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Sight and recollection: Seneca's use of mental images in shaping virtue

Abstract: The purpose of this study is to highlight the central role that image (*imago*) plays in the exercise of recollection, the depiction of virtue, and the emulation of a model's life, as evidenced in Seneca's writings, particularly in the *Letters to Lucilius*. In my approach, I considered the tripartite relationship between the subject, the image, and the represented object, established as a result of the interaction between reality, imagination, and memory. I have also sought to identify several cognitive functions and attributes of image in the studied contexts, such as: image as substitute for a person, image as an object of contemplation, and as an ideal[1].

Keywords: memory, recollection, image, sight, imagination, phantasia, stoicism.

Seneca begins his 49th letter to Lucilius by recounting an experience of spontaneous recollection, triggered by the sight of familiar surroundings. While in Campania, Seneca sees the familiar landscapes of Neapolis and Pompeii and involuntarily recalls his friend Lucilius, and, more specifically, the moment of their parting. The scene is relived intensely and creates for the philosopher the illusion that Lucilius is present and, thus, that no time has passed. Although Seneca and the Stoics repeatedly show us that virtuous friendship is by no means conditioned by physical presence, since friends can always cherish in their hearts the memory each other and of the conversations, advice, and lessons received from one another, the emotional response evoked by the sight of places or images we associate with friends nevertheless overpowers this logic through its intensity. In addition to the emotional connection between memory and space, the opening lines of the letter prompt a broader reflection on the subjective and relative nature of human perception of time and the relationship between memory and time (Montiglio 2008).

> *Ecce Campania et maxime Neapolis ac Pompeiorum tuorum conspectus incredibile est quam recens desiderium tui fecerint; totus mihi in oculis es. Cum maxime a te discedo. Video lacrimas conbibentem et adfectibus tuis inter ipsam coercitionem exeuntibus non satis resistentem. Modo amisisse te videor. Quid enim non " modo " est, si recorderis ? (...) Causam huius rei quaeris ? Quicquid temporis transit, eodem loco est*; pariter aspicitur, una iacet. Omnia in idem profundum cadunt. (*Epist.,* 49. 1-3)[2]

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Here's Campania—and it's incredible how this region, and above all Naples and your dear Pompeii, have made me wish for your presence all over again. Every bit of you is before my eyes. I am leaving you even now. I see you blinking back tears—struggling in vain against emotions that cannot be suppressed. It seems only just now that I lost you. For remembrance makes everything "just now," doesn't it? (...) Do you ask the reason for this? All the time that has passed is in the same place; we look on it all at once. All things are dropping into the same abyss[3].

What arouses curiosity when reading the quoted passage is the way in which images of his memories of Lucilius appear to Seneca so spontaneously and unexpectedly that it seems as though they pierce the fabric of reality and, for a few moments, suspend the boundaries between the real and the imaginary, as well as those between the present and the past. The mental images Seneca sees distance him from reality and draw him closer to a space of memories, where chronology is suspended and where all these images coexist, creating a momentary state of ambiguity that the philosopher attempts to explain by attributing it to a certain uniformity of time (*una iacet*). It is no coincidence that Seneca describes his experience in the present tense, while constantly building a bridge to the past. What seems to him a memory that has just (*modo*) happened has, in fact, already happened some time ago, and in the same way, the present imperceptibly becomes past. Moreover, this fragment shows us how memory encompasses and unites these two tenses and thus manages to reactivate the memories of his parting from Lucilius, which unfold before Seneca as a presence, creating the sensation that time is turning back. At lexical level, the contrast between the verbs "*video*" and "*videor*" underscores this very state of ambiguity, expressing the difference between "what is" and "what seems to be." Viewed in this light, during the act of recollection, Lucilius is for Seneca both absent and present at the same time, as the image of him kept in the philosopher's mind obscures this distinction and arouses a present emotional and sensory response. But the difference between the two tenses is not even significant for the Stoic sage, since he knows from the outset that closeness to his friend, in sensible reality, could only last a fleeting moment, just like a "loan" granted by fate and fixed in time, unlike memory, which preserves continuous presence within itself. *Letter 63* (7) offers an expression of this idea and shows us the volatility of material presence, in comparison to spiritual presence, which is characterized by a certain permanence of memory:

Mihi amicorum defunctorum cogitatio dulcis ac blanda est. Habui enim illos tamquam amissurus, amisi tamquam habeam (To me, the thought of friends who have died is sweet, even comforting. For when I had friends, I had them as one who would lose them; now that I have lost them, I am as one who still has them).

Enduring friendship, which defies a friend's absence, is, in fact, a recurring theme in the Stoics' discourse on friendship, as discussed, for

example, at the end of *Letter 55* (8–11), where Seneca describes the wise man's ability to maintain a close connection (*conversatio*) with a friend, with the aid of memory and thought (*cogitationes*), even when he is not physically present. These faculties can recreate the absent person to such an extent that the bond between friends takes on a new form—a mental one—just as strong as the physical one. In her study dedicated to the role of letters in Seneca's epistolary corpus as intermediaries of long-distance friendship, Catharine Edwards described this paradox of the absent friend's presence in one's thoughts as an "absent presence". In the epistolary mode of address, the written word represents the delegation of the correspondent's voice and thoughts, as reading their letter reproduces the sensation of a "living presence," even in imagination. This recreated image of the absent person thus becomes a substitute for them and a catalyst for conversation.

> *Amicus animo possidendus est; hic autem numquam abest. Quemcumque vult, cotidie videt. Itaque mecum stude, mecum cena, mecum ambula. In angusto vivebamus, si quicquam esset cogitationibus clusum. Video te, mi Lucili; cum maxime audio. Adeo tecum sum, ut dubitem, an incipiam non epistulas, sed codicellos tibi scribere. VALE. (Epist. 55*, 11).

> *One has to hold on to one's friend mentally, for the mind is never absent, and sees anyone it wants to every single day. So study with me! Dine with me! Walk with me! Nothing can be prohibited from our thoughts: if it could, then our lives would be cloistered indeed. I see you, dear Lucilius; I hear you, as much as ever. I am so much with you that I am on the verge of sending you notes of hand rather than letters. Farewell.*

In a manner very similar to that described by Edwards regarding epistolary writing, it is enough for Seneca to have the memory of Lucilius in mind to feel close to his friend and be able to share various moments and actions with him. This experience is both intellectual and sensory, and Lucilius's presence, though apparent, is almost tangible. Seneca describes the stages of acquiring this type of friendship through a phrase that likely retains, in its first part, a proverb (*De benef.* VI, 34.5: *In pectore amicus, non in atrio quaeritur; illo recipiendus, illic retinendus est et in sensus recondendus/ We must look for a friend, not in a reception hall, but in the heart; there must he be admitted, there retained, and enshrined in affection.*) In order to keep a friend in heart, it is necessary that he first be retained by the senses, so that his image may be memorized and then recalled. Seneca describes similar experiences on other occasions as well, such as at the beginning of *Letter 64*, when he tells Lucilius how the latter appeared to him in his mind during a banquet, where he was with several friends and where philosophy was being read—a setting familiar to both of them— to such an extent that it seemed to him that the memory of Lucilius was indeed erasing the permeable boundary of concrete reality and was transforming his absence into a presence—*fuisti here nobiscum*. (*Epist.*, 64, 1).

However, the impressions (*phantasiai*) produced by the senses are not all equally plausible, convincing, or true. In fact, these vary greatly from one

case to another, making it necessary for the Stoics to divide impressions into several distinct categories: impressions can be convincing, unconvincing, neither convincing nor unconvincing, or both convincing and unconvincing at the same time. Among the convincing ones, some are true, others are false, others are both true and false, and others are neither true nor false (cf. Sextus Empiricus, *Adv. Math.* 7. 242–6, SVF 2.65). Of these, those that are both true and false at the same time resemble visions and dreams, as impressions that have an existing or potential object, but one that is absent or imagined in an unreal circumstance. Although the spontaneous memories that familiar sights evoke in us are not treated under this category in the passage quoted above from Sextus Empiricus, we can argue the memory of Lucilius at the beginning of *Letter 49* is such an impression. Although the images that we keep in mind evoke an absence, their sensory experience is present, and what is presented to Seneca is largely faithful to reality, since Lucilius appears before his eyes whole and exactly as he is (*totus mihi in oculis es*). The clarity of this image is fascinating, and the viewer is thus captivated. Vain fascination, however, is considered unhealthy. He who loses himself in visions and phantasms (*phantasma*) like Narcissus, the one captivated by his own reflection, wastes the short time he has available on earth. Indeed, this is also noted by Pseudo-Plutarch (*Placit.*, 4.12 1-5/SVF 2.54), when he explains that, in the absence of an object of representation in immediate reality, the imagination (*phantasia*) exerts a vain attraction upon the melancholic and the delirious (*τῶν μελαγχολώντων καὶ μεμηνότων*)[4].

Seneca does not dismiss the role that the exercise of recollection (and of images, in the broadest sense) can play in the pursuit of virtue. *Letter 49* does not address the emotions evoked by memories and passage of time from a pathological perspective, but rather makes an argument against a passive state of mind, characterized by nostalgia and the prolonged contemplation of memories[5]. In this sense, Seneca warns us against the brevity of life, which "is not even enough for the necessary things" (*quod sufficere ne ad necessaria quidem potest*), contrasting the passive act of a spontaneous recollection in the opening lines of the letter with the active attitude in its second half. Seneca addresses Lucilius rhetorically, asking him what he should do if death is approaching and he has not yet attained wisdom (49.9: *Quid agam? Mors me sequitur, fugit vita*), only to answer himself later, through an exhortation: the Stoic gains control over his own life when he assimilates the necessary teachings and exercises his reason to bring it to perfection, making virtuous use of every moment, without losing himself in vain activities. Such a memory, like the one described at the beginning of this letter, can be virtuously harnessed as an opportunity for meditation on the passage of time[6].

In addition to this passive state, which is evident in *Letter 49*, memory is also responsible for the voluntary act of recollecting past impressions

accumulated through perception. Recollection occurs either spontaneously and involuntarily, in the presence of certain factors, as we saw earlier, or voluntarily, as an exercise. Aristotle already makes a conceptual distinction between memory and recollection in the treatise he devotes to the subject, where he describes the two faculties. While memory is the passive one, dependent on perception and consisting of the storage of the representation of a situation or aspects of reality, recollection is an active and voluntary process, independent of the senses, through which memories stored in memory are sought out and accessed selectively, according to a certain criterion, leading to knowledge (Bloch 2007, 74-78). Although Seneca does not explicitly distinguish between the two faculties in terms of terminology, an implicit distinction will nevertheless emerge from the passages referring to them, which are discussed below (Montiglio 2008, 170).

We understand that for the Stoic sage, the second path is more important, a point Seneca repeatedly suggests, as we shall see. Involuntary recollection triggers a strong, uncontrollable reaction, which is at odds with the Stoics' general view on excessive emotions, which they link to the cause of human suffering. Although this cannot be avoided, it is within our power to control it. Perhaps this is precisely why Seneca advocates for a selective approach to memories, so that they do not distract us from the good deeds of the person we are recollecting by bringing the bad ones to the forefront. *Letter 81* even presents us with a "strategy" in this regard, by which the wise person can guide their memory. In order to cultivate a serene memory, the wise person disregards the wrongs done to them and chooses to forget them, by attributing them to chance, as they focus their attention on the good deeds that the person in question has done for them. Good and evil are weighed against one another, and even if the bad deeds outweigh the good ones, the Stoic tries to maintain the attitude he had when he received a benefit from that person, since this attitude is positive to him:

> *Illa contemnit, quibus laesus est, nec obliviscitur per neglegentiam, sed volens. Non vertit omnia in peius nec quaerit, cui inputet casum, et peccata hominum ad fortunam potius refert. Non calumniatur verba nec vultus; quicquid accidit, benigne interpretando levat. Non offensae potius quam officii meminit. Quantum potest, in priore ac meliore se memoria detinet nec mutat animum adversus bene meritos, nisi multum male facta praecedunt et manifestum etiam coniventi discrimen est*; (*Epist.*, 81.24-25)

> *He thinks nothing of his injuries, forgetting them not out of carelessness but of his own volition. He does not make the worst out of everything, nor does he go looking for someone to blame for his misfortune; rather, he attributes to fortune the misdeeds of other people. He does not find fault with people's words or facial expressions; he puts a kind interpretation on anything that happens and thus makes it easier to bear. He is not one to remember an offense rather than a service. Insofar as he can, he dwells on earlier and better memories of others, and does not change his attitude toward those who have deserved well of him unless their crimes are so greatly in excess that the difference is obvious, even to one who looks the other way*;

Memory is, therefore, a selective act, and the Stoics are well aware of this fact. To a certain extent, we can say that they "recreate" their memories, voluntarily producing a more favorable image of reality. This aligns with the broader aim of their doctrine: to correct perception (*phantasia*). Just as with sensory impressions, which the Stoic must not accept as convincing and true at first glance (*prima facie*), but should rather attempt to assign them their proper value and correct them through the his use of reason, so too, in the case of memory and recollection, memories must be subjected to scrutiny. Once their true value has been established, memories are worth retaining, to the extent that they can be of use.

The voluntary selection of memories raises the question of verisimilitude in representation. As mental images, memories form a "portrait" of the represented object and impose a "staging" of it. The portrait thus obtained is an ideal one, a model by which we can guide our actions. Through the subjective and selective nature of this representation, the Stoic transcends reality or the claim of a "realistic" representation and seeks to fashion an ideal that coincides with the very concept of virtue. In fact, the similarity of the image to reality is of little importance; what truly matters is our response to this image. The exercise of directed recollection (*anamnesis*) consists precisely in accessing this example, in its reactualization and *re*-presentation, and is, in itself, an exercise in imagining virtue. Paradoxically, the absence of friends becomes superior to their presence, because it offers us the opportunity to think of them[7]. We understand that the inner friend (*cogitationibus clusum*) is closest to us (*in angusto*), as we have already seen in Letter 55, and the encounter with him is, to a large extent, an occasion for inner dialogue.

> *Imago effingatur animo notabilis et e vivo petita, non evanida et muta. Sic ille manus, sic ora ferebat. Adiciamus illi quae magis ad rem pertinent: sic loquebatur, sic hortabatur, sic deterrebat, sic erat in dando consilio expeditus, in accipiendo facilis, in mutando non pertinax; sic solebat beneficia libenter dare, patienter perdere, sic properabat benignitas eius; sic irascebatur, eo vultu ab amico vincebatur, quo solent vincere: ceteras virtutes pererremus, in harum usu tractatuque versemur.* (F59 "De amicitia", ed. Vottero)

> *Let an image be fashioned in our mind—a memorable one taken from the living person, not faint and mute:Thus did he move his hands, and thus his lips. Let us add to it the more relevant things: Thus did he speak, thus did he give encouragement, thus did he dissuade, thus did he give advice without constraint, receive it readily, and change it, without stubbornness. Thus was his habit of giving benefits willingly, of enduring when they were given without profit—thus was the speed of his generosity. Thus did he grow angry, this was the expression on his face when he yielded to a friend—the expression men usually have when they get their way. Let us survey his other virtues and occupy ourselves with how he used and managed them*[8].

In fragment 59 (ed. Vottero) of the now-lost work *De amicitia*, Seneca illustrates the "steps" one has to take to reconstruct the mental portrait of an absent person. To attain this, a particular mise-en-scène is required, so a

sense of familiarity is created. We evoke their presence starting with the remembrance of their hand gestures and facial expressions, and then we gradually add aspects of their personality: the way they spoke, what they said, how they gave and received advice, the way they acted in different circumstances, and so on. The mnemonic correspondence between appearance and virtues brings us closer to the person we remember and, at the same time, imprints their example as a lesson in our mind. As we saw above, the selection of memories is rigorous in this case as well, in an effort to direct the memory toward imagining those aspects of the evoked person's personality that we ourselves must cultivate in turn. The repetition of "sic" throughout the description indicates the precision with which the representation is made and also serves the mnemonic function of shaping the example. The clearer the image and the better defined its important aspects, the more powerful the example will be. The purpose of the exercise is ultimately didactic: to learn the moral example and to put it into practice.

As we noted at the beginning of the passage, we are encouraged to maintain a "vivid" and evocative image of the person we admire (*imago effingatur animo notabilis et e vivo petita*), one that can bring us closer to them. The image described here by Seneca possesses a "dynamism" of its own. For the ancients, *enargeia* is the quality of words to describe something in such a way that it can be mentally represented, thereby creating the sensation of presence and of the action taking place. Orators and poets make particular use of this to move and then to persuade. The narration of a scene will not have the same power when it is presented schematically, in just a few words, as when its details are, one by one, illustrated with the appropriate words. Quintilian explains this type of discourse and notes that describing the parts has greater power than describing the whole, in order to create a sense of presence for the audience. (*Inst. Or.* VIII.iii.68–72: *minus est tamen totum dicere quam omnia. Consequemur autem ut manifesta sint si fuerint veri similia, et licebit etiam falso adfingere quidquid fieri solet / it is less effective to tell the whole news at once than to recount it detail by detail. And we shall secure the vividness we seek, if only our descriptions give the impression of truth, nay, Ave may even add fictitious incidents of the type which commonly occur*[9]). When the facts presented are similar to reality, the imagination is more easily stirred, and the visualization of the facts described by words is clearer and more powerful. Quintilian points out that, to achieve this effect, the orator may also introduce fictional events that are similar to those that commonly occur. There is, therefore, a capacity of the imagination to represent, based on memories, things that go beyond the realm of facts but are consistent with reality, in order to achieve a clearer visual impression. Similarly, in the case of the memories described in *Letter 55*, despite Lucilius's absence, his hypothetical behavior becomes a reality.

Concrete reality is, in fact, that which can be experienced, above all, through sight. In this regard, Seneca considers that hearing words is inferior

to seeing the images[10] they describe, and he draws a distinction between precepts (*praecepta*) and examples (*exempla*). The latter, once presented to us in concrete reality, or as if they were in concrete reality, have a stronger effect on the viewer—they impress and convince—and are thus easier to grasp and remember[11]. Once retained, they become mental images that we can access at any time and which, as is evident from the excerpt from *De Amicitia* quoted above, preserve within themselves the experience of the living example. Through recollection, these are reactivated, and the example becomes reality once more.

On a slightly different note, but one that once again highlights the dynamic nature of the image, at the beginning of the treatise *De Clementia*, Seneca invites Nero to look at text of the philosophical work as if it were a mirror *([…] Scribere […] ut quodam modo speculi vice fungerer*). As he reads, the emperor visualizes the virtue he is to attain and imagines himself putting what he has read into practice, as in a performative act. In this case, the text has the ability to spark the imagination not regarding a concrete example from the past, as we saw earlier, but regarding an ideal situation from the future, and to make us try to bring it to life. The mental image precedes action, and we understand from these examples that, for the Stoics, the person who wishes to embark on the path of virtue must first be a spectator of it.

There is, therefore, a direct connection between sight (whether physical or mental) and understanding, which makes it necessary to visualize the ideal before achiving it. Seneca confirms this when he recalls the relationship between Zeno and Cleanthes (Epist. 6, 6). The latter was able to emulate his teacher, becoming an "image" of him, because he lived in his presence and was able to observe his public and private behavior: *Zenonem Cleanthes non expressisset, si tantummodo audisset; vitae eius interfuit, secreta perspexit, observavit illum, an ex formula sua viveret. Platon et Aristoteles et omnis in diversum itura sapientium turba plus ex moribus quam ex verbis Socratis traxit* (If Cleanthes had merely listened to Zeno, he would not have been molded by him; instead, he made himself a part of Zeno's life, looking into his inmost thoughts and seeing whether he lived in accordance with his own rule). Once again, we are reminded that merely hearing the philosophers' precepts is not enough, since they do not encapsulate lived experience, and the Stoic philosophy, as promoted by Seneca, has a practical value and aims, above all, enactment. Cleanthes had to observe Zeno's life as it unfolded and was able to emulate it once he saw that the master's precepts stood the test of practical application (*an ex formula sua viveret*) and became convinced of their validity.

The wise man's life must be guided by an example. The conclusion of *Letter 11* offers us, in this regard, an exercise based on memory and imagination. Seneca teaches, based on a maxim he attributes to Epicurus, that we must choose a model illustrious for their moral integrity and

imagine that we are watched over by them in all our actions. Memory selects from our memory, through *anamnesis*, those admirable aspects of the chosen model's character, as they emerge from the recollection of their life, speech, and gaze, while the imagination presents them to us in various poses, as if they were present. Our life will thus unfold in parallel with and in harmony with that of the chosen model, just as Cleanthes was able to emulate Zeno, because he had the example of Zeno's life before his eyes.

> *Elige itaque Catonem. Si hic tibi videtur nimis rigidus, elige remissioris animi virum Laelium. Elige eum, cuius tibi placuit et vita et oratio et ipse animum ante se ferens vultus; illum tibi semper ostende vel custodem vel exemplum. Opus est, inquam, aliquo, ad quem mores nostri se ipsi exigant; nisi ad regulam prava non corriges. (Epist.* 11.10)

> *Choose Cato, then; or, if you think Cato too stern, choose Laelius, a man of milder temperament. Choose anyone whom you admire for his actions, his words, even for his face, since the face reveals the mind within. Keep that person in view at all times as your guardian or your example. I repeat: we need a person who can set the standard for our conduct. You will never straighten what is crooked unless you have a ruler.*

In this sense, the wise man becomes an object of contemplation. It is no coincidence that Cato the Younger is called "the living image of virtues" ("*[Cato] virtutium viva imago*", *De tranq.*, 16.1), but because the phrase brings together both facets of the moral example: the image preserved and cultivated in memory corresponds to lived experience, thus being "*e vivo petita*," as Seneca recommends in the passage from *De amicitia* that we discussed earlier. When Tacitus narrates the episode of the philosopher's suicide (*Annales, XVI, 62*), he notes that the philosopher, deprived of the right to leave a will, bequeaths to posterity what remained to him: the image of his life (*imago vitae suae*). This visual representation of the Stoic ideal, as it was put into practice throughout Seneca's own life, must be preserved in the memory of his descendants, so that it may become, like the one described in *Letter 11*, the object of remembrance, contemplation, and emulation, and, ultimately, that they become theirselves "the image of virtutes" by so doing. James Ker remarks regarding this practice that "one of the defining characteristics of Roman exemplarity is that the agent aspires, in the act of imitating prior exempla, to become exemplary in his own right" (Ker 2009, 283)[12].

Perhaps *Letter 115* (3-6) offers us the clearest and most unique perspective of all on the power that the image of virtue holds over the one who contemplates it. If there is an inner face of the wise man, his appearance will embody the sum of virtues and is, by this very fact, utterly fascinating to any observer, who cannot help but admire it at length, gazing intently. The vocabulary used to construct the passage conveys the attraction that the representation of perfect virtue exerts on the beholder, through words such as *fulgens, lucens, or splendor*, which suggest the radiance that this image emanates. Seneca likens this act of gazing to the veneration

of a god, finding a similar sacredness in the figure of the wise man. Particularly interesting is the connection Seneca establishes between the wise man and the divine, implying that the divine dwells in the wise man's soul, through virtue, and may also be accessible, to a certain extent, to those who can penetrate it. The beauty of virtue, however, can be seen only with the eyes of the mind and only once their vision has been clarified, setting aside anything that might cloud it.

> *Si nobis animum boni viri liceret inspicere, o quam pulchram faciem, quam sanctam, quam ex magnifico placidoque fulgentem videremus, hinc iustitia, illinc fortitudine, hinc temperantia prudentiaque lucentibus! Praeter has frugalitas et continentia et tolerantia et liberalitas comitasque et (quis credat?) in homine rarum humanitas bonum splendorem illi suum adfunderent. Tunc providentia cum elegantia et ex istis magnanimitas eminentissima quantum, di boni, decoris illi, quantum ponderis gravitatisque adderent! quanta esset cum gratia auctoritas! Nemo illam amabilem qui non simul venerabilem diceret. [4] Si quis viderit hanc faciem altiorem fulgentioremque quam cerni inter humana consuevit, nonne velut numinis occursu obstupefactus resistat et ut fas sit vidisse tacitus precetur, tum evocante ipsa vultus benignitate productus adoret ac supplicet? (...) nunc enim multa obstrigillant et aciem nostram aut splendore nimio repercutiunt aut obscuritate retinent. Sed si, quemadmodum visus oculorum quibusdam medicamentis acui solet et repurgari, sic nos aciem animi liberare inpedimentis voluerimus, poterimus perspicere virtutem etiam obrutam corpore, etiam paupertate opposita, etiam humilitate et infamia obiacentibus; cernemus, inquam, pulchritudinem illam quamvis sordido obtectam. (Epist.* 115 3-6)

> *If we could examine the mind of a good man, O what a beautiful, what a sacred sight we would see! What grandeur, what calm would shine forth in it, and what constellations of the virtues: justice on one side, courage on the other, moderation and prudence over there. Besides these, frugality, self-control, endurance, generosity, and cheerfulness would shed their light upon it, and human kindness, which (hard as it is to believe) is in fact a rarity among human beings. Foresight too, and refi nement, and most outstanding of all, greatness of spirit: what grace, and, by god, what dignity would these bestow! How great its authority would be, and how much appreciated: beloved it would be, yet at the same time revered. If one could only behold this countenance, more lofty and more radiant than anything in human life is wont to be, would he not stop, astonished as by the advent of a deity, and utter a voiceless prayer of propitiation for the sight, then summoned by the benevolence of that visage, step forward into adoration and worship? (...) As it is, there are many obstacles that either dazzle us with excessive brightness or plunge us into darkness. But just as medicines can cleanse our eyes and sharpen our vision, so also, if only we are willing, we can free our minds of every impediment to their vision. Virtue will then be visible to us, even buried in the body, even with poverty in the way, even with low estate and poor reputation crowding in around it. I repeat: we will see that beautiful sight, even though it may be covered with dirt.*

According to the early stoics, at birth, the guiding part of the soul (*hegemonikon*) is like a sheet of paper on which impressions (*phantasiai*) are to be inscribed and then memorized. Memory plays such a fundamental role in the process of concept formation and comprehension that it is believed art and science would not be possible without it[13]. Multiple similar impressions recorded in memory form experience, upon which concepts are formed

through which we can understand the surrounding world (*SVF*, II, 83). Of these, the senses contribute to the formation of so-called preconceptions (*prolepseis*), and the learning and practice of crafts to the development of the concepts themselves (*ennoiai*). While the former are acquired naturally and are of a general nature, the latter are acquired deliberately, are of a more complex nature, and may be culturally conditioned (Long & Sedley 1987, 40). Concepts are images (*representations*) of things in reality (*phantasmata psyches/phantasma dianoias*, see *SVF* I, 65) and do not exist independently, but are formed in the soul, as I said, as a result of experience. The Stoics distinguished between impressions (representations) formed by the senses in contact with sensible reality and mental representations—removed from reality—formed through various mental operations on impressions previously received from the senses and stored in memory. Although there is no clear terminological distinction—one that is consistently applied—in certain contexts the term *phantasma* is preferred for the latter (Cocking 1991, 44; Sheppard 2014, 12-13).

Although Seneca himself never discusses the formation of concepts in detail, there are two technical passages in the *Letters to Lucilius* (117.6 and 120.4–5) that partially outline the theory of the early Stoics, which we will now examine. Seneca shows that humans acquire their first concepts of what is good through inference, based on experience. Concepts are thus formed through observation and by comparing things that occur repeatedly[14]. For this process, Seneca prefers the term "judgment by analogy" (*per analogian*) and describes analogy as the transfer of a situation from the sensible reality—about which we already have some understanding—to a higher, more complex realm, regarding which we cannot directly accumulate experience[15]. Seneca uses several examples here, such as the necessity of a form of mental health, extrapolated from physical health. Regarding the formation of the concept of the "supreme good," Seneca shows that the existence of a higher form of good is inferred from the admiration people have for the great deeds of their fellow human beings. People choose to overlook the flaws and mistakes of the role models they esteem, thereby creating an idealized image of them and their deeds. Then, the very act of imagining the ideal will lead to the formation of the concept of the highest good. In the terms of the Greek Stoics, Seneca describes the formation of the pre-conception (*prolepsis*) of the supreme good. We may, therefore, ask ourselves whether the general purpose of the exercise of virtuous recollection is not precisely this—to imagine and cultivate in memory an ideal of virtue, which will then reshape the very concept of virtue?

In my study, I have sought to demonstrate that the exercise of guided recollection highlights the particular importance of mental images—and, more broadly, of the "visible"—in Stoic philosophy as part of the cognitive process. For Seneca, guided recollection is an opportunity to reevaluate the

situations represented and to reconceptualize virtue, based on the moral examination to which memories are subjected. For Seneca, recollection is a voluntary act with epistemic value, which paves the way for the assimilation of lessons and precepts embodied in memories. Thus, their virtuous management and the establishment of a constant, close relationship with the memories of significant moral value are of real importance for the individual's moral perfection. In the above, I have illustrated three functions of the mental images that constitute memories: as substitutes for an absent person, as we see in *Letter 55*; as objects of contemplation, such as, for example, the image of virtue in the soul of the wise man in *Letter 115*; and, finally, as ideal representations of virtue, by which we can guide our lives, just as Cato the Younger becomes "*virtutium viva imago*." Paradoxically, the importance Seneca attaches to memories does not lead to a passive attitude towards the present or a retreat into contemplation; rather, the virtuous cultivation of memories is one of the foundations for putting philosophy into practice. In this sense, philosophy involves a visual dimension, since sight, as we have seen, takes precedence over the other senses in the cognitive process, so that precepts must first be mentally represented and visualized in order to be put into practice. However, these images develop their own power, given that we rather establish a direct relationship with them, prior to the objects they represent, to such an extent that the stoic finally "lives by them", as we have seen in Letter 11.

Notes

[1] A previous version of this paper was presented in front of the audience at the conference *Iconography 2024*, organized by IMT School for Advanced Studies Lucca, Italy (Lucca, 4-6 December 2024). I would also like to thank professor Ioana Munteanu for her precious suggestions regarding my research.
[2] For the latin text, I always cite from Hense's edition of the *Letters* (1914).
[3] Unless otherwise specified, the English translations were quoted from Seneca, *Letters on Ethics to Lucilius*, translated by Margaret Graver and A. A. Long 1992.
[4] A very common belief in Antiquity. Hippocrates links for example melancholy to fear, nightmares, frightening visions and seeing the dead. (Hippocrates 1983)
[5] Dana Jalobeanu reads this letter on a similar note: „Nostalgia, longing, and emotionally charged memories serve to obscure reality. They give us the impression that our lives are longer or richer than they actually are. They rob us of a precious ally: the awareness of the urgency with which we should live so as not to miss out on life's important things." (Jalobeanu 2022, 138.)
[6] *Cf. Epist. 70. 1-2*
[7] *Cf. Epist. 55.9*: *Magis hac voluptate, quae maxima est, fruimur dum absumus; praesentia enim nos delicatos facit, ut quia aliquando una loquimur, ambulamus, consedimus, cum diducti sumus nihil de iis quos modo vidimus cogitamus.*
[8] Translated by James Ker 2009, 282.
[9] Translated by H.E. Butler 1921.

[10] A quite common conception in Antiquity regarding the superiour status of sight before the other senses. See, for example, Solimano 1991.
[11] *Cf. Epist.*, 6.5: *Plus tamen tibi et viva vox et convictus quam oratio proderit. In rem praesentem venias oportet, primum, quia homines amplius oculis quam auribus credunt; deinde, quia longum iter est per praecepta, breve et efficax per exempla.*
[12] Ker's contribution on the posterity of Seneca's image remains of the utmost importance for the topic, and represents the fundament of this research. *Vide* Ker 2009, 281-325 (especially).
[13] *Cf.* Cic. *Acad.*, 2, 22.
[14] Regarding the innate nature of certain concepts, the philosopher acknowledges that, among other things, all people share a belief (*praesumptio*) in the existence of the gods and that there is a common criterion of truth (*argumentum veritatis*).
[15] *Cf. Epist., 120.*4: Nobis *videtur observatio collegisse et rerum saepe factarum inter se conlatio, per analogian nostri intellectum et honestum et bonum iudicant.*

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