



# Seneca on Surpassing God

**ABSTRACT:** *Seneca twice argues that the wise person (sapiens) outstrips or surpasses (antecedat) God. On its face, this claim seems both starkly impossible and rankly impious, the kind of thought antithetical to Stoic wisdom. However, a case may be made that the thought is a natural outgrowth of Stoicism's value theory and is part of the broader Stoic aspirational ethical program.*

**KEYWORDS:** Seneca, Stoicism, piety, Stoic paradoxes

## I.

At two points in his works, Seneca states explicitly that in achieving Stoic virtue and attaining wisdom, a person may surpass God. In *De providentia*, after articulating the benefits of endurance in the face of life's many challenges, Seneca pauses to note the direction that perfecting one's soul takes:

In this [endurance] you may outstrip God [*deum antecedatis*]; he is exempt from [*extra*] enduring evil, while you are superior [*supra*] to it. (Seneca 1920, hereinafter: *De providentia* 6.6)

Alternately, in Letter 53 to Lucilius, Seneca notes that in achieving virtue and invulnerability, the *sapiens* has outstripped God:

You will be far ahead of all mortals, and even the gods will not be far ahead of you [*non multo te di antecedent*].... The wise man's life spreads out to him as large a surface as does all eternity to a god. There is one point in which the sage has an advantage over the god [*sapiens antecedat deum*]; for a god is freed from terrors by bounty of nature, the wise man by his own bounty [*ille naturae beneficio non timet, suo sapiens*]. What a wonderful privilege to have the weakness of a man and the serenity of a god! (Seneca 1917, hereinafter: *Epistles* 53.11–12)

The core of Seneca's thought is that in both cases human beings who have perfected themselves have thereby surpassed the divine in an important sense. They have achieved more than gods can.

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On its face, this thought seems to have two problems: one metaphysical, the other axiological. The metaphysical problem is quasi-Anselmian in form: that one cannot be greater than God because God is, by definition, *greatest*. I call this reasoning *Anselmian* in order only to highlight its form, of course, not to commit an act of philosophical anachronism. The Anselmian form of thought itself was alive and well in the ancient world, as it informed Xenophanes's critical and reconstructive program with its demands for perfection in the one god's moral and cognitive capacities (Fragments B1, B11, and B12). Plato, too, extended this formal requirement, one that held that the divine itself must embody only what is excellent (*Euthyphro* 6a and *Republic* 391e). And so our moral lives are to be spent in *imitation* of the divine, attempting only to manifest it obliquely. The same goes for Aristotle's reasoning in the sense that the model for divine action is doing only the things that are best, which is understanding what is best. Thus, the Aristotelian god must be a perfect understanding focused on understanding itself (*Metaphysics* 12.1072b.18–21). To be or to do anything else, to have another object or activity, would be worse. So the god, by its very nature, is best and perfect; it could not be otherwise. And so there are *Anselmian* metaphysical reasons to object to Seneca's statement.

There are also axiological reasons to object to Seneca's claims. A widely held view of impiety is that the easiest path to it is by way of hubris, taking oneself to be on par with the gods. Pindar counsels Hieron, the victor of the Pythian horse races (and, by extension, he counsels his own soul also), not to 'pursue immortal life' (*Pythian Odes* 3.61), and he warns the pancratist Phylacidas of Aegina not to 'strive to become Zeus' after his Isthmian win (*Isthmian Odes* 5.14). In Euripides's *Hippolytus*, Theseus mockingly questions his son's pretensions: 'So you are a companion of the gods, a man exceeding others?' (947–48). Vergilian piety, too, is articulated in terms of honoring and being subservient to the gods, as Aeneas is called *pious* in his sacrifices (*Aeneid* 5.695), in his focus on ritual (6.232 and 12.170), and most prominently in his commitment to the demands of his task fulfilling heaven's bidding (4.398). Of course, it is worth pausing to recall the fate of Marsyas, the satyr who presumptuously held that his flute playing was better than Apollo's on the cithara—Apollo flayed him alive.

Even within the Stoic philosophical program, the model of piety is that of service to the gods and humility before them. Cicero's Balbus reports the earlier Chrysippian line in *De natura deorum*:

But the best and purest, holiest and most pious way of worshipping the gods is to ever venerate them with purity, sincerity and innocence both in thought and speech. (*DND* 2.30.71)

And Marcus Aurelius, later:

To live with the gods. And to do that is to show them that your soul accepts what is given and does what the spirit requires—the spirit God

gave each of us to lead and guide us, a fragment of himself. Which is our mind, our *logos*. (*M* 7.27)

Epictetus, too, makes a case for a substantive attitude of humility before the divine, as the philosopher's task is to follow God (*D* 1.30.5). As a consequence, taking oneself as on a par with the gods (much less taking oneself to have surpassed them) is a grave moral error.

In antiquity, it was a commonplace among the Stoics to note that their views ran contrary to common sense. The Stoics regularly highlighted their *paradoxa*, or astonishing truths, both as mnemonic tools for those making progress as Stoics and as methods for marking out the starkness of their views as opposed to those of others. The objective with each paradox is to pose a challenging thesis and then reason one's way to it from principles of the philosophical program. In many cases, the Stoic paradoxes have a ring of their Socratic forbears. Cicero goes out of his way to note the Socratic nature of most of the paradoxes in his *Paradoxa stoicorum* (1942: 4). A few of the Socratic paradoxes that resonate especially with those of the Stoics were that the good man cannot be harmed (Plato, *Apol.* 41d), those who do evil do so out of ignorance (Plato, *Gorg.* 509e), Socrates' wisdom is that he knows he knows nothing of consequence (Plato, *Apol.* 21d), and that virtue is knowledge (*Meno* 87d). Cicero reports further paradoxes that only the noble is good, that virtue is sufficient for happiness, that all goods are equivalent, that all vice is insanity, that only the wise are free, and that only the wise have riches. And in many ways, once one has taken on the appropriate value theory, one can see how such views could be plausible (see Andrew Holowchak's review of the Ciceronian paradoxes [2008: 69–72] for a reconstruction of the paradoxicalist tradition). Regarding the paradoxes, then, the key is to highlight what a revisionary value theory the Stoics are posing. Epictetus additionally embraces a similar strategy of pressing Stoic paradoxes for the sake of clarifying a point about virtue—namely, that being admired by others is not a good (*D* 1.21.3), that we ought not to be angry with those who err (*D* 1.18.2), and that mastering the texts of great philosophers does little good for one's soul (*D* 2.17.37 and *E* 49). Seneca, too, performs these Stoic exercises of paradox, holding that one can still be happy on the rack (*Epistles* 61.22) and that the vicious cannot be benefited (*De beneficiis* 5.12.5). It seems that here, with the thought that the *sapiens* surpasses the gods, Seneca is extending this Stoic paradoxical tradition. The objective, then, in the spirit of the tradition of Stoic paradoxes is to see how to reason one's way to this thought.

## 2.

Any account of Seneca's view of surpassing God must come to terms with the metaphysical and axiological challenges. In what follows, I will present what I take to be Seneca's reasoning for the claim that the *sapiens* may surpass God. When the claim is given proper presentation, the axiological and metaphysical challenges to it can be answered.

The place to start is with the Stoic (and more broadly Platonic and Aristotelian) commonplace that a substantive component of human perfection is that of imitating

the divine. Let us call this the *imitation thesis*.<sup>1</sup> The view is clearly presented in the Platonic dialogues as a view of the two worlds and a reminder of our citizenship as souls here in the world of appearance but with minds that may access the world of universals and true being. The *Timaeus* closes with the injunction, then, to imitate God: ‘He who has seriously devoted himself to learning and to true thoughts... must necessarily and inevitably think thoughts that are immortal and divine’ (90c). The wise person is always ‘tending to his divine part’ (90c). Likewise, in the *Republic*, virtue is conceived as likening oneself to God (638b), and in the *Laws* the Athenian stranger holds that the virtuous are friends of and similar to God (716d).<sup>2</sup> Aristotle’s case for the contemplative life in book 10 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, too, is made on the basis of its ‘activity most akin to the activity of the gods’ (1178b.25).<sup>3</sup>

In the Stoic tradition, the imitation thesis is widely held. Diogenes Laertius presents the imitation thesis as a result of a syllogism combining Stoic theology with the program of life in accord with nature. Zeno, Diogenes reports, first designates the end of life as living ‘in accord with nature’, which is coextensive with a life of virtue. Our natures, as Chrysippus extends the thought, are part of the whole universe, and so when we live in accord with nature, we must live ‘in accordance with our own human nature as well as that of the universe’. Finally, the right reason that pervades nature ‘is identical to Zeus, lord and ruler of all that is’ (DL 7.87–88). As a consequence, life in accord with nature is a life in communion with God.

Cicero reports the Stoic view that the primary impulse of all beings is their self-preservation, but the natural orientation toward the good and rational exhibited by human beings allows them to bring order not only to themselves but to the things around them. In this regard, we are like the gods (*De finibus* 3.20–22). As a consequence, this is why we speak even of gods like Jupiter in human terms such as ‘Savior’, ‘Lord of Guests’, ‘Rallier of Battles’. The safety of humankind depends on Jupiter’s keeping, and our model for that is our parallel human activity of safekeeping (*De finibus* 3.66).

There is ample evidence of Seneca’s holding the imitation thesis. He holds that proper worship of the gods consists in imitating them sufficiently (*Epistles* 95.50). The imitation of the gods is the key to wisdom (*Epistles* 92.3). Happiness, too, is a function of imitating the divine. ‘If the life of the gods contains nothing greater or better than the happy life, then there is no further height to which a man can be raised’ (*Epistles* 85.19). Indeed:

<sup>1</sup> The imitation thesis is a pervasive feature of ancient ethical thought, stipulating that one take the life of the gods as an ideal toward which to strive. Such a model is clear in the Greek term *eudaimonia*, which invokes the divine to characterize the happy life. The thesis extends to the Christian tradition with the injunction that one imitate Christ, as Justin Martyr is keen to characterize the parallel (*Second Apology* 13).

<sup>2</sup> See also *Republic* 613b, *Theatetus* 176b, and *Timaeus* 90b. On the Platonic version of what I am calling the *imitation thesis*, see Sedley (1999), Armstrong (2004), Mahoney (2005), and Silverman (2010). Further, there is ample evidence that the imitation thesis was held by the Epicureans, too. Epicurus argues that human beings and gods have affinity in the same virtues (*Ep. Men.* DL10.124), and Sextus Empiricus reports that the Epicureans take happiness to be found in living well with the gods (*Adversus Mathematicos* 9.47).

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of the imitation thesis and its appeal among the Presocratics, Plato, and Aristotle, see Patrick Lee Miller’s *Becoming God* (2011). Daniel Russell’s ‘Virtue as Likeness to God in Plato and Seneca’ (2004) makes the case for this thought extending into the Stoic tradition.

Do you ask what it is that produces the wise man? That which produces a god. You must grant that the wise man has an element of godliness, heavenliness, grandeur. The good does not come to everyone, nor does it allow any random person to possess it. (*Epistles* 87.19)

The aspiration, then, is to ‘vie with Jupiter’ in the objectives of the development of virtue and mastery of oneself (*Epistles* 110.20). This project of emulating the divine has the promise of significant payoff: ‘[In enacting virtue and endurance]... you may imitate God. And what does virtue promise you for this enterprise? Mighty privileges equal to the divine’ (*De beata vita* 16.2). In short, in the development of our virtues, in bringing reason and order to ourselves and our environment, we not only liken ourselves to the divine, we kindle the divine within us (*Epistles* 31.11).

The trouble for human beings is that the parallel between gods and human beings is limited because human nature is frail and finite. The gods are enduring and immortal. They not only have the virtues by nature, but this virtue, by necessity of the gods’ rationality, is also invulnerable: ‘The immortal gods did not learn virtue—having been born with virtue complete, and containing in their nature the essence of goodness’ (*Epistles* 95.36). As a consequence, the gods cannot do anything but what is good. ‘And what reason have the gods for doing deeds of kindness? It is their nature’ (*Epistles* 95.48). Human beings can become invulnerable in like fashion, by mastering their minds and desires. But this invulnerability is itself not invulnerable (*Epistles* 92.30 and 124.23). Human beings may have a nature that makes them amenable to harmony and rationality, but this nature is fragile and can be perverted. ‘We hasten toward virtue while hampered by vices’ (*Epistles* 75.16). What allows us the capacity to make ourselves alike to the gods is our shared capacity for rationality. ‘Reason... is a common attribute of both gods and men; in the gods it is already perfected, in us it is capable of being perfected’ (*Epistles* 92.27). It is here, again, that the contrast is drawn between human beings and gods in terms of what is shared. The difference is the modality of that common attribute and its perfection. The gods are *already perfected* (and presumably could never be otherwise); whereas human rationality and its consummation is contingent and is yet perfectible. Call this the *different natures thesis*.

### 3.

In light of the imitation and different natures theses, a question lingers: can human beings ever overcome the difference and sufficiently imitate the divine? Can human beings draw equal with the gods? Seneca’s answer is in the affirmative. To begin with, the life of the *sapiens* is: ‘joyful, happy and calm, unshaken; he lives on a plane with the gods’ (*Epistles* 59.14). The quality of life for the *sapiens* draws equal to the gods because those who are wise have perfected their natures. They have lived in accord with the proper capacities given them. They have cultivated their nature.

No mind that has not God is good. Divine seeds are scattered throughout our mortal bodies; if a good husbandman receives them,

they spring up in likeness of their source and on a par with those from which they came. (*Epistles* 73.16)

[Nature] has given you such gifts that you may, if you do not prove false to them, rise level with God. (*Epistles* 31.9)

We may, given this point about life in accord with our own nature, then have the beginnings of an answer at least to the axiological challenge. Is it impious, hubristic, to vie with the gods? No, not in the sense that we truly are aspiring to achieve their virtue by perfecting our own.

He in whose body virtue and spirit is ever present is equal to the gods; mindful of his origin, he strives to return thither. No man does wrong in attempting to regain the heights from which he once came down. (*Epistles* 92.29)

This inclination to climb Olympus is part of our nature. It cannot be impious if it is an expression of the divine within us.

Philosophical training, Stoic exercises, and the perfection of one's mind are the constitutive means to this end. In fact, the appeal of the philosophical life, its dignity in the face of adversity and suffering, is that one enacts the divine, even amidst human depravity and inanity. In so doing, we rise above adversity and become divine. 'For that is what philosophy promises to me, that I shall be made equal to God' (*Epistles* 48.11). In this respect, then, the Stoic sage, the *spoudaios*, *sophos*, the *sapiens* does draw even with the gods. The sage and the gods are good because they share virtue, and in this there is nothing to distinguish them. But the different natures thesis returns: doesn't the modal status of that attribute count for something? The gods have virtue, rationality, and their invulnerability by nature, for eternity. Human beings have it contingently and for a short time. Does this not make it so the gods will always be greater than human beings? Does this not mean that even if human beings come to be on a par with the gods regarding the attribute in question, it is in name only? Seneca's answer is a resolute *no*:

In what respect is Jupiter superior to the good man? His goodness lasts longer; but the wise man does not set a lower value upon himself, just because his virtues are limited by a briefer span.... Virtue is not greater that lasts longer. (*Epistle* 73.13)

The fact that the gods have virtue by nature and for eternity and human beings only contingently and for a time is itself immaterial. Cicero reports in *Paradoxa stoicorum* that a core feature of Stoic value theory is that 'virtues are equal to one another [*virtutes pares sunt inter se*]' (20–21). Consequently, having a virtue contingently and having a virtue necessarily are equally good. The good is the good. All goods are equal on the Stoic value theory, and so human virtue is as good as

divine virtue in the simple fact that they are both instances of what is good—virtue. And so the virtuous person draws equal with God. Call this the *equality thesis*.<sup>4</sup>

#### 4.

The imitation thesis is that human beings ought to make themselves like God, and the different natures thesis is that human beings must overcome their own natural shortcomings in this quest (and the gods have no challenges). The equality thesis is that it is possible for human beings to succeed in their objective of making themselves like God. They draw even with the divine when they bring to perfection whatever seeds of the divine are in them.

Now consider the following question: do we consider those who earned their wealth more deserving of it than those who merely inherited it? Or consider two athletes, one for whom the size of her body makes the game easy, the other who must train constantly in order to compete. Do we not admire the determination and resiliency of the latter, even if she accomplishes the same deeds as the former in competition? The thought is that even if the achievements of the two are absolutely equal but one makes up more ground than the other, then the one starting at a disadvantage is more creditable than the other in the achievement when it is harder. Call this the *greater credit principle*.

Seneca makes the case for a version of the greater credit principle with the following analogy with building:

Suppose that two buildings have been erected, unlike as to their foundations, but equal in height and in grandeur. One is built on faultless ground, and the process of erection goes right ahead. In the other case, the foundations have exhausted the building materials, for they have been sunk into soft and shifting ground and much labor has been wasted in searching for the solid rock. As one looks at both of them, one sees clearly what progress the former has made, but the larger and more difficult part of the latter is hidden. So it is with men's dispositions; some are pliable and easy to manage, but others have to be laboriously wrought out by hand.... I should accordingly deem more fortunate the man who has never had any trouble with himself; but the other, I feel, has deserved better of himself, who has won a victory over the meanness of his own nature, and has not gently led himself, but has wrestled his way to wisdom. (*Epistles* 52. 5–7)

<sup>4</sup> A stronger version of the equality thesis was represented in the Stoic and other parallel traditions as what might be called the *identity thesis*, which is that philosophical training makes one a god or identical to God. Heraclitus's extension of his doctrine of the unity of opposites has human beings as 'immortal mortals' (B62), and Marcus Aurelius holds that perfecting one's *logos* will make it so that one will 'vanish into what produced you' (*M* 4.14). Plato's *Phaedo* (84b) and *Timaeus* (90a) have the souls of philosophers becoming immortal and divine, and Plotinus's view is that in achieving wisdom, one merges with the rational source of reality and achieves 'the life of gods' (*Enneads* 6.9.11).

The different natures thesis is that human beings are flawed, but in the aspirations of the imitation and equality theses, we can overcome those limitations. We, in achieving virtue, in perfecting our rationality, bringing order to ourselves, draw even with the divine. In so doing, we deserve greater credit in reaching that state, as our arriving at wisdom is an *achievement*, but the gods' wisdom is guaranteed by their nature. And thus, we surpass the gods in the achievement. Let us return to Seneca's accounts, first in *De Providentia*:

In this [endurance] you may outstrip God [*deum anteceditis*]; *he is exempt from [extra] enduring evil, while you are superior [supra] to it.* (6.6, emphasis added)

Then in *Epistle 53*:

*There is one point in which the sage has an advantage over the god [sapiens antecedit deum]; for a god is freed from terrors by bounty of nature, the wise man by his own bounty.* What a wonderful privilege [*res magna*] to have the weakness of a man and the serenity of a god! (11–12, emphasis added)

In both cases, Seneca contrasts the two classes of entities. In *De providentia*, God, given God's nature, is outside of, beyond (*extra*), the evils. Human beings, when they achieve virtue, are superior (*supra*) to them. (Jan Garrett's gloss on this difference is helpful: 'Seneca's point is that human beings can avoid distress, though their mere humanity does not guarantee that they will do so... on the other hand, the god, given his qualitatively greater perfection... cannot feel distress' [1999: 5].) Human beings overcome challenges, the gods face none.

Seneca's contrast in *Epistle 53* is that the gods suffer no evils by virtue of what their nature provides, but the *sapiens* has this not because of nature's bounty solely, but by his own work and effort on what nature had given him only incipiently. It is clear that in invoking the different natures thesis, and human weakness in particular, Seneca is deploying the greater credit principle to yield the claim that the *sapiens* outstrips God. Human virtue, given its contingency and the challenges of achieving it, is more creditable than divine virtue. The gods and the *sapiens* have virtue, but only for the *sapiens* is this an achievement. And so, the *sapiens* is more creditable.

## 5.

Recall the concerns one may have with Seneca's claim that the wise person may outstrip God: that it is metaphysically impossible for human beings to stand before the gods, and it is deeply impious for human beings to think so or try to do so. In the spirit of the Stoic paradoxical tradition, my strategy has been to show that Seneca's outstripping thesis falls to neither objection when seen in light of the reasoning that yields it. That reasoning can be captured with the following core argument:



1. *The imitation thesis*: It is proper for human beings to try to make themselves alike to the divine in achieving virtue and perfecting their rationality.
2. *The equality thesis*: In achieving virtue and perfecting their rationality, human beings draw equal with the gods.
3. *The different natures thesis*: The gods have their rationality and virtue by way of their nature whereas human beings have rationality and virtue by way of overcoming their weaknesses.
4. *The greater credit principle*: If two agents possess the same good, but one must overcome more than the other in achieving it (or the other does not overcome anything in possessing it), then the one that must overcome more deserves more credit for the achievement.
5. *Therefore*, human beings, in achieving virtue, deserve more credit for their virtue than the gods.

Given the conclusion here, we have the outstripping thesis that human beings, in achieving their virtue and perfecting their rationality, have the advantage over the gods.

Is such a thought metaphysically impossible? It does not seem so because the different natures thesis is one that shows that the human difference from the divine will always be absolute, necessary. But the comparative credit commitment is based precisely on the thought that contingency of achievement is itself consistent with but also a consequence of the Anselmian thought that the gods by their nature must be perfect. Thus, the gods are not ever *absolutely* outstripped. And is this thought that human beings deserve more credit for their virtue than the gods itself impious? I think not. Human nature has its weaknesses, but we have a spark of the divine within us. It is not impious for us to kindle that spark and return it to its heights. And it is not impious to take ourselves to have outstripped God in such a return, as our objective is not to reject the gods or hold them in contempt in such assessments, but to revel in communion with them (see Henry Barton [1909:365] for an account of what such a union would consist of). The outstripping thesis risks impiety, for sure. But when understood as the result of our proper aspiration to imitate the gods out of genuine piety, the risk dissipates. In this regard, Seneca's outstripping thesis is an extension of the tradition of Stoic paradoxes. In the same way that one is forced to reconceive 'freedom' and 'wealth' with the classic paradoxes that *Only the wise are free* and *Only the wise have wealth* (see Cicero, *Paradoxa stoicorum*, 33 and 42, for these paradoxes, respectively), Seneca's view that *The wise surpass God* demands a reconception of the relation of human and divine natures. Once seen rightly, what once appeared not only counterintuitive and hubristic now is uncontroversial and pious.

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