

Seneca against Plato: *Letters* 58 and 65

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1. Introduction

It is a disconcerting fact about our evidence for post-Hellenistic Stoicism that its adherents seem to put up very little fight in response to the rise of Platonism at that period. This is disconcerting because Platonists, for their part, consistently and aggressively defined their philosophy in opposition to the Hellenistic schools, including the Hellenistic Stoa, whose work they liked to depict as the product of a degenerate regression from the insights of Plato. Yet, far from responding in kind, or even defending themselves, it has often seemed that the Stoics of this later era, if they offered any response at all, rather conceded ground to the Platonists: that they sought ‘rapprochement’, maybe even a marriage of sorts; at least an open conversation.¹

I have argued elsewhere (Boys-Stones 2009) that this impression is false. The principal reason why it is not obvious to us that Stoics of the early centuries AD responded critically to the Platonist revival may be the simple fact that their response did not involve the development of new and eye-catching lines of argument. Post-Hellenistic Platonists had to construct a position against the Stoics from scratch; but as far as the Stoics were concerned, what was wrong with Platonism was what their ancestors had argued was wrong with Plato in the first place – *imprimis*, the belief in non-material causes. No wonder, then, that Platonist polemic is more visible to us. Platonists are hard at work defining their relevance in contemporary philosophical debate; the Stoics, on the other hand, are best served by acting as if the battle had been won 300 hundred years and more earlier.

It may be as a consequence of this that Plato himself is not given the warm welcome among post-Hellenistic Stoics that he received in the Hellenistic school. In fending off Platonists, the Stoics are brought to remember their antipathy to Plato. At least, this is what I shall argue in this chapter. If one takes the Stoic need to defend themselves against the threat of the new Platonism as part of the context for their writing, then their frequent interactions with Plato, the allusions and quotations, agreements and borrowings which lead scholars to see a tendency to eclecticism in the Roman Stoa, may turn out to be evidence of a very much less accommodating move. In particular, I should like to show how this is true of two of Seneca’s letters – *Letters* 58 and 65. These letters, dealing as they do with Platonic notions of being and causality, have been singled out as especially important indices of how far Stoics felt able to go in opening a dialogue with Platonism. But they rather seem to me to be – and to need to be – highly polemical: a bullish response to the challenge posed to Stoicism by the new Platonist movement; and ultimately a rejection of Plato too.²

¹ E.g. (to mention only works with a focus on Seneca): Sedley 2005: 131-2 (‘rapprochement’); Donini 1979 (esp. 159: partial acceptance) (cf. Natali 1992 and 1994); Inwood 2007a (esp. 110: ‘conversation’).

² The most important recent work on these letters includes Sedley 2005, and Inwood 2007a and 2007b. Earlier discussions tend to focus on the question of Seneca’s sources (a question about which I shall have nothing at all to say). See in particular Bickel 1960 (with useful pointers to previous discussions) (Bickel sees Posidonius behind 58, and Aristotelian commentators behind 65); Whittaker 1975 (Eudorus behind 58); Dillon 1977: 136-8 (Arius Didymus behind 58, Eudorus or Antiochus behind 65); Donini 1979: 275-95 (Antiochus behind both); Setaioli 1985 (an unknown commentary on the *Timaeus* behind both); Gersh 1986: 194-5 (an early Platonist handbook behind both); Rist 1989: 2010-11 (Arius Didymus behind both); Chaumartin 1993 (Platonist commentators of an Aristotelian bent behind 65).

2. Approaching Letters 58 and 65

The pro-Platonic reading of Seneca has, it must be said, a number of things going for it. Seneca evidently *is* pro-Plato, at least in the sense of holding Plato in high regard as a major figure in the history of philosophy.³ He uses Plato's dualistic language to lead his audience away from fixation on the body and towards an appropriate respect for the soul and the deeper mysteries of nature (not least in *Letters* 58 and 65); on one occasion, he actually defends Plato against the attack of a fellow-Stoic (*Letter* 94.38). When he turns in *Letter* 58 to what seems to be a fusion of Platonic ontology with principles of Stoic classification, it is only natural to take this very seriously indeed.

The problem is that what appears to be going on in *Letter* 58 is of a different order of significance to Seneca's other Platonic engagements. When Seneca emphasises the importance of soul over body, he does so without ever abandoning the view that only the material exists, and that the soul is ultimately mortal.⁴ The occasion on which he defends Plato (94.38) sees Seneca (ironically) in disagreement with one of the most famously Platonic of all the Stoics, and over a matter of marginal philosophical importance.⁵ If reconciliation is really what is on offer in *Letter* 58, on the other hand, then it puts the very basis for a distinction between Stoicism and Platonism at risk. If Seneca is countenancing the existence of (non-material) forms and a transcendent god, then he is doing something much more radical than he does elsewhere: something which might arguably count as giving up on Stoicism altogether.

There is another problem with the 'reconciliatory' reading of *Letter* 58, which is how it is to be squared with the more overtly hostile line taken in *Letter* 65. *Letter* 65 is relevant here, not just because it is the one other letter that deals explicitly with Platonic doctrine, but also because the doctrine it deals with is closely related to that in 58. In 65, Seneca surveys Platonic causal theory, comparing it unfavourably with that of the Stoics. But Platonic causal theory is, of course, closely bound up with Platonic ontology, since the primary causes for a Platonist are precisely the non-material ones (forms and god). At the very least, we can say that if Plato's causal theory does not survive *Letter* 65, Seneca might be expected to find the Platonic ontology of 58 otiose after all.

The response to this latter objection seems to be that the priority of *Letter* 58 in the sequence means that it should be the one to set the tone. The idea would be that it is perverse to read *backwards* from 65 to a negative interpretation of 58. It is more natural to assume that the basically friendly attitude towards Plato established in the earlier letter is meant to ensure that the reader is not misled by the rough-and-tumble of the debate over details in *Letter* 65 into thinking that Seneca really ends up in fundamental disagreement with Plato.

Something along these lines seems to be an important part of the groundwork for the pro-Platonic reading of these letters, and so of Seneca's philosophy as a whole. And it is an approach that works well enough so long as one only has *Letters* 58 and 65 in view. The trouble is that it works very much less well if one considers the broader published context of these letters: the place they occupy in the collection of letters as a whole.⁶ It is increasingly well recognised that the collection has a unified character and purpose that transcends and

³ At *Letter* 108.38, Plato is listed as one of the original sources for the philosophical arguments trotted out by derivative scholars, alongside Zeno, Chrysippus, and Posidonius (et al., clearly, although the text becomes uncertain at that point).

⁴ This language above all else has led to a view that Seneca is inclined towards a Platonic 'dualism'; but see now the perspicuous (and definitive) assessment of Reydam-Schils 2010.

⁵ The Stoic is Posidonius; the question, whether laws should be written with a preamble. (Posidonius argues that they should not.) See n.63 of Long's chapter.

⁶ Cf. remarks at Inwood 2007b: 150-2 (though Inwood himself does little more than bring *Letter* 66 into play as well).

frames the individual letters which comprise it. In particular, the collection is carefully and artfully structured to trace and respond to the developing pedagogical needs of its addressee, Lucilius.⁷ But this is crucial for the reader of these letters. Judgements on their interpretation need to take into account the point that Lucilius has reached on his journey towards philosophical maturity; and judgements about developments in emphasis or thought between different letters need to take into account the progress that Lucilius is supposed to have made between those letters. In this light, it is far from absurd to think that the tone of subsequent letters ought to colour our view of letters earlier in the series. On the whole, one can assume that earlier letters are meant to speak to a philosophically more naive audience: the ‘official’ position might well be the one that Seneca feels able to set out only after suitable preparation, later on.⁸ This, I suggest, is precisely what is happening with *Letters* 58 and 65. In order to see how, though, we need to start right back at the beginning of the corpus.

3. *The Story So Far*

The apparent hardening of Seneca’s attitude towards Platonism between 58 and 65 has, I think, a parallel in a much more famous development that occurs earlier on in the corpus: that in Seneca’s attitude towards Epicurus.⁹ For Epicurus features prominently in the first three books: in fully 23 of the letters they comprise (*Letters* 1-29, the exceptions being *Letters* 1, 3, 4, 5, 10 and 15), Epicurus is mentioned by name, and is often the source for a closing maxim. Yet he is scarcely so much as mentioned thereafter.¹⁰ There is no question that this is because Seneca changed his own mind about Epicureanism as the *Letters* progressed. He refers to Epicureanism as the ‘enemy camp’ even as he borrows from it early on (2.5: he goes there *non tamquam transfuga sed tamquam explorator*). So why does he appeal to Epicurus in the early letters, when he does not do so later on? The answer lies with Lucilius. Seneca begins his letters as protreptic addressed to a man who is too wrapped up in the affairs of the world to have time for philosophy. What he needs to do is to present philosophy as something both accessible and appealing. Epicureanism can easily be made to seem both.¹¹ By judicious appropriation of Epicurean language and thought, Seneca is able to lay emphasis on those aspects of philosophy in general which will make it seem attractive to Lucilius: especially its promise of withdrawal and emancipation (already 1.1, but see esp. *Letter* 19) – even, it is hinted, of *otium* (19.8). In doing this, Seneca, is conceding nothing to the truth of Epicureanism. He is simply *using* Epicurus as a way into philosophical study that is likely to appeal to someone like Lucilius who, as yet, does not know too much about it.¹²

By *Letter* 27 (towards the end of Book 3), Lucilius must have been well and truly hooked, because at this point Seneca drops the pretence that philosophy is a relaxing activity.

⁷ See e.g. Wilson 2001: 184-6; Henderson 2004; Griffin 2007.

⁸ Cf. Wilson 2001: 182 on the ‘vehemence with which Seneca repudiates the approach he previously advocated’ in the use of maxims as a pedagogical tool.

⁹ Reydams-Schils compares Seneca’s pedagogical use of Plato to his use of Epicurean material (2010: 214); cf. Inwood; 2007a: 110.

¹⁰ To be precise, he is named, or the word *Epicureus* is used, in 13 further letters (viz. 33, 46, 48, 52, 66, 68, 72, 79, 81, 85, 89, 92, and 97) – and not at all in the last four books that we have (Books 17-20 = *Letters* 101-24).

¹¹ The idea that Epicureanism was a philosophy for ‘beginners’ is well established in ancient polemic: see for example Cicero, *de finibus* 3.2-3; *Academica* 1.4-7.

¹² Though Griffin (2007: 91) may also be right to suggest that Lucilius was interested in Epicurus to begin with. (I certainly agree, by the way, with Griffin’s insistence that the letters represent a fictional exchange between Seneca and a fictionalised version of the historical Lucilius. In this paper, nothing I say about Lucilius should be taken as a historical claim about his real-life counterpart.) A different sort of approach to Seneca’s appeal to Epicurus early on is suggested by Inwood (2007c, 146), who notes that it establishes a literary precedent for Seneca’s letters in those famously written by Epicurus.

On the contrary, he says, it turns out to be what *real* work is: *Letter* 27, then, is about the *difficulty* of virtue (2: *dimitte istas voluptates turbidas!* 4: *multum restat operis* &c.). It is no coincidence that it is very shortly thereafter (from the beginning of Book 4) that references to Epicurus start to dry up. And it is not just Epicureanism that falls away, but the ‘easy’ way of doing philosophy that was tacitly associated with it. In particular, Seneca now drops the use of maxims altogether: as he explains in *Letter* 33, it is time for Lucilius to engage seriously with serious philosophy.¹³

This now leads to the appearance of a new motif that resonates through future letters: the idea that some forms of philosophical activity are less useful (that is, less serious) than others. In particular, at this stage, Seneca is very concerned that Lucilius should not spend too much time on dialectic. *Letter* 45 is the first extended warning against sophistical niceties. In a rhetorical question which will come to have to have some significance for us, Seneca asks what point there is in making verbal distinctions, when all they do is to help one avoid the traps of dialecticians one does not need to be talking to in the first place. In real life, he says, ‘it is things that mislead: draw your distinctions between them’: *res fallunt: illas discerne* (45.6).

Lucilius clearly does not get the point straight away. The very next letter finds Seneca full of praise for a book Lucilius has written. But on closer inspection, this praise turns out to be very back-handed. It is Lucilius’ *style* that Seneca praises – precisely his *verbal* facility: the book, he says, might have been written by Epicurus himself (!) (46.1). As to content: we never learn so much as its general topic. When Seneca says that the beauty of the work unsettled his judgement so that he has to defer serious comment to another occasion (46.3), we are surely meant to hear in this an echo of Socrates’ reaction to the speech of Lysias in the *Phaedrus* (234D-235A).¹⁴ Lucilius, it seems, has indeed become hooked on philosophy, but with the tyro’s sense of it as something linked to brilliant verbal facility. Seneca pointedly shoots off some more letters to him against sophistry (*Letters* 48, 49), and, in the final letter of Book 5, against using philosophy as a way of showing off (52). And all of this, it seems to me, is crucial background to *Letter* 58 in the Book that follows: for *Letter* 58 is a striking foray into just the sort of dialectical niceties Seneca has been warning us about.

4. Letter 58

Letter 58 is, by all traditional accounts, a real headache, and no-one has ever really given a satisfactory account of the contradictions and unclarity it contains. A description of its contents is enough to show the problem.

The discussion which takes up most of the letter was inspired, Seneca claims, by someone’s comment that Plato recognised ‘six ways in which being is said’ (*sex modis hoc [sc. quod est] a Platone dici*: 58.8), but the letter begins with a lengthy reflection on the Latin language. Seneca deplores its ‘poverty’ (*paupertas*: 1), a poverty exacerbated by the fact that more words keep falling out of use (a few are listed at 2-5). With this in mind, he craves his readers’ indulgence for adopting new expressions: in particular, the Ciceronian coinage *essentia* as a translation of the Greek οὐσία (‘essence’: 6),¹⁵ and the phrase *quod est* to render τὸ ὄν (‘being’: 7-8). It is at this point that Plato’s claim about the senses of ‘being’ is

¹³ I disagree, then, with Henderson 2004: 30 that Epicurus echoes beyond this point in any constructive sense: he is, I think, definitively *left behind*.

¹⁴ If this is right, then Seneca’s remark at 46.3 (*tamquam audierim illa, non legerim*) would be rather arch: Socrates, of course, literally *heard* (but did not read) Lysias’ speech.

¹⁵ At least, Seneca claims it is Ciceronian (58.6): Quintilian ascribes it to a ‘Plautus’ (*Inst. Or.* 2.14.2; 3.6.23) or to Verginius Flavius (8.3.33).

introduced; but as a preliminary to its discussion, Seneca explains what it means to classify the contents of the world into ‘genera’ and ‘species’ – apparently relying on the Stoic definition of those terms (8-15; cf. D.L. 7.61). At 58.16, he finally ‘returns’ (*revertor*) to Plato, setting out the six ‘ways’ (sc. of being) into which things can be divided. These are: universals (16); god (17); *ideae* (sc. ἰδέαι) (18-19); *idos* (sc. εἶδος) (20); individuals (‘such as men, cattle, things,’ as he says) (22); and ‘quasi-beings’ (*quae quasi sunt*: exemplified by void and time) (22). The letter ends with the claim that, after all, none of this fine-grained work (*subtilitas*) is of much profit; but we can use it as the occasion to reflect on the transient nature of corporeal entities, including, of course, ourselves (22-37).

The exegetical problems here are legion; but perhaps nothing is more problematic than the very aspect of the letter which leads readers to see in it an attempt at bringing Stoicism and Platonism closer together – namely, the juxtaposition of a more or less Stoic classification of *beings*, according to genus and species (8-15) with a more or less Platonic analysis of *being* (modes of existence) in 16-22. Not to dwell on problems internal to each (well exposed in existing literature on this letter),¹⁶ it is unclear that combination or convergence between them ought to be possible *at all*. For the two activities (‘Stoic’ classification and ‘Platonic’ analysis) belong to different intellectual spheres: one (the classification of things) comes under the terms of ancient dialectic; the other, in dealing with the nature of being as such, is properly metaphysics.¹⁷

Inwood (2007a, 123) is on the whole very forgiving here: Seneca, he says, is merely ‘insensitive to the philosophical possibilities in a careful distinction between an account of how we talk about the world and an account of how the world is.’ That might be more surprising than it sounds, however, for this distinction had become a very hot topic in the philosophical circles of Seneca’s day, where a lively debate was under way over just which of these two sorts of account was to be found in Aristotle’s *Categories*. (The Stoic Cornutus, who might well have been personally known to Seneca, and was certainly in his philosophical ambit, was one of the contributors to this debate.)¹⁸ And in any case, it makes it, if anything, even harder to understand what is going on in this letter if we are to suppose that Seneca was not observing this distinction. For it is no minor or peripheral issue that is at stake: the topic of the letter itself hangs on the question. If Seneca was unclear what sort of account he was giving, then the topic of the letter is unclear. In that case, anyone who thought that they understood what the letter was about would in fact be labouring under a delusion: they would be as confused as Seneca himself appears to be.

But then maybe, after all, that is that is precisely the point. Could Seneca’s ‘insensitivity’ be deliberate? Could he have set us a trap? At second glance, there are some strong indications that not all is as it seems with this letter.

Consider the introduction. As my summary above indicates, it is set up to deal – and at some length – with the difficulties of translating technical Greek vocabulary into Latin. The pretext for it all is to justify Seneca’s use of *essentia* for the Greek οὐσία. But here is a remarkable thing: for all this preliminary agonising, Seneca *doesn’t go on to use the word at all*.¹⁹ Again, Seneca worries about translating τὸ ὄν as *quod est*. The problem this time (he says) is that he’ll be using a verb (*verbum*) for a noun (*vocabulum*). But why is this a

¹⁶ See n.2 above.

¹⁷ The confusion arises not only in the juxtaposition: it also exists *within* the ‘Platonic’ analysis, where a classificatory term (‘universal’) is listed alongside types of entity (god, forms, men, and time).

¹⁸ Cornutus was on the side of those who saw the work as a work of linguistic classification. See Moraux 1984: 592-601 (and cf. Sedley 2005: 139), with Porphyry, *On the Categories* iv.1, 58.30 - 59.14; 86.20-4 Busse; Simplicius, *On the Categories* viii. 18.26 - 19.1; 62.24-30 Kalbfleisch.

¹⁹ This is not simply an oversight, for at 58.6-7 he says that he might not: that to be allowed to do so is all that he wants (*fortasse contentus ero mihi licere*).

problem? Seneca never tells us, and I am yet to find the commentator who can do it for him. Add to the mix the curious preamble on the archaic words for ‘gad-fly’, ‘decide’, and ‘order’ (2-5, all exemplified from Virgil), and it is difficult to resist the conclusion that Seneca is engaged here in precisely the sort of distracting and ultimately pointless linguistic speculation he elsewhere castigates: the obsession with *verba prisca aut ficta . . . et translationes inprobas* of *Letter* 108.35, for example.²⁰

Why would Seneca do this? Precisely, perhaps, to try to avoid the impression that the confusion of logic and metaphysics at the heart of the letter is merely ‘muddled’ (compare Inwood 2007a, 120, on the division in 58.13-15) or ‘insensitive’. It is much worse than that: it is, and it is meant to be, a hopeless mess; but it is a mess with a very particular aetiology. It is the sort of mess which is generated when one spends too long worrying about distinctions of *meaning* and not enough time on differences between *things*. And this is a moral that is all the clearer since the mess itself involves confusing distinctions of meanings (the Platonic analysis of ‘being’) with distinctions of things (Stoic classification). *Letter* 58, in other words, is an object-lesson for someone who has not yet fully appreciated the message of *Letter* 45: *res fallunt: illas discerne*.

If this is right, then Plato is severely implicated. It was a Platonic linguistic reflection – that ‘being is said in six ways’ – that started everything off; and it is in the division that Seneca ascribes to Plato that the confusion has its root. For the division ascribed to Plato at 58.16 is precisely not a linguistic division (about how being is ‘said’) but a metaphysical one, concerning the types of being there are. If one further reflects that we should expect Seneca, as a Stoic materialist, to be out of sympathy with the existence of at least three of the items on Plato’s list of beings – namely forms, whether transcendent (*ideai*) or immanent (*eidê*), and god (at least on the transcendent, ‘Platonic’ notion of god presumably intended here) – then there is an obvious conclusion to draw from this: that Plato’s inflated ontology is the unfortunate result of his dialectical preoccupations. The suggestion would be that Plato got so carried away by his work on logical division, in particular in distinguishing senses of ‘being’, that he ended up confusedly supposing that some of those senses corresponded to real types of entity. Platonic metaphysics on this view turns out to be a monstrous hypostatisation of what the Stoics correctly recognised to be merely classificatory categories.

This way of reading *Letter* 58 has some uncomfortable consequences. Most importantly, it suggests that the letter is far from being the reliable witness to the classificatory theory of the Hellenistic Stoa that it has sometimes been taken to be.²¹ If I am right, it would, on the contrary, be at best a highly refracted version of that theory – distorted to the extent that it presumably has little of independent value to offer in our reconstruction of the theory. But whatever the extrinsic fall-out, it is a reading which yields, I believe, not only a more interesting and relevant conclusion for the letter itself, but also a substantially more comprehensive explanation of its peculiarities than any that tries to make Seneca’s engagement with Plato more straightforward. If it is objected that it succeeds in this only by making the letter excessively devious, the answer is that it is no more devious than Seneca’s standard pedagogical approach demands: it is ‘devious’ just as the praise of Lucilius’ book in *Letter* 46 is devious; as devious as the early appropriation of Epicurus, or the suggestion then that philosophy is a restful alternative to work. Lucilius by *Letter* 58 is well past his Epicurean phase: his philosophical childhood, so to speak. But we know that he is now, in his

²⁰ Another – complementary – way of reading this introduction is as a skit on conventional apologies for Latin philosophical writing, with their acknowledgement of the supposed ‘poverty’ of the language, and regret for the coinages into which their authors will be driven. (Lucretius 1.136-9 is a famous example; cf. Cicero *de finibus* 1.1-12; discussion in Fögen 2000.) Seneca’s Latin is not only impoverished but *getting poorer* as more words are lost.

²¹ E.g. Brunschwig 1988; Mansfeld 1992: 78-109; Caston 1999.

philosophical adolescence, attracted to (or, rather, distracted by) the dangers of sophistical show. This, I am proposing, is represented for Seneca by Plato. And just as Seneca was careful not to be overtly dismissive or explicitly critical of Epicurus at the beginning – on the contrary, he exploits convergence with the Stoics – so he treads carefully in *Letter* 58 with Plato. The letter offers Lucilius a logico-metaphysical feast with no overt disapproval. The lesson will come when he finds of his own accord, after a bit of chewing, that nothing in this will nourish or satisfy.²² It is by these means that Seneca initially helps Lucilius through his ‘Platonic’ phase. But just as Seneca put Epicurus decisively behind him in Book 4 of the *Letters*, so, I suggest, the critical stance of *Letter* 65 marks the end of Seneca’s patience with Platonism.

5. Letter 65

Letter 65 is concerned with the issue of causality, and contrasts the Stoic view with views Seneca ascribes to Aristotle and Plato. It is presented as an exposition of the three positions, between which Lucilius is invited to judge – although Seneca obviously thinks the Stoics are right to admit just one cause, namely god. Aristotle by contrast is said to recognise three causes (65.4) – or perhaps four (65.5), or even five (65.14). Plato for his part recognises five (65.7) – or should that be six (65.14)? The number of causes keeps growing because the point is that the sort of *multiplicatio causarum* in which Aristotle and Plato are engaged has no non-arbitrary limit.²³ But the extra ‘causes’ they name are not properly causes at all – they are *conditions*: ‘that in whose absence nothing can be effected’ (65.11). Having made his point, Seneca ends once again by raising the question of whether this kind of speculation has any value (65.15). What it does, however, is to give the philosopher occasion to consider the intellect as something unfettered by the body. As such, it helps him to set the values of body and soul into proportion.

The traditional view of 65 is that it represents an interest on Seneca’s part in the *Timaeus* – or some imagined Platonist commentary or handbook that dealt with the *Timaeus*. This view is largely based on the fact that Seneca, in the course of his discussion, quotes from the *Timaeus* (65.10, translating 29D-E), which must in fact have been the principal focus of contemporary interest in Plato. In recent work, though, Brad Inwood (2007*a* and *b*) has pointed out that there is much more going on in this letter. In particular, he has drawn attention to the important role played by the *Phaedo*. The letter ends, for example – and, as Inwood points out (2007*b*, 152), the ‘ending’ in this case is some 40% of the whole – with a reflection on psychology and ethics whose dualistic language clearly invokes the *Phaedo*. The *Phaedo* also contributes to its themes of causality and cosmology; and it provides the ultimate reference-point for the crucial distinction invoked by Seneca between the ‘causes’ of something and the ‘conditions’ for their operation. This distinction, between causes and

²² Seneca is able to use the material as the *occasion* for useful reflection, namely on the transience of the corporeal (58.25-end). But in doing so, he is explicitly turning away from the substance of the letter up to this point as mere ‘amusements’ (*oblectamenta*: 25). For the discussions of change in Marcus Aurelius see p. XX of Bénatouil’s chapter.

²³ I see a joke here, comparable with the ever-growing number of rogues supposed to have attacked Falstaff at *Henry IV* pt 1 (II.iv). Inwood suggests that there is an artful ‘casualness’, meant to recreate the atmosphere of conversation (2007*b*: 158; though at 2007*a*: 144 and 2007*b*: 162 he sees satire in the introduction of the sixth cause): but I note only that the ‘casualness’ is all in one direction – towards *more* causes, never fewer, even though this involves Seneca discussing Aristotle first so that he can talk about Plato ‘adding’ extra causes (65.7). Other discussions of the issue address themselves mainly to the initial attribution of three (rather than four) causes to Aristotle: see variously Donini (1979), 297-8; Timpanaro (1979); Guida (1981).

conditions, is precisely the distinction that Plato had invoked in the *Phaedo* to demolish Anaxagoras' attempt to explain the cosmos (99B).

So far, so good; but I diverge from Inwood in his conclusion that *Letter 65* shows a kind of looseness and variety in its sources and topics that is meant to recreate the loose but learned style of live conversation (2007*b*, 165-6). It seems to me, on the contrary, that the *Phaedo* has a privileged relationship with 65 as the source of its very architecture – and, if so, then as the key to its real, polemical purpose. In the Appendix to this chapter, I tabulate the structural and thematic parallels between *Letter 65* and the *Phaedo* that make this case. The following are the main points:

(i) *Letter 65* begins with Seneca saying that he had the previous day been *ill* and incapable of doing anything else in the morning; then he attempted a little reading, then he wrote a bit; then received a visit from some friends, with whom he turned to conversation. Illness is a framing theme of the *Phaedo* too: it is one of the distractions from intellectual activity that Socrates identifies (66B-D: it 'leaves us no leisure for philosophy'), and Socrates may be representing himself as at least *metaphorically* ill in his deathbed vow of a cock to Asclepius.²⁴ In any case, Socrates certainly resembles Seneca in finding himself *trapped indoors* at the beginning of the dialogue. And what has been doing? Not something we hear of him doing very much: he has been *writing* (61B: versifications of Aesop). But now he is *receiving a visit from friends, with whom he turns to conversation* (58D, 63D).

(ii) The transition to the main discussion in Seneca is made with the comment: *te arbitrum addiximus* (65.2). Meanwhile Socrates, in the *Phaedo*, represents the discussion he is about to have as a *defence* of his lack of fear in the face of death, in front of an audience who will, for the duration of the argument, be his *jurors* (*Phd.* 63E).

(iii) The bulk of Seneca's letter discusses the matter of causality, and defends against Plato and Aristotle the Stoic hypothesis that the cosmos (as such) has a *single* cause. The *Phaedo* for its part proceeds with three, related, discussions. The immortality of the soul (which has no direct parallel in Seneca) is only one: a second (95-105) is the nature of causality and the need for forms in particular, while cosmology makes a third (107-15). These last two correspond to Seneca's interest in applying the issue of causality to an explanation of the cosmos.

(iv) Lucilius' judgement is demanded by Seneca on the matter of causes (65.10, 15), just where Socrates' audience is reminded by him that they are his jury on the matter of the soul (69E). Note by the way how Seneca asks for Lucilius to judge which position seems *most likely*.²⁵ In this curious modesty (curious because Seneca seems quite clear what the right answer is, and in fact has not even attempted to set out the other side of his question) there is a parallel that can be drawn with the *Phaedo*. For Socrates concludes from his account of the cosmos in the *Phaedo* that, while he could not be sure, he thinks he has given *something like* the right account (namely about souls and their dwellings: 114D).

(iv) Finally, while Socrates takes a bath, drinks the hemlock, and dies, Seneca ends his letter with a discussion of the metaphorical way in which philosophy frees the soul from the body – and in doing so annihilates the fear of death.

²⁴ Not to mention the fact that the *Phaedo* starts with the illness (and absence) of its own author: 59B.

²⁵ Reading *verisimillimum* with the majority of MSS. The parallel is weakened, but does not entirely disappear, if one reads the alternative *verissimum* ('most true'), since Seneca is here in any case drawing an explicit contrast between what merely *seems* most true or likely, and the truth itself – which is, he says, beyond us.

If I am right that all this amounts to a case for seeing the *Phaedo* as programmatic for *Letter* 65, the importance of the observation lies in the fact that it tends to make the existence of *forms as causes* the real point of the letter, not just one topic among others. We might be inclined to miss this because we tend to think of the *Phaedo* as a work that is most importantly about the immortality of the soul. But ancient readers also recognised the *Phaedo* as a *locus classicus* for the discussion of forms as causes.²⁶ In this sense, Seneca can quite legitimately take Plato's criticism of Anaxagoras to be the real and focal point of the whole exercise. The *Phaedo* motivates a theory of forms (namely as causes) on the back of Plato's attack on Anaxagoras for appealing to 'air and aether and water and many other extraordinary things' as cosmological causes (98C) – a move which, Plato says, shows us that Anaxagoras could not distinguish between a 'cause' and 'that without which the cause would not be a cause' (ἄλλο μὲν τί ἐστὶ τὸ αἰτιον τῷ ὄντι, ἄλλο δὲ ἐκεῖνο ἄνευ οὗ τὸ αἰτιον οὐκ ἂν ποτ' εἴη αἰτιον: 99B). What *Letter* 65 does is to reverse the criticism, to say that the Platonic and Aristotelian theories of causality owe their unduly and unrestrictedly expansive nature to their confusion of 'that in whose absence nothing can be effected' with a real cause (65.11). The forms which Plato introduced as the solution in his attack on Anaxagoras become here the principal object of Seneca's attack on Plato.

Is it likely that Seneca would have gone to this much trouble over Plato's metaphysics? Nothing more likely, in my view. Not only does it round off the series of warnings to Lucilius about the dangers of sophistry by exposing (explicitly, this time) the metaphysical absurdities to which it gives rise in Plato – thereby signalling the end of Seneca's tolerance for Lucilius' flirtation with this sort of thing –, it also tackles directly what must from the beginning have been the Platonist line against the Stoics. Platonists argued that the Stoics were in effect deficient heirs of philosophy as Plato left it, in particular insofar as they fail to recognise the metaphysical principles which exist prior to the material cosmos. For this (so they said) limits the explanatory power of Stoicism, no explanation being complete without reference to the divine mind and the pre-existing paradigms for creation which are its thoughts; and it limits the credibility of its epistemology too, for knowledge is likewise impossible if it is not grounded on ideal, normative principles which lie beyond and before the empirical world.²⁷ The Stoics had better have had a response to this – and the response they needed is exactly the sort of thing I have ascribed here to Seneca. Forms are fantasies: the ontological epigones of sophistical dialectic.

6. Conclusion

Seneca, I have argued, manifests an unqualified opposition to Platonic metaphysics in *Letters* 58 and 65, and it is a stance that defines his response to the Platonist movement which, emerging in his day, differentiated itself from Stoicism principally by its commitment to this metaphysics. (The attack is, in this sense, a total attack on Platonism as a movement, not a quibble over details.) But, as I noted in the Introduction, Seneca also allows it to determine his philosophical opposition to Plato. His argument might have been that Platonists were

²⁶ According to Damascius, for example, 'Plato has nowhere shown the answer to the question of participation [sc. in forms] so clearly' (*in Phd.* I. 418, *ad* 100d). It is in the *Phaedo*, after all, that Socrates talks of having wanted to learn 'the causes of each thing: why each comes to be and passes away, and why it is' (96A). He is interested specifically in the nature of the highest cause, and it is, as Proclus too knows, in the *Phaedo* that we can an argument for this, or at least an argued rejection of alternatives, not just a description of it (*in Tim.* i. 2.11-15, 204.3-8 Diehl).

²⁷ For case studies which argue these points, see Boys-Stones 2005 (epistemology) and 2007 (physics).

wrong, that they misunderstood what Plato actually meant. But it was not. As far as Seneca is concerned, the Platonists were quite right about Plato – and so much the worse for Plato. And in this retreat from the pro-Plato tendencies of the late Hellenistic Stoa,²⁸ Seneca is consistent with all our evidence for post-Hellenistic Stoicism.²⁹

As I said in the Introduction, part of the reason for this hardening in attitude towards Plato may lie in the fact that the new Platonist movement forced Stoics in search of a response to revisit the arguments of their school fathers, and in doing so to rediscover the anti-Platonic strain of the early Stoa.³⁰ Some further observations relevant to the context of philosophical debate in the first century AD might lend additional plausibility to the suggestion. The first is the fact that Stoics at this time had an independent motive for becoming interested in the founders of their school all over again, in the collapse of the formal institution at Athens. There is some evidence that texts of the early Stoics became objects of fresh study from the late first century BC – presumably as the obvious reference-point for the identity of the school in diaspora.³¹

The other observation concerns an aspect of the polemical historiography developed by the new Platonists themselves. According to them, the Stoics (and indeed all other post-Classical schools) fell into error because of innovations they dared to make with respect to the perfect system developed by Plato.³² But in these circumstances, it would naturally suit the Stoics well to shift the emphasis of their own foundation narrative back to the ultimate roots they claimed in Socrates. An argument based on claims of innovation would sound weaker against a school that could claim that the essentials of their system were in place before Plato was born – and with Plato's revered teacher to boot. In any case, Seneca's mature preference for Socrates over Plato is clear. It is striking that, in the early *Letters*, Socrates' appearances were, as often as not, made alongside Plato.³³ After *Letter* 65, Plato is mentioned only twice more as a figure in his own right (at 94.38 and 108.38) – with respect, to be sure, but not as an authority for anything significant. Socrates, on the other hand, is invoked as someone who 'summoned philosophy as whole back to ethics', giving the crown of wisdom to the ability to distinguish good from bad, rather than to the verbal games played by philosophers (71.6-7). As such, he is mentioned in six further letters – and very much, on each occasion, as someone who set the example for a true philosophical life.³⁴

²⁸ I have in mind, most obviously, Panaetius and Posidonius; but cf. also Antipater (*SVF* iii. Antipater fr. 56).

²⁹ Boys-Stones 2009 is another case-study of the phenomenon (dealing with Cornutus). A possible exception is the mysterious Trypho, 'Stoic and Platonist', mentioned at Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus* 17.3.

³⁰ It is possible to exaggerate the heat of this antipathy, but there is plenty of evidence for it. Early Stoics writing against Plato include: Zeno (*SVF* i. 260); Persaeus (*SVF* i. 435); Chrysippus (*SVF* ii. 763; iii. 157, 226, 288, 313, 455). Note that it is Xenophon (not Plato) whose Socratic writings convert Zeno to philosophy (D.L. 7.2). Compare p.XX of Long's introduction above.

³¹ Sedley 1997: 114 says, that 'no commentary can be shown to have been written on a Stoic text before the sixth century AD'. But, as Frede notes (2005, 785 with references to Epictetus *diss.* 1.17.16-18, and *Suda* α 3917, 'Aristocles of Lampsacus'), we know that there were new editions of the classic texts of Stoicism in the late first century BC, and there is suggestive evidence for commentaries written in the first century AD too. It is telling that Persius possessed 'around 700 of Chrysippus' books' (something like a complete set), which he left to Cornutus; equally so that Cornutus accepted them, though giving away the money that Persius bequeathed to him in addition (*vita Persii* 36-41 Clausen).

³² See Boys-Stones 2001, ch. 7.

³³ See 6.6; 44.3-4; and especially 64.10. There are three early letters in which Socrates is mentioned but not Plato: see 7.6, 13.14, 28.2. Somewhere between these two groups might be considered *Letter* 24, where Plato is mentioned (at 6), but merely as the author of the *Phaedo* – on which, together with the *Crito*, the reference to Socrates at 24.4 already relies.

³⁴ See *Letters* 67.7; 70.9; 71.7, 16-17; 79.14; 98.12; 104.7, 21, 27-8. For a study of references to Plato (and other philosophers) in Seneca's corpus at large, see Tieleman 2007.

Appendix: Seneca, Letter 65 and the Phaedo

The purpose of this appendix is to support my suggestion that *Letter 65* is a Stoic response to the *Phaedo* in particular, by tabulating parallels in structure and thought between them. Note that I do not wish, in arguing this case, to deny that there are important secondary references to other dialogues – the *Timaeus* prominent among them.³⁵ (Seneca actually quotes from the *Timaeus* at 65.10, after all.) But these references, I suggest, can all be considered precisely to be *secondary* – that is, to be framed by the primary relationship of the text with the *Phaedo*. (The quotation from the *Timaeus*, for example, would be explained by the fact, recognised in all the later commentaries, that there is a permeability between the discussions of cosmology and causes in the *Phaedo* and the *Timaeus*, so that a discussion of one typically calls for a cross-reference to the other.)³⁶ As some sort of check on the plausibility of the claim that the *Phaedo* has a particularly strong relationship with *Letter 65*, I have added a column to the table listing parallels with the *Timaeus* as well. Square brackets and italics are used throughout to indicate merely suggestive similarities with Seneca (for example in theme) rather than closer parallels in thought: it will be noted that they predominate in the *Timaeus* column.

³⁵ And cf. Inwood 2007b, 152 for other possible dialogues in play.

³⁶ So e.g. Proclus appeals to the *Phaedo* discussion of causality and cosmology in his commentary on the *Timaeus*. (For causality, see i. 2, 204; iii. 137 Diehl; for cosmology i.180, 190, 204; iii. 141 Diehl.) Damascius conversely appeals to the cosmology of the *Timaeus* in his commentary on the *Phaedo* (i. 503-11 Westerink).

Seneca, <i>Letter 65</i>	Plato, <i>Phaedo</i>	Plato, <i>Timaeus</i>
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Opening scene

- Seneca ill and at first incapable; - then attempted reading; - then wrote a bit (1); - then received & conversed with friends (2)	- [illness of Plato: 59B / for illness preventing philosophy: 66C-D] - Socrates had been writing (61B) - then received & conversed with friends (58D, 63D)	- [illness and absence of one would-be participant: 17A] - [discussion with friends: 17A-B]
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Introduction to the main discussion

'Conversation took the place of writing, and I am going to set out for you the contentious part of it. I appoint you judge' (2)	'With you as my jurors, I wish to give my defence for thinking that a man who has really devoted his life to philosophy might reasonably be cheerful in the face of death . . .' (63E)	'If we provide likelihoods no worse than any others, we should be happy, remembering that I, who am speaking, and you who are my judges, are only human' (29C-D)
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Main discussion(s)

On causality and its application to cosmology (2-14) (Plato ait: 'quae deo faciendi mundum fuit causa? bonus est; bono nulla cuiusquam boni invidia est.' fecit itaque quam optimum potuit: 10)	immortality of the soul (64A-95A)	On cosmology (including causation, and creation of immortal soul) (27D-61C) (Λέγομεν δὴ δι' ἥντινα αἰτίαν γένεσιν καὶ τὸ πᾶν τόδε ὁ συνιστάς συνέστησεν. ἀγαθὸς ἦν, ἀγαθῷ δὲ οὐδεὶς περὶ οὐδενὸς οὐδέποτε ἐγγίγνεται φθόνος: 29D-E)
	on causality (95E-105C)	
	immortality of the soul (105C-107B)	
	cosmology (107C-115A)	
'If Plato and Aristotle judge, as a <i>cause</i> of something's being made, that in whose absence nothing can be effected (<i>si quocumque remoto quid effici non potest, id causam iudicant esse faciendi</i>), the causes they list are too few' (11).	'It is one thing to be a cause of being, another to that without which the cause would never have been a cause' (ἄλλο μὲν τί ἐστὶ τὸ αἷτιον τῷ ὄντι, ἄλλο δὲ ἐκεῖνο ἄνευ οὗ τὸ αἷτιον οὐκ ἂν ποτ' εἴη αἷτιον) (99B)	[cf. <i>συναίτια</i> at 46C-D; <i>συμμεταίτια</i> at 46E – both 'accompanying' causes embraced by Plato]

closing observation

'So bring your sentence as judge, and pronounce who you think has the most likely position – not who speaks most truly, for that is as far above us as the truth itself' (10)	'It would not befit an intelligent man to insist that things are as I have related them; but for someone who think that this, or something like it, is true of souls and their dwellings, given that souls are clearly immortal, the position is reasonable and worth venturing . . .' (114D)	[compare again 29D, as above, for the sentiment]
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coda

Philosophy wins the <i>metaphorical</i> freedom of the soul from the body, and freedom from fear of death. (15 – end)	Socrates dies calm in death (115B-end)	
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