

Stoicism and Suicide: Political Resistance in the Cases of Cato and Seneca

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Abstract. This paper questions that Stoicism provided a direct motivation for the most notable suicides in the Roman era and that it provided a collective, so called “Stoic revolt” against monarchical rule. The paper critically examines the cases of Cato the Younger and Seneca the Younger by first outlining the Stoic boundaries of a permissible suicide by means of rational self-control, the preservation of virtue, and the repudiation of actions that were motivated by passion. The paper closely examines their biographies and contemporary sources. It concludes that the violent and emotional self-termination by Cato cannot be reconciled with the Stoic doctrine on the question of emotional control and should instead be more plausibly interpreted as a political protest Caesar that was grounded in the republican tradition. Seneca’s peaceful death, by contrast, was slightly more consonant with the Stoic dogmas. However, it needs to be understood in the context of the long record of concessions at the court of Nero and the failure for Seneca to agree with the principles he lobbied as a self-claim Stoic. The term Stoic came to be invoked routinely after the event to describe the politically motivated suicides and that scholars should distinguish the doctrinal nature of the Stoicism from the political uses, to which it had been put during the constitutional crises at Rome. This paper argues that Cato and Seneca’s biographies did not match their Stoic identity.

Keywords: Stoicism, Suicide, Political Resistance, Republicanism

1. Introduction

The period from the late Roman Republic to the early Principate is known for the frequent suicides of the Roman political elites and intellectuals [1]. In the context of severe political struggles between the Optimates and Populares, those republicans who rejected any form of tyranny also chose the path of suicide to avoid being enslaved by dictators. Stoicism, a philosophical school derived from Greece and having gained prominent popularity among the Romans since the first century BCE, provided them a convenient philosophical justification by claiming that a virtuous agent may embrace death with calm self-determination. Past research has shown great correlation between suicide and Stoicism in the late republic and early empire, highlighting the connection between the philosophical pursuit and the noteworthy frequency of suicides among the Roman elites during the transformative era [2].

However, this paper intends to demonstrate that those who committed suicide in this period were more likely to do so based on the sentiment of political resistance. In other words, Stoicism was not the driving force, nor the motivation for their actions but rather a convenient philosophical and ideological justification. By studying the cases of Cato the Younger and Seneca, this paper shows that neither of the two fit the Stoic doctrine of emotion-control regarding their suicides neatly. Instead, it argues that, though being considered exemplary Stoic philosophers, the two Roman statesmen committed suicide as an act of political resistance rather than a hardcore exercise of the Stoic ideal.

2. Stoic ideas on death and suicide

Stoicism earned most of its reputation in Imperial Rome by influencing a great myriad of philosophers in the Graeco-Roman world, known as the Stoics. Stoics' theology centres on "logos" (logic) and places ethics as one of the main components. Within this framework, the cultivation of virtue is regarded as something necessary and sufficient to achieve eudaimonia. According to Aristotle, eudaimonia refers to "living well and faring well with being happy" (Arist. Eth. Nic. 1.4). The Stoics inherited this concept and offered ways to achieve it. Zeno of Citium (c.334–262 BC), the founder of Stoicism, highlighted the idea of "telos," which means "end". It was represented as a state of "living in agreement" with reason, since those who live in conflict would be unhappy (Stob. Flor. 63B). Cleanthes of Assos (c.330–232 BC), Zeno's successor, emphasized not only reason but also nature, claiming that the end is living in agreement "with nature." The quote to "live in agreement" with both human nature and cosmic or divine nature at once (Diog. Laert. Lives. 87), means that virtue will be the only thing required, which is a disposition that accords with nature. Therefore, eudaimonia could only be achieved if one implements all the virtues and avoids the vices (Sen. Brev. Vit. 8).

The most significant means highlighted by the Stoics to achieve this goal was the self-discipline of emotions. Chrysippus of Soli (c.279–262 BC), a pivotal Stoic during the Hellenistic age, argued that emotion is a "rational impulse" (Stob. Flor. 53Q) rather than the product of reason, which accords harmoniously with nature. Therefore, an excessive amount of emotion will result in a weak mind [3]. Building on the teachings of Zeno, Chrysippus argued that these potential disturbances must be handled by preparing the mind in advance and maintaining inner equanimity to prevent the dominance of passions, i.e. pleasure, distress, desire and fear, over logic, which will hinder the realization of eudaimonia (Diog. Laert. Lives. 7.1) [4]. Epictetus (c. 50–135 CE), expanded this understanding of emotion by distinguishing between things within our control and the external events that were up to the "god" [5], which refers to Zeus. For him, the most ideal state is the passion-free (apatheia). It is desirable because of the negative definition that has been attached to "emotions". Epictetus argues that emotions stem from our judgments toward external events, and by pre-venting/correcting these, we can reach harmony and align with nature. (Epictetus, Ench. 5). Epictetus's argument was inspirational for later Stoics. Seneca (c. 4 BC–65 AD) advanced this enterprise by categorizing the emotions, some of which, such as anger, were not the outcome of man's inner rationality but rather "short madness" (Sen. De Ira 1.9). Other emotions like joy, on the contrary, could be the outcome of virtue and rationality, and therefore be self-contained accordingly (Sen. De Ira 59.1).

The Stoics' self-discipline of emotion also applies to death. They regarded death as something inevitable and should be treated with the utmost calm. Any form of death that adheres to natural law was welcomed by the Stoics [6]. Chrysippus, for instance, died from laughter, which can be seen as an example of natural death because he welcomed that laughter, and his death was a natural outcome

of that [7]. The fear of death, instead of death itself, was something that the Stoics attempted to eliminate. As Epictetus put it, “I cannot escape death, but at least I can escape the fear of it” (Epictetus Disc. 1.1).

Counterintuitively, however, some Stoics also regarded suicide as an acceptable way of death. Zeno, for instance, met his end consistently, following the Stoic ideal of rational self-determination. After slipping on a stairway and fracturing his toe, he calmly resolved that the pain and impediment to his virtuous practice outweighed the value of continued life. Thus, He chose to hold his breath and died as he believed that was the most fitting exit from a life no longer capable of full rational action (Diog. Laert., Lives. 7.28). Therefore, later Stoics drew a clear line between the acceptable and the unjustifiable suicides based on the Stoic concept of freedom, which refers to the ability to act without being compelled against one’s will (Epictetus Disc. 4.68–90). When disease or tyranny stripped away the possibility of moral choice, depriving human beings of the potential for self-flourishing, suicide could be considered a justifiable response [7]. In contrast, those who commit suicide due to lesser motives, such as distress, financial loss, and social disgrace, are condemned for cowardice by the Stoics. Epictetus further conceptualized this boundary by arguing that only those who relinquish life in defence of the highest good could be praised for following the Stoic doctrines. He criticized those who abandoned their own lives solely to escape from pain or duty (Epictetus, Disc. 1.24). Thus, the Stoics generally held that suicide is not an act of despair, but rather a principled assertion of rational autonomy that is acceptable and often praised when the opportunity of exercising a virtuous life is undermined. Anything beyond that boundary, e.g., committing suicide due to lesser reasons, the Stoics warn, betrays not only the Stoic philosophical pursuit, but also makes the individual prey of the very passions they sought to master [7].

Although the Stoics put politics into the category of the “indifferent,” some modern scholars have taken this remark too far in describing Stoicism as a hatchery for conspiracies against the imperial power [8]. In fact, Stoicism did not necessarily entail serial acts of defiance against tyranny. The frequently employed term “Stoic opposition” has been used in recent studies to suggest a coordinated intellectual anti-emperor movement, but there is no immediate evidence that makes this clear [9]. Rather, the so-called “Stoic opposition” should be understood as an endogenous philosophical and historiographical construct, but not a political reality from the past. As mentioned above, Stoicism was about living virtuously and naturally, but not actively opposing political power. The word endured nevertheless because some of the most well-known political dissenters, such as Thrasea Paetus and Helvidius Priscus, were devoted Stoics, resulting in a combination of philosophy and political resistance.

As a result, later interpreters tended to exaggerate the Stoic motives in their resistance, which were less grounded or even non-existent. What motivated their resistance was mostly their political ideal or personal nostalgic commitment to the republican cause, not necessarily the Stoic pursuit. As illustrated by the cases of Cato and Seneca, their suicides were not so many acts of Stoic teaching as gestures of re-publican devotion and the fulfilment of their civic duty. In all of these scenarios, death was a politically driven demonstration of resistance, though mediated and head-lined by the Stoic language and later reconstructions. All in all, as shown by the cases of Cato and Seneca, the suicides of the Roman elites shall be regarded as less Stoicism-inspired but politically driven.

3. Exemplars figures: Cato and Seneca

To grasp the implications behind their suicides, it is essential to outline the lives and careers of these two distinguished Roman figures. As a prominent senator, Cato the Younger (c.95–46 BC) was known for his virtues and his relentless defence of *mos maiorum* during the last days of the Roman

Republic. According to Plutarch, Cato was such an exemplary figure that when his brother Caepio was praised for moderation, he replied that he was better than the extravagant and effeminate Sippius when compared to Cato (Plut. Cat. Min. 3.) During the Roman civil war, Cato became the leader of the optimates and struggled to defend the Republic. In 46 BCE, he committed suicide after the republic's military defeat at Utica, where Cato garrisoned (Plut., Cat. Min. 70.5–6).

Compared with Cato, Seneca had a slightly less distinguished family background. Born into the class of equites in Roman Spain, Seneca had the chance to immerse himself in rhetorical studies, which allowed him to engage in the study of Stoic philosophy, thanks to which he gained his fame as an orator and a polymath. Being elected as a quaestor around 35 AD, Seneca entered the Senate and subsequently became the tutor of the young emperor Nero at the request of the younger emperor's mother. He was widely regarded as a wise man of multiple philosophical works. Unfortunately, at the age of 65, he was ordered to commit suicide by Nero for the alleged involvement in the "Pisonian Conspiracy" in 65 AD.

Though they were thought of as Stoic philosophers, there had been much criticism of the discrepancies between their actions and their alleged pursuit of the Stoic way of life. Plutarch and Tacitus provided many details about the lives and the contemporary criticism of the two, especially in their episodes about the suicides of Cato and Seneca. To Cato, Plutarch dedicated an independent biography aiming to compare him to the Athenian statesman Phocion. In the biography, Cato was depicted as a firm defender of the republic's values and system. When Caesar's troops were approaching the city of Utica, Cato proposed to defend the city with the delaying tactics of Fabius, the greatest defender of Rome during the Second Punic War. With his suggestion rejected by Metellus Scipio, Cato saw no chance to turn the tide and, therefore, made up his mind to commit suicide.

Plutarch offered a vivid and detailed description of Cato's suicide in his residence. (Plut. Cat. Min. 70) Before taking the final step, he completed his duties that he was responsible for, showing a great extent of selflessness and sentimental attachment to the republic. Using his wisdom to persuade his friends and relatives to retreat from the city, he retreated to his residence, where he took a bath and thought about those Stoic philosophers who ended their lives by suicide. Reportedly, Cato could have ended his life most peacefully by reading Plato's Dialogue, only if his sword had not disappeared. He then forgot Plato's teaching and angrily bade his servants who failed to find the sword. After taking several rests, he eventually stabbed himself late at night. Therefore, Cato's violent and resentful death fell in discrepancy with the Stoic ideal he aspired to, leaving a blemish on his philosophical legacy and standing in stark contrast to the Stoic vision of dying with peace and composure.

4. Contrast views on Cato and Seneca

The suicide scenario of Cato in Plutarch's text was complex for its diverse items and rich connotations. In Life of Cato, with his narrative perspectives and devices, Plutarch was mostly praising Cato for following Stoicism throughout his whole life until its very end, bringing it to its climax. The last episode of Cato's life, that is, his suicide, was incorporated into a 'Stoic's life' of Cato as a factual description without mentioning the inner tension between Cato's death scene with his Stoic ideal.

Yet the scene itself is strikingly violent. Plutarch's adoption of a series of verbs that indicate bloodiness and emotional deviation from Stoicism. For example, Cato bade his servant who failed to fetch the sword he prepared to use for suicide; he then demanded the sword in a louder voice and declared his family members to be his enemies. This psychologically immature status subverted his

Stoic image. When Cato's physician went to save him, "(Cato) tore his bowels with his hands... rent the wound still more" (Plut. Cat. Min. 70). Plutarch's word choice of "rend" and "tear" violently conveyed the dramatic amount of brutality in the last hours of Cato, which discord with the calmness expected on a stoic philosopher in their final hours.

In this way, Plutarch's narrative is subverting the consistency of the Stoicism doctrine that Cato had attempted to follow in his lifetime. The anger and violence demonstrated by Cato were, in fact, contradictory to the Stoic ideal, which condemned the uncontrolled exposure of emotions. Particularly, anger, according to Seneca, "is temporary madness, for it is equally devoid of self-control, forgetful of decency, unmindful of ties, persistent and diligent in whatever it begins" (Sen. De Ira 2.1). According to Stoicism, a mind driven by such "brief madness", even in the name against tyranny, cannot be reconciled with the inner reason, which should dominate the self (Chrysippus Frag. 2 On Passions). This anger betrays reasoning and renders all the virtues in humanity to be invalid, particularly temperance and equanimity which allow men to reason. Therefore, Cato's "temporary madness" was at odds with the philosophy he hoped to embody, compromising his image as a stoic who could become his "own master" (Plut. Cat. Min. 70). Cato was ostensibly sunk in a predicament in which the danger of the collapse of the Republic is close at hand and the menace of Caesar's troops are more than apparent.

However, to some extent the true enemy of the Stoic image of Cato was not Caesar or the opponents of republicanism, but his own inner turmoil. He did not utilize the Stoic teaching of tranquillity but imitated the violence and fury of Caesar on the Republic, which is represented throughout his unthoughtful behaviours towards his servant and taking his own life by suicide. Hence, his suicide cannot be justified; instead, it can be seen as an escape from the responsibility as a military leader to secure Utica which was one of the only very few strategic strongholds controlled by the republicans [10]. The people of Utica "begged him to use their lives and property and arms as he himself judged best" (Plut. Cat. Min. 60). The morale was high and there was still a considerable force left for the rescue of Cato. His colleagues such as Juba and Scipio, the commander of the army and the navy respectively all expressed their support for Cato. Yet the only reciprocation he can give to his fellow companions was to take his own life. Cato likely believed that under Caesar's rule, his virtues would be stifled or even eroded. Therefore, though declared him mad, Cato justified his suicide to his family members by claiming that his freedom had been taken away, which those his critics had never realized. However, instead of trusting his inner virtue, he emphasized the importance of exterior factors and argued that it is these factors that determined his fate, just as what Seneca explained later in his Moral Letters to Lucilius, "it is not a question of dying earlier or later, but of dying well or ill" (Sen. Ep. 70).

Moreover, Cato not only showed contrasting behaviours when committing suicide, but also demonstrated such complexity when communicating with his son. According to Plutarch, "he forbade the young man to engage in political matters; for to do so worthily of a Cato was no longer possible, as things were going, and to do so otherwise would be disgraceful." (Plut., Cat. Min. 66). Seemingly, in this episode, Cato admonishes his son to continue living at the cost of abstaining from political activities under the rule of a tyrant. Many held Cato's advice to his son problematic because if he believed that it was a disgrace to live under Caesar's rule, which resulted in his suicide, why did he think that his son could receive Caesar's generosity? (Aug. De civ. D. 1.23). However, this challenge is unaccounted for as it ignores the context that Cato's son could accept Caesar's clemency on the premise that he remained un-tainted in politics, which was impossible for Cato himself to follow.

Plutarch's portrayal of Cato also reflects his critical stance towards the inconsistencies among Stoicism and its practitioners. In *Moralia*, Plutarch criticized how "the Stoics wilfully pervert the common conceptions held by all men of 'to have use for,' 'to need,' 'to be in want of'... and in so doing abandon their own as well" (Plut. Comm. not. 20). This contradictory relationship between Cato and Stoicism was also demonstrated by Plutarch's biography of Cato where Cato tried to make himself look different than others by practicing odd traditions such as wearing different clothes and tell his friends that he has done so only to preserve the inner equilibrium and not to fear for other's opinions (Plut. Cat. Min. 3). For example, when Cato was travelling in Asia to study the local traditions and practices, he deliberately avoided governor's welcome and even scolded his servants, falsely believing that they asked the municipality of Antioch to prepare a lavish reception for his arrival, only to realize later that it was prepared for Pompey's servant Demetrius (Plut. Cat. Min. 13). By violently rejecting his colleague's welcome, Cato was at odds with the Stoic notion that one should embrace the circumstances than reject them. However, Plutarch also praised Cato for being a principled republican, because he was always the first to reach the Senate and the last to leave it. When other senators were slowly gathering, he would often sit and read quietly alone, holding his toga in front of the book. Besides, he never left the city when the Senate was in session. (Plut. Cat. Min. 19) Therefore, what Plutarch intended to highlight was Cato's alignment with republicanism through the fulfilment of his duties rather than the attachment to a certain philosophical doctrine.

Cato was also a contentious figure in Cicero's comments. In his poetic panegyric, Cicero lauded Cato for his constant rectitude during Caesar's consulship [11], declaring that even if Cato did not need Rome, still Rome needed Cato (Plut. Cat. Min. 5). Yet, Cicero criticized Cato for lacking pragmatism, which made it less possible to bring the republican political ideal into real life by "talking of principles as if he were in Plato's academy, not on the hustings of Rome" (Cic. Fam. Att. 2.21). That being said, Cicero acknowledged Cato's clinging to his political ideal by caring and dying for the Republic [12]. In other words, for both Cicero and Plutarch, Cato's death was a bitter political resistance against the impending tyranny because of Cato's insistence on republicanism rather than his attachment to stoicism.

The representation of Seneca in Tacitus's *Annals* is no less gloomy than Plutarch's Cato. The author offered a dismissive image of Seneca as he describes him as an ineffective philosopher [13], highlighting the inconsistency between his philosophical pursuit and his lifestyle [14]. Rather than presenting Seneca as a sapiential moral guide of Nero, Tacitus reported that "(Seneca) augmented that enormous wealth which had transcended the limits of a private fortune...perverting the affection of his countrymen to himself" (Tac. Ann. 14.52). By describing how Seneca flaunted the splendour of his villas and pleasure-grounds that surpassed that of the emperor, Tacitus presented Seneca's lifestyle as anything but the Stoic austerity. He then mocks Seneca's intellectual pretensions, noting that "he arrogated [the honours of eloquence] to himself alone," even as he busied himself with "writing verse[s] more frequently, now that Nero had developed an affection for the art" (Tac. Ann. 14.52), reducing his status of philosopher to a courtier more concerned with his emperor's preferences than genuine wisdom. As for the role of Seneca as the tutor of Nero, Tacitus indicated that he was unsuccessful and humiliating because Nero "had a sufficiently distinguished staff of teachers in his own ancestors." (Tac. Ann. 14.53) Therefore, in Tacitus' *Annals*, Seneca was hardly a positive Stoic exemplary figure, but rather a Neronian politician.

Despite the negative views Tacitus had of Seneca, the death of Seneca still show-cased a Stoic ending of a political figure, but this suicide happened after Nero's order of Seneca's execution took place. In other words, Seneca's suicide was hardly "voluntary," but all he could do to make Nero less satisfied. When Nero suspected Seneca's involvement in the Pisonian Conspiracy, he demanded

Seneca's "voluntary death," wishing to prove that his reputation as a sage was a flattery figment by scaring him off (Tac. Ann. 15.60-61). Responding in a quite stoic way, Seneca faced his death with tranquillity and chose a rather calm suicide. As one of the most proclaimed stoics, Seneca had written multiple accounts on how to die as a Stoic. He was so indulged in explaining suicide that, in fact, he was the only Stoic that devoted this much attention to suicide [14]. Seneca rebukes those who seek death merely as an escape from misfortune, illness, or dishonour, despite his acknowledgement of the rational agent's sovereignty over life and death. For him, true Stoic suicide occurs only when continuing life would irrevocably obstruct one's pursuit of virtue, and it must be self-determined [15]. For example, if the patient was physically incapable or mentally feeble, then the decision made cannot be seen as the outcome of reason. He argues that "if the body is useless for service, why should one not free the struggling soul?" (Sen., Ep. 50.33). In this sense, Seneca proved to be consistent with his philosophy, as his was not mentally err nor was physically incapable of producing irrational decisions by any record, and he chose a calm suicide in place of execution, which is the behaviour of self-determination and the realization of his own words.

Therefore, although Seneca did show discrepancy in his lifetime, he remained firm and maintained calmness on his death before the courier; this also contrasts with other so-called Stoics who collapsed into despair, as Faenius Rufus notoriously did [7]. This calmness was further expressed in the way how Seneca chose the way of his suicide. According to Tacitus, after the message was delivered, he gathered all his friends and relatives, admonished them not to cry for him, showing the empathy that Cato lacked. In the end, he cut his veins, drank the same poison as Plato did, and finally died in a bathtub that accelerated the speed of blood loss (Tac. Ann. 15.63).

Far from succumbing in fear, Seneca's acceptance of a dignified suicide, even after being named among Nero's victims, transformed his death into another piece of evidence on the indictment of the emperor's despotism. By adding Nero's tutor and mentor to the killing list of the emperor, Seneca could do little but sarcastically further reveal the tyranny of Nero (Tac. Ann. 15.62). Moreover, by choosing a death of cool serenity, Seneca frustrated the emperor, who was expecting a chaotic spectacle where his Stoic tutor would beg on his knees for pardon (Tac. Ann. 15.64). Therefore, it would not be exaggerating to say that Seneca did this on purpose to defy the order of Nero and to repudiate the legitimacy of his rule. In this sense, Seneca was no different from Cato, who could not tolerate a life under Caesar's dictatorship.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, after examining the deaths of Cato and Seneca, it becomes clear that their suicides, though traditionally linked to Stoicism, were primarily politically driven. Though Cato's motive was to escape from tyranny, his violent and emotionally charged suicide was overwhelmed by anger and malice, undermining the Stoic ideal of tranquil rationality. In contrast, while Seneca's life was marked by inconsistencies and complicity with imperial power, as frequently scorned by Tacitus, his deliberate suicide after Nero ordered his execution was more closely aligned with the Stoic principles. Therefore, both figures appropriated the Stoic principles not as a fulfilment of their philosophical tenets but as a medium to propagate their political stance. Yet to regard both deaths as equal forms of "resistance" would be both unfair and misleading. In Plutarch's account, Cato's political image as an emblem of republicanism against Caesar's rule made his suicide seamlessly intertwined with his life-long political pursuit.

Same interpretation, however, cannot be applied to Seneca. To frame Seneca as a Republican rebel against imperial rule would bear the risk of ignoring his deep entanglements within Nero's court, his role as Nero's tutor, political advisor, and those dialectic proses he wrote to bring Nero

onto the right track. Seneca had compromised a huge amount of political capital when he went into exile. If he had raised against Nero, it would have come long before the emperor's messenger arrived. Seneca's final act, therefore, was not a rejection of the empire nor against Nero but a calculated performance so he could save his own reputation. In this sense, Cato's suicide was a light spot in his belief in republicanism that had been consistent throughout his life, while Seneca was merely a desperate self-help to extricate himself from the pens of later historians. Thus, only Cato's death can be seen as a true alignment with Republicanism, whereas Seneca reflects the more compromised form of resistance possible under the empire, while Stoicism was hardly the driving force in either of the two cases.

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