

**Seneca on Moral Improvement through Dialectical Study:  
A Chrysippean Reading of *Letter 87***

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Abstract

Does Seneca entirely reject the utility of dialectical study for moral improvement? No, I argue here. Focusing on *Letter 87*, I propose that Seneca raises and disarms objections to formal Stoic arguments in order to help moral progressors avoid backsliding and advance towards ethical knowledge. I trace this method back to Chrysippus and show that reading *Letter 87* in this Chrysippean framework yields a satisfying explanation of its otherwise puzzling features.

Introduction

Consider the following argument:

- (A1) That which is good makes people good (*Quod bonum est, bonos facit*).
- (A2) Things due to fortune do not make a person good (*Fortuita bonum non faciunt*).
- (A3) So, things due to fortune are not good (*Ergo non sunt bona*).

Seneca attributes this argument to earlier Stoic theorists, who formulated it as part of a larger effort to show that virtue is sufficient for happiness (*Moral Letters [Ep.] 87.11-12*). Although it does not establish this positive claim about virtue on its own, the argument contributes to this effort by denying goodness to “things due to fortune” (*fortuita*), i.e. to what the Stoics elsewhere call “preferred indifferents” but which rival philosophers, e.g. the Peripatetics, would regard as “external goods”: items such as health, wealth, and fame, whose possession depends on fortune in a way that the possession of virtue does not. This argument thus serves to formalize some of the grounds for the distinctively Stoic thesis that health, wealth, fame etc. are not good – where goods, in the Stoics’ eudaimonist framework, are assumed to have a causal or constitutive relationship with happiness.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thus Inwood 2007, 243, commenting on *Ep.* 87.11: “the relationship of the good to the happy life is taken for granted”. On Greek Stoic eudaimonism, see e.g. DL 7.88-9 and Stob. 2.75-7; for the relation between goods and happiness, DL 7.96-7 and Stob. 2.72.3-6.

As *Ep.* 87 unfolds, Seneca goes on to discuss three more arguments of Stoic authorship, which conclude that wealth, in particular, is not good:

(B1) That which the basest and most despicable person can have is not good.

(B2) But pimps and gladiator-trainers can have wealth.

(B3) So, wealth is not good. (*Ep.* 87.15)

(C1) Good does not come from bad.

(C2) But riches come from greed.

(C3) So, riches are not good. (*Ep.* 87.22)

(D1) That which, when we desire to get it, leads us to many bad outcomes is not good.

(D2) But when we desire to get wealth, we are led to many bad outcomes.

(D3) So, wealth is not good. (*Ep.* 87.28)

Seneca then turns to a fifth argument, credited to the Stoic Posidonius, for the general conclusion that “wealth, health, and things like them are not good”:

(E1) Those things which do not produce greatness or confidence or calmness in the soul are not good.

(E2) But wealth and health and things like them produce none of these results.

(E3) Therefore, wealth, health, and things like them are not good.<sup>2</sup> (*Ep.* 87.35)

Considered merely as doxography, Seneca’s presentation of arguments (A)-(E) offers a rare and precious record of some of the original Stoic motivations for denying that preferred indifferents are good, above and beyond the bare statement of the doctrine itself (cf. DL 7.102-3). My focus in this paper, however, will be the role of these arguments in Seneca’s own theory of moral improvement, which, though deeply indebted to earlier Stoic proposals, bears its own idiosyncratic imprint.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Seneca records an extended version of this argument at *Ep.* 87.35. A sixth argument is presented at *Ep.* 87.38, but Seneca makes clear that its origins are Peripatetic rather than Stoic. Translations of arguments (A)-(E) above are based on Inwood. I cannot address on this occasion how exactly to construe the logical form of arguments (A)-(E), which is curious in many ways: see Inwood 2007, 244-60, *passim*, and Wildberger 2006a, 144n762.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Ep.* 33.4: “we Stoics do not live under a king”; see Inwood 2022, 207, and Asmis 2015 for general discussion of Seneca’s originality within the Stoic framework.

Whereas Zeno and Chrysippus require their pupils to take up dialectical study, on the grounds that a general facility in logical argumentation will help them avoid assenting to falsehoods and acting incorrectly, Seneca, according to what I will call the *anti-dialectic reading*, departs from his Stoic predecessors on this point and entirely rejects the utility of argumentative study for moral progress: activities such as evaluating the logical validity of a formal argument, searching for ambiguity or equivocation in its premises, and devising objections and replies are at best an idle intellectual diversion and at worst a harmful distraction from the weightier forms of ethical study that Seneca thinks genuinely support moral improvement.<sup>4</sup> Thus we find in a series of earlier letters (*Ep.* 45, 48, and 49) a stark warning against investigating the correct solution to logical puzzles like the Liar and Horned Man, on which Chrysippus expends so much attention, but which Seneca derisively compares to deceptive shell-games (45.8) – trifles (*lusoria*) unfit for, and even deleterious to, men of talent (48.8-10). Moreover, in a series of later letters, spanning *Ep.* 82, 83, 85, and culminating in *Ep.* 87, Seneca appears no less hostile to formal arguments originating in the Stoa and pertaining directly to ethical topics, including arguments (A)-(E) above. The only reason Seneca bothers to address these arguments in *Ep.* 87, the anti-dialectic reader maintains, is to show the folly of the logic-choppers. He wants his correspondent Lucilius to appreciate that, despite the fleeting attraction one might feel for it, the study of formal Stoic arguments in ethics, just like the study of sophisms and logical puzzles, is a hopelessly ineffective method of moral improvement and should be altogether avoided by those earnestly seeking to become good (Cancik 1967, 41).

In this paper, I will argue for an alternative to the anti-dialectic reading of *Ep.* 87. My basic contention is that Seneca does not categorically reject the value of formal ethical argumentation for the purpose of moral improvement, although he does limit its use to particular agents in particular circumstances.

On Seneca's view, as I interpret it, arguments (A)-(E) and others similar in structure propounded by the Stoa will neither persuade rival philosophers that only virtue is good, nor suffice to eliminate the Roman public's passionate attachment to wealth. However, for the Stoic moral progressor (*proficiens* / *προκόπτων*) – represented at this stage in the action of the *Moral Letters* by Lucilius and Seneca himself – who have insecurely grasped that wealth, fame, and other preferred indifferents are not good, in that they

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<sup>4</sup> So Cooper 2004, 320: Seneca in *Ep.* 87 has “dismissed” arguments (A)-(E) “as simply beside the point – that is, of no use for moral improvement”. Griffin 1992, 175, offers a more sweeping assessment: “although Seneca accepts the traditional division of philosophy into ethics, physics, and logic... his interest was by no means catholic, and the only division of which he even intended to give a complete account was the *pars moralis*. For the rhetoric and dialectic included in the *pars rationalis* he had nothing but contempt”. For the Greek Stoic definitions of dialectic, which, like rhetoric, is housed in the logical part of philosophy, see e.g. DL 7.42-4 and discussion in Castagnoli 2010. For Seneca's definition of dialectic, see *Ep.* 89.17. All Stoics are agreed that the study of formal arguments and sophisms falls under dialectic but does not exhaust it.

are liable to abandon this grasp in trying circumstances, it is useful to consider the established Stoic arguments showing that wealth, fame, etc. are not good. This dialectical activity, when elaborated in the form we find in *Ep.* 87, helps to fortify the progressor's insecure grasp of wealth's indifferent status and bring agents like Seneca and Lucilius closer to the all-important goal of *knowledge* (*scientia* / ἐπιστήμη) of what is good, bad, and neither, in which virtue consists, and thereby become less prone to succumb to wealth-related passions in the future.

Among Seneca's philosophical commentators, I am not alone in arguing that the anti-dialectic reading goes too far in assigning no value to the study of formal arguments as a means of moral improvement. However, I break new ground by specifying what kind of dialectical activity Seneca endorses in *Ep.* 87, in which circumstances he thinks it should be used, and on which types of agent, if it is to aid progress toward virtue. Brad Inwood, for instance, attributes to Seneca a distinction in *Ep.* 87 between "good and bad dialectic", with arguments (A)-(E) representing the former and a sixth, Peripatetic argument at *Ep.* 87.38, the latter, but does not go on to develop a positive characterization of the features of "good dialectic" (2007, 259). Inwood is surely right, however, to insist against the anti-dialectic reading that Seneca's decision to engage in detail with arguments (A)-(E) implies that his attitude toward them cannot be totally dismissive: "silence would have been more effective" (2007, 218). The conclusion reached by Jonathan Barnes lays the groundwork for my own. Barnes dubs Seneca a "logical utilitarian" (1997, 21), so that the value of arguments like (A)-(E) depends on "what you do with them"; when taken "as concise expressions of philosophical insight, or as starting-points for discussion and illustration and development... then they are serious things" (1997, 18). My goal in what follows is to identify more precisely what kind of utility for moral progress Seneca finds in the study of arguments (A)-(E), by comparing the procedure he adopts in *Ep.* 87 with earlier Chrysippean recommendations.

Seneca's presentation of arguments (A)-(E) is always accompanied by a set of objections and replies. For instance, following argument (A) Seneca raises a Peripatetic objection to its first premise (*Ep.* 87.12), responds to this objection with a reply given by earlier Stoics (*Ep.* 87.13), and then provides a rejoinder of his own creation, which he considers "clearer" (*planius*) than that of his Stoic predecessors (*Ep.* 87.14). This pattern recurs, with minor variations, in Seneca's treatment of arguments (B)-(E).<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, at the outset of the letter, Seneca admits to moral backsliding: he confides to Lucilius that, in certain circumstances, he is prone to abandon his professed Stoic views and come to believe, if only for a moment, that wealth really is good. Accordingly, he declares to Lucilius that he is looking for a way to

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<sup>5</sup> Seneca's discussion of (B) does not explicitly refer to a previously given Stoic reply, and he endorses the rejoinder of Posidonius, without offering his own, in the course of expounding argument (D). I agree with Graver 2018, 317-8, and Inwood 2007, 220, 244-56, that all the objections to arguments (A)-(E) are posed from a Peripatetic viewpoint.

make “fixed and unchangeable” (*certam... et immobilem*: *Ep.* 87.4) his appreciation of the correct value of wealth, as something indifferent.

These points of detail are significant, I argue, when juxtaposed with the Stoic account of knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) – a cognitive grasp that is “secure and unchangeable” (ἀσφαλῆ καὶ ἀμετάπτωτον: *Stob. Ecl.* 2.73.19-21) – and with a brand of pedagogy associated with Chrysippus in particular. In order to “instill knowledge, on the basis of which we will live consistently”, Chrysippus recommends that Stoic teachers set out the arguments in favor of Stoic doctrine, *as well as the arguments and considerations on the other side*, making sure to “destroy the plausibility” of these contrary positions when the moment is opportune (Plutarch, *St. Rep.* 1035f-1036a). According to Chrysippus, this dialectical exercise will help students who “grasp in a way that is easily shaken” fortify their grasps and make them less changeable, since, once the teacher has exposed its flaws, the contrary view will no longer appear plausible to them and threaten to undermine their grasp of the truth (Plutarch, *St. Rep.* 1036d-e).

I will suggest that Seneca is best understood as adhering to this Chrysippean recommendation in *Ep.* 87, when he presents first the Stoic arguments in favor of wealth (and other preferred indifferents) not being good, then the Peripatetic objections, and finally the Stoic replies, which serve to “destroy the plausibility” of those objections. The intended result is that Seneca and Lucilius are no longer moved by Peripatetic reasoning to the effect that wealth is good, or by the plausible impression that it is so, and thus make their grasp of wealth’s indifferent status that much more secure. On my reading, then, there is a pleasing unity in *Ep.* 87’s composition: the “dialectical part” of the letter, in which arguments (A)-(E) are introduced and defended, directly addresses and seeks to correct the moral backsliding thematized in the “non-dialectical” opening frame (cf. Inwood 2007, 240). Combining the roles of teacher and student, Seneca relies on no lesser Stoic authority than Chrysippus for a method that can remedy the cognitive instability to which he confesses at the outset.

This is not to say that Seneca’s procedure in *Ep.* 87 is a carbon-copy of Chrysippus’. Most notably, Seneca is skeptical, in a way the early Stoa is not, that proficiency in resolving logical puzzles such as the Liar or Horned Man could be even indirectly relevant for moral improvement (Wildberger 2006a, 141-3; Cooper 2004, 316; Barnes 1997, 14-5). Nonetheless, I will show that there is more overlap between the early Stoic approach and Seneca’s than has previously been recognized. By emphasizing these parallels, we can shed new light on Seneca’s nuanced view of how dialectical study can help progressors attain knowledge and become good.

There is also an important philosophical reason to prefer my reading of *Ep.* 87. The anti-dialectic interpretation, as mentioned above, struggles to explain why Seneca spends so much time discussing arguments (A)-(E), if his goal is simply to deny their pedagogical value altogether. But even commentators who reject this interpretation have been disappointed by what they regard as Seneca’s

rough handling of the Peripatetic objections: he never seems to engage with the Peripatetic position on its own terms or to show the Peripatetic why, by their own lights, their objection is misguided.<sup>6</sup> On my reading, however, this otherwise curious feature can be readily explained. Since the intended beneficiary of the letter's dialectical exercise is Seneca himself, together with his fellow *proficiens* Lucilius, he does not need to identify considerations that *the Peripatetic* would accept: his goal is not to convince the Peripatetic, but rather to fortify his and Lucilius' own insecure grasp by removing the plausibility of the anti-Stoic view, to which end he can productively appeal to proprietary Stoic doctrines with which the contrary view conflicts.<sup>7</sup>

The paper is structured as follows. Section 1 examines Seneca's confession of cognitive instability in the introduction to *Ep.* 87, arguing that it alludes to the orthodox Stoic account of knowledge. Section 2 presents Chrysippus' recommendations on how to use formal argumentation, both for and against Stoic doctrine, as an aid to acquiring knowledge. In section 3, I argue that Seneca's discussion of argument (B) conforms to these Chrysippean recommendations and is conceived as a means to reinforce his and Lucilius' shaky grasp of wealth's indifferent status. In section 4, I confront the challenge posed by the anti-dialectic reading and show that, despite surface appearances, Seneca's criticisms of dialectic in other selected letters do not apply to the Chrysippean exercise undertaken in *Ep.* 87. Section 5 concludes.

### 1. Seneca's Road Trip

I begin with the opening frame of *Ep.* 87, before the five Stoic arguments are introduced. Here Seneca announces that he is writing to Lucilius in the midst of a rustic cross-country journey (87.2-4). After describing the uncharacteristically spare provisions for his trip – simple food, light baggage, and above all an austere country wagon – Seneca makes a confession:

I can scarcely bring myself to want the wagon to be seen as mine. Even now, I persist in having a sense of shame that has turned away from what is right (*durat adhuc perversa recti verecundia*), and whenever we meet some more fashionable party I blush

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<sup>6</sup> To take a few examples from Inwood 2007: Seneca's discussion of the craft-analogy at 87.14 is "unsatisfactorily weak... a more thorough analysis of the factors in a craft is necessary for a stronger response to the Peripatetic objection... no fresh arguments are offered here" (245); in argument (B), "the Peripatetic [objection] relies on a broad, relativized notion of good... while Seneca restricts good to the distinctively narrow good of a well-run life" (246); Seneca's reply to the objection to (C1) is "question-begging" (247); etc.

<sup>7</sup> Merry 2021 attempts to show that, despite the appearance of being question-begging against the Peripatetic, Seneca's discussion of argument (B) should really be seen as an exercise in finding "common ground" (107-10). However, on my reading, these appearances are real: Seneca does use arguments which beg the question against the Peripatetic, but which nonetheless are suitable for his inward-looking pedagogical exercise of fortifying the insecure grasps of the Stoic progressor.

unwillingly (*invitus erubesco*). That's proof that what I approve and admire doesn't yet have a fixed and unchangeable foundation (*quod argumentum est ista, quae probo, quae laudo, nondum habere certam sedem et immobilem*). He who blushes in a shabby carriage will boast of an expensive one. I have made insufficient progress so far (*parum adhuc profeci*). I don't yet dare to wear my frugality out in the open; I still care about the opinions of travelers. (87.4-5, tr. Inwood, with changes)

With some frankness, Seneca here reveals the limitations of his own moral progress. To be seen by other travelers in a ramshackle wagon causes him to blush and feel ashamed, and he interprets this response as “proof that what I approve and admire doesn't yet have a fixed and unchangeable foundation”.

It is crucial to hear in Seneca's phrasing here an allusion to the orthodox Stoic account of knowledge (*ἐπιστήμη*): the cognitive condition restricted to the Sage that is “secure and unchangeable” (*ἀσφαλή και ἀμετάπτωτον*).<sup>8</sup> According to this conception, to know, as the Sage does, that *wealth is not good* or *poverty is not bad* implies that one will never retract one's endorsement of these claims in the face of a rival view, because one has fully understood the reasons why they are true and is positioned to defend their truth against any possible challenge.<sup>9</sup> Thus the Sage never assents to the impression that *wealth is good* and is never misled by any argument or line of reasoning to the effect that *wealth is good*.<sup>10</sup> For the Stoics, the security characterizing the Sage's knowledge of the indifferent status of wealth rests not on blind faith or uncritical deference to authority but rather on a comprehensive understanding of what is genuinely good, bad, and neither, together with the further parts of the Stoic philosophical system that lend support to the truth of this claim. Consequently, no amount of cajoling, provocation, or contrary argumentation will be able to subvert the Sage's rational commitment to it.

This degree of unchangeability in the face of pressure or temptation is precisely what Seneca is denying to himself in the passage above. His own moral progress is insufficient because he does not yet possess knowledge, for his judgments about the value of wealth and poverty are not securely established in the manner of the Sage. Though he approves and admires – i.e., has previously given assent to (cf. *Ep.*

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<sup>8</sup> Stob. 2.73.19-21. See also DL 7.47; SE *M* 7.151; Cicero, *Acad.* 1.41, 2.23. Further allusions in Seneca's *Moral Letters* to this account can arguably be found at 45.9 (the virtuous person is *certus iudicii, inconcussus, intrepidus*) and 75.7 (a rhetorical question posed to the non-Sage: *Quando, quae didiceris, adfiges tibi ita, ut excidere non possint?*). See also 88.28 (*scientia bonorum ac malorum inmutabili*).

<sup>9</sup> Thus our Stoic sources further clarify that knowledge is secure and unchangeable *by reason* (*ratione* / ὑπὸ λόγου). Here I follow Coope 2016, 246; Vogt 2012, 167-8; Brennan 2005, 69-71; and Menn 1995, 18-20.

<sup>10</sup> On the relation between knowledge and assent, see especially the definition of the dialectical virtue of ἀπροπτωσία at DL 7.46 and discussion in Coope 2016, 245-8, Gourinat 2000: 73-9, and Long 1978 / 1996, 92-94. Recall that, on Stoic theory, assent is given to the proposition (ἀξίωμα) serving as the content of a rational impression (Stob. 2.88.1-6), and each act of assent in the Sage counts as knowledge (Vogt 2012, 167-8). For clarity, I indicate propositional content with italics.

76.7) – the ethical truths that *wealth is not good, poverty is not bad*, etc., the humiliation he feels on the road trip shows that his grasp of these claims is still insecure and prone to be given up. In particular, what indicates to Seneca the shakiness of his grasp of the correct evaluation of wealth and poverty are his own emotional reactions: feelings of shame, which are “turned away from what is right” (*perversa recti verecundia*), and involuntary blushing.

If these feelings amount to full-fledged passions (*affectus* / *πάθη*), as the Stoics conceive of them, it is easy to see why Seneca draws this conclusion.<sup>11</sup> As is well known, the Stoics put forward a cognitivist theory of the passions, where (roughly) to experience a passion involves forming a false evaluative judgment to the effect that something genuinely indifferent is good or bad.<sup>12</sup> So we can surmise that in feeling shame (*αἰσχύνη*) – which the Stoics define as a subset of fear, namely the fear of disrepute (*φόβος ἄδοξιας*; DL 7.112; Stob. 2.92.3-4) – the agent implicitly judges that *Disrepute is bad*.<sup>13</sup> Now, since Seneca’s shame is centered on the disrepute attached to his shabby carriage, i.e. on being disdained for poverty, he would seem to be giving assent to the evaluative claim that *The reputation for poverty is bad*. Of course, on the Stoic analysis, neither poverty nor wealth, nor the reputation for having such things, is genuinely good or bad. But if Seneca is able to assent to such a claim and form this mistaken judgment, as his feeling of shame implies, then he thereby fails to know that *poverty is not bad, the reputation for poverty is not bad, wealth is not good*, etc., for a secure grasp on these claims would have been unchangeable by the “opinions of travelers” who have seen him on his rustic journey.<sup>14</sup>

The Sage, by contrast, is entirely insusceptible to passion, as a consequence of her possession of ethical *knowledge*. Because she has attained a maximally stable and unchangeable grasp of the fact that wealth, poverty, and the reputation attached to them are neither good nor bad, her commitment to these ethical truths will not be shaken or undermined by the contrary opinions of fellow travelers.

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<sup>11</sup> Kaufman 2013, 151-2 argues that the involuntary blushing mentioned here is a “pre-passion” (*προπάθεια*), not a full-fledged passion, since the Stoics, Seneca included, classify passions as voluntary psychological activities (see e.g. *De Ira* 2.2.1; Cicero, *Fin.* 3.35). Kaufman accepts, nonetheless, that this case of blushing testifies to Seneca’s unstable cognitive make-up. In any event, in speaking of “a sense of shame that has turned against what is right”, Seneca must be referring to a full-fledged passion, as I will now explain.

<sup>12</sup> As well as a judgment about the appropriateness of some behavioral or phenomenological response: see e.g. Klein 2021, 236-7, and Graver 2007, 41-6. On the complications posed by Alcibiades’ grief, see Graver 2007, 191-206.

<sup>13</sup> Some Stoics allow for a positive form of shame (usually labeled *αἰδώς* in contrast to *αἰσχύνη*), functioning as an ancillary to moral progress. See detailed discussion in Kamtekar 1998 and Graver 2007, 206-10. Cf. also Seneca’s usage of shame-terminology at e.g. *Ep.* 49.11, 82.12, 83.19, and discussion in Wray 2015. However, it is clear that at *Ep.* 87.4 this positive form of shame cannot be intended, since it is “turned against what is right”.

<sup>14</sup> That Seneca’s poverty-based shame also implies a propensity to accept *wealth is good* and *the reputation for wealth is good* falls out of his remark above that “he who blushes in a shabby carriage will boast of an expensive one”: even if he is not feeling delight at a reputation for wealth *now*, he would on some other occasion, when the circumstances are otherwise. On the interdependence of the opinions underwriting the various kinds of passion, see Stob. 2.88.18-21, Seneca, *Ep.* 5.7-9 and 98.6, and helpful discussion in Brennan 2005, 93-6, and Inwood 2022, 82.



So far as I can tell, no previous commentator has called attention to Seneca's invocation of the Stoic account of knowledge in *Ep.* 87.4-5, or to its connection in Seneca's narrative with his inclination to feel shame and with his assessment that his own moral progress is incomplete.<sup>15</sup> But consistent with both Stoic orthodoxy and his own philosophical outlook, Seneca here affirms that a propensity to passion is a sure sign of lacking knowledge.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, these remarks are highly significant in the context of *Ep.* 87, since they point toward an explanation of the procedure Seneca employs in the following sections of the letter, where not only the arguments in favor of Stoic views are examined, but also the Peripatetic objections on the other side. True enough, Seneca uses a similar procedure in *Ep.* 85 and underscores at the start of that discussion that he "takes no pleasure in this kind of argumentation": rather, he claims only to be acquiescing to the request of Lucilius to pass along "the arguments which have been either devised by our school or thought up in order to ridicule us" relating to the question of the sufficiency of virtue for happiness (*Ep.* 85.1; see Inwood 2007, 220-1). But no such request from Lucilius is repeated in *Ep.* 87, where instead Seneca cites his own cognitive instability and lack of knowledge in the run-up to his presentation of arguments for and against the goodness of wealth.<sup>17</sup> I will now suggest that Seneca uses this dialectical method as a means to secure the foundation of his views on wealth and poverty, and thereby come closer to *knowing* the genuine value of such items, and that, to this extent, he should be understood as employing the advice of the Stoa's keenest dialectician, Chrysippus.

## 2. Chrysippus' Pedagogical Recommendations

In two verbatim fragments, Chrysippus takes up the question of how arguments and views which run contrary to Stoic doctrine should be incorporated into the Stoic curriculum. In the first,

[Chrysippus] says he does not entirely disapprove of arguing for contrary positions (τὸ πρὸς τὰναντία διαλέγεσθαι), but he recommends that it be used cautiously, just as those in the courts dissolve the plausibility [of the contrary positions] without advocating for them. ... "For those who instill knowledge, on the basis of which we will live consistently (ἐπιστήμην... καθ' ἣν ὁμολογουμένως βιωσόμεθα), it is suitable to instruct

<sup>15</sup> Inwood 2007, 242, notes Seneca's invocation of "a stable disposition which can be relied on for a prolonged period" but does not connect this disposition to the Stoic account of knowledge.

<sup>16</sup> A point Seneca stresses as recently as *Ep.* 82.6. See also *Ep.* 23.6, 37.4, 75.17, etc.

<sup>17</sup> I thus reject Cooper's assumption (2004, 320) that the motivation given in *Ep.* 85 of satisfying the idle curiosity of Lucilius implicitly carries over into *Ep.* 87. In his road trip confessional, Seneca explicitly identifies a different rationale.

pupils in the elements and to fortify them from beginning to end. In cases when it is opportune, it is suitable to mention the contrary arguments (ἐναντίοι λόγοι) as well, destroying their plausibility just as is done in the courts.” (Plutarch, *St. Rep.* 1035f-1036a, tr. after Cherniss)

In speaking of those who “instill knowledge, on the basis of which we will live consistently”, Chrysippus is referring to philosophers of his own school: his phrasing echoes one standard Stoic formulation of the human goal or τέλος (τὸ ὁμολογουμένως ζῆν), in attaining which we are happy (DL 7.87; Stob. 2.77). Moreover, Chrysippus grounds the achievement of the τέλος on the possession of knowledge – a natural enough view for a Stoic to take, given their doctrines that (i) virtue is necessary and sufficient for happiness (DL 7.89, 127-8), and (ii) virtue consists in or supervenes upon knowledge (Stob. 2.62-4). The goal of Stoic pedagogy, then, is to engender knowledge in the student, and with it virtue and happiness.

But how does the cautious consideration of contrary arguments assist the acquisition of knowledge? Chrysippus’ answer no doubt relies on the Stoic account of knowledge, as a grasp that is secure and unchangeable. As we have seen, knowledge on this conception is an extremely demanding intellectual accomplishment, found only in the Sage: to know that (e.g.) *wealth is not good* requires the ability to maintain one’s rational attachment to this proposition in the face of whatever contrary argument or position one encounters. Non-Sages, by contrast, will be vulnerable to at least some of these opposing arguments and rival views: they may grasp that *wealth is not good*, but only insecurely, in the sense that they are prone to abandon it when faced with (e.g.) a plausible Peripatetic argument to the contrary. So if the aim of Stoic pedagogy is to reproduce in the student the imperturbable cognitive condition characteristic of the Sage, by upgrading insecure grasps into knowledge (SE *M* 7.151; Cicero, *Acad.* 1.41, 2.23), it is useful to mention these plausible counter-arguments beforehand in the classroom, to remove the risk they might otherwise pose to the credulous student, whose grasp of the truth is not yet fully stable. Once the teacher has explained the deficiencies of the contrary view and thereby “destroyed” its plausibility, the student is no longer moved to accept it: his grasp will be inoculated against this particular dialectical threat.

Consistent with this picture, Chrysippus says in our second fragment:

The contrary arguments and plausibilities in contrary views are to be exhibited not at random but with caution, lest those diverted by them lose hold of their grasps, since they cannot adequately understand the solutions and they grasp in a way that is easily shaken (οὔτε τῶν λύσεων ἰκανῶς ἂν ἀκοῦσαι δυνάμενοι καταλαμβάνοντές τ’ εὐαποσείστως). (Chrysippus in Plutarch, *St. Rep.* 1036d–e, tr. after Cherniss)

Here Chrysippus makes clear that those who “grasp in a way that is easily shaken”, i.e. insecurely and changeably, are liable to abandon their grasp when confronted by a plausible counter-argument or contrary position. This is because such agents “cannot adequately understand the solutions” to the opposing view: they cannot yet see through its initial plausibility and latch on to the features which make it unsound.

The second fragment thus serves to justify the pedagogical proposal in the first. Suppose that the teacher presents a plausible argument for the claim that *wealth is good*. If the teacher does not go on to explain the flaws of this argument – e.g. why one of its premises is false, or why its logical form is invalid – it could remain plausible in the eyes of those who insecurely grasp that *wealth is not good*, leading them to assent to its false conclusion and give up their grasp. Taking the two fragments together, then, Chrysippus insists that whenever the teacher mentions an argument against *p*, she must also clarify its shortcomings, if the dialectical exercise is to help stabilize the student’s insecure grasp of *p*.<sup>18</sup>

The inclusion of contrary arguments and views in the Stoic curriculum is clearly a sensitive subject for Chrysippus, and he shows a remarkable degree of anxiety over the danger (as he sees it) that, in dwelling on the contrary argument at excessive length, at the wrong time, and without an immediate indictment of its flaws, the inexperienced student could be led to abandon his fragile grasp of the truth. We might worry, then, that Chrysippus’ proposal can’t do full justice to the contrary arguments: it seems that he eschews an even-handed dialectical test of the opposing views by setting them up for failure.

It is important to recall, however, the defensive nature of the pedagogical exercise: it is intended for students who have already been “instructed in the elements” but still “grasp in a way that is easily shaken”. Presumably, Chrysippus would adopt a more open-minded inquiry into questions which he thinks remain unclear, but for matters which can be insecurely grasped and ultimately known – e.g., in ethics, the indifferent value of wealth and the goodness of virtue – presenting the contrary argument without refuting it is hazardous and misleading: it runs the risk of confusing students and exaggerating the merits of a demonstrably false view. Moreover, the flaws of a contrary argument are sometimes extremely subtle and hard to discern. Destroying its plausibility could therefore require extensive engagement with the contrary argument, e.g. in exposing a hidden assumption behind one of its premises or the use of ambiguous or equivocating terms.

To be sure, more could be said about these fascinating fragments (on which see Shogry 2022), but for present purposes the crucial points are these. First, Chrysippus assumes it is impossible both to know *p* and retract one’s commitment to *p* in the face of a contrary argument or opposing view. Second, it is

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<sup>18</sup> Chrysippus’ predecessor Zeno may have held a different view on the correct use of contrary arguments: see Plutarch, *St. Rep.* 1034e and discussion in Castagnoli 2010, 166-7.

possible to make one's grasp of  $p$  more stable by examining the argument for *not-p* under appropriate pedagogical supervision and learning where it goes wrong, with the result that it no longer appears plausible. So, third, it is not enough to hear the contrary view on its own, if the goal is to fortify one's grasp against it; rather, it must always be considered alongside an explanation of its defects.

### 3. Putting Chrysippus' Pedagogical Recommendations into Practice

With this background material in place, I now return to *Ep.* 87 to substantiate my claim that, in presenting the Stoic arguments against wealth being good, followed by a series of objections and replies, Seneca's procedure is best understood in the context of Chrysippus' pedagogical theory. As his poverty-based shame on the road trip attests, Seneca's endorsement of *wealth is not good, the reputation for poverty is not bad, poverty is not bad*, etc., is changeable and not yet secure, and he seeks to rectify this vulnerability by cautiously going through the arguments for and against wealth's indifferent value. Seneca's discussion of argument (B) (*Ep.* 87.15-21) will be my focus in this section, as it usefully illustrates how this dialectical method could help provide a "fixed and unchangeable foundation" for Seneca's insecure grasp that *wealth is not good* by first raising and then undermining a rival, Peripatetic account. But before I begin, a few clarifications are in order.

#### *3.1 Preliminary Clarifications*

First, I am not here taking up the project of *Quellenforschung*, i.e. an investigation into the original Stoic works which Seneca consulted, paraphrased, or adapted in the course of writing *Ep.* 87. I remain agnostic on the question of Seneca's ultimate or proximate textual sources. Rather, my interest is exegetical. To better understand the philosophical motivations for Seneca's engagement with the Stoic arguments and Peripatetic objections in *Ep.* 87, we can profitably contextualize this dialectical activity within an earlier strand of Stoic thought, most clearly represented in our extant sources by the Chrysippean pedagogical theory discussed in the last section. This theory – whatever exactly its textual origin<sup>19</sup> – would have been familiar to Seneca, and it offers an attractive rationale for the technique he employs in *Ep.* 87: through this exercise, he can expect to remedy his cognitive instability with respect to the indifferent status of wealth.

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<sup>19</sup> Plutarch extracts the second fragment presented above in section 2 from Chrysippus' *On Ways of Life* (*St. Rep.* 1036d). The first fragment is not attributed to any particular work, though it perhaps originates in Chrysippus' *On the Use of Reason*, which is quoted later in the same chapter (*St. Rep.* 1037b; thus SVF v.3, p. 201 and Bénatouil 2006, 84). Recall also that Seneca cites two post-Chrysippean Stoics, Posidonius and Antipater, in the course of his discussion in *Ep.* 87; cf. Inwood 2022, 45-6, and Graver 2018, 316-7.

However, one might object that Chrysippus' advice does not apply to agents like *Ep.* 87's Seneca. Whereas Chrysippus emphasizes the danger posed by contrary *arguments* (ἐναντίοι λόγοι), Seneca identifies his own emotional reactions, incited by the "opinions of travelers", as a sign of his cognitive volatility. It seems, then, that Seneca doesn't find himself in the situation envisioned by Chrysippus, in which an unsuspecting student is persuaded by a faulty contrary argument to abandon his endorsement of a Stoic truth. Seneca has succumbed to passion, not to the blandishments of a plausible but unsound counter-argument, and it is only the latter threat that Chrysippus means to address.

Or is it? Chrysippus asserts in the second fragment that "contrary arguments" (τοὺς ἐναντίους λόγους) and "plausibilities in contrary views" (τὰ πρὸς τὰναντία πιθανά) are able to shake the student from their insecure grasp. I would suggest that, in the circumstances of the road trip, Seneca can be understood as falling victim to the latter: in coming to feel the passion of shame, he incorrectly assents to a plausible contrary view, which contradicts his earlier attachment to the indifferent status of wealth and poverty.

Elsewhere, the Stoics identify individual propositions as "plausible" (πιθανόν) – those which "induce assent" (DL 7.75) – and Chrysippus applies the same label to impressions, including impressions falsely depicting indifferents as good or bad (Galen, *PHP* 5.5.18-20). Seneca himself provides evidence of this usage later in our letter, when he mentions the plausible impression that *wealth is good*, "which is credible to many people" (*Ep.* 87.33; see Graver & Long 2015, 552, and Inwood 2007, 254). It is natural to suppose, then, that in mentioning the "plausibilities in contrary views" (τὰ πρὸς τὰναντία πιθανά), Chrysippus refers to this broader class of plausible things (propositions and impressions), which, though obviously not formalized in the manner of an argument – as a collection of premises leading to a conclusion – nonetheless are truth-evaluable and bear on the non-Sage's act of assent (Plutarch, *St. Rep.* 1055f-1056a), such that they could potentially divert an insecure grasp.

If so, and if (as we saw above) Seneca's passion of shame entails his acceptance of *poverty is bad*, *the reputation for poverty is bad* – together with an ongoing susceptibility to accept *wealth is good*, *the reputation for wealth is good* when circumstances are otherwise – then Chrysippus could very well be addressing an agent like Seneca with his pedagogical proposal. This type of agent needs to see why the plausible impressions, assent to which generates poverty-based shame, are false and not worthy of acceptance, and to this end it could be useful to cautiously examine the arguments for and against the indifferent status of wealth. This process could help the progressing student appreciate the reasons why wealth really isn't good and thus provide him with rational resources to resist the *prima facie* plausibility in the contrary view, whether it is depicted in a plausible impression, or is a conclusion explicitly drawn from further premises.<sup>20</sup> In any event, Seneca himself views dialectic as applicable to the consolation of

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<sup>20</sup> Chrysippus' method of emotional consolation goes some way toward corroborating this suggestion. In this context, Chrysippus proposes to address arguments to agents who have previously succumbed to passion but are no

passions (*Ep.* 89.17-23), and what Chrysippus' exercise promises to provide is precisely what Seneca himself confesses to need: assistance in the acquisition of knowledge. So, given their shared assumption that knowledge confers *ἀπάθεια*, nothing prevents Seneca from employing Chrysippus' pedagogical proposal to obtain a “firm and unchangeable foundation” for his still-shaky commitment to wealth's indifferent status and thus remove his propensity to accept the false, but plausible, value-claims at the root of poverty- and wealth-related passions.

Before turning to argument (B), one further objection should be raised. One might worry that, while Chrysippus addresses his recommendations to those who *grasp* (*καταλαμβάνειν*) insecurely, Seneca does not explicitly characterize his own changeable commitment to *wealth is not good*, etc., as a grasp. “Grasp” (*κατάληψις*) is a term of art in orthodox Stoic epistemology, referring to a factive mental state consisting in the assent to an impression that is “grasp-prompting” or kataleptic (*καταληπτική*).<sup>21</sup> The kataleptic impression, in turn, is one which arises in such a way that it “could not have come from what is not the case” (*SE M* 7.248), and so the assent to it is guaranteed to be true.<sup>22</sup> However, as we have seen, the Stoics think it is possible for non-Sages to grasp insecurely – to assent to a kataleptic impression on one occasion but remain prone to abandon it later in the face of a contrary argument or opposing view. Thus the Stoics distinguish insecure grasping from knowledge. But they also distinguish insecure grasping from other changeable acts of assent, which are given to impressions that are *not* kataleptic. In some texts, “opinion” (*δόξα*) is the label for this insecure assent to a non-kataleptic impression.<sup>23</sup>

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longer in their emotional peak: the aim here is to “present the irrationality of the passion” (Galen, *PHP* 4.7.27) and help them see “that every passion involves an inconsistency” (Origen, *Contra Celsum* 8.51.30-3). In this way, Chrysippus thinks, it is possible to undermine the judgments on which their passions depend (Cicero, *Tusc.* 3.76) and thus help agents avoid passions in the future (Graver 2007, 196-206). Admittedly, this procedure is not explicitly claimed to lower the *plausibility* of the impression assent to which creates a passion, but given that Chrysippus relies on arguments to show an “inconsistency” between this impression and some other judgment the agent holds, this would surely be one of the intended effects (specifically, that the content of the emotional impression is *less plausible* than the judgment with which it is inconsistent). For discussion of Seneca's application of Chrysippean methods of consolation in his *Consolation to Marcia*, see Donini 1995.

<sup>21</sup> See e.g. *SE M* 8.397. Other possible translations for *κατάληψις* include “apprehension” or “cognition”, and for the corresponding adjective *καταληπτική*, “apprehensive” or “cognitive”. For discussion of Seneca's response to, and familiarity with, the Stoic theory of *κατάληψις* in the *Moral Letters*, see Wildberger 2006b.

<sup>22</sup> For recent discussion of the definition of the kataleptic impression, see e.g. Shogry 2021. Note that the Stoics recognize both perceptual and non-perceptual impressions (*DL* 7.51) and presumably also perceptual and non-perceptual *kataleptic* impressions. For discussion of how non-perceptual impressions could meet the definition of the kataleptic impression, see Schwab forthcoming and Vogt 2022, 173-7.

<sup>23</sup> E.g. Plutarch, *St. Rep.* 1056f. However, in other Stoic sources, *δόξα* may pick out *any* act of assent of the non-Sage, not only those given to non-kataleptic impressions: see Meinwald 2005 and Vogt 2012, 159-65. For present purposes we need not definitively settle the role of *δόξα* in Stoic epistemology. Without prejudice to the different interpretations on offer here, I will use “opinion” or “mere opinion” as a convenient shorthand for insecure assent to the non-kataleptic. Since some non-kataleptic impressions are true (*SE M* 7.247), “true opinion” is my label for the outcome of assenting to such impressions. Despite differences in terminology, this reconstruction of Stoic epistemology is compatible, I take it, with the view defended in Vogt 2012, 158-82.

The question, then, is whether Seneca's shaky endorsement of *wealth is not good*, etc., which is tested on the road trip, constitutes an insecure grasp or a mere opinion. Both are changeable acts of assent found only in the non-Sage. But if it is a mere opinion and not a grasp, then my proposal to understand Seneca's use of contrary arguments in *Ep.* 87 as an application of Chrysippean pedagogy would face a difficulty, since, in lacking a *grasp* of *wealth is not good*, etc., Seneca might not have made enough epistemic progress for Chrysippus' method to be effective.

In reply, note first that, if we take Seneca's acceptance of these claims as mere opinions, they must be true opinions, since the Stoics regard *wealth is not good*, *poverty is not bad*, etc. as true axiological claims. But given the characterization of true opinion in our Stoic sources, together with the wider context of *Ep.* 87, it is clear that Seneca must insecurely *grasp* these ethical truths. This is because true opinions, unlike grasps, arise in such a way that their truth is *not* guaranteed: a true opinion is true *by chance* or *by accident* (cf. *SE M* 7.247). In Seneca's case, this would amount to his forming the judgments that *wealth is not good* or *poverty is not bad* in a way that was totally unrelated to the grounds of their truth (e.g. through coercion, deception, or luck). However, both Seneca and Lucilius are represented at this stage of the *Moral Letters* as having already internalized the fundamentals of Stoic ethics.<sup>24</sup> They first came to accept that *wealth is not good*, etc., not by accident but rather through devoted study of the Stoic system (attending lectures, reading treatises, and so on): what initially moved them to spurn cultural convention and take up the view that *wealth is not good* are the types of considerations formalized in the arguments of the Stoic philosophers. So, like Chrysippus' students, they have been "instructed in the elements" but still "grasp in a way that is easily shaken", and thus are the ideal beneficiaries of the cautious consideration of contrary arguments.

### 3.2 Seneca's Discussion of Argument (B) as an Illustration of the Chrysippean Proposal

Seneca's epistemic condition before considering the formal Stoic arguments in *Ep.* 87 can therefore be summarized as follows. Through his prior study of Stoicism, he has grasped the indifferent status of wealth, poverty, and the reputation attached to them, but only insecurely, since he comes to feel poverty-based shame during the road trip, which reveals that he is still susceptible to the plausible views on the other side (including that *wealth is good*). Seneca therefore fails to *know* these truths, as his grasp is not maximally stable. We can also surmise that Lucilius, due partly to Seneca's efforts and partly to his own

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<sup>24</sup> At 82.1, Seneca says he has stopped worrying about Lucilius, since he possesses an *animus recti ac boni amatorem*. At 85.1, Lucilius has already been given a taste of the Stoic arguments in favor of virtue's sufficiency for happiness and is eager to hear more. For further discussion of Lucilius' gradual development over the course of the *Moral Letters*, and Seneca's dynamic sensitivity to his changing pedagogical needs, see Boys-Stones 2013, 131-3, Griffin 2007, 90-5, Griffin 1992, 346-55, and Cancik 1967, 39-42.

self-study, has by this point in the action of the *Letters* reached a similar epistemic condition: insecurely grasping, but not yet knowing, the indifferent status of externals and thus remaining vulnerable to at least some forms of passion.

How, then, is Seneca's discussion of the Stoic formal arguments – and argument (B) in particular – supposed to redress this cognitive deficiency? In short: by undermining the plausibility of the Peripatetic objections on the other side, thus clearing the way for Seneca and Lucilius to better appreciate the soundness of the original Stoic argument and more securely grasp its conclusion that *wealth is not good*, so that they are less prone to revise their commitment to this truth in future circumstances of temptation (e.g. when they receive the plausible impression that *wealth is good*). As we will see, raising and dispatching the Peripatetic objection to argument (B) provides Seneca with an opportunity to ground this argument's major premise in more general principles of Stoic ethics, which he and Lucilius would recognize from their previous Stoic training but might not have otherwise applied to the question of wealth's value. The dialectical exercise thus serves to strengthen Seneca and Lucilius' attachment to wealth's indifferent status by tracing the truth of this claim back to central axioms of Stoic ethics, a process initially prompted by their reflection on the shortcomings of the rival Peripatetic view.

Consider again argument (B):

(B1) That which the basest and most despicable person can have is not good.

(B2) But pimps and gladiator-trainers can have wealth.

(B3) So, wealth is not good. (*Ep.* 87.15)

The Peripatetics reject (B1), for “in grammar and in medicine or navigation we see that the lowliest people can have good things” (87.15).<sup>25</sup> All parties are agreed that the “lowliest” people include those with vices such as greed or intemperance. But according to Peripatetic axiology, craft-knowledge (e.g. of medicine or navigation) is a good internal to the soul, which an agent may acquire without also possessing virtue of character (Stob. 2.135). Moreover, on the Peripatetic view, agents lacking virtue of character may also possess goods external to the soul, such as health or wealth (Stob. 2.134-5; cf. 2.46.10-7). Thus, for the Peripatetic, an intemperate doctor can benefit from his possession of the craft-knowledge of medicine and from the money he makes in exercising it, so (B1) is false.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Tr. Inwood. See note above on the identity of the objector as Peripatetic.

<sup>26</sup> For discussion of Peripatetic axiology and its basis in Aristotelian texts, see e.g. Sharples 2010, 165-8, and Inwood 2014. Graver 2018, 313-4, shows that the Peripatetic objection to premise (A1), reported by Seneca at *Ep.* 87.11-2, tallies with views presented in the epitome of Peripatetic ethics attributed to Arius Didymus (Stob. 2.116-152, at 2.129-130). If I am right, the Peripatetic objection to (B1) recounted by Seneca also finds corroboration in this same source.



Having supplied the reasoning behind the plausible Peripatetic view which runs contrary to (B1), Seneca reminds Lucilius of some characteristic features of the good, as the Stoics understand it:

Those crafts [e.g. medicine or navigation] never promised greatness of soul. They do not rise to great heights nor do they disdain the things of fortune. Virtue elevates a human being and places him above the things which are dear to mortals. It neither excessively desires nor fears those things which are called good and those things which are called bad. (*Ep.* 87.16, tr. Inwood modified)

Seneca's move here is to distinguish crafts like medicine from virtue: only the latter bestows "greatness of soul" (*magnitudo animi*) on its possessor and thereby enables her to "disdain the things of fortune", such that they no longer provoke intense desire or fear (i.e. passion).<sup>27</sup> It is apposite for Seneca to insist on this distinction, since elsewhere the Stoics deny that virtue should be understood on the model of stochastic crafts like medicine, whose successful performance depends partly on fortune; virtue is rather to be compared to non-stochastic skills like dancing.<sup>28</sup> Facts about practitioners of stochastic crafts – and about what possessions are open to them – are therefore irrelevant to the Stoic conception of virtue and the good, and so, on this basis, the initially plausible Peripatetic objection to (B1) can be resisted.

Seneca next deploys a further line of argument to defend (B1):

Virtue takes its stand above all such things [sc. due to fortune]. It is assessed at its own value and judges to be good none of those things which can turn up just anywhere. Medicine and navigation do not bar themselves and their practitioners from admiring such things; someone who is not a good person can nevertheless be a doctor... the kind of things a person can possess show the kind of person he is (*qualia quisque habet, talis est*). A money bag is worth as much as it contains; indeed, it counts as an adjunct to what it contains. Who puts any value on a full purse except the value of the amount of money it contains? The same thing applies to those who command great personal wealth; they are adjuncts and appendages of it. So why is a wise person great? Because he has a great

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<sup>27</sup> The Greek Stoics also define μεγαλοψυχία in this way: see DL 7.93, 127-8; Stob. 2.61.15-7; Cicero, *Off.* 1.13, *Tusc.* 3.15. Note further that, on the Stoic account, medical expertise is a technical achievement that does not presuppose the possession of knowledge: non-Sages practice medicine on the basis of their grasps (SE *M* 11.182).

<sup>28</sup> See e.g. Cicero, *Fin.* 3.24 and detailed discussion in Klein 2014 and Striker 1986. Seneca has earlier invoked the distinction between stochastic and non-stochastic crafts at *Ep.* 85.30-5, also in the context of defending Stoic axiology against Peripatetic objections (on which see Inwood 2007, 234-5). Recall that the Stoics standardly characterize virtue as the *ars vitae* or τέχνην περὶ τὸν βίον (Cicero, *Fin.* 3.4; Stob. 2.66-7; SE *M* 11.170).

soul. Therefore it is true that what even the most despicable person can have is not good [B1]. (*Ep.* 87.17-8, tr. Inwood, modified)

Despicable people – including those with medical or navigational expertise – cannot possess the good because their present psychological condition leaves them vulnerable to “admiring” the things of fortune in the wrong way, i.e. passionately, and organizing their life around the wrong goal, e.g. the acquisition of wealth, to which they are mere “adjuncts and appendages”. By implication, then, to possess the good requires a different condition of soul – greatness of soul – which enables the agent (*inter alia*) to assess externals correctly. So, as elaborated and justified by Seneca here, (B1) relies on an important principle of Stoic axiology, that *the good is a property of the rational soul or person, causally responsible for correct cognition and motivation*.<sup>29</sup> Arguably the same principle motivates premise (A1) (“that which is good makes people good”) and (E1) (“those things which do not produce greatness or confidence or calmness in the soul are not good”), and it can be understood as an articulation of the Greek Stoics’ slogan that the good is “the natural perfection of the rational being qua rational”.<sup>30</sup> It also underlies Seneca’s agricultural metaphor at *Ep.* 87.19-21: just as grain only grows in a particular kind of soil, so the good is only found in a particular kind of rational soul, one that is “pure and sacred” (*purus ac sanctus*) and befitting a god.

This same principle of Stoic axiology could also be used to explain what is wrong with poverty-based censure, in a way that further develops Seneca’s remarks at the outset of letter. Noticing the shame he feels in being seen in a shabby carriage, Seneca chastises himself and denounces the opinions of his fellow travelers, who “gawk at superfluous things” and do not “value anyone at their true worth” (*Ep.* 87.5). In other words, Seneca here comes to see that censuring others for poverty involves a mistake about what makes a life good and praiseworthy: the possession of wealth, not virtue (cf. *Ep.* 41.7-8, 45.9). Yet this mistake could also be diagnosed as a case of ignorance of the Stoic principle that *the good is a property of the rational soul or person*, which entails that the proper locus of praise or blame is not the person’s material possessions but rather the condition of her rationality (whether it is virtuous or not). So then, as a result of their engagement with argument (B) and the Peripatetic objection against it, the pair of moral progressors have available the beginnings of a systematic explanation of why neither wealth nor the reputation for it are good – neither is a property of the person – and are thus equipped with additional rational resources with which to resist the contrary view. The false value-claims underlying Seneca’s shame are now liable to strike him and Lucilius as less plausible than before, in light of their newfound appreciation that such claims are incompatible with fundamental Stoic principles about the good.

<sup>29</sup> See further *Ep.* 41.7-9, 66.6, 76.9-10, 120.10-2, 124.12-4. On the identity of the rational soul, or mind (διάνοια), with the person, see e.g. Chrysippus in Galen *PHP* 2.2.9-11 and discussion in Brennan 2009, 400-1.

<sup>30</sup> DL 7.94: τὸ τέλειον κατὰ φύσιν λογικοῦ ὡς λογικοῦ. Cf. Cicero, *Fin.* 3.33, attributed to Diogenes of Babylon: *quod esset natura absolutum*.

Admittedly, Seneca's defense of (B1) likely won't persuade the Peripatetic that their objection to this premise is misguided. For the Peripatetics, but not the Stoics, there are goods internal to the soul, like craft-knowledge, and external to it, like wealth, which are separate from virtue and benefit the agent without perfecting the cognitive and motivational activities of the rational soul. Seneca's reply assumes, but does not demonstrate, that this notion of the good is false.<sup>31</sup>

This need not be a problem for Seneca, however, if his interests are shaped by the Chrysippean pedagogical theory. In this context, the dialectical aim is limited to a particular audience: the teacher must undermine the plausibility of anti-Stoic views specifically in the eyes of advanced Stoic students, not any given interlocutor, and to this end can effectively deploy claims that these students, but not (e.g.) the Peripatetic philosopher, would endorse. Accepting this frame of reference, we can make good sense of Seneca's approach to the Peripatetic objection to (B1), which is revealed to be inconsistent with more general principles of Stoic axiology, whose truth he and Lucilius are already willing to accept, and whose relevance to the case at hand they have now worked out. What we find here, then, is an *inward-looking* dialectical exercise, whose effectiveness is conditioned by the identity of the interlocutor and their degree of previous engagement with, and credence in, Stoic doctrine. Seneca's reply may beg the question against the Peripatetic but nonetheless succeed in fortifying the grasps of the Stoic moral progressor.

#### 4. Seneca on the Limitations of Dialectical Study

It is now time to face the challenge posed by the anti-dialectic reading. On this interpretation, Seneca sees the study of formal arguments as at best unhelpful for moral progress and at worst counter-productive. This hostile attitude emerges, it is argued, in two series of letters, first in *Ep.* 45, 48, and 49, and later in *Ep.* 82, 83, 85, and 87.<sup>32</sup> Specifically, the final section of *Ep.* 87 (41) would seem to support this reading, where Seneca appears to rule out any kind of positive contribution to moral improvement from the close consideration of arguments (A)-(E), therefore undermining my suggestion that he and Lucilius stand to gain from this exercise by stabilizing their grasp of wealth's indifferent status. In reply, I will argue that Seneca's criticism here and in these other letters is considerably more qualified than the anti-dialectic reading supposes. Seneca is not advocating a total ban on the study of formal arguments but is rather repudiating its effectiveness in certain contexts, on certain agents, and on certain topics, while leaving open the possibility that it could benefit himself and Lucilius in the manner I have proposed above.

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<sup>31</sup> So while I agree with Merry 2021, 107-8, that Seneca does not attempt to *refute* the Peripatetic objection to (B1), I cannot see how his discussion can be construed as an attempt to find "common ground with the Peripatetic".

<sup>32</sup> For references, see introduction.

In *Ep.* 45, 48, and 49, Seneca litigates a “dispute with the dialecticians” (*litem cum dialecticis*: 45.13). One main charge of his indictment is the utter uselessness of the study of sophisms like the Liar, the Horned Man, and others less well-known whose resolution turns on disambiguating the meanings of equivocal terms or distinguishing the term itself from its referent (45.4-6, 8, 10; 48.4, 6-7; 49.6-9). Ignorance of these matters, Seneca asserts, brings no risk or even inconvenience (48.6); indeed, studying these *ineptiae* and *lusoria* is positively *harmful* for men of talent (48.9). Lucilius should stay away (48.12).

Here one might reasonably disagree with Seneca that ignorance of (e.g.) the fallacy of presupposition or the use-mention distinction – broader issues raised by the study of the Horned Man and other sophisms – has no bearing on moral progress. The early Stoics certainly did not agree.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, Seneca himself may not be fully consistent on this point, since he is able to find at least one productive application of a general facility in disambiguation:

If you really want to draw distinctions among terms (*verborum ambiguitates diducere*), explain to us the following: that the happy person is not the one ordinary people call happy, not the one who has been showered with money, but rather the one whose every good resides in the soul. That one is upright and exalted; he spurns underfoot the objects of wonder; he would not trade his life for any other that he sees. He assesses a person only by that part which makes him a human being [sc. his rationality]... He is sure in judgment, firm and unshaken. (*Ep.* 45.9, tr. Graver & Long, modified)

In any case, the Stoic arguments at issue in *Ep.* 87 differ significantly from the sophisms whose study Seneca so harshly condemns. These puzzles are not of Stoic authorship and, in Seneca’s view at least, they do not pertain to matters of ethics. More importantly, they are presented as exercises in deception, “stringing a false conclusion to a true premise” (48.5), whereas Seneca never questions the truth of either the premises or conclusions of arguments (A)-(E). So even if Seneca rejects the value of studying the Liar, the Horned Man, etc., and (self-consciously) departs from the early Stoics in taking this position, this result does not imply that he thereby also rules out the positive use of formal Stoic argumentation in *Ep.* 87: they are simply not the same breed of argument.

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<sup>33</sup> As Wildberger 2006a, 143, correctly emphasizes. Similarly Cooper 2004, 316, is right to observe that, for the early Stoics, “these fallacies are in fact of very general application”, so that ignorance of how to resolve (e.g.) the Horned Man leaves one open to drawing “an erroneous inference in a more complicated case and then even [acting] upon it”. See Castagnoli 2010, 159-60, for a survey of the early Stoic texts testifying to the “defensive function” of dialectical and logical study.

This reply will not satisfy the anti-dialectic reader, however, since in *Ep.* 82 Seneca appears to critique, no less vigorously than the sophisms, certain formal arguments of Stoic origin that directly address ethical topics. Here Seneca contemptuously mocks the idea that, by exposure to Zeno's famous two-premise arguments, one could be persuaded that (e.g.) *death is not bad* and thus come to be cured of the fear of death:

This strength [sc. to overcome the fear of death] will come from constant reflection (*assidua meditatio*), provided that you practice not your verbal skills but your soul (*non verba exercueris, sed animum*), and provided that you prepare yourself against death, to which end you may expect no encouragement or cheer from those who try to persuade you, by means of their jests, that death is not bad (*qui cavillationibus tibi persuadere temptaverit mortem malum non esse*). For I take pleasure, excellent Lucilius, in poking fun at the absurdities (*ineptiae*) of the Greeks, of which, to my continual surprise, I have not yet succeeded in ridding myself. Our Zeno employs this argument: "Nothing bad is glorious; but death is glorious; therefore death is not bad". You've progressed (*profecisti*)! I have been freed from fear; henceforth I shall not hesitate to bare my neck on the scaffold. Will you not utter sterner words instead of rousing a dying man to laughter? (82.8-9, tr. Gummere with changes)

In this passage laced with sarcasm, Seneca dismisses the possibility that, simply by rehearsing Zeno's argument, either he or Lucilius could advance in their moral progress (note: *profecisti*). Like the sophisms criticized in the earlier letters, Zeno's argument is described here as another Greek *ineptia*: frivolous word-play with no real persuasive effect.<sup>34</sup> Although his Stoic predecessors labored to demonstrate the soundness of Zeno's argument and to distinguish it from its sophistical parallel (82.10; see Schofield 1983 and Ierodiakonou 2002), Seneca derides these efforts:

Those of our school want Zeno's argument to be regarded as sound (*veram*) but the other which opposes it [sc. the sophistical parallel] to be fallacious and unsound (*fallacem... et falsam*). But I for my part decline to reduce such questions to a matter of dialectical rules or to those subtleties of a languid skill (*Ego non redigo ista ad legem dialecticam et ad illos artificii veternosissimi nodos*). My position is that all that kind of thing should be

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<sup>34</sup> See further discussion in Barnes 1997, 16-7, and Schofield 1983, 32-3. Upon hearing the conclusion to the Horned Man, Seneca says, no one checks their head to see if it has horns (45.8). In the closing section of 82, Seneca compares using Zeno's arguments to cure the fear of death to using small arrows to kill a giant serpent: both are hopelessly ineffective weapons to combat a pressing danger (82.23-4; cf. 85.1).

thrown out, which makes the one under questioning think he is being entrapped and forces him to answer one way, although he believes something else (*Totum genus istuc exturbandum iudico, quo circumscribi se, qui interrogatur, existimat et ad confessionem perductus aliud respondet, aliud putat*). (*Ep.* 82.19, my translation)

Taken together, these passages look like very strong evidence for the anti-dialectic reading. John Cooper, for instance, reconstructs Seneca's train of thought here as follows (2004: 317-9). In general, no formal argument has any persuasive effect on its listener. Hence it would be laughable for Leonidas to try to persuade the 300 to die at their posts in Thermopylae by reciting Zeno's argument (82.20-1). So in showing that Zeno's argument is sound, whereas its sophistical parallel is not, the Stoic dialecticians have achieved an ultimately meaningless victory, if their goal is to *persuade* the audience that *death is not bad*: they have sidestepped this important task and instead applied the overfine "subtleties of a languid skill". Moreover, Seneca thinks there is something objectionable about the dialectical setting itself – the arena in which this "languid skill" is employed. A dialectical confrontation proceeding by question and answer is inherently hostile and manipulative. Its aim is solely to "entrap" (*circumscribere*) the interlocutor and maneuver him into answering "yes" to the premises and conclusion: this contest can be won without ever really persuading the interlocutor that the conclusion is true (Schofield 1983, 33-4; Merry 2021, 103-4). Therefore, if the goal is winning genuine conviction in the interlocutor, "all this sort of thing", i.e. any use of dialectical argumentation, "must be thrown out" (*totum genus istuc exturbandum*): "there are other, better ways of showing that no one's death is ever bad for them" (Cooper 2004: 319).

So interpreted, Seneca's view in *Ep.* 82 would rule out my proposal for the positive use of dialectical study in *Ep.* 87: if formal arguments have no persuasive effect and are only promulgated for shallow, victory-seeking ends, then Seneca and Lucilius could not hope to be improved in any way through the consideration of arguments (A)-(E). His purpose in mentioning them in *Ep.* 87 would be purely cautionary: an extended warning to Lucilius that they offer no contribution to moral progress.

There is something odd, however, in the suggestion that Seneca raises arguments (A)-(E), and goes on to defend them in detail against Peripatetic objections, only as a way of emphasizing to Lucilius just how pointless that whole enterprise is. In any event, on closer inspection, Seneca's criticisms in *Ep.* 82 can be shown to be much narrower than the anti-dialectic reading interprets them and ultimately compatible with a salutary assessment of the dialectical activity pursued in *Ep.* 87.<sup>35</sup> Consider this remark:

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<sup>35</sup> So also Merry 2021, 105-6.

My preference would be to break down these arguments, which are thought up by them [sc. Zeno and other Stoics] and expand on them, so that I can persuade rather than deceive (*Haec ipsa, quae voluntur ab illis, solvere malim et expandere, ut persuadeam, non ut inponam*). (82.20, my translation)

One reason Zeno's argument fails to convince, Seneca suggests here, is that it is presented in the wrong way: bare and unadorned in an agonistic dialectical setting, without being carefully analyzed and expanded upon (*solvere... expandere*) – or properly considered<sup>36</sup> – for the benefit of the interlocutor. In other words, arguments need to be explained, defended, and reflected upon in order to have persuasive force, and this task can only be carried out in a context lacking the strictures of live, competitive, question-and-answer dialectic, such as a philosophical-cum-pedagogical correspondence between intimates, where the Stoic formal argument can serve as a starting-point for instruction.<sup>37</sup>

One way to “break down... and expand on” a formal Stoic argument, I propose, would be the procedure we observe in *Ep.* 87. In presenting argument (B), and then raising and answering the Peripatetic objection to (B1), Seneca is able to join up the argument's major premise to more fundamental principles of Stoic axiology, while also removing the plausibility of the contrary view and fortifying the persuasiveness of the original Stoic argument, so that its conclusion is more firmly grasped. This kind of exercise goes way beyond the mere reciting of argument (B) – and so differs from the austere practice mocked by Seneca at *Ep.* 82.8-9 – and is carried out together with Lucilius in a collaborative spirit.<sup>38</sup>

I will concede, however, that Seneca thinks that some Stoic arguments are more suitable than others as a basis for further reflection and pedagogical application. For instance, in Seneca's view, Zeno's argument that the Sage will not get drunk (*Ep.* 83.9) employs a premise whose truth cannot be defended, despite Posidonius' best efforts (83.10-17), and should therefore be replaced with more rhetorical exhortations to avoid the dangers of excessive drinking (83.17-27). But in this respect the drunkenness argument differs from the formal Stoic arguments considered in *Ep.* 87, whose premises, Seneca thinks, all survive the more exacting scrutiny of the Peripatetic counter-arguments. So rather than categorically

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<sup>36</sup> Some manuscripts have *expendere* instead of *expandere* at 82.20.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Seneca's distinction in *Ep.* 33.8 between remembering (*meminisse*) and knowing (*scire*) the arguments of the Greek Stoics: knowledge is achieved when one has made these arguments one's own (*sua facere*) and is able to expound upon them without “constantly looking back at the master” (*totiens respicere ad magistrum*).

<sup>38</sup> But then why shouldn't Seneca's procedure in *Ep.* 87 count as showing that arguments (A)-(E) are *sound* (*veram*), the very activity he criticizes in the Stoic dialecticians (82.19)? In engaging with arguments (A)-(E), Seneca, unlike the Stoic dialecticians, does not claim to be ascribing any property to these arguments according to the canons of Stoic dialectic or Stoic syllogistic specifically (for ἀληθής as a property of arguments, capturing our notion of soundness, see DL 7.79). Rather Seneca uses these arguments as a tool of moral instruction – part of process that, for him, does not transpire within the confrontational context of live, question-and-answer dialectic. Cf. *Ep.* 102.20.

banning the use of formal Stoic arguments, Seneca is better understood as approving some and rejecting others as appropriate foundations for further expansion and analysis.

There is also something noteworthy about the *targets* of persuasion imagined in *Ep.* 82 and 83: they are not so much philosophical sophisticates, or even advanced moral progressors, but rather soldiers (82.20-2), a “middling person” (*tolerabilis homo*: 83.17), or human beings in general (82.22). Perhaps, then, Seneca’s qualms about the use of Zenonian argumentation extends also to the *kind of agent it is addressed to*. This suggestion leads us to the closing passage of *Ep.* 87:

Imagine we have been summoned to a public assembly (*contionem*) where the question is whether to pass a law to abolish wealth. By using these arguments, will we be positioned to persuade or dissuade (*his interrogationibus suasuri aut dissuasuri sumus*)? To bring it about that the Roman people would demand and praise poverty, the foundation and cause of their empire, and to fear their present wealth? To make them realize that their wealth was derived from conquered peoples, and is the reason why ambition, bribery, and unrest have taken over a city of such great sanctity and restraint? ... It is better to persuade them of these points and assault their passion than to entrap it (*Haec satius est suadere et expugnare adfectus, non circumscribere*). (*Ep.* 87.41, tr. Graver & Long, modified)

It cannot be denied that Seneca is here emphasizing the limitations in the use of Stoic formal arguments for moral exhortation and persuasion.<sup>39</sup> He invites Lucilius to imagine a patently absurd scene. The Roman public is assembled in a *contio* and addressed by a magistrate on the merits of enacting a law prohibiting wealth. However, this magistrate’s speech contains nothing other than the crisp, two-premise arguments Seneca has presented in *Ep.* 87. Seneca expects Lucilius to agree that, for the purpose of convincing the public to support the wealth-ban, this effort would be laughably futile.

But what exactly does this thought-experiment show? Even if the Stoic arguments concluding that *wealth is not good* fail to persuade the Roman people to ban wealth, that does not imply that they are of no value whatsoever (Inwood 2007, 259; Barnes 1997, 17-8; cf. Cancik 1967, 38-9): they may still be beneficial for other agents or for other purposes. Perhaps Seneca’s point is that the Roman-on-the-street must first be softened up by non-technical rhetorical persuasion – like Seneca’s denunciation of

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<sup>39</sup> Merry 2021, 106, proposes that the criticism here applies only to the Peripatetic argument mentioned just before (87.38) and not to the Stoic arguments (A)-(E). To be sure, Seneca complains that the resolution of the Peripatetic argument will involve disambiguating the various meanings of “poverty” (*paupertas*) (87.38-40), and disambiguation, as we have seen, is an activity for which he has little patience; to his mind, engaging with the Peripatetic argument occasions another trivial quarrel over words (87.40; cf. Inwood 2007, 258-9). However, the plural *interrogationibus* at 87.41 poses a difficulty for Merry’s proposal: we would expect the singular if it were the lone Peripatetic argument being targeted here.



drunkenness addressed to the “middling person” (83.17-27) – and commit to further engagement with Stoic doctrine before they can gain the benefits of studying formal arguments. Elsewhere (*Ep.* 75), Seneca notes that different vicious agents are closer or farther from attaining virtue and accordingly require different methods of instruction. And there is ample evidence that Seneca and Lucilius at the start of *Ep.* 87 differ from the non-philosophical public in their progress toward virtue: they have internalized the fundamental truths of Stoic ethics, albeit they are prone to moral backsliding; they have an insecure grasp that *wealth is not good*, whereas the average Roman is fully committed to the false opinion that *wealth is good*; and although they are still prone to suffer passions related to wealth and poverty, Seneca, at least, has come to accept the value of *frugalitas* (87.5) and is represented as suffering wealth-related passions to a lesser extent than the Roman-on-the-street (note the emphasis on the *adfectus* of the Roman people at 87.41).

In summary, then, Seneca’s critique of dialectic in these letters is best understood not as a categorical prohibition but rather as a more limited rejection of its use in certain contexts (the hostile dialectical setting, without an opportunity to expand on or further articulate the larger issues raised by a given premise); on certain topics (sophisms and logical puzzles, which Seneca maintains, on questionable grounds, to have no relevance to ethics); and on certain agents (the non-philosophical public). This criticism is therefore perfectly compatible with the procedure adopted in *Ep.* 87, as I interpret it, where Seneca and Lucilius examine in a collaborative pedagogical setting formal Stoic arguments in ethics alongside a set of Peripatetic objections; these objections prompt them to expand on the premises of the original arguments and work out their connection to more fundamental principles of Stoic ethics, with the result that the two moral progressors become more firmly persuaded of the conclusion that *wealth is not good* and less prone to abandon it in the future.

## 5. Conclusion

I have argued that Seneca’s intricate discussion of the five Stoic arguments in *Ep.* 87 illustrates the kind of dialectical activity that, on his view, genuinely supports moral improvement. Seneca conceives of this activity as a way to help moral progressors like himself and Lucilius solidify their fragile grasp of the truths of Stoic ethics and thereby come closer to *knowing* them – the epistemic condition of the Sage that brings with it happiness and a complete insusceptibility to passion. By cautiously raising and then disarming objections to arguments (A)-(E), in a pedagogical context that allows for careful reflection and analysis, Seneca and Lucilius become better positioned to oppose plausible anti-Stoic views (e.g. that *wealth is good* or *poverty is bad*) and to withhold assent on these false value-claims on future occasions. In all these details, I have argued, Seneca follows the earlier recommendations of Chrysippus. The

skeletal outline of the Chrysippean pedagogical proposal excavated in the fragments in Plutarch is thus fleshed out by the action of *Ep.* 87. Applying the Chrysippean frame of reference to *Ep.* 87 makes the best sense of how Seneca goes about engaging with the contrary Peripatetic views – not independently refuting them but rather making explicit their incompatibility with certain Stoic principles to which he and Lucilius are already sympathetic – and brings out the significance of this letter for understanding Seneca’s nuanced view of how dialectical study can help one to become good.<sup>40</sup>

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