The εὐδαιµονία in the Roman Empire around the Birth of Christ in the Stoic School as seen through Seneca

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Seneca lived in the 1st century AD, and thus around the birth of Christ, in the Roman Empire. He defended the Stoic teaching to whom he himself adhered to. The Stoics saw the separation from reason out of pleasure as main goal, and advocated that reason has to win over pleasure, unlike Epicureans who saw pleasure as basis for a courageous and virtuous – and thus a happy – life. Seneca’s key argument is the rejection of a middle way, by emphasizing that even the smallest sin destroys the virtuous life, while one who lives a virtuous life is free of any sin. Same as one who has fever is not ‘a little healthy’, one who suffers from an entirely developed cataract is blind, while one who already suffers from a slight cataract cannot see everything anymore. Thus, Seneca teaches two theorems: 1) It can be concluded a priori that the virtuous Good is the only true Good, 2) it can be concluded a priori that courageous virtue is enough to reach a happy life.

While for the Ancient Greek society, virtue (ἀρετή) was most important, consisting of four major rules, including bravery (ἀνδρεῖα), that itself could be translated not only with ‘manliness’, but also with courage; virtus was most important for the Romans, which itself means ‘manliness’ and equals rather ἀνδρεῖα in the meaning of the word, but represents ἄρετη, or is the exact equivalent to it.

Even further Seneca criticises Epicurus, as Epicurus claims that a virtuous life is not achievable without pleasure, separating both out of each other. Seneca claims that in fact, Epicurus’ pleasure must be part of the virtuous life, and thus virtue can stand for itself. Even further, someone cannot be more or less happy for Seneca, since all goes back to the one good and thus there is just one form of happiness, and through this one true good, the one true happiness can be achieved which will equal a successful life.

As blogger Massimo points out: “The main argument [in Seneca’s De vita beata] is that the pursuit of happiness [...] is the pursuit of reason. Or, in more standard Stoic fashion, that only the exercise of reason can lead to a flourishing life”.

Despite popular adoptions in quotation books on luck and happiness, websites for proverbs, and non-philosophical blogs, scientific discourses on Seneca’s profound thesis have a long tradition, not only in philology, but also in philosophy. Seneca’s concept is a “theory on
therapy” for reaching the ultimate goal of self-knowledge, which of course, is identified as εὐδαιµονία. The ascesis of self-control however is derived from Pythagorean thought.

Francesco Citti points out: “uitam beatam: beatam predicativo come in Cic. n. II 106 uobis uoluptatum perceptaram recordatio uitam beatam facit (riferito agli Epicurei). Si noti l’insistenza finale sul tema: 6 uitam beatam; 7 beatam uitam optent; summa uitae beatae. Seneca preferisce rendere così – come già Cicerone – l’ εὐδαιµονεῖν e l’ εὐδαιµονία (si pensi al dialogo De uita beata), mentre evita beatitas e beatitudo, impiegati da Cic. nat. I 95 (su cui Pease 1955, 458), e ricorre se mai a felicitas (cf. uit. beat 2.2; 5.1), me no frequente invece in Cicerone con valore filosofico (cf. n. IV 22 si neque uirtus in ullo nisi in sapiente nec felicitasuere dici potest; cf. anche tranq. 8.5 si quis de felicitate Dio gentis dubitat, potest idemdubitatare et de deo rum inmortalium statu, an parum beate degant).” (p. 107)

Citti refers here to Seneca’s Letters to Lucili where he states in letter no. 44 “Nam cum summa beatae uitae sit solida securitas et eius inconcussa fiducia, sollicitudinis colligunt causas et per insidiosum iter vitae non tantum ferunt sarcinas sed trahunt;” which is a clear connection to the concept of εὐδαιµονία, which Citti compares with Cicero’s De finibus in which he talks about pleasure and its origin. For Cicero, εὐδαιµονία can be achieved through beautiful deeds which he calls ‘honestum’ (the Honest = the Beautiful).


However, in letter 44, Seneca also states “Si quid est quod vitam beatam potest facere, id bonum est suo iure; depravari enim in malum non potest.”, which means that if there is anything which makes life happy then it must be good, while it cannot be bad, cause otherwise it would not make happy.

Thus, both – Cicero and Seneca – go back to Plato, who talked about “the Beauty” as highest ethical principle, and which Cicero transfers in a Stoic understanding in which deeds done out of ‘the Beauty’ are honest deeds, and thus reasonable, leading to a happy life. For Seneca, εὐδαιµονία or the vita beata can only be achieved through good causes that itself are part of the Highest Good, but not further separable and thus one is either happy or not, but one cannot grasp a bit of it. In the Roman Empire, emphasis was done not only on happiness in a
broad sense as the Greek word suggests, but rather on a successful and good life as the Latin term shows.

Notes:

2. Seneca: Das stoische Ideal des Weisen, in: Dieter Birnbacher; Norbert Hoerster (Eds.): Texte zur Ethik, Munich 1976, pp. 295-303
3. ibid.
4. ibid.
5. ibid.
6. ibid.
8. Eliopoulos, Panos: Ars Vitae in Iamblichus and in the Stoic seneca, ΣΧΟΛΗ – Φιλοσοφικο Αντικοβίςνεννιο και Κλασική Αιδηία, 4 (2) 2010, pp. 210-219
9. ibid.

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