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## SENECA'S IDEA OF GOD

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Nowhere is the maxim that nothing is new under the sun more true than in philosophy. More than one great movement in modern thought has been but a repetition of an essentially identical movement among the ancients. A striking example of this is the notable change that has taken place in our time in the conception of deity prevalent among thinking men—a change which may be described as the substitution of the cosmological for the anthropomorphic idea of God, a disposition to think of God not as a mere magnified man but as a mighty, beneficent world-power. Along with this change has gone another—the transfer of emphasis in religion from doctrine to experience, a tendency to discover the essence of religion less in one's definition of deity than in one's attitude toward the God in whom he believes. Finally, accompanying these changes, there has arisen a new interest in conduct, a conviction that the chief end of man is not so much to understand or to worship God as to love him and to love one's neighbor as one's self. Precisely the same three tendencies are seen in ancient religious history. The original belief in the divinities of polytheism, and their worship by means of trivial ceremonies which were considered more sacred than moral laws, gave way, in the later period of Graeco-Roman thought, to the conception of a universal divine being whose kingdom is in the human soul and who demands righteousness in thought and act.

It happens that the clearest exhibition of the newer and nobler morality, religion, and theology that has come down to us is found in the pages of Lucius Annaeus Seneca, the Roman philosopher of Nero's reign, who, as a statesman, as an orator and stylist, and as an ethical thinker, was undoubtedly the foremost man of his time. Seneca was pre-eminently a moralist; but since in his view the duty of man is conformity to the will of God, and the laws of morality are but the expression of the moral nature of deity, he was necessarily

a theologian as well. Yet he has left no treatises on the nature or attributes of the divine being. His essays and letters relate to practical questions of ethics, and it is only incidentally that his conception of God and of the relation of God to man is revealed. We shall more easily form a correct estimate of his theological views if we first notice their sources by glancing briefly at the successive steps in the development of the idea of God in Greek thought.

Greek philosophy originated in a revolt against the traditional Greek religion. That system of nature worship in which outward events were conceived as due to the activity of unseen powers almost as numerous and diverse in character as the events themselves became unacceptable to the Greek mind as soon as it really began to reflect. The problem of philosophy was therefore to find a substitute for the gods, to discover the ultimate essence from which the existing world might reasonably be held to have originated. Every system of philosophy then was atheistic, in the sense that it involved the partial rejection at least of the gods of mythology. Yet every system may be looked upon as a system of theology as well as philosophy, since it postulated an ultimate, which, even though denied the name of deity, actually occupied the place and fulfilled the function of the gods in the interpretation of the universe.

The attributes of the ultimate being were developed gradually, at first defined in crude and exaggerated terms, but formulated at length with the utmost subtlety. The eternity of the original essence, both in the past and in the future, was assumed at the outset. The earliest thinkers, Thales and his successors, constituting the so-called Ionian school, asserted its unity, postulating a single material substance, as water or air, having the power of mechanical expansion and contraction, by means of which the universe was evolved and is kept in being. Anaximander added the attribute of infinity, assuming an unlimited, undifferentiated material ultimate to which he applied the term "divine," thus boldly seating the new philosophy on the throne of the old religion. Heraclitus was so impressed with the fact of constant change in things—"all is in flux" was his famous maxim—that he regarded activity as the essential attribute of the ultimate entity, which he compared to fiery breath. Parmenides, the chief intellect of the Eleatic school, emphasized the opposite

attribute, the unchangeableness of the ultimate, and postulated a single changeless substance as the essence of things.

The successors of Heraclitus and Parmenides perceived that these apparently antagonistic principles—activity on the one hand, producing the variety and change to which the senses testify, and unity and permanence on the other, which reason demands—must both be recognized. Empedocles undertook to reconcile this antagonism by assuming four material elements—fire, air, water, earth—acted upon by two opposite forces, attraction and repulsion. Anaxagoras attempted the same thing in a slightly different way, assuming an indefinite variety of material atoms, corresponding in character to the various substances actually existing in the universe, all of them wholly inert, save one, which he called “mind.” These attempts at harmony were but partly successful, for the unity of the ultimate was abandoned in the effort to account for variety and change. Both Empedocles and Anaxagoras substituted for the single ultimate of their predecessors a double ultimate—inert matter on the one hand and force on the other. But the unity of the original essence was soon reasserted, in opposite senses, by two contemporary schools—the Atomists, who assumed a single material substance—homogeneous atoms, and the Pythagoreans, who traced the origin of things to a single immaterial principle—the idea of number.

In the contrasted views of the Atomists and the Pythagoreans the antithesis between matter and spirit begins to appear in Greek thought. The earlier schools had not asked the question “Is the ultimate essence material or spiritual?” Its materiality was uniformly taken for granted, but at the same time non-material attributes were assigned to it. The “fiery breath” of Heraclitus was a material substance, but it was said to act freely in accordance with divine law and under the guidance of reason. The ultimate “being” of Parmenides was material, for its essential attribute was its capacity to fill space, yet it is cognized not by the senses but by reason and is declared to be identical with thought. The “mind” of Anaxagoras consisted of material atoms, yet it acts intelligently and teleologically. But when the Pythagoreans define matter itself as the embodiment in space of a wholly immaterial essence, and the Atomists trace all vital and mental phenomena to the self-activity of material particles,

spiritualism and materialism become well-defined antagonistic conceptions.

Nearly every school of philosophy thus far considered held to the unity of the ultimate being. In modern terminology they were "monists," that is, their ultimate was a single substance, out of which all things have been evolved, and which therefore is identical with the substance of the universe. The monism of the Atomists was materialistic, for they traced all phenomena, spiritual and material, to a single material substance—the atoms. The Pythagoreans were idealistic monists, since they referred all phenomena, material and spiritual, to a single immaterial principle—the idea of number. The earlier thinkers, who had not yet distinguished matter and spirit, were consequently neither materialists nor idealists, but may be called pantheistic monists, if we use the term in its literal, etymological sense, for their ultimate was a single all-embracing entity having both material and spiritual qualities. But if we employ the word "pantheistic" in its ordinary modern acceptation, as connoting the denial of personality, or at least the assumption of impersonality, it may be correctly applied to every system of thought that we have thus far discussed, for no Greek thinker had yet arrived at the philosophic concept of a personal first cause. Greek philosophy had repudiated so thoroughly the petty personal deities of the old religion that it was slow to attribute any personal quality whatever to the ultimate being which it substituted for those deities.

Yet it is interesting to note that more than once in the history of Greek thought the religious conception of personality asserts itself by the side of the philosophic idea of unity and universality. Xenophanes, the earliest of the Eleatics, while denouncing in unmeasured terms the irrationality of the polytheistic divinities, and holding to a single, universal, changeless being, nevertheless ascribed to that being the highest intelligence, power of will, and moral perfection. Socrates, a hundred years later, united in a similar way the cosmic and anthropomorphic conceptions of deity, for he believed firmly on religious and ethical grounds in a single intelligent power, which he called Providence, that pervades and rules the world.

But we must not identify this survival of the ancient religious feeling toward the divine with the modern philosophic conception of

the personality of deity, involving self-consciousness and free volition as essential elements. It is one thing to cherish a vague sentiment of confidence in the wisdom, power, and providential care of the being or force which we call God, and quite another to hold the definite intellectual conviction that that being not only acts rationally and benevolently in accordance with law and with reference to ends, but knows that he so acts and freely wills to act as he does. Orderly, rational, purposive action is quite conceivable wholly apart from conscious volition. Even the lowest forms of plant and animal life exhibit an elementary sort of intelligence, yet we do not credit them with consciousness of their own activity. The higher brutes often show a surprising power of adapting means to ends, yet are apparently without self-consciousness. A large part of the activity of every human being is automatic, i. e., unconscious, yet may involve a high degree of rationality and skill. Such automatic, impersonal, yet intelligent and purposive action was attributed to the elemental principle, whether material or immaterial, by every school of Greek philosophy down to the time of Plato.

Plato's theory of the ultimate being rests upon his well-known doctrine of ideas. The ideas find their unity in the supreme Idea of the Good, which he called God. Is Plato's Idea of the Good identical with the physical universe? He attributes to the ideas the power of realizing themselves—in Pythagorean phrase, "taking form"—in empty space, which he calls non-existence, or "not-being," and thus bringing into existence the phenomenal world. Had Plato looked upon space as the Atomists and Pythagoreans did, as a mere negative condition, or the mere possibility, of the existence of things, his theory would have been purely monistic. The universe would have been a perfect realization of the supreme Idea and hence identical with it. But despite the negative character of space—or "not-being"—he assigned to it a positive influence, antagonizing and in part neutralizing the rational activity of the Idea in its self-realization, with the result that the phenomenal world is imperfect, changeable, and relatively unreal, in contrast with the absolute reality and changeless perfection of the world of ideas. Plato's theory thus becomes dualistic. The divine Idea, which alone possesses real being, is distinct from the imperfect and unreal universe. But the divine Idea exists not only in

the imperfect universe, but also apart from it. In modern phraseology, deity not only is immanent in the universe but also transcends it. Did Plato hold to the personality of the supreme Idea? Like Socrates he often speaks of God, who is identical with the highest Idea, in a personal way, as possessing moral perfection and exercising providential care over men. But we should probably interpret these utterances as the expression of religious sentiment associated with the old anthropomorphic divinities and not as implying the distinct attribution of self-consciousness to the abstract first cause, the one supreme deity. Plato neither asserts nor denies the personality of deity. Probably, as Zeller remarks, "that question is one which Plato never definitely proposed to himself."

Aristotle's theology is based upon his doctrine of "form," which is a modification of the Platonic theory of ideas. Objects are simply formed matter, consisting of immaterial form, or idea, and formless substance, or matter. The sum of all forms—the Perfect Form—is deity. The Perfect Form realizes itself in the universe—as the form-element in things—but the formless, material element resists the molding activity of the Form, as the marble hinders the perfect realization of the sculptor's thought. Hence the imperfection of the actual world. But the highest Form by reason of its perfection exists also as Pure Form apart from the imperfect universe. It is both immanent and transcendent. Aristotle's theory, like Plato's, is dualistic. The Perfect Form is distinct from the imperfect universe. The theology of the two philosophers differs chiefly in the fact that Aristotle grasped more clearly than Plato the idea of the personality of deity. His Pure Form, though essentially an intellectual conception, a purely abstract entity, is at times described in terms that seem to imply self-consciousness. It is the "thought of thought," "thought thinking itself." Certainly Aristotle came nearer the modern conception of a personal God than any Greek thinker before him had done.

With Plato and Aristotle the flight of Greek imagination respecting the nature of the ultimate reached its highest point. The result was unsatisfactory to the Greek mind. A sense of the futility of speculation regarding the origin of the cosmos or the problem of being came to prevail. Even the followers of Plato were at one time dominated

by the general spirit of skepticism. The successors of Aristotle, who in general were faithful defenders and expounders of his views, soon repudiated the doctrine of transcendence, declaring that pure form is just as unthinkable as Plato's "not-being." The most pronounced expression of the anti-idealistic spirit is found in the revival of materialist atomism in the teachings of Epicurus. Like Democritus he explained the universe by the self-caused movement of atoms in space, denying the existence of purpose or plan apart from the atoms, and hence rejected absolutely the theory of a non-material force or being in things. The Epicurean theology then was wholly negative.

It was Stoicism which opposed to the transcendental idealism of the Socratic school a positive dogmatic system. Zeno and Cleanthes and Chrysippus, the founders and formulators of the Stoic doctrine, were so firmly convinced that the universe is one in substance and activity, that they rejected at the outset any and all dualistic theories. They were besides so firmly convinced of the absolute unreality of any alleged spiritual essence existing apart from matter, that they laid it down as a fundamental principle that all real existence is material. Matter is the only reality. But the Stoic conception of matter differed essentially from that of Aristotle. The Stoics rejected the Aristotelian hypothesis of immaterial form and formless substance, and held that matter alone possesses all the qualities and powers which Aristotle assigned to matter and form. But they did not ignore either of the two essentials of the ultimate essence of things—permanence and changeableness. They asserted that matter, which is one in substance, has two inherent qualities or aspects—passivity and activity. By virtue of the former it has permanent being, by virtue of the latter it is continually putting forth energy.

The material universe then possesses real being, as Parmenides had taught. At the same time it is in constant activity, as Heraclitus insisted, and manifests that active energy alike in the physical properties of objects, in vegetable and animal life, and in the mind and soul of man. Moreover, the universe acts rationally, with intelligent adaptation of means to ends. It is self-directive, finding the plan and purpose of its action in itself, not in any being or influence outside of itself. Its activity proceeds in accordance with uniform law, as



Democritus had held, but the Stoics referred its uniform action not to mechanical necessity residing in the individual atoms, but to rational necessity inherent in the very nature of the rational universe. Finally, the action of the universe is ethical; it acts with perfect justice and so secures the highest good of all existences. In short, the material universe was felt to be a living being, unlimited in power, absolute in will, possessing the highest reason, acting with moral purpose. In other words the universe in and of itself is divine. The Stoics rejected the theory of a transcendent deity, such as Plato's Idea or Aristotle's Pure Form. God and the universe are one.

The Stoic doctrine is distinctly monistic, yet there is sometimes an apparent dualism in the statement of it. The nature of man, with the antithesis of body and soul, is employed as a figure for the nature of things. God is described as the soul of the world, while matter is its body. God is the breath of the universe, the reason of the world or its mind. But there is implied in these terms no real denial of the perfect unity of God and the world. God is the divine universe viewed with reference to its activity, while the same divine whole is called matter when viewed with reference to its substantiality. The universe is called matter when it is thought of as visible and tangible, as appealing to the senses; the same universe is called God when its unseen forces, its order, its rationality, its moral purpose are in mind.

Did the Stoics believe in the personality of the universal deity? Certainly no definite statement of such a belief is to be found in the fragments that remain of the writings of the founders of the school. Yet in view of the lofty intellectual and moral qualities which they assign to the world divinity, we might have expected them to adopt and carry forward Aristotle's suggestion of the self-consciousness of deity. But Aristotle's conception of divine personality—the abstract first cause, present in the world yet soaring infinitely above it, the universal thought perpetually thinking itself—was doubtless too purely speculative and idealistic to attract the unimaginative, realistic, practical-minded Stoic. What Zeller says of the Greek thinkers in general applies with special force to the Stoics: "Reason was not seldom apprehended as a universal World Intellect hovering

uncertainly between personal and impersonal existence." But in the Roman period the theology of the school was somewhat modified. The Stoic idea of God, though still cosmological, became more nearly personal. The later view is reflected in the emphasis which Cicero, in his account of the Stoic views, gave to the doctrine of divine Providence.

Of Stoicism as it was molded by Roman modes of thought and influenced Roman society, Seneca is the best representative. Seneca evidently classed himself as a Stoic. The Stoic teachers are referred to as "our party" (*nostri*), even when he is expressly differing with their views. For Seneca, in harmony with the universal eclectic spirit of the Romans in philosophy, felt himself by no means bound by the teachings of any master. He finds much to approve in Plato, in Aristotle, and even in Epicurus with whom on the whole he differed most widely. In fact certain modern critics have gone so far as to deny that Seneca should be called a Stoic at all, declaring on the one hand that his doctrine is a modified Epicureanism, on the other hand asserting that in his doctrine of God at least he is practically a Platonist. A few quotations from Seneca's own words will help us to form an opinion as to his real views.

Seneca's attitude toward the gods of Graeco-Roman polytheism should be noticed at the outset. The Stoic theory of a universal world deity logically left no place for those mythological divinities. Yet the Stoics did not deny their existence, but recognized them as special manifestations of the one all-embracing deity. Seneca too refers to God as "the ruler of earth and heaven, the God of all Gods, on whom depend those individual divinities which we worship."<sup>1</sup> Accordingly we find him using the plural "gods" as the precise equivalent of the singular "God" or "nature" or "the universe."

Seneca identifies God with the universe. "What is God?" he asks. "The universe, visible and invisible."<sup>2</sup> "The universe in

<sup>1</sup> The following references to Seneca are to Haase's second edition (Leipzig, 1881).

*Fragm.*, 26: . . . "rektor orbis terrarum caelique et deorum omnium dei, a quo ista numina, quae singula adoramus et colimus, suspensa sunt."

<sup>2</sup> *Nat. quaest.*, I, prol. 13: "Quid est deus? quod vides totum et quod non vides totum."

which we dwell is one and it is God."<sup>3</sup> "You gain nothing, most ungrateful of mortals, if you say that you are indebted not to God but to nature, since neither nature exists without God nor God without nature but the two are identical."<sup>4</sup> "What else is nature than God and divine reason diffused through the whole world and all its parts?"<sup>5</sup>

Seneca agrees with the Stoics in regarding God as a material entity. He quotes with approval Lucretius' line, "Nothing can touch or be touched except matter,"<sup>6</sup> implying that in the denial of spirit he is in accord with Epicurean materialism. Nor are we to understand him as thinking here of the passive aspect of the universe, its substantiality alone, but rather of its activity in particular, for both in this connection and elsewhere he uses the formula, "Whatever acts is material."<sup>7</sup>

The material universe not only acts, but acts intelligently. Seneca condemns the view of those "who think that the universe, of which we are also a part, is devoid of reason, acts at haphazard, and knows not what it does."<sup>8</sup> "Known to the gods is the order of their universe, and the knowledge of all events that through their power are yet to occur is ever before them."<sup>9</sup> "Nothing is hidden from God; he is present in our minds and enters into our very thoughts."<sup>10</sup>

God is unchangeable; the divine universe acts according to uniform law. The conception of the uniformity of the divine action is expressed by Seneca, as by the Greek philosophers and poets, by

<sup>3</sup> *Epist.*, 92. 30: "Totum hoc quo continemur et unum est et deus."

<sup>4</sup> *Ben.*, IV, 8. 2: "Ergo nihil agis, ingratissime moralium, qui te negas deo debere, sed naturae: quia nec natura sine deo est nec deus sine natura, sed idem est utrumque."

<sup>5</sup> *Ben.*, IV, 7. 1: "Quid enim aliud est natura quam deus et divina ratio toti mundo partibusque eius inserta?"

<sup>6</sup> *Epist.*, 106. 8: "Numquid est dubium an id quo quid tangi potest corpus sit? Tangere enim et tangi nisi corpus nulla potest res, ut sit Lucretius."

<sup>7</sup> *Epist.*, 106. 4: "Quod facit corpus est." *Epist.*, 117. 2: "Quicquid facit corpus est."

<sup>8</sup> *Nat. quaest.*, I, prol. 15: "Sunt qui putent . . . hoc autem universum, in quo nos quoque sumus, expers esse consilii et aut ferri temeritate quadam aut natura nesciente quid faciat."

<sup>9</sup> *Ben.*, IV, 32. 1: "Nota enim illis est operis sui series omniumque illis rerum suas per manus iturarum scientia in aperto semper est."

<sup>10</sup> *Epist.*, 83. 1: "Nihil deo clusum est. interest animis nostris et cogitationibus mediis intervenit."

the terms "necessity," "destiny," "fate." But to the older thinkers destiny, the fixed order of events, was something oppressive and restrictive, to be endured rather than welcomed. Seneca, however, always represents fate as the beneficent will of a wise and good power. Perhaps no better short statement has ever been made of the principle that the will of a wise and good God must be unchangeable than in these words of Seneca: "His will must be ever the same who can never will aught but that which is best." And, anticipating the objection that if God cannot will otherwise than he does his will is not free, he adds: "Nor is he on that account less free or less powerful, for he is himself the source of his own destiny."<sup>11</sup> "Inability to change is the best proof of strength of will."<sup>12</sup> "The great author and ruler of all things wrote the decrees of fate indeed, but he also follows them. He decreed them once for all, he continually obeys them."<sup>13</sup>

The divine universe sustains a peculiarly close relation to man. Its rationality is identical with human reason. "God is near you, he is with you, he is within you." "A sacred spirit dwells within us, the observer of our good and evil deeds." "In every good man God dwells."<sup>14</sup> "An upright, pure and noble soul is nothing else than God sojourning in a human body."<sup>15</sup> "Why should you not believe that in man, who is a part of God, there is something divine?"<sup>16</sup>

The benevolence of deity is often referred to by Seneca, usually as an example to men in their relations with one another. "If you imitate the gods, grant favors even to the ungrateful."<sup>17</sup> "God

<sup>11</sup> *Nat. quaest.*, I, prol. 3: "Necesse est eadem placere cui nisi optima placere non possunt. nec ob hoc minus liber et potens est; ipse enim est necessitas sua."

<sup>12</sup> *Ben.*, VI, 21. 2: "Immo maximum argumentum est firmae voluntatis ne mutari quidem posse."

<sup>13</sup> *Prov.*, 5. 8: "Ille ipse omnium conditor et rector scripsit quidem fata, sed sequitur. semper paret, semel iussit."

<sup>14</sup> *Epist.*, 41. 1, 2: "Prope est a te deus, tecum est, intus est. . . . sacer intra nos spiritus sedet, malorum bonorumque nostrorum observator. . . . In unoquoque virorum bonorum . . . habitat deus."

<sup>15</sup> *Epist.*, 31. 11: "Quid hoc est? animus, sed hic rectus, bonus, magnus. quid aliud voces hunc quam deum in corpore humano hospitantem?"

<sup>16</sup> *Epist.*, 92. 30: "Quid est autem cur non existimes in eo divini aliquid exsistere, qui dei pars est?"

<sup>17</sup> *Ben.*, IV, 26. 1: "Si deos, inquit, imitaris, da et ingratias beneficia."

bestows blessings on the whole human race; no one is excluded."<sup>18</sup>

It is interesting to note that Seneca cites as proof of the benevolence of deity not only the abundant gifts of nature to man, but the universal impulse of humanity to seek help from the gods. Arguing against the Epicurean theory of the "do-nothing gods," he says: "He who teaches this doctrine does not hear the voices of suppliants who, with hands uplifted to heaven, offer prayers in public and private. Surely all mankind would not agree in appealing to the gods, did we not feel sure that great and timely benefits are granted voluntarily or in answer to our prayers, and great evils warded off by their intervention."<sup>19</sup>

God stands in the relation of father toward human beings. In the essay on Providence Seneca argues that suffering and apparent misfortune contribute to the development of character. He says: "There is friendship between good men and the gods. Do I say friendship? nay, rather intimacy and likeness, since a good man is God's pupil, his imitator and true offspring, whom that great father, no mild exactor of virtue, trains rigidly like a stern parent."<sup>20</sup> "God has the spirit of a father toward good men and shows his love for them by strict discipline."<sup>21</sup> "God fondly loves good men."<sup>22</sup> "God trains, tests, and disciplines brave men whom he approves and loves."<sup>23</sup>

God exercises providential care over his universe with special regard to the moral good of man. This divine watchcare, so far from being an exception to the uniformity of God's action, is but an instance of it.

<sup>18</sup> *Ben.*, IV, 28. 3: "Deus quoque quaedam munera universo humano generi dedit, a quibus excluditur nemo."

<sup>19</sup> *Ben.*, IV, 4. 1: "Hoc qui dicit non exaudit precantium voces et undique sublatis in caelum manibus vota facientium privata ac publica. quod profecto non fieret nec in hunc furorem omnis mortales consensissent adloquendi surda numina et inefficaces deos, nisi nossemus illorum beneficia nunc oblata ultro, nunc orantibus data, magna, tempestiva, ingentes minas interventu suo solventia."

<sup>20</sup> *Prov.*, I. 5: "Inter bonos viros ac deos amicitia est conciliante virtute. amicitiam dico? immo etiam necessitudo et similitudo, quoniam quidem bonus . . . . discipulus eius aemulatorque et vera progenies, quam parens ille magnificus, virtutum non lenis exactor, sicut severi patres durius educat."

<sup>21</sup> *Prov.*, 2. 6: "Patrium deus habet adversus bonos viros animum et illos fortiter amat."

<sup>22</sup> *Prov.*, 2. 7: "Deus ille bonorum amantissimus."

<sup>23</sup> *Prov.*, 4. 7: "Hos itaque deus quos probat, quos amat, indurat, recognoscit, exercet."

"If you wish to call him fate, you will not err; for he is the cause of causes, on which all things depend. If you wish to call him providence, you will speak truthfully; for it is he who oversees the world in wisdom, that it may move on unimpeded in its course."<sup>24</sup> Ill fortune is only apparent. "That which you call unfortunate is advantageous both to those to whom it happens and to people in general, for whom the gods care more than for individuals. Moreover these things happen to good men through fate—that same universal law through whose working they become good men. Therefore do not pity a good man: he may be called unhappy, he cannot be so."<sup>25</sup> Seneca apparently thought, with Cicero, that God's care extends only to the most conspicuous of mankind. Cicero said: "The gods care for great affairs, they disregard small matters."<sup>26</sup> Seneca says: "The gods exercise guardianship over the human race, and at times care for individuals."<sup>27</sup>

Seneca's remarks on the worship of the gods throws light on his conception of deity. "God is to be worshiped, not by sacrifice and much bloodshed—for what pleasure has he in the slaughter of innocent victims?—but by a pure heart, a good and honorable purpose. No lofty temples of stone should be erected to him; he is to be worshiped in each man's own soul."<sup>28</sup> "Do you wish to propitiate the gods? Be a good man. He has worshiped the gods who has imitated them."<sup>29</sup> Commenting on the folly and selfishness of most

<sup>24</sup> *Nat. quaest.*, II, 45: . . . "Vis illum fatum vocare: non errabis, hic est ex quo suspensa sunt omnia, causa causarum. Vis illum providentiam dicere: recte dices. est enim, cuius consilio huic mundo providetur ut inoffensus exeat et actus suos explicet."

<sup>25</sup> *Prov.*, 3, 1: "Ista quae tu vocas aspera, quae adversa et abominanda, primum pro ipsis esse quibus accidunt, deinde pro universis, quorum maior dis cura quam singulorum est. . . . His adiciam fato ista sic et recte eadem lege bonis evenire qua sunt boni. . . . Ne unquam boni viri miserearis: potest enim miser dici, non potest esse."

<sup>26</sup> Cic., *De nat. deorum*, II, 66, 167: "magna di curant, parva negligunt."

<sup>27</sup> *Epist.*, 95, 50: "humani generis tutelam gerunt interdum curiosi singulorum."

<sup>28</sup> *Fragm.*, 123: "Vultisne vos deum cogitare . . . non immolationibus et sanguine multo colendum—quae enim extrucidatione inmerentium voluptas est?—sed mente pura, bono honestoque proposito. Non templa illi congestis in altitudinem saxis extruenda sunt; in suo cuique consecrandus est pectore."

<sup>29</sup> *Epist.*, 95, 50: "Vis deos propitiare? bonus esto. satis illos coluit quisquis imitatus est."

of our prayers, he says: "If you wish to be happy, ask that none of the things that you pray for may come to pass."<sup>30</sup> "Live among men as if God were looking at you; pray to God as if men were listening to you."<sup>31</sup>

Seneca's ethical teachings are closely connected with his theology. The Stoic ideal of conduct—action in harmony with nature—when interpreted in the light of Seneca's conception of nature as the universal divine being, is seen to be nothing else than obedience to God. "It is best to follow God without murmuring."<sup>32</sup> "Our philosophy bids us obey God willingly."<sup>33</sup> "He is a noble soul who yields himself to God; he is foolish and weak who resists, and prefers to change the gods rather than himself."<sup>34</sup>

Seneca's doctrine of immortality is also a part of his theology, since he held that the individual soul, when freed from the body, entered into a closer relation with God, the soul of the universe. "Death interrupts life, it does not take it away."<sup>35</sup> "That day which you dread as the last is the birthday of an eternal existence."<sup>36</sup> Seneca used this doctrine of reunion with the divine as an incentive to a noble life. "This thought permits no baseness, no impurity, no cruelty to rest within the soul. This thought reminds us that the gods are witnesses of our acts and bids us seek their approval, prepare to dwell with them, and set eternity before the mind."<sup>37</sup>

In the light of these utterances what judgment are we to form regarding Seneca's idea of God, taken as a whole?

<sup>30</sup> *Epist.*, 31. 2: "Si esse vis felix, deos ora ne quid ex his quae optantur eveniat."

<sup>31</sup> *Epist.*, 10. 5: "Sic vive cum hominibus tanquam deus videat: sic loquere cum deo tanquam homines audiant."

<sup>32</sup> *Epist.*, 107. 9: "Optimum est deum, quo auctore cuncta proveniunt, sine murmuratione comitari."

<sup>33</sup> *Epist.*, 16. 5: "Haec (philosophia) adhortabitur ut deo libenter pareamus."

<sup>34</sup> *Epist.*, 107. 12: "Hic est magnus animus qui se deo tradidit: at contra ille pusillus et degener qui oblectatur et . . . emendare mavult deos quam se."

<sup>35</sup> *Epist.*, 36. 10: "Mors . . . intermittit vitam, non eripit."

<sup>36</sup> *Epist.*, 102. 26; "Dies iste quem tanquam extremum reformidas aeterni natalis est."

<sup>37</sup> *Epist.*, 102. 29: "Haec cogitatio nihil sordid umano subsidere sinit, nihil humile, nihil crudele. Deos rerum omnium esse testes ait. illis nos adprobari, illis in futurum parari iubet et aeternitatem proponere."

It is evident that he maintained firmly the Stoic doctrine of the absolute identity of God and the universe. Seneca's God was neither spirit only nor matter only, but possessed all the attributes of both. On the material side he constitutes the substance of the universe. On the spiritual side he manifests himself in the forces of nature, in plant and animal life, in the thoughts, feelings, and volitions of the human soul. There is no room in Seneca's conception for the notion of transcendence. God is literally the all of existence—the universe, seen and unseen. Seneca agrees both with the Stoic and Socratic schools in holding that God is absolutely self-directive, that he acts with perfect wisdom and consequently with perfect uniformity, that his will is perfectly just and good, and that under his beneficent rule all things work for the good of all.

Did Seneca believe also in the personality of deity? The quotations that have been given justify, I think, the contention that Seneca's idea of God was more positively and distinctly personal than that of Plato or Aristotle or the Stoics or any other Greek or Roman thinker before his time. Indeed it was not until two hundred years after his day that an equally clear conception of a personal God was developed by another Pagan teacher, Plotinus, the founder of Neo-Platonism. It is of course not maintained that Seneca had worked out the concept of personality, either human or divine, with the precision that modern psychology and metaphysics demand. No ancient thinker had done that. Yet in more than one of his utterances already cited, the self-consciousness of deity is unmistakably asserted. God, he says, is not a being "who does not know what he is doing." "The knowledge of events which through his power are to come to pass is ever present before him." "He is present in our minds; he enters into our very thoughts." But apart from direct statement Seneca's ordinary language about God plainly indicates that he conceived the personality of deity quite as definitely as the personality of man. His constant representation of God as the father of men, who knows men's thoughts and observes their acts and is interested in their moral welfare, forbids the belief that he was accustomed to think of him as an unconscious mechanical force or an impersonal intellectual abstraction. Seneca was a monist, for he identified the ultimate being with the universe, but his monism was not pantheistic, but theistic,



for the divine universe in which he believed was not an impersonal entity, but a personal being.

The chief interest of Seneca's idea of God—in fact its uniqueness—lies precisely in this union of apparently contradictory elements. God is an intelligent, free, self-conscious being, yet at the same time identical with the material universe. Can such a conception of deity be regarded as self-consistent? Seneca himself appears to have seen no inconsistency whatever in his view. Nor is this surprising when we recall his fundamental idea of matter. To ascribe both materiality and personality to God involves a contradiction only to one who regards matter and spirit as two distinct essences of contradictory nature. But Seneca, like the Stoics, rejected utterly the antithesis of matter and spirit, which lay at the foundation of Socratic dualism, holding that the hypothesis that pure spirit and inert matter exist independently as separate and opposite entities, is unfounded and unnecessary. In actual experience we never meet either pure spirit or inert matter isolated from each other, but always find spiritual activity connected with a material organism, and material objects exerting force of some kind, as gravity, chemical affinity, life, or thought. Surely then, the Stoics thought, it is a natural hypothesis that the ultimate entity—like every manifestation of it—is one in essence, and possesses both material and spiritual attributes. Seneca therefore conceived of matter, not as the materialistic Atomists had done, as having physical properties only, and as acting mechanically and automatically, but as possessing a rational quality as well, and hence as acting intelligently in accordance with reason. To one holding this conception of matter it would appear not only credible but inevitable that the material universe should possess every conceivable attribute of a spiritual being, including the highest and most comprehensive of all, namely, divinity.

Seneca expresses his sense of the perfect unity of the material and spiritual in the divine being in the parallel which he is fond of drawing between the universe and man. If man, who is composed of living matter, possesses not only physical properties but also intelligence, self-consciousness, and personal will, surely the universe, which consists of living matter, and includes within itself all existences, physical and spiritual, must possess those personal attributes and powers in the highest degree.

Every system of thought comes into conflict sooner or later with the two insoluble problems of philosophy—the problem of evil and the problem of freedom. Seneca met the first, as the Stoics had done, by admitting the imperfection of the world and of human nature, but referring it to the degrading influence of matter. This solution was not essentially different from that of Plato or Aristotle, and was certainly not more successful. To attribute evil to “not-being,” or non-existent matter, as Plato did, or to mere potential matter, the formless element in things, as Aristotle did, is unsatisfactory enough. But to ascribe evil to matter which by definition is identical with the perfect divine universe, is, if not really more unsatisfactory, at least more manifestly so. Seneca dealt with the problem of freedom in a similar way. Like the Stoics, he held that the soul of man is a part of the universal world-soul. Yet he believed firmly in the freedom of the individual. All his ethical teachings rest upon the assumption that man is morally free and responsible. But how the individual soul can be free which forms a part of the soul of the universe whose activity is predetermined by uniform law, he does not attempt to explain.

Seneca's indifference to the difficulties and apparent inconsistencies in his conception of deity, which would appear formidable to a thinker of the strictly systematic type, is explained by the character of his mind and by the spirit of the time. Seneca's mind was not of the systematic type, and he lived in an age of eclecticism. In his time the Greek systems had had their day and ceased to be, and Seneca at least saw that “God is more than they.” Samuel Dill says: “Seneca is far more modern and advanced than even the greatest of the Neo-Platonic school, just because he saw that the old theology was hopelessly effete. He had utterly cast off that heathen anthropomorphism which crossed and disturbed their highest visions of the divine.”<sup>38</sup> The method of the old theology was dialectical. Postulates were laid down and carried out in logical or pseudo-logical fashion to their necessary conclusions. But Seneca had no blind faith in abstract logic. His mind was rather of the intuitive order. Truth to him was that which he saw and felt to be true. Yet he was no mystic; his test of truth was practical and ethical. If he were living in the

<sup>38</sup> *Roman Society from Nero to Marcus Aurelius*, 331.

twentieth century, he would be called a pragmatist. Principles which, taken singly, appealed to him as founded in reason or confirmed by experience or justified by their moral effects—such principles he was content to accept and teach, and live by and die for, even if human wisdom has been unable to establish perfect harmony between them.

Seneca probably viewed the old problems of being and becoming, and the perfection of deity versus the imperfection of the world with the same languid interest that the modern Christian preacher feels in the doctrine of transubstantiation or the procession of the Holy Ghost. For Seneca was in a real sense a preacher of practical morality. Literary critics deprecate a certain oratorical quality in his style, which they feel to be inappropriate to philosophical discussion. Seneca was by nature an orator. However simple or personal his theme, he writes with an audience before his mind—the turbulent, indifferent audience of a Roman basilica, whose attention must be roused by brilliant epigram, striking metaphor, and exaggerated statement. But with all his faults of temperament and style, Seneca was a preacher of righteousness. The writer whom I have already quoted emphasises his “spiritual imagination,” “his profound moral experience,” his “earnestness and conviction,” his “pure enthusiasm for the salvation of souls,” and adds: “The Christianity of the twentieth century might well hail with delight the advent of such a preacher” as the “accession of an immense and fascinating spiritual force.”<sup>39</sup> The essentially ethical quality of Seneca’s mind strongly influenced his idea of God. This was inevitable, for every man creates God in his own image. Our conception of the divine character is determined by our own moral standard. The remark that “an honest God is the noblest work of man” is more than a witty parody. Only the man who knows what human justice, benevolence, and purity are, is able to conceive of God as just and loving and holy. Accordingly we find that Seneca’s lofty conception of the moral perfection of deity is the reflex of his own ethical ideal. In his own conscience he discovers the moral attributes of God. What he felt that man ought to be, that he believed that God is.

Seneca’s theology was influenced not by his moral ideals alone,

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 295.

but by his religious sentiments as well. Doubtless theology, religion, and morals ought never to be separated in experience, for religion divorced from morality becomes formalism, and theology divorced from religion becomes scholasticism. But we may distinguish the three as fields of thought; indeed we must do so, if we are to think clearly. Morality has to do with man's relations to his fellow-man; theology deals with man's thought about God—his strictly intellectual, speculative conceptions of deity; while religion has a twofold character—the inward and the outward—on the one hand embracing man's intuitions of God, his emotions regarding God, the state of his will toward God, and on the other hand including all expression of those sentiments in formal worship.

Seneca seems to have felt little interest in religious ceremonial; but if we conceive of religion as chiefly concerned with the personal attitude of the soul toward the divine being, surely no reader of Seneca can doubt that he was a profoundly religious man. The divine was absolutely real to him, not as the product of scientific induction or of metaphysical speculation, but as the direct deliverance of his own consciousness, the object of that spiritual insight through which, we may believe, God always reveals himself to the soul that seeks him in sincerity. Seneca regarded God with reverence and devotion, but without a shadow of superstitious fear. Recognizing him as the very ideal of goodness and holiness, he thought of him with admiration and love. With perfect faith in his wisdom and benevolence he submitted gladly to his will.

Seneca was the spiritual successor of men like Xenophanes and Socrates, who without the support of philosophical speculation had nevertheless on religious grounds alone maintained the old faith in the personal attributes of deity. Seneca reinforced the speculative argument for personality with a religious faith no less vigorous and positive. It is this which renders Seneca's idea of God more vividly personal than Aristotle's. Seneca was no match for that great "master of those who know" in intellectual subtlety, but Aristotle's religious consciousness was relatively undeveloped. His conception therefore of the divine personality—the "thought of thought"—lacks the living reality and spiritual force that impress us in the utterances of Seneca about God. It was Seneca's religious spirit which drew the Fathers of

the Christian church into closer sympathy with him than with other pagan writers whose theology was much nearer to their own. To quote again from Dill: "The church almost claimed Seneca as her son, while it never dreamt of an affinity with Plutarch or Plotinus."<sup>40</sup>

We may then distinguish in Seneca's conception of deity a strictly intellectual element, derived from speculative thought, an ethical element, derived from the observation and experience of life, and a religious element, derived from reflection and reverent meditation. As a philosophic and scientific thinker he ascribed to God oneness with all that exists, eternity and infinity, rationality and supremacy, uniform and purposive activity; his lofty ideals of character and conduct led him to endow God with every moral perfection; while with religious faith he looked up to him as the father of men in devout submission to his wise and perfect will. With mind and heart and spirit he believed in

That God who ever lives and loves,  
One God, one law, one element.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 331.