

## INTRODUCTION

“Your anger is a kind of madness, because you set a high price on worthless things.” Seneca the Younger wrote those words in the mid-first century AD, as the Roman principate, the system of one-man rule inaugurated by Augustus Caesar, reached its fourth generation. Seneca ostensibly addressed that thought to his elder brother Novatus but really intended it for all his Roman readers, and it continues to speak powerfully today, in an age that still struggles, more than many previous ones, to deal with insanities wrought by anger.

To better grasp what Seneca means when he defines anger as a misvaluation, try the

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following exercise. Recall the last minor incident that sent you into a rage. Perhaps a reckless driver cut you off and made you slam on your brakes, or someone cut in line in front of you or stole a parking spot or a cab from under your nose. You were injured—or were you? Were you notably worse off, a day or two later, than before the incident occurred? Did it really *matter* that someone disrespected you, in the way that global climate change matters? Or the threat of nuclear war? Or the fact that stars are collapsing into black holes in other parts of our galaxy, swallowing up everything around them?

The juxtaposition of the quotidian with the immeasurably vast is a favorite stratagem of Seneca's, especially in *On Anger* (*De Ira* in Latin), the essay from which this volume is drawn. By shifting our perspective

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or expanding our mental scale, Seneca challenges our sense of what, if anything, is worth our getting angry. Pride, dignity, self-importance—the sources of our outrage when we feel injured—end up seeming hollow when we zoom out and see our lives from a distance: “Draw further back, and laugh” (3.37). Seneca’s great exemplars of wisdom—Socrates, the most revered sage in the Greek world, and Cato the Younger, a senator of the century preceding Seneca’s, in the Roman world—are, in this essay, seen getting spat on, knocked about, and struck on the head without expressing anger or even, it seems, feeling any.

An infringement on your car’s right of way might not matter, but your reaction to it *does*, Seneca believed. In your momentary road rage, in your desire to honk at, hurt, or *kill* the other driver, lie grave threats to

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the sovereignty of reason in your soul, and therefore to your capacity for right choice and virtuous action. The onset of anger endangers your moral condition more than that of any other emotion, for anger is, in Seneca's eyes, the most intense, destructive, and irresistible of the passions. It's like jumping off a cliff: once rage is allowed to get control, there's no hope of stopping the descent. Our spiritual health demands that we let go of anger, or else it will never let go of us.

Seneca knew at first hand the perils of anger. By the time he came to write *On Anger*, or at least the greater part of it, he had witnessed, from the close vantage point of the Roman Senate, the bloody four-year reign of Caligula. (We might give other names than anger to Caligula's maladies—paranoia, say, or sadism—but Seneca, to ad-

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vance his case, lumps all of that emperor's cruelties under the heading *ira*). Caligula casts a long shadow over *On Anger*; Seneca often mentions him by name, but also invokes him implicitly when he associates anger with instruments of torture, with flames and swords, and with civil strife. The nightmare of the Caligula years, it seems, had taught Seneca the high cost of unrestrained wrath, not just to the individual soul, but to the whole Roman state.

It was unusual in Rome for a philosopher and moral essayist to occupy a seat in the Senate, but Seneca was an unusual man. In youth he studied with teachers who embraced Stoicism, a system imported from Greece that counseled mental self-control and adherence to the dictates of divine Reason. He chose to follow the Stoic path, but not in any orthodox way; as a mature writer,

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he drew on many philosophic traditions, or else eschewed theory altogether in favor of practical ethics enhanced by rhetorical flourish. *On Anger* is a case in point: only a portion of the treatise, largely confined to the first half, is demonstrably rooted in Stoic principles. The second half, from which much of this volume is drawn, deals with the problem of anger more pragmatically, reminding us, in its most banal passages, not to overload our schedules, or take on tasks at which we're likely to fail.

Seneca, to judge by his self-presentation in his writings, was a self-reflective and inward-looking man. He describes, in one of the passages translated below (3.36), his zen-like nightly reviews of his own ethical choices—tranquil meditations conducted in the quiet of his bedroom. Yet we know that Seneca also enjoyed proximity to power

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and eagerly played the game of Roman politics, sometimes with disastrous results. In his thirties, he entered the Roman Senate, where he gained a reputation as an original and compelling speaker, but his eloquence only aroused the envy of emperor Caligula, who reportedly wanted him killed (but was himself assassinated before taking action). Under Claudius, Caligula's successor, Seneca came under suspicion again and was exiled to Corsica; the charge brought against him, adultery with one of Caligula's sisters, was likely a pretext. Quite possibly *On Anger* was begun during that period of exile.

After eight years on Corsica, and the near-extinction of his political career, Seneca was recalled to Rome in AD 49 with a most important brief: instructing and guiding the thirteen-year-old Nero, Claudius's adopted son and presumptive heir. With the support

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of Agrippina, another of Caligula's sisters and Claudius's new wife, Seneca became more influential than ever, and also extremely rich. It was at about this time, presumably, that he completed *On Anger* (our only firm clue as to its date is that Novatus, to whom it is addressed, changed his name to Gallio in late 52 or early 53, so the treatise must have been published before that). Perhaps the work was circulated at Rome to herald its author's return there, and to advertise the humanity of the man reentering the inner circle of imperial power—much as a modern politician might publish a memoir prior to a run for higher office.

Humanity, in the sense of humaneness, is indeed the keynote of *On Anger*. To counter the impulses of anger, here defined as the desire to punish, Seneca reminds us of how much we humans have in common—above

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all, our forgivability. In between monsters like Caligula and saints like Socrates stand the other 99.9 percent of the human race, sinners all, yet all deserving of clemency. “Let’s be kinder to one another,” Seneca exhorts, in the impassioned final segment of his treatise. “We’re just wicked people living among wicked people. Only one thing can give us peace, and that’s a pact of mutual leniency.” This theme of a shared fallibility underlying the social contract recurs often in Seneca’s writings but is nowhere so clearly or so loftily expressed as here.

Seneca brought all his formidable rhetorical powers to bear in *On Anger*, sometimes chilling his readers with tales of grotesque cruelty, other times uplifting them with exhortations toward mercy, and finally leaving them haunted by the specter of death, the grim absolute that was never far from

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his thoughts (see *How to Die: An Ancient Guide to the End of Life* in this series). He deploys his famously seductive prose style, rendered here only with very partial fidelity, to keep us hanging on every word. (The passages in this volume do not represent “every word” but constitute less than one-third of *On Anger*; the whole may be read in Robert Kaster’s translation in the University of Chicago volume *Anger, Mercy, Revenge*.)

Seneca ended his life as the victim of a wrath he could not assuage. The emperor Nero, after more than fifteen years under Seneca’s tutelage, became increasingly unstable and paranoid in the mid-60s AD, and imperial *ira* began to raise its head once again, as in the bad old days of Caligula. Seneca was linked to an assassination plot

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by means of contrived evidence and forced to commit suicide in AD 65.

The complexities of Seneca's life, and the sheer volume of his writings, have made him harder to embrace today than the two great Stoics who followed him, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius (see *How to be Free*, another volume in this series, for excerpts from the writings of the former.) Nevertheless his thought remains, for some, a source of inspiration and a guide toward moral awareness. In the mid-twentieth century, the psychologist Albert Ellis drew on Seneca and other Stoics in formulating his rational emotive behavior school of therapy, and in later decades Michel Foucault used Seneca's practice of daily introspection as a model for what he termed "care of the self." Under that model, ancient Stoicism has a

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salutary role to play in the modern world, as we seek remedies, at night in our quiet bedrooms, for our many ills of the soul.

The present volume honors the idea that Seneca was not writing only for elite Romans of the age of Nero, but for all people at all times. In an age when anger thrives, he has much to teach us.