



Practical Wisdom in Ancient Rome: Public Action and Contemplative Life

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Contents

Introduction: Greek Sophistication and Roman Conservatism	2
Cato and Catonism: The (Greek) Philosophical Shaping of an (Roman) Ethical Ideal	3
Lucretius and the Contemplative Retreat from the World	5
Action Men and Wise Spectators: <i>De officiis</i> of Cicero and Seneca's Tragedies	7
Conclusions	11
References	12

Abstract

This chapter covers the main moments and authors of Roman thought in the field of practical wisdom. The contents of this proposal integrate a rich legacy within coexist, not without difficulties, two ways of understanding life. The sophisticated Hellenistic philosophy, which since the end of the Second Macedonian War and after the fall of Carthage got to become more and more present in the cultural scenes of the republican Rome; and the traditional Roman perspective, more pragmatic than reflexive, more agrarian than navigating, more realistic than idealistic. After analyzing both perspectives, we present the main proposals on practical wisdom during the republican period until the Principate: the traditionalist, from the hand of Cato the Censor; the epicurean, by Lucretius; the eclectic conciliation, developed by Cicero; and, finally, the Roman Stoicism, for which we will rely on the figure of Seneca, as one of his three top representatives and also for writing in Latin, unlike Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius. We intend to offer not so much an exhaustive work, but rather a map that allows to recognize the main veins of Roman practical thought.

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© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2020
B. Schwartz et al. (eds.), *Handbook of Practical Wisdom in Business and Management*,
International Handbooks in Business Ethics,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-00140-7_4-1

Keywords

Hellenism · Catonism · *Mos maiorum* · Epicureanism · Cicero · Stoicism

Introduction: Greek Sophistication and Roman Conservatism

On October 19, 202 BC, the Carthaginian general Hannibal Barca (247–ca. 183 BC) was defeated in the Battle of Zama. The Second Punic War had ended and a period of splendor never before known to the Romans began. The victory attracted the attention on general Publius Cornelius Scipio (236–183 BC). The man of the hour, “liberal, flamboyant, and Cosmopolitan” (Ruebel 1977, p. 161), he was also known for his sympathy for Greek culture, which he considered superior to Roman in many ways, especially artistic and educational. His prominence in political arena and his status as a hero of the homeland elevated him as the distinguished leader of one of the most influential fronts of Roman public life. Facing the defenders of the ancient Roman virtue, a new sensibility arose far from agrarian and militaristic concerns, and closer to the contemplative values of Greek philosophical culture. This involved a new way of understanding education, cultural production, and, of course, politics, which affected both internal affairs of the Republic and the management of the conquered territories.

Scipio *the Africanus* “captured all the best and worst of the new phil-Hellenism” (Ruebel 1977, p. 161). His political management of Greece consisted of earning its respect, presenting Rome as one of the most decisive powers in the Mediterranean. Greek people saw Romans as prototypes of barbarians, unable to establish by themselves a community of free men. In this way, the admiration for the Greek culture had to be returned by the recognition of the Greeks. For this a protectorate policy was necessary, while other renowned politicians thought that it was more profitable to liberate Greeks in order to gain their trust and appreciation, especially after the defeat of Philip V of Macedon (238–179 BC) during the Second Macedonian War (200–197 BC). This position was held, for example, by Titus Quinctius Flaminius (229–174 BC), who “concentrated his attention on Greece,” while Scipio did it “on the Greek world” (Smith 1940, p. 152). In any case, Greek respect was an aspiration for both of them.

The other side was occupied by traditionalist party, whose members did not share the same ideas regarding Greek autonomy. From the cultural point of view, their main concern was to maintain the validity of the Roman *mos maiorum* against any foreign irruption. This resource of practical wisdom consisted in looking to the past, to those great achievements of the elders, *exempla* that were valid for every citizen, both in the private and public spheres (Rech 1936). This “custom of the elders,” above tensions and internecine wars, was defined as the ancestral tradition which defined the daily aspects of Roman conduct. At the same time, the *mos maiorum* was the best guarantee to preserve the Roman “greatness” (*maiestas*), but also its cultural identity as “Roman community versus the non-Romans” (Arena 2010, p. 41): those “elders” were visited under the purpose of finding standards of behavior, practical

examples, and, in short, “good life” models. Although the fact is that this *mos maiorum* was really characterized by its fluid nature and its inherent plasticity in tacitly assimilating new forms of sensibility and mentality, to a large extent, some researchers have seen it as the conservative invention of coping with the new times (Beard 2016, p. 218). Hence, the *mos maiorum* cannot be considered a current legislative body, but rather a way to control the present through continual revisiting of the past, a past that was created, recreated, and many times invented: “a vague and emotional concept [. . .], subject of partisan interpretation, of debate and of fraud” (Syme 1939, p. 153).

Cato and Catonism: The (Greek) Philosophical Shaping of an (Roman) Ethical Ideal

Marcus Portius Cato *the Elder* (234–149 BC) “embedded the ‘old’ Roman farmer-soldier, politically conservative, provincial, and chauvinistic” (Ruebel 1977, p. 161). But his critical position had begun long ago, due to the abuses committed in the conquered territories – especially Carthage – and the progressive withdrawal from republican sobriety, which had provoked a series of completely inappropriate behaviors in soldiers and, even, magistrates (Smith 1940, pp. 152–153). What was at stake was the “integrity” (*integritas*) and the legendary “self-control” (*severitas*) of the Roman people. Nevertheless, supporters of Hellenizing tendencies also publicly accused the moral debilitation of the nobles, the increase of their “greed” (*avaritia*) and the ostentation of “luxuries” (*luxuria*) as reprehensible standards of conduct. But while the philhellenes saw no problems in introducing the cultural Greek forms into the Roman educational system, the traditionalists, with Cato leading the way, defended the validity of the ancient *mos maiorum*. Their biggest fear was that Roman youth would end up wishing to show their worth not on the battlefield, or in the management of material resources, or in political decision-making – usual paths in the *cursus honorum* –, but in rhetoric or philosophy, something unthinkable for Cato and his men, “who preserved their quarrels and *discordiae* for the enemy” (Earl 1967, p. 101).

The practical ideology of Cato can be tentatively reconstructed from a few of his texts which basically extol certain virtues over others – austerity, masculinity, frugality – but on which it shines with special force the moral standard of “virtue” (*virtus*). This was a broad-spectrum concept usually related to “brave deeds” (McDonnell 2006, p. 132) and a “native courage and primitive morality” (Powell 2012, p. 18). Originally linked to the “glory” (*gloria*) and the “nobility” (*nobilitas*) of a family “lineage” (*gens*), the *virtus* had been redefined: when the glory of the past no longer constituted in the last period of the Roman Republic a sufficient support to guarantee its exercise and possession, what came to the fore were (1) personal actions; (2) what reasons originated them; and (3) what were the purposes (Balmaceda 2007, p. 299). In other words, each man became a child of his own acts, able to make him a behavior model for others, or just the opposite.

Already toward the first century BC, the concept of *virtus* shared familiarities with Greek concept of ἀρετή (Balmaceda 2017, pp. 19–26). *Virtus* ended up designating the scrutiny of the own exploits against the background of public morality, so other values came into play, such as “decency” (*decorum*), that is, the adjustment of each action, behavior, and person to the place appropriate; “modesty” (*modestia*), which prevented considering events, collective or not, as personal achievements worthy of praise; and, mostly, “self-control” or “severity” (*severitas*), which guaranteed the exercise of other virtues insofar as it sought not only the health of the spirit but also that of the body and its care. All these virtues, collected by Gaius Sallustius Crispus (86–34 BC) in his own portrait of Cato (*De Catilinae coniuratione* 54, 5), had to be put into practice at the service of the Republic, expecting none reward, but the private satisfaction for the duty fulfilled.

Cato wrote some texts of relevance, among which stands out a kind of roman encyclopedia, *Libri ad filium*, written with the aim of neutralizing the effects of Greek culture on education. This work contained the essentials for different areas of knowledge and technical and practical wisdom. However, we only keep what seems to be an extension of the entry on crops and care of the field, entitled *De Agri Cultura*. There should have been extended versions of other issues of the encyclopedia about law, military art, or public affairs, as can be confirmed from the testimonies of other authors. On the other hand, we have many contents related to his conception of rhetoric and oratory, among which, due to its importance for the tradition, his famous sentence “grasp the subject, and the words will follow” (*rem tene, verba sequentur*) has become a classic commonplace. Or his no less quoted: “an orator, Marcus my son, is a good man skilled in speaking” (*Marce fili, vir bonus dicendi peritus*), as it is collected by the master of rhetoric Marco Anneo Seneca (54 BC–39 AD), father of the philosopher, in his *Controversiae* (I, 9).

The narratives about Cato’s proverbial integrity conform one of the most famous legacies of the European imaginary in terms of practical wisdom. In this sense, the memory that Rome kept of his political career – first as *consul*, later as *ensor* – constituted a precious material for moralistic historians, who generously nourished his legend. There is consensus when considering Plutarch’s work in his *Parallel Lives* (Βίοι Παράλληλοι) as one of the most representative, where he compares Cato’s life with the achievements of the Athenian statesman Aristides (ca. 530–468 BC). But, for the purposes of analyzing his presence in Roman theories of practical wisdom, the *Cato maior de senectute liber*, written by Cicero, was the most influential work, because he managed to associate the legend of Cato with a conception of life and death undoubtedly close to the old censor’s mentality. The dialogue, integrated by him and two young men, is about old age and four usual problems: (1) the cessation of activities; (2) the loss of physical strength; (3) the collapse of physical pleasures; and, finally, (4) the fear of death. Cicero will oppose, speaking always by the mouth of Cato, that the best defense against old age are “the arts and the practical implementation of the virtues, cultivated at any age” (*De sen.* III, 9). The argumentation begins from the idea that (1) such loss of activity normally refers actions dependent on qualities rather physical than intellectual, therefore associated to the virtue of “strength” (*fortitudo*). But in old age there are other

excellences that matter, like “wisdom” (*sapientia*), “advise” (*consilio*), “reasoning” (*ratione*), or “judgment” (*sententia*), qualities that we find in “our elders” (*maiores nostri*) (*De sen.* III, 9); regarding the second argument, (2) Cato argues that the decrease of physical strength is not a serious problem as long as the damage is “diligently” assumed (*diligentia*) (*De sen.* IX, 35): thus, for example, he recommends to do moderate exercise, take food and drink not *ad nauseam*, but to satisfy immediate needs – idea taken from his concern for the public as well as private health; (3) against the sadness for the collapse of pleasures, Cato opposes the happiness of a virtuous life when it has been liberated from the slavery of the immediate, although in some points he displays certain ambiguity: such is the case of sexual pleasures, perhaps because an old Cato himself married a Roman slave called Salonia – or, perhaps, for Cicero’s own private reasons, who had broken marital relations with his wife, Terentia, in favor of his young pupil Publilia; and (4) regarding the proximity of death, this is analyzed in an epicurean way: once we are dead we have no longer to feel, so we will not have to fear what is beyond. Why should we be afraid of death?

In the end, we cannot conclude this section without referring to an important collection of sentences, the *Disticha Catonis*, whose real authorship is controversial, although from the point of view of the catonian myth they make total sense. However, they neither provide any guidance on political, military, or legal matters nor on the influence of non-Roman cultures or on foreign affairs, burning issues during the Republican period and which constitute, all of them, the typical catonian concerns. In fact, based on this and other arguments, Serena Connolly has proposed that the most likely author of this collection was the Stoic politician Marcus Porcius Cato Uticensis *the Younger* (95–46 BC), a great-grandson of Cato, circumstance that would help to explain, for example, that these *Disticha* are focused on “oneself, family, friends, and the wider community” (Connolly 2012, p. 121). It seems evident, if Connolly’s positions were to be true, that the legend of Cato the Elder as *exemplum* of practical wisdom in Roman Republic would have been fed especially between the late Republic period, thanks to prominent authors such as Cicero or Sallustius, and the Principate period, when Plutarch wrote his parallel lives.

Lucretius and the Contemplative Retreat from the World

The first century BC was marked by a generational feeling of crisis. Reid Barbour has highlighted that if there were something shared by philosophical movements in this period, it was precisely “the need for casuistry on the circumstances under which a wise man might or should enter politics” (2007, p. 148). But, nonetheless, not all schools were equally successful. For example, and around 155 BC, the Athenians organized a raid in the border town of Oropos, which ended up being destroyed. Its inhabitants asked the Senate of Rome, which intervened naming the city of Sicyon as an arbitrator. The judges condemned Athens to pay the amount of five hundred talents, due to the absence of the Greek representatives on the appointed day for the trial. Athenians sent an embassy to Rome in order to cancel the debt and defend their

position. The reasons for the military action of the Athenians are not entirely clear, but the consequences of it were key to the proliferation of Greek philosophy in Roman lands (Rubinstein 2013): the embassy was integrated by three philosophers who, in turn, represented the most important schools of the moment, Carneades of Cyrene (ca. 214–129 BC), from the Academy, who surprised the senators of Rome with his rhetorical skill; Kritolaos of Phaselis (ca. 200–118 BC), from the Peripatetic school; and Diogenes of Seleukeia (ca. 240–150 BC), a prominent Stoic who greatly pleased the Senate, among other reasons, for his unhurried and sober way of speaking. This trio formed the “embassy of the three philosophers” (Powell 2013), which not only succeeded in reducing the fine to a fifth of the original quantity but also for stamping an indelible imprint on Roman intellectual circles. Although they were attacked too: in fact, we find again Cato the Elder, who, even at a very old age, requested their expulsion. It did not prevail.

The embassy did not have among its members any representative of the Epicureans, something indicated by Cicero: “[. . .], who was the most distinguished Epicurean of the time and the head of the Garden at Athens; [. . .]?” (*Att.* XII, 23). Reasons are unknown. But what we do know is that Epicureanism did not hold a good reputation. In fact, the first contacts with this movement had not been favorable to it (Blits 2014, pp. 93–112; Gemelli 1983; Grimal 1969). One of the most revealing anecdotes in this regard took place in King Pirro’s winter quarters (Hersbell 1992). The legate Gaius Gabricius Luscinus was sent to negotiate a prisoner exchange and, during his visit, one of the king’s most important advisers, the philosopher Cineas, exposed to the Roman the bases of the epicurean doctrine. Fabricius, shrewdly, answered: “O Hercules, may Pyrrhus and the Samnites cherish these doctrines, as long as they are at war with us” (*Plut. Pyrr.* xx, 4). In this line, Romans used to consider Epicureanism as a feeble philosophy. Its therapeutic vocation, its tendency to isolation, and its pleasure theory were considered a set of symptoms of individual weakness rather than a recipe book for daily life. This conception of practical wisdom raised suspicions of Republican intellectuals, especially in the first half of the second century BC: in 173 BC a senatorial decree was proclaimed against two philosophers, Alcaeus and Philiscus, under the accusation of having corrupted Roman youth (*Athenaeus Deip.* XII, 547a-b; *Aelian Var. His.* 12). Shortly after, in 161 BC and through a *senatusconsultum*, it was decreed the expulsion from Rome of every Greek philosopher or master of rhetoric. Over time, while Stoics, Platonists, and Peripatetics, in this order, would be respected and invited to teach lessons and to share the table of influential men, Epicureans were kept aside: that *modus vivendi* was alien to the Roman way of life.

The most important Roman exponent of epicurean philosophy (ca. 99–55 BC) was the poet and thinker Titus Lucretius Carus. His epic poem *De rerum natura* is composed of more than seven thousand four hundred dactyl hexameters distributed throughout six books, along which he makes a presentation of Epicureanism, in particular of his cosmological and physical perspectives. The objective of the work coincides with the starting postulates of the first hierarch of the Garden: to free man from those fears related to divinities and death through an exposition of the world system in which gods do not intervene, but they are contained in it; and where the

end of life is exposed as something inevitable, about which nothing is known. However, the poem can also be reinterpreted as a much deeper and revealing source of wisdom, namely, as a treatise on physiology whose reflections on the nature of things and gods contain ethical and political issues of practical order too (Colman 2012; Minyard 1985; Nichols 1976).

Geert Roskam has identified four sections in *De rerum natura* that constitute the essentials for establishing a practical philosophy for daily life. To begin with, (1) pleasure is defined as the result of an undisturbed life, in line with a conception of existence as shipwreck, and where a contemplative retreat from the world equals to embody “something of the image of [. . .] gods” (Blumentberg 1997, p. 27): “it is comforting, when winds are whipping up the waters of the vast sea, to watch from land the severe trials of another person” (*De rer. nat.* II, 1–4). Next, (2) it is pointed out the “ambition of honours” (*honorum caeca*) and “greeds” (*avarities*) as ultimate causes of the fear of death, as if accumulation of wealth avoided it or immortality was possible through the accumulation of material goods (*De rer. nat.* III, 59–86; Roskam 2007, pp. 90–93; Perret 1940). Then, (3) political life is rejected, considered as a “hard work” (*durum laborem*) that takes many efforts that are useless in order to achieve happiness (*De rer. nat.* III, 997–1000; Roskam 2007, p. 94). And, lastly, (4) it is preferable, for Lucretius, “to obey in peace than to long to rule the world with kingly power and to sway kingdoms” (*De rer. nat.* V, 1129–1139).

The pursuit of political powers, the citizen involvement in politics, and the exposure of individuals to dangers of public arena are avoidable activities in the way of happiness. The objective is an “unnoticed life” and therefore less exposed to daily suffering (Roskam 2007, pp. 95–97). Lucretius’ influence on popular culture therefore was less profound than that of his most direct adversaries, Stoics. On the contrary, there is consensus among researchers regarding the important role that Cicero played in publicizing Lucretian ideas in the most exclusive cultural circles, including personalities like Virgil, Horace, and Ovid (Farrell 2008). But the most faithful authors to Republican institutions could not share Lucretian proposals. Their education prevailed over temptations of retirement and that singular concept of unnoticed life. However, despite his low influence, it is no less true that Lucretius’ presence was remarkable and, in later historical periods, fundamental.

Action Men and Wise Spectators: *De officiis* of Cicero and Seneca’s Tragedies

Marcus Tullius Cicero himself had had during his childhood a teacher who was an Epicurean philosopher. But he never shared that Hellenistic impulse to live on the fringes of world. His main philosophical works, in this sense, include not only the *De re publica* and the *De legibus*, but especially that which is, for many, his masterpiece: the *De officiis*, written around 44 BC. In a line of thought and action completely different from that of Epicureans, Cicero considered that if justice consisted of not harming anyone by using the private as private and the public as public (I, vii, 20–23), the contemplative retirement from the world could not neglect the congenial

obligation to help the most disadvantaged. This is the reason for his critics, for example, against Plato, when the Greek philosopher praises those thinkers who are fair because they are engaged in the investigation of the truth, but who “despise and have for nothing what most of the men crave desolate, fighting for it against each other” (*De off.* I, ix, 28). Under this point of view, dedication to study and professional occupations should not make a man forget his commitments as a citizen. Not only the non-commission of crime does not necessarily imply the production of justice but it sometimes contributes to the persistence of forms of injustice. The *De Officiis* thus becomes a manual of public and private virtues, an oracle of prudence for men incardinated in a world in which the omission of action can be interpreted as a favorable sanction to the state of affairs, whatever it might be.

At the beginning of his work on duties, Cicero clearly expresses his opinion about philosophical schools, considering that, especially “those teachings which have been handed down on the subject of moral duties seem to have the widest practical application” (*De off.* I, ii, 4). For him, Stoics, academics, and peripatetics are the most powerful positions on the subject, since “no fixed, invariable, natural rules of duty can be posited except by those who say that moral goodness is worth seeking only or chiefly for its own sake” (*De off.* I, ii, 6). In this sense, stoicism is Cicero’s great commitment and, of course, the philosophy that determined his way of understanding politics, ethics, and morals. On the other hand, stoicism was the philosophical system that had the best reception in Rome and, in particular, in that space of crisis that represents the late Republic and the beginnings of the Principate.

We are therefore in what is usually known as the last and the third phase of its development. The so-called middle stoicism had been fundamentally characterized by trying to harmonize the two main philosophical schools of the time, Platonism and Aristotelianism, mainly in those aspects related to metaphysics and the theory of cosmos. Concerns about anthropology, the theory of knowledge and ethics, which was perhaps the most neglected discipline in this period, were similarly increased. And it is at this time that the first contacts with the Roman culture took place, thanks to the role played by Diogenes of Seleukeia in the Embassy of the Three Philosophers and, especially, to his disciple Panaetius of Rhodes (ca. 185–110/109 BC), who founded the first Stoic school in Rome, with great success of influence and students. This is, properly, the stoicism that Cicero met in his initial formation and the one he presents in the *De officiis*.

Divided into three parts, the first one gives attention to “honesty” (*honestitas*) of actions, that is, the moral rectitude, which Cicero lines up in accordance with the cardinal virtues: wisdom, justice, strength, and temperance. All of them have to be at the service of Republic, wisdom in particular, for the risks involved in an excessive zeal in its cultivation and the consequent retirement to the contemplative world (I, vi, 18–19). Then, he exposes “charity” (*charitas*) and its motives; types of injustice; and lastly physical strength, for what he analyzes those cases where it can be used. Nevertheless, its value is relative in spite of the absolute value of inner strength, which allows to overcome passions, guarantee self-control, and relativize material goods. This first part also includes the exposition of certain values associated to the

tradition of the old Republic, which bring to light the influence of cationism, like the relationship between honesty and decorum (I, xxvii, 93 – xlii, 151).

The second part is about benefits of “utility” (*utilitas*): “to trace out those kinds of duty which have to do with the comports of life, with the means of acquiring the things that people enjoy, with influence, and with wealth” (*De off.* II, I, 1). For Cicero, honesty and utility are often dimensions of daily life that lead to dilemmatic situations, in which it is inevitable to bet on one or the other. Cicero’s solution to discerning the correct course of action is to always decide for what guarantees the good of others. In this sense, and this is the real subject of the second book, four situations in which utility consists, precisely, in seeking others’ happiness: (1) “benevolence” (*benevolentia*), which favors the glory and the love of the people, making it more effective than fear, whose utility is not debatable, but whose profitability is much less; (2) “liberality” (*liberalitas*), in connection with (3) “charity” (*beneficentia*) and (4) “prodigality” (*prodigalitas*). In this sense, different situations are analyzed where it is necessary to be prodigal in expenses or moderate in donations. He analyzes exhaustively those cases where it is convenient to exercise liberality for the benefit of the common good, establishing also when charity can cause negligent situations that can rise corruption.

At last, the third book is dedicated to the relationship between the useful and honest, that is, to those possible circumstances where there is a moral conflict between the exercise of excellence and utility, crossing the perspective of philosophy (III, iii, 11–13) and practical life itself (III, iii, 14–19). This is where Cicero establishes a normative protocol, whose general standard is a stoic principle. Thus linked to the positions of authors such as Panaetius, whom he mentions frequently, and against the position of academics and peripatetics, who placed the honest before the useful, Cicero prefers the stoic idea of a mutual implication between both dimensions, which prevents its separation, not even possible in theoretical terms: “whatever is morally right also expedient and nothing expedient that is not at the same time morally right” (III, iv, 20). It is at this point where Cicero is more vehement in relation to damages committed to the neighbor, which have no place neither by natural laws, nor by civil order, nor by natural reason: transgressors of such principle should to be accused of impiety before the gods (III, vi, 27–28). Then, he develops one of the most famous themes of Panaetius: the conflict between honesty and apparent utility, as well as a selection of guidelines on how to determine the triumph of the former over the latter from the point of view of the four cardinal virtues, what constitutes a precious legacy of moral casuistry in light of the mentioned stoic principle.

At the same time that Cicero writes and reflects on duties, two thinkers will set the pace for the new stoicism: Epictetus (55–135 AD), a slave of Greek origin, author of two famous works, the *Discourses of Epictetus* (Ἐπικτήτου διατριβαί) and the *Handbook of Epictetus* or *Enchiridion* (Ἐγχειρίδιον Ἐπικτήτου); and, undoubtedly, Lucius Annaeus Seneca (4 BC–65 AD). Within the same stoic period, but more than a century later, the great stoic figure will be the emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus (121–180 AD), author of a famous *Meditations* (Τὰ εἰς ἑαυτόν). We will

focus our attention on the second of them attending to the fact that he was the only one of this famous trio who wrote in Latin.

Seneca, perhaps because of its prominent position in Roman public life, has a special interest for us. He was one of the most important exponents of stoic moral idealism, and always kept close to his compatriots in their pursuit of happiness despite daily falls. Just as stoics thought, in a world governed by fate the existence takes the form of a daily struggle for the control of personal passions, that is, roots of unhappiness. The objective of Seneca's practical philosophy was to guarantee the government of good judgment by seeking an alignment with those decisions that are beyond control of men, but that determine them. In this sense, he never hesitated to comfort those who in their daily battles had to face situations of failure, disappointment, or sadness. To face this task Seneca wrote numerous works that, to this day, remain an influential legacy of Latin practical wisdom. Seneca's texts not only favor typically Roman severity with oneself but also compassion and a kind demand on others, insofar as every man, by the mere fact of being so, is subjected to the same volubility and exposed to the same occasions of defeat. We can highlight the texts *On happiness (De vita beata)*; the collection of *Moral letters to Lucilius (Epistulae morales ad Lucilium)*, whose composition always ends with a philosophical reference for the later praxis – in many cases, by the way, from Epicurus himself; the text *On clemency (De clementia)*, commendable virtue whose implementation is usually associated with the pity toward the human race and its continuous exposure to capitulation in the daily fight against passions; and, next to the previous one, *On wrath (De Ira)*, one of the most eloquent works about evils derived from the lack of self-control, as well as an exceptional argument for those who consider, especially in contexts of government and direction, that the outburst of rage have beneficial effects for the whole company.

Parallel to his philosophical production, Seneca also cultivated tragedy. Some authors have recently traced how certain features of this literary genre and its mise-en-scene cover his own philosophy. They have also indicated how some structures of stoicism are present in the dramaturgy of his characters. The most interesting thesis consider that tragedies of the Roman philosopher follow a structure that coincides, in their essential points, with the stoic psychology of action (Staley 2010, pp. 66–101; Young 2013, p. 49): (1) impressions – that is, thoughts, some of which are desires, proposers of courses of action; (2) judgment – exercise whereby reason gives or rejects consent to that course of action; and, at last, (3) action – the action itself, decided in the light of the judgment. When passions prevail, the judgment is twisted and the action triggers undesirable events, if not catastrophic. In the case of his most famous tragedy, *Medea*, when the princess suspects that her mind can lead her to desire a terrible revenge against Jason – impression–, she goes looking for advice to her nurse, who tries by all means to placate Medea's soul, seeking to encourage her good sense – judgment; finally, the nurse, defeated, recognizes the dominion of rage over the reason, which originates the last step of Medea toward the terrible events – action – that culminate the tragedy that we all know. The virtues proposed by the character of the nurse are genuinely stoic: (1) to stop impulses to make way for reason and think calmly before acting; (2) to praise the value of the “opportune

occasion” (*opportunitas temporum*) (e.g., Cic. *De off.* I, xl, 142–143); (3) to recognize, when facing dire situations, that it is necessary to renounce to a futile hope and focus on the present; (4) to show the truth, in its most absolute harshness; (5) to accommodate oneself to the circumstances, which is as much as to accommodate oneself to the fate, in the idea that there are reasons for the reality that, even escaping human reason, request a quiet acceptance. In short, objectives of Seneca’s practical philosophy are summarized in the principles of ataraxy, the imperturbability of mind, no matter how painful or pleasurable may be the events; and, at the same time, in exercising pity for those who fail to exercise virtue. Compassion implies “taking charge” of others in certain circumstances that, in a final analysis, could also be ours.

Conclusions

Roman practical philosophy and its link with practical wisdom is not original, but rather an assimilation of Greek contents, filtered by the legendary pragmatism of Latin people. Ideas about life were meaningless to Romans without the inclusion of a serious reflection on human action, both public and private. This included also the question of political survival as a people and the enjoyment of life without calamities, but also without the foreseeable vices derived from moral lightness. It seems normal, therefore, that the Catonian model was the best to embody the double republican figure of the statesman, both, capable of managing military matters, as well as political and social issues; and, the homelike man, in charge of domestic affairs, cultivation of land, and care of his collaborators, assistants, and, of course, slaves. The model was something, if not exclusive, typical of the republican mentality, many of whose members belonged to the most powerful lineages of Rome: we cannot forget the link of Cato himself with one of the most important plebeian *gens*, the Portia. Under this perspective, a republican prototype like Cato managed to make the valuation of personal merits prevail over belonging to an outstanding lineage: the decadence of the present could not be justified according to the heroic past. In short, the republican sensibility of the third century witnessed a displacement of the *virtus* from the value of personal ancestors, to the personal value of an exemplary behavior, capable of becoming exemplary for others. Consequently, the valuation of public action and personal success were based on the individual exposure to members of community and their judgment, drawn up under strict criteria of decorum, integrity, and self-control.

Purified of its territorial and patriotic commitments, the Catonian model of practical wisdom suffered throughout the second century BC an important process of sophistication, in which philosophical schools, well established in the capital, played an important role. The popular wisdom of ancestors, incardinated in the core of the *mos maiorum*, reinvented itself at the service of a new sensibility, aware that the long republican period was giving way to a larger, broader, and more varied Rome. This period will be marked by the bewilderment at the end of an era and the urgent need for practical guides for daily life. This is the time of the decline of Republican politics and the growth and proliferation of a Philosophy of resistance

under the Empire (Blits 2014, pp. 93–112), more practical than theoretical; more urgent than laborious in disquisitions; more oriented to present life than to future hopes. For this cause, the main schools partially abandoned the metaphysical contents to commit themselves to the new times. This is one of the reasons why Roman practical wisdom continues to be a mandatory stop for persons exposed to public activity. But also for those perplexed in need of reasoning, answers, or consolation.

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