Seneca on Death

RUSSELL NOYES, Jr.

Lucius Annaeus Seneca, the foremost exponent of Roman Stoic philosophy, dwelt extensively upon the subject of death in his writings. The key to the ethics he espoused lay in conquering the fear of death; he urged premeditation throughout life in preparation for its final and climactic hour. Indeed, Seneca saw learning to die as preparation for life; hence he made it a goal of his practical philosophy. He raised the human will to lofty heights by his call for men to seize power over tyrannical fortune and, if necessary, to end their lives to maintain supremacy. In contrast to the Christians of the following era, he was uncertain of existence after death and did not regard this life as a preparation for the next one. Consequently, he did not consider the manner of dying to be an important determinant of an afterlife as did the Christians. Like them, however, he recognized the importance of this last stage of life and viewed it as a long-awaited moment when a man’s beliefs were put to their severest test. If he died well, a man died bravely and gladly. Since dying held continuity with the life of the Stoic, early contemplation of the event influenced his moral development. Seneca’s teachings stand in sharp contrast to

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RUSSELL NOYES, JR., M.D., is an Associate Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Iowa College of Medicine, Iowa City, Iowa.
to our own and deserve re-examination during a time when attitudes toward death are undergoing change.

Life and works

Seneca was born in Corduba, Spain, in 4 B.C. of wealthy and cultured parents. He was of delicate constitution and suffered serious illness during his childhood. In Rome, he studied rhetoric and philosophy and, in early adult life, rose to wealth and prominence as a pleader of causes. He became a senator under Caligula, but the latter, envious of his talents, marked him for destruction. The emperor was restrained from killing him only because he believed that Seneca's ill health would soon result in death. Under Claudius, Seneca rapidly rose to eminence. Accused, probably falsely, of adultery by Claudius' wife, Messalina, he was banished to Corsica, where he remained for eight years. A succeeding wife, Agrippina, brought about his return and entrusted him with the education of her son, Nero. When, in 54 A.D., Nero became emperor, Seneca served as his prime minister. The restraint that his counsel imposed upon the emperor, however, led to strained relations between them, and in 59 A.D. the philosopher retired to his estates. Becoming implicated in an abortive conspiracy in 65 A.D., he was bidden to take his own life. He did so in the company of his wife, who had insisted upon sharing his death.

 Seneca's death was a truly noble one, becoming to a Stoic if not to Seneca himself. According to Tacitus, when Nero's message reached him, "undismayed he asked for tablets upon which to make his will. When this was refused by the centurion, he turned to his friends and said that since he was prevented from rewarding their service, he would leave to them one thing, and yet the best thing, that he had to leave—the pattern of life. . . . At the same time he reminded his weeping friends of their duty to be strong, now by his conversation, now by sterner rebuke, asking them what had become of the precepts of wisdom and of the philosophy which through so many years they had studied in the face of impending evils. . . . Then he embraced his wife and, with a tenderness