
JOHN R. CLARK

Ours is assuredly an era of health-consciousness: homes are filled with saunas and gymnasial machines, video exercise programs, and crash diets. Whole families flock to the spas, hike in the mountains, and run in the parks. For this age is almost religiously devoted to ideals of calorie-counting and slim-fast eating, to Addida sneakers and the Boston Marathon, to the clay court and the jacuzzi, to Arnold Schwarzenegger and to the pumping of iron.

Seneca had first-hand knowledge of such fads, since health-buffs flourished in his day too¹. In *Epistle Fifteen*, for example, he mocks those who pay excessive attention to physical health.

Stulta est enim, mi Lucili, et minime conveniens litterato vivo occupatio exercendi lacertos et dilatandi cervicem ac latera firmandi; cum tibi feliciter sagina cesserit et tori creverint, nec vires unquam opimi bovis nec pondus aequabis. (*Ep.* 15,2)

[It is indeed foolish, my Lucilius, and not at all becoming to an educated man, to spend time developing sinews, broadening shoulders, and strengthening flanks; although you will have succeeded in beefing yourself up and in enlarging your muscles, you will never equal the strength nor the weight of a well-to-do ox.]

Similarly, in *Epistle Fifty-six*, he derides the devotees who waste their time in sweatbaths and massage parlors, where the air is filled with the grunts and groans of those belaboring themselves in pursuit of physical fitness. Seneca ironically describes the absurdities of their futile activities: their ceaseless round of fasting and feasting, of dieting and dining, of drinking and sweating; they resemble, he tells us, a sick man suffering from fever and chills².

Seneca maintains that such attention to diet and exercise leads, paradoxically, to ill-health. In earlier times, doctors did not have so many patients; they did not have to tend to so many upset stomachs and so many injured limbs³. But nowadays, Seneca asserts, human beings are beset by luxury and debauchery that enervate them and drain

¹ On the importance of physical education and exercise in ancient Greece, consult H.-I. MARROU, *Histoire de l'éducation dans l'antiquité*, 6th ed. (Paris 1965), Pt.ii, Chap.3, pp.181-204. The Romans increasingly came to follow Greek examples, and the ancient world was filled with palestras, stadiums, and gymnasiums. Nor must we forget the polar training and playing fields in Rome, the Campus Martius. See Marrou, Pt.iii, Chaps.1 and 2, pp.339-373.

² *Ep.* 15,3.

³ *Ep.* 95,22.

their energy.

In one epistle, he compares the bath of Scipio Africanus with those of the Neroian age. Scipio's was simple and unadorned; ours, he says, are replete with palatial decorations; Scipio bathed fully once a week; the Romans of Seneca's day visited the bathhouse daily. Scipio tilled his own land and Yorked off his honest sweat; the *delicati* of Seneca's day, after artificially provoking perspiration by needless physical exertions, bathed in luxurious pools⁴.

Heeding his own advice, Seneca himself throughout his life attempted to avoid such excesses. He restricted his diet, abstaining from gourmet foods; he refused to use perfumes, and sought to limit the intake of wine⁵. More over, regarding his manner of bathing, he writes:

...in omnem vitam balneum fugimus, decoquere corpus atque exinanire sudoribus inutile simul delicatumque credidimus. (*Ep.* 108,16)
[...I have shunned the bath all my life and have believed it useless and effeminate to boil the body and to thin it out by sweating.]

Those who indulge themselves in such emptiness, who succumb to such hedonism, who addict themselves to such a regimen, become listless and debilitated. Unlike them, we should choose as models heroes like Scipio, who perform great feats hile pursuing the simple life.

Nobis quoque militandum est, et quidem genere militiae, quo numquam quies, numquam otium datur. Debellandae sunt in primis voluptates [...] Si quis sibi proposuerit, quantum operis adgressus sit, sciet nihil delicate, nihil molliter esse faciendum. Quid mihi cum istis calentibus stagnis? Quid cum sudatoriis, in quae siccus vapor corpora exhausurus includitur? Omnis sudor per laborem exeat. (*Ep.* 51,6)
[We too must wage war, a warfare, to be sure, which permits no peace, no quiet. First of all, pleasures must be overcome... Once one recognizes the magnitude of his task, he will understand that he must do

⁴ *Ep.* 86,5-12. For a brief survey of the Roman ideas about exercise, see PETER L. LINDSAY, "Attitudes Towards Physical Education Reflected in the Literature of Ancient Rome", in *A History of Sport and Physical Education to 1900*, ed. Earle F. Zeigler (Champaign, Ill., 1973), pp.177-86. On the popularity of bathing and swimming among the Romans, see E. BRÖDNER, *Die römischen Thermen und das antike Badewesen* (Darstadt 1983), and JASPER GRIFFIN, *Latin Poets and Roman Life* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1986), 88 ff. See esp. JÉRÔME CARCOPINO, *La Vie quotidienne à Rome à l'apogée de l'empire* (Paris, 1939); pp.293-304 treat of "les thermes", palatial structures for "récréation," housing vast public baths and innumerable other structures, including *palestrae* for exercise.

⁵ *Epigram* 14,49.

nothing in a delicate and unmanly way. What have I to do with those hot baths? What have I to do with those sweating rooms where dry steam exhausts the body? All sweat should be the result of hard work.]

On this subject, Martial is equally practical; he believes that the weight-lifter would be far better served simply by working in his own field by cultivating, as *Candide* tells us, his own garden:

Quid pereunt stulto fortes haltere lacerti?
exercet melius vinea fossa viros. (*Epig.* 14,49)

Ortega y Gasset remarked in 1925 that twentieth-century man loved sports and games.

El culto al cuerpo es eternamente síntoma de inspiración pueril...El triunfo del deporte significa la victoria de los valores de juventud sobre los valores de senectud⁶.

[The worship of the body is a perennial symptom of childish inspiration... The triumph of sports signifies the victory of the values of youth over the values of old age.]

In assessing what he terms the rise of mass man in our century, Ortega noted a distinct flowering of anti-intellectualism. Seneca repeatedly complains of the *profanum vulgus* its superficial values, its cruelty at the gladiatorial combats, its lack of *humanitas*⁷.

But alas, the Roman populace of Seneca's day, like our own masses, valued brawn over brains. Their spare time was, for the most part, spent at public games, at shows, at athletic contests. In fact, Seneca, in one letter, remarks that while he is left alone in the city, all others have flocked to the stadium to attend a boxing match.

Cogito mecum, quam multi corpora exerceant, ingenia quam pauci; quantus ad spectaculum non fidele et lusorium fiat concursus, quanta sit circa artes bonas solitudo; quam inbecilli animo sunt, quorum laceratos umerosque miramur. (*Ep.* 80.2)⁸

[I reflect to myself, how many train their bodies, how few, their

⁶ JOSÉ ORTEGA Y GASSET, "La deshumanización del arte", *La deshumanización del arte y otros ensayos estéticos*, 9ª ed., Madrid, 1967, p.64.

⁷ See esp. *Epistle* 7. Consult ANNA LYDIA MOTTO and JOHN R. CLARK, "Seneca on the *Profanum Vulgus*", *CB* 65 (1992), 1-5.

⁸ In this letter, Seneca hopes to study in peace and quiet, since all are at the athletic contest, yet comically the roaring of the crowd upsets his concentration. The same drama is played out in *Epistle* 56, when the Philosopher aspires to do some thinking while living above a bath-house. Needless to say, he is sorely defeated by all the gymnastic noise and flees the scene. This is comedy akin to that where Horace is "defeated" by the Bore (*Sat.* 1.9).

minds; what crowds are drawn to the undependable and trifling games, what solitude prevails at cultural events; how imbecilic are the athletes whose muscles and shoulders we admire.]

Franz Kafka in our own century portrays the giddy masses flocking in huge crowds to the circus to gape at sleek, muscular black panthers⁹.

Indeed, ancient Rome, like the modern world, idolized athletes and studied sporting events as if they were subjects of the uttermost scientific and scholarly importance. In a satiric vein, Seneca staunchly refuses to concede that wrestlers, beauticians, and chefs deserve an honorable place in the educational curriculum.

...luctatores et totam oleo ac luto constantem scientiam expello ex his studiis liberalibus; aut et unguentarios recipiam et cocos et ceteros voluptatibus nostris ingenia accommodantes sua. Quid enim, oro te, liberale habent isti ieiuni vomitores, quorum corpora in sagina, animi in macie et veterno sunt? (*Ep.* 88,18-19)

[...I expel from the liberal arts wrestlers and the whole science composed of oil and mud; or else I would have to admit cosmeticians and cooks and others who cater to our pleasures. For what, pray, is liberal about those dieting gluttons, whose bodies are over-stuffed, whose minds are emaciated and inert?]

Seneca is fully aware of the crowd's fickleness, of its shallow values, its round of trivial activities, its addiction to gourmet foods and chefs, its obsession with particular diets and cuisines.

Nunc vero quam longe processerunt mala valitudinis! Has usuras voluptatum pendimus ultra modum fasque concupitarum. Innumerabiles esse morbos non miraberis- cocos numera. (*Ep.* 95,23)

[Now indeed how far have the evils of ill-health progressed! This is the price we pay for pleasures coveted beyond measure and beyond what is right. You should not be surprised that diseases are innumerable: count the cooks.]

There can be no doubt, Seneca says that the priorities of the masses of men are topsy-turvy.

Cessat omne studium et liberalia professi sine ulla frequentia desertis angulis praesident. In rhetorum ac philosophorum scholis solitudo est; at quam celebres culinae sunt... (*Ep.* 95,23)

All studies have come to a halt and professors of the liberal art preside

⁹ In his story, "Ein Hungerkünstler" (1923).

over empty halls. The classrooms of teachers and philosophers are silent; but how crowded are the restaurants...]

Seneca would urge his fellow-men to balance their life by cultivating the mind as well as the body; he certainly would have endorsed Juvenal's ideal of *mens sana in corpore sano*¹⁰.

But the masses of men and the health buff are too one-sided. Their monolithic focusing upon the physical, the material, is too restrictive. For, as George Santayana observed,

...the material basis is a basis only, as the body is in personal life, and when that has been rendered vigorous and healthy, the question still remains what further functions you are to give to your soul. There is, as the ancients said, a vegetative soul... But the vegetative soul, in man, is only a background and a potentiality: the moral and intellectual functions must be superimposed upon it¹¹.

Good health and a good physique, in short, must be striven for, not for their own sakes, but for some higher purpose.

Seneca would entirely agree.

Recte nos dicimus: 'Si philosopharis, bene est.' Valere autem hoc demum est. Corpus quoque, etiam si magnas habet vires, non aliter quam furiosi aut phrenetici validum est. Ergo hanc praecipue valitudinem cura, deinde et illam secundam... (*Ep.* 15,1-2)

[We rightly say: 'If you apply yourself to philosophy, it is well.' This essentially is the meaning of well-being. By itself the body, even if it be powerful, has only the strength of a lunatic or madman. Therefore, pay special attention to the health of the mind, then to that of the body...]

In short, it is a species of bestiality and insanity to dote-upon one's physique, while scanning the intellectual life.

...quantum potes, circumscribe corpus tuum et animo locum laxa. (*Ep.* 15,2)

[...Limit your attention to the body as much as you can and expand your attention to the mind.]

¹⁰ *Sat.* 10,356.

¹¹ *George Santayana's America: Essays on Literature and Culture*, intro. James Ballowe (Urbana, Ill., 1957), p.118.

Quicquid facies, cito redi a corpore ad animum. Illum noctibus ac diebus exerce... (Ep.15,5)

[Whatever you do, return quickly from body to mind. Train the mind night and day...]

Any other course of action, Seneca assures us, is defective and incomplete.

Nonetheless, Seneca is by no means an opponent of useful physical training and good hygiene. All his life he knew the value of harmony, balance, and integratio, continually exercising his body as well as his mind. In *Epistle Fifteen*, he recommends exercises that are easy, simple, non-exhausting¹²: running, weight-lifting, high-jumping, and broadjumping. Such exercises should be regularly performed but rigorously regulated. A key point is the saving of time so that one will have leisure for intellectual pursuits¹³.

The ideal *modus vivendi* is the maintenance of a sound mind and a sound body.

Medicus tibi quantum ambules, quantum exercearis, monstrabit; ne indulgeas otio, ad quod vergit iners valetudo; ...ut naviges et viscera molli iactatione concutias; quibus cibis utaris... (Ep.78,5)

[Your doctor will point out how much you should walk, how much you should exercise; he will explain that you should not indulge in idleness that is conducive to ill-health; ...that you should exercise your internal organs by the gentle motion of sailing; he will recommend the proper diet....]

Seneca himself, who suffered from various ailments throughout his life -tuberculosis, asthma, catarrh, fever¹⁴- was especially sensitive to the need of disciplining and strengthening the body by healthy exercise. He became in fact, not only a *Seelenartz*¹⁵, a physician of the soul, but a doctor of the body as well, ever recommending daily exercise to himself and to others.

He was well aware that life without proper exercise was detrimental to one's health. He speaks scathingly of slothful men who engender their own obesity; he compares them, in fact, to birds fattened for the kill¹⁶.

¹² Seneca discouraged excessive activities of any sort that strained the body or the mind.

¹³ Ep.15,4-5; on the importance of the proper use of time, see ANNA LYDIA MOTTO and JOHN R. CLARK, "Time in Seneca: Past, Present, Future", *Emerita* 55 (1987), 31-41, and "'Tempus omnia rapit': Seneca on the Rapacity of Time", *Cuadernos de Filología Clásica* 21 (1988), 129-138.

¹⁴ See Ep.54,1-3, 6; 61,1; 65,1; 67,2; 78,1-4; 104,1. See also P. RODRÍGUEZ FERNÁNDEZ, *Seneca enfermo*, Mieres del Camino, 1976.

¹⁵ For a thorough treatment of Seneca as *Seelenartz* see ILSETRAUT HADOT, *Seneca und die griechisch-römische Tradition der Seelenleitung*, Berlin, 1969.

¹⁶ Ep.122,4.

Unlike the inertes, whom he so frequently excoriates, Seneca himself followed a daily routine of calisthenics throughout his life. He divided his day between reading, writing, relaxation, and bodily exercise.

Running was one of his favorite sports, and even in old age, when he had retired from political life, he continued this daily workout even entering foot-races with old friends and slaves¹⁷.

He also believed travel and sailing beneficial to health, since both provide motion salutary to internal organs¹⁸. In speaking of riding in his litter, he writes:

Mihi...necessarium erat concutere corpus, ut sive bilis insederat faucibus, discuteretur, sive ipse ex aliqua causa spiritus densior erat, extenuaret illum iactatio, quam profuisse mihi sensi. Ideo diutius vehi perseveravi invitante ipso litore...(Ep.55,2)

[It was necessary for me to shake up my body, so that if bile had settled in my throat, it might be shaken loose, or, if my breathing for some reason was too heavy, the tossing about, which I believed beneficial to me, would alleviate it. For that reason, I insisted upon being carried for a longer time on that inviting beach...]

Moreover, such travel was especially appealing to him since it enabled him to combine physical motion with literary pursuits:

...studio quare [itineraria ista] prosint indicabo: a lectionibus nihil recessi. (Ep. 84,1)

[I shall show you why those journeys help my studies: I can read while riding.]

But the physical activity he probably enjoyed most was swimming and bathing. Unlike the luxurious Romans who pampered themselves with hot baths and steamy rooms, Seneca was a devotee of cold water¹⁹. When he was younger, he used to plunge into the Virgo Aqueduct or the Tiber River. In fact, he would always celebrate the New Year with a swim in the canal. In his later years, he bathed in his private bath which was warmed only by the sun or, in wintertime, slightly heated²⁰.

In combining mental with physical activity in all periods of his life, Seneca followed in the footsteps of other great thinkers and writers. In Cicero's *De senectute*, Cato at the age of eighty-four continues to extol a balanced life of physical and of mental exercise:

¹⁷ Ep. 83,3-4.

¹⁸ Ep. 78,5; 55,1-7.

¹⁹ Ep. 53,3.

²⁰ Ep. 83,5-6; 67,1.

Resistendum... senectuti est... habenda ratio valetudinis, utendum exercitationibus modicis, tantum cibi et potionis adhibendum, ut reficiantur vires, non opprimantur. Nec vero corpori solum subveniendum est, sed menti atque animo multo magis. Nam haec quoque, nisi tamquam lumini oleum instilles, extinguntur senectute. (*De senectute* 11,35-36)

[One must resist... old age... one must have a program for maintaining good health; one should engage in moderate exercise; one should consume as much food and drink as is necessary to restore one's strength, not overwhelm it. Nor indeed should one only cultivate the body, but much more so the mind and the soul. For these too are extinguished by old age unless you rekindle them with oil.]