

POLI 341: ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL POLITICAL THOUGHT

Session 9 - THE POLITICAL THEORY OF SENECA

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2014/2015 – 2016/2017

Session Overview

- **The Political Theory of Seneca.** In this session, we will introduce you to one of the leading lights of Stoicism, Seneca.
 - Our focus here is to introduce you to the background and training of Seneca and how these affected his philosophies.
 - We will also discuss Seneca's thoughts of the state and the society and the distinction he draws between them.
 - As a student of power, you need to know that the state and the society are very important variables for purposes of political analysis.
 - We conclude the session with a discussion on one of the distinctive themes
- in Seneca's political philosophy, the Golden Age.
- The idea of the Golden age suggests that men were in the state of purity which Seneca admired perhaps before men fell to the evil trappings of power and the acquisition of private property.
 - Just relax and go through the session as it promises to be very interesting.

Session outline

This session covers the following topics:

- The Life and works of Anneus Seneca (*3 BC- 65 AD*)
- The State, society and Religion
- The Golden Age

TOPIC ONE

THE LIFE AND WORKS OF ANNEUS SENECA
(3BC- 65 AD)

The Life of Anneus Seneca (3 BC- 65 AD)

- A century after Cicero came Anneus Seneca, also a distinguished jurist.
- He was born in Spain and was brought to Rome when very young.
- He studied philosophy and law but he gave up the practice of law when he inherited his father's sizable fortune.
- For offending Caligula and later Claudius, he was exiled for eight years (41-49 AD) to Corsica, where he suffered with his asthma and composed tragedies.
- Seneca contributed most of his fortune to the rebuilding of Rome.
- He argued that slaves and beautiful houses are of no real worth to a man, for they are only the outside. What is the inside of a man, that is, what is the peculiar property of the man.
- When Seneca spurned a messenger from Nero, Nero commanded him to die, at last true to his professed Stoic detachment from worldly concerns, he calmly opened his veins and did die, taking at the end a cup of hemlock as if to imitate Socrates.

His Works

- Despite his iŵpođtaŶt đole as adłisođ iŶ Neđo's regime, he longed to withdraw and eventually succeeded in withdrawing to his Campanian villa.
- In Campanian villa, he wrote (63-65) his scientific essays,
 - *Questiones Naturales* (Enquires Concerning Nature), and
 - the most mature of his works, *Epistudes Morales* (Moral Essays), addressed to his friends, Lucilius, governor of Sicily and Epicurean poet.

The Human Nature

- Seneca argued that man is a creature of nature. The highest good is attained if he fulfills the good for which nature designed him at birth.
- The easiest thing in the world is to live in accordance with his nature. He posited that nature sends forth all these things towards the same goal.
- Whatever is will cease to be resolved into its elements.
- To our minds, this process means perishing, for we behold only that which is nearest; our sluggish mind, under allegiance to the body.
- He argues further that the soul of the wise man is to God.
- Like Cicero, Seneca held the view that human nature was innately good and reasonable.
- The cardinal attribute of human nature were such humanitarian virtues like love, mercy, kindness, benevolence, charity and tolerance together with the condemnation on moral grounds of cruelty, hatred, anger, harshness towards dependents and subordinates.
- Seneca was a secular theorist.
- Seneca had tremendous influence on Roman law especially in providing for the safeguards of properties, protection of women and dependent children and even the protection of slaves.
- Seneca was a humanitarian philosopher who resented the pronounced moral corruption and callous indifference to human suffering that was the hallmark of his age.

Seneca's Cosmopolitanism

- Seneca tells us that there is a much-debated choice between three kinds of life—the life of theory, the life of politics (or practice), and the life of pleasure.
- Seneca is not committed to the view that life of theory is a different from the life of practice. Seneca argues both philosophy and politics are spheres in which we can benefit others.
- He argues that philosophy and politics represent two worlds that we simultaneously belong to.
- The world of politics is our local world, the world of philosophy is the whole world.
- By pursuing active career in politics, we aim to do good to the people to the people in our vicinity.
- By retreating into philosophy, we choose to live, for a while, predominantly in the world at large.
- By studying, teaching, and writing philosophy, Seneca thinks, we help others who are not necessarily spatially close to us.
- Philosophical study is beneficial; it is of use to others, in the world-wide community to which we all belong.

Seneca's Cosmopolitanism

Seneca's Cosmopolitanism

- Seneca seemed to portray politics as a game of cheats.
- He argued that the virtuous person should shy away from politics because a political career has little to offer the good man except the annihilation of his goodness.
- He thought that absolutism is inherent in the office of leaders. Leadership itself, he maintained, involves a high degree of absolutism.
- He argued that even dependence upon a despot is preferable to dependence upon the people, since the mass of men are so vicious and corrupt that it is more merciless than a tyrant.
- In Stoic philosophy, cosmopolitanism includes a view of the nature of human beings; human beings are by nature of the kind of beings they are, connected.
- The Stoics see human beings as parts of the whole, namely as parts of the cosmos.

Seneca fully embraces this idea.

- He argues that God has granted two things that make this man the vulnerable creature, the strongest of all: reason and fellowship.
- He contends that fellowship has given him power over all animals.
- Remove fellowship and you will destroy the unity of mankind on which our life depends.



TOPIC TWO

THE STATE, SOCIETY AND RELIGION

State and Society

- Some writers say that Seneca tried to strike a difference between the state and society.
- He called the state government and society community. He held the view that people in a community are held together by moral ties, but government concerns itself with legal and political obligations.
- To Seneca therefore, the state and society should be regarded as two separate entities.
- The Community is usually for festivals and marriages and the state, for the regulations of economic activities, and competition for political limited government.

State and Society ; Coût'd?

- The two entities, i.e. government and the community should be independent of each other.
- There should be no interference in the activities of each other.
- Seneca believed in morals and he tended to believe that a better citizen is one who involves himself in public service.
- The public service here involves sharing and giving on human service.
- The danger here is that a leader who wants cheap popularity will overdo these and the government will become a government of charity.

State and Society ; Court's

- In recent years the government of Buhari in Nigeria from 1984-86 and that of Acheampong in Ghana from 1975-78 (aptly described as an era of economic decadence) could reflect the views shared by Seneca.
- In situations like what is painted above, the state becomes a trading venture in disguise.
- He argued plausibly that the good or the wise man renders a service to humanity even though he has no political power.
- He does this by virtue of his moral relations to his fellows or even through philosophical contemplation alone.
- He believed that there should be a clear distinction between the affairs of the state and that of the community.
- Seneca insisted upon the moral duty of the good man to offer his services in some capacity or other, and he was as decisive as Cicero in rejecting the Epicurean pursuit of private satisfaction sought by the neglect of public interest.

God and Religion

- Seneca's idea of the struggle that the body is dutifully obedient to the soul. And that the soul must struggle continually against the desires of the flesh.
- To him the growing need for spiritual consolation gave religion an ever higher place
- Seneca's ideas set it apart from the ordinary means of contact with a higher range of realities.
- The essential secular unity of life in the classical age was breaking down, and religion was achieving more and more independent footing beside or even above the life of the state.
- Seneca was on one hand, very conscious of the inherently sinfulness of human nature and on the other his ethics showed the tendency toward humanitarianism which became continually more marked in later Stoicism.
- Seneca's ideas of his wisdom as a universal quality caused him to place so high a value on human sympathy and gentleness, virtues which had not been very characteristic of Stoicism in its more rigorous versions.
- Already the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man had taken on connotation of love and goodwill toward all mankind which came to characterize Christian teaching.

God aŷd Religioŷ ;Đoŷt'd?

- As the civic and political virtues dropped back into second place, the virtues of mercy, kindness, charity, benevolence, tolerance and love, together with the condemnation on moral grounds of cruelty, hatred, anger, and harshness toward dependents and inferiors, were given a far higher place in the moral scale than they ever had in earlier ethics.
- The effects of this humanitarianism were apparent in the classical Roman law, especially in placing safeguards about the property and the persons of women and dependent children, in protecting slaves, in a more humane treatment of criminals, and in a common policy of protecting the helpless.
- The study of nature-of the heavens –eventually leads to the knowledge of God or at least the beginning of such an understanding. Seneca characterizes God in a number of ways.
- First, God is everything one sees and everything one does not see. Nothing greater than his magnitude is conceivable.
- He alone is everything-he keeps together his work from outside and from the inside.

God and Religio; Do it' d?

- Secondly, God is completely soul and deasoy, od deasoy iŷ aDtioŷ.
- Thirdly, Seneca like earlier Stoics, emphasizes that God can be referred to by many names: fate, the cause of causes, providence, nature, universe etc.
- Fourthly, Seneca argued that God is corporeal. God is a part of the world.
- Fifthly, God or nature is beneficial. There is no advantage that God could possibly gain from us and yet God benefits all of us.
- Indeed God is the ultimate source of benefits, as cause of all causes. God is the cause of everything that is good for us, and that includes the sun, the seasons, and so on.
- The common practice of praying will be insane if there were no caring God.
- The fact that people everywhere use in a caring God in prayer

Life in the state of purity

- Seneca's depiction of the Golden Age was strikingly marked by his glowing account of the Golden Age which he maintained preceded the sophisticated age of civilization.
- In the Golden Age, Seneca believed that men were still happy and innocent.
- They loved simple life without the superfluities and luxuries of civilization.
- They were neither wise nor morally perfect, for their goodness resulted rather from innocence of ignorance than from practiced virtue.
- Men had not yet acquired that great agency of greed and the institution of private property.
- In fact, it was the growth of avarice which destroyed the condition of primitive purity.
- The emphasis on the golden age was intended to bring out the vices and corruption of mankind and to indict the politics and corrupt political or the economic abuses of his age.
- He was appalled by the decay in the Roman society.

Life in the state of purity

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- It is also important to note that, so long as men remained pure, they had no need for government or law (law defined as the mere cure for sins), they obeyed voluntarily the wisest and best men who sought no advantage of their own in ruling over their fellows.
- But when men began to desire for private property, they became self-seeking and rulers became tyrants.
- The advance of arts of brought about luxury and corruption. It was this train of consequences that made law and coercion necessary in order that the vices of corruption of human nature might be curtailed.
- In short, government is the necessary remedy for wickedness.
- He argued that private property did not exist in the state of nature.
- This position was not shared by lawyers who apparently regarded ownership as strictly in accord with natural law.
- Seneca referred to law as a mere cure for sin.
- The belief in a primitive condition of purity was implied by the story of the fall of man, and certainly it became among Christian writers not uncommon to conceive this condition as one of communism and one in which force would not be needed.

The Purpose of the State and rulers

- SeÿeĐa's đepđeseÿtatioÿ of go|eđÿwēÿt as a wōde or less makeshift remedy for human evil was the index of an enormous shift in moral opinion.
- Like St. Paul SeÿeĐa đ'elie|ed that the wāgistđate's power was necessary consequence of human sin, the đuled's ||ođk is to đepđess e|il aÿd eÿĐouđage good.
- This does not imply that respect for rulers is any less binding obligation.