

Gareth D. Williams

The Cosmic Viewpoint. A Study of Seneca's Natural Questions.

Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012.

xi + 392 pages

\$45.00 (cloth ISBN 978-0-19-973158-9)

Gareth Williams's [hereafter W] interpretation of Seneca's *Naturales Quaestiones* [hereafter NQ] represents a thorough and minute reading of one of the works from the history of the Stoic school that is likely to attract more attention from scholars in the near future. Williams offers a highly original approach to NQ by deliberately focusing not so much on its physical and/or cosmological aspects but rather on its rhetorical dimension: according to W, Seneca intends the reading of NQ to be *in itself* a spiritual/intellectual exercise, a literary experience through which the reader will embark on a philosophical journey that ideally takes him from an all too human mindset to a (Stoic) cosmic viewpoint that should put behind all anthropocentric distinctions and delimitations when considering natural phenomena such as earthquakes, comets, or floods. Considered from this perspective, physics and cosmology become, to a certain degree, an excuse for what is essentially an *ethical* project, or rather the material through which the project comes alive – something that would bring NQ closer to Lucretius than to Pliny.

By drawing on M. Graver's comments on Brad Inwood's reading, W avoids the risk of overstating the originality of Seneca's approach to cosmology. The rationalistic strategy of interpreting nature on its own terms is not a Senecan or Stoic innovation, rather, it constitutes a permanent strand in Greek philosophy that goes back to the Pre-Socratics' attempts to explain natural phenomena as events devoid of supernatural or religious significance. However, W intends to show that Seneca goes well beyond that rationalist tradition: rather than a mere collection of explanations of natural phenomena, NQ consists of 'an eventful, often highly dramatized mode of discourse that... activates the reader to be more than just the passive recipient of Seneca's researches; to be truly moved and transported by the figurative mind travels that the eight books instigate and enact' (4). NQ is thus not just an inquiry into natural science with a therapeutic goal: it is in itself a therapeutic device, the ultimate goal of which is to enable the reader – through a correct understanding of the universe – to experience the world without experiencing the perturbations that the unenlightened mind is prone to, such as fear, anguish, or distress. In this respect, although Aristotle, Theophrastus, Posidonius, and Pliny the Elder figure prominently throughout the book, so do Cicero and, most interestingly, Ovid and Virgil. The presence of the latter testifies to the direction of W's general approach, which is to focus primarily on the rhetorical dimension of Seneca's discourse and on the strategic relationship between the technical expositions of NQ and its moralizing prefaces, epilogues, and digressions. Although this goal is explicitly addressed in Chapter 2, it pervades the whole of W's detailed reading of the eight books of NQ.

The title of the book points to the heart of W's reading, which is built on top of the distinction between two possible mindsets or viewpoints: on the one hand, what we might call the 'self-centered perspective', which W progressively identifies with a narrow, earthly, Rome-centered, literal-minded worldview, a perspective which focuses unduly on the exceptions to the regular order of nature (i.e., *mirabilia*) or on the details and singularities of a given phenomenon. By contrast, the 'cosmic viewpoint' is characterized by an attitude of open-mindedness when

speculating about the possible explanations of natural phenomena; it concentrates on the necessity and regularity of nature and on the universality of apparently exceptional and rare phenomena. This is certainly in conformity with Stoic physics, which is built on a coherent, continuous, naturalist, and providential conception of the universe, and NQ proves to be useful (if we accept W's reading) not only as a confirmation of Seneca's orthodoxy on physical matters but also as a way of enriching our understanding of Stoic cosmology.

To be sure, the adoption of the cosmic perspective is not devoid of practical consequences, and W sees the mind-expanding process that the reader is supposed to experiment as 'a form of detachment that empowers by preserving, even celebrating, individual integrity within (and despite) the all-controlling power system of the Principate' (51). Whether this liberating process is to be considered as political or rather *apolitical* is a problem that permeates the whole of Stoic philosophy and is understandably not addressed by W.

One of the most interesting hermeneutic strategies that W implements throughout his book is to draw together all the scattered instances of NQ where Seneca resorts to negative examples of behaviors, attitudes or habits into an extremely heterogeneous "community of deviants", which includes, among others, the *vitiosi* of Seneca's Rome (Hostius Quadra being their most extreme incarnation), the *delicati*, the flatterers, the *luxuriosi*, 'the marauders who sail the seas in search of war' (204), or 'the *historici* ... who are charged [by Seneca] with sprinkling their works with wonders and lies' (292). This "community of deviants" provides Seneca with extremely graphic examples of the consequences of adopting the self-centered perspective and thus becomes extremely useful from a pedagogical perspective when set to the task of defining not only what sagacity consists in, but also what its limits are (87–92).

The book is organized in accordance with Codoñer's and Hine's rearrangement of the traditional order of the eight books of NQ: 3–4a–4B–5–6–7–1–2. It closes with a brief Epilogue in which W further defends his decision to stick to that order, a decision that is nevertheless not essential to W's general interpretation of NQ, as indeed W claims already at the outset (13).

As could be expected from the fact that much of the material of the book proceeds from previously published papers, the unifying thread of W's reading (i.e., to present NQ as a therapeutic enterprise) occasionally becomes somewhat loose, and the great hermeneutical heights reached by W in chapters 3 (on the cataclysms and the Nile flood), 6 (on earthquakes), and 7 (on comets) becomes intermingled with, e.g., a chapter on the Rhetoric of Science that (intrinsic merits aside) seems to bear a rather light connection with the proposed main goal of the book and should perhaps have been relegated to an appendix.

This issue notwithstanding, *The Cosmic Viewpoint* offers an extremely convincing articulation of NQ's moral prefaces and interludes with the strictly technical sections of the book – an issue that has sometimes been considered one of the weaker points of NQ. This helps substantiate W's claim that, contrary to the process of divorce between science and philosophy that some have seen as perceptible for the first time in Pliny, Seneca manages to connect speculations about nature with philosophy in a perfectly coherent system – a system that is ultimately crowned by an ethical/existential aim. Considered from this perspective, the greatest virtue of W's reading is that it prompts us to approach NQ not (merely) as a meteorological

treatise but rather as a pedagogical/therapeutic moment in the history of Stoicism, thus bringing it closer to Musonius, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius and inscribing it in the hermeneutic tradition that, beginning with Pierre Hadot and Michel Foucault, have concentrated on the rhetorical and pedagogical strategies developed by the Hellenistic philosophers as a means to reach the ultimate *telos*. (As a marginal note, Martha Nussbaum and Richard Sorabji are absent from the otherwise impressive bibliography). *The Cosmic Viewpoint* is of interest, therefore, not only to those interested in the history of science, but also to those who are concerned with the practical dimension of Stoic philosophy.

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