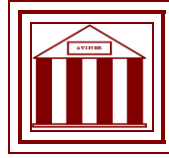


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**Connections between Seneca and  
Platonism in *Epistulae ad Lucilium* 58**

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**Connections between Seneca and Platonism in  
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**Abstract**

Goal of this paper is to highlight the close connections between the philosophy of Seneca and Platonism. In this sense, the present essay focuses its attention on the *Letter LVIII of Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, which describes a hierarchical division of beings, belonging to the Platonic tradition. This letter shows a sort of “betraying” of Seneca towards the Stoicism, since he refuses the Stoic hierarchy, that places the *Quid* on the top of hierarchy, for the Platonic solution, that instead places the *Quod Est* on the top of hierarchy, removing completely the *Quid*. However, what is more striking of this whole theory is that, it is not a mere corollary to an essentially Stoic philosophy, but represents the ontological backbone of all Senecan philosophy. In fact, every step of this hierarchy has a perfect match in the corpus of Seneca, and this demonstrates how deep are the connections with Plato and the Platonic tradition.

**Keywords:** Seneca, Plato, Platonism, Roman Philosophy.

## Introduction

The works of Seneca are full of connections with Plato or Platonism. We find in his works references both to questions typically Platonic and to Plato himself. For instance, in *Naturales Quaestiones*<sup>1</sup> Seneca takes up the problem of matter in a way it is posed within Middle Platonism: whether it is bad and whether it pre-exists God. Further, in *De Ira*<sup>2</sup> there is an explicit reference to Plato, which it is also adduced by Diogenes Laertius<sup>3</sup>, concerning the way to act when we are inflamed by anger; while in *Ad Marciam de Consolatione*<sup>4</sup> we can find a myth that evidently follows the myth of Er presented in the tenth book of Plato's *Republic*<sup>5</sup>. Nevertheless, the most relevant connection with Plato and Platonism is in the *Letter LVIII*<sup>6</sup>. It is not only a marvellous masterpiece of Platonic philosophy in the early Empire, showing the connections and the relations between Stoic and Platonic philosophy, but it is also a kind of ontological manifesto to Seneca's philosophy, containing the aim of all his philosophy. For this reason, an analytic comment will be necessary in order to explain these relationships.

## Commentary

### *The Beginning of the 'Letter' [1-4].*

The *Letter* begins with a complaint of Seneca about the poverty of the Latin language. He states that this fact can be essentially attributed to two reasons: it can be a structural lack, namely there is not a word in the Latin vocabulary for a Greek word; or it can be a temporal lack, namely there was a time when there was the word but at the time of Seneca the word is no longer used. Regarding the second lack, he gives three words as examples: *asilum* (gadfly)<sup>7</sup>, *cernere* (to decide something that is contested) and *si iusso* (if I have commanded). The first one at the time of Seneca had disappeared, while the other two had suffered a change in their form: *cernere* became *decernere*, while *si iusso* became *iussero*.

### *The Problem of Translation [5-7].*

Reconnecting with the precedent part, where he complained of the poverty of Latin vocabulary, in these paragraphs Seneca asks permission to use the Latin word *Essentia* instead of the Greek word οὐσία, and the expression *quod est* instead of τὸ ὄν. For the former there are no real problems, except for the

<sup>1</sup>Seneca, *Naturales Quaestiones*, pref. I, 16.

<sup>2</sup>Id., *De Ira*, II, 36, 1; and III, 12, 5-7.

<sup>3</sup>Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, III, 39.

<sup>4</sup>Seneca, *Ad Marciam de Consolatione*, 18, 1-8.

<sup>5</sup>See Plato, *Republic*, 614b-621d.

<sup>6</sup>See also J. Dillon, *The Middle Platonists. 80 B.C. to A.D. 220*, Duckworth, London 1996, pp. 135-137.

<sup>7</sup>This is a clear reference to Plato, *Apology*, 30e.

style, which seems to Seneca too rough; but the second translation brings a difficult problem, namely the impossibility of exactly translating the Greek word ὄν (noun), because the common solution “*est*” (verb) substitutes for a noun a verb. These problems will be simply solved by recurring to Cicero's *auctoritas*.

*Meaning of Genus and Species [8-12].*

Here Seneca starts to approach the core of the letter, saying that the “What Is” *is said in six ways by Plato*<sup>1</sup>, but soon after he withdraws himself from this task, saying that before talking about the *Quod Est*, we must clarify the difference between genus (*genus*) and species (*species*). So he explains this by an Aristotelian example: the man, the horse, and the dog are species; now what have they in common? All of these species are animals, so the genus is what holds together different species. To better clarify those concepts, he continues the example, and now divides beings into animals and vegetables<sup>2</sup>, underlining how both of them have a vital principle<sup>3</sup>. Subsequently he notes that there are things which have not a vital principle, like stones, so he needs something that holds together what has a vital principle and what has not. He finds this in the genus “body”, as in fact both objects have a body. Yet there are things which have not a body, so he needs a genus that holds together those two other objects, and this is the *Quod est*. Over this genus there is nothing, because it is the *genus generale*. To explain this concept<sup>4</sup> he produces another example: the genus “man” is a genus because it includes: the species “nationality”, like Roman, Greek and Parthian; the species “colours”, things like white, black, and yellow<sup>5</sup>; and the species “persons”, like Cato, Cicero, Lucretius. Yet it is also a species because, as we have seen, man is a species of animal, so it is both, but the *Quod Est* is only a genus and for this reason it is called *genus generale*.

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<sup>1</sup>Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, 58, 8. Rightly Inwood underlines that “the idea that an item of philosophical interest is said in several ways [...] is familiar from Aristotle's works rather than Plato's. In fact, the claim that “being is said in many ways” is fundamental to Aristotle's basic approach to ontology”. So Inwood correctly concluded that “an interesting form of philosophical fusion (involving Stoicism, Platonism, and Aristotelian ideas) is in play”. (B. Inwood, *Seneca Selected Philosophical Letters*, Oxford University Press, 2007 Oxford, p. 115).

<sup>2</sup>It is striking here how plants and animals are placed at the same level of the hierarchy, giving in this way the same dignity to plant and animal. We have a something analogous in Plato's *Timaeus* 77a-b, and 90a-c.

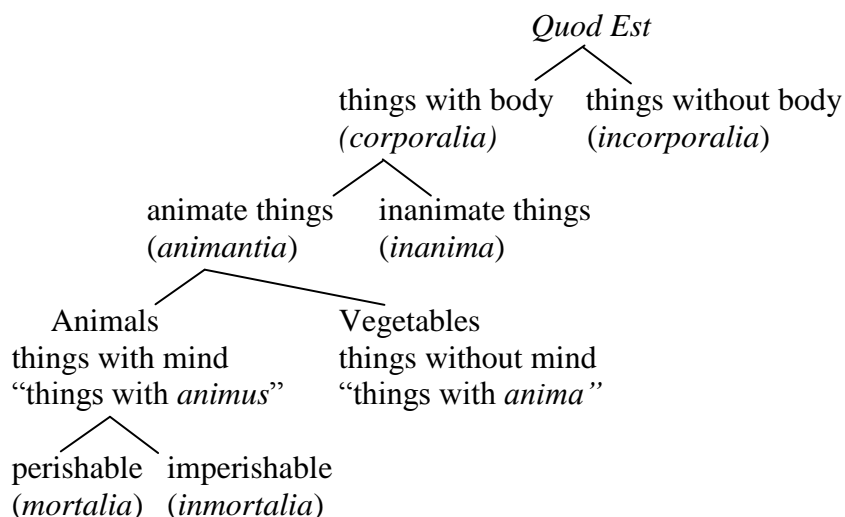
<sup>3</sup>It is to note also, how the use of a word like “*superius*” (superior) in this passage underlines the presence of a hierarchical scale of values.

<sup>4</sup>Inwood summarized very well the meaning of genus, paraphrasing Seneca's thought in this way: “when we see the common features linking the various species together then we start to get a notion of genus which contains them” (B. Inwood, *Seneca Selected Philosophical Letters*, Oxford University Press, 2007 Oxford, p. 117).

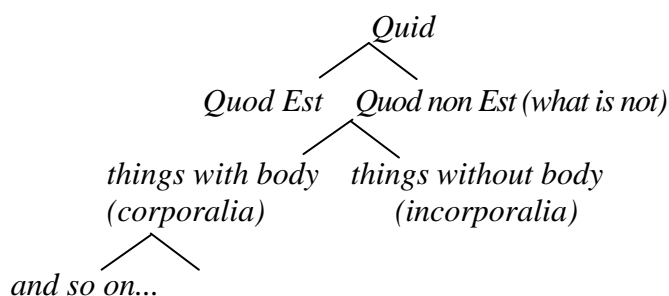
<sup>5</sup>This is striking, because the use, among the species of skin colours, of the term *flavus* means that in the age of Seneca there were contacts between the people of the Roman Empire and the people from the Far-East, and they were well-known to the Roman people. We can find, among other, references to the *Seres* (people of Eastern Asia) also in: Virgil, *Georgics*, 2, 121; Horace, *Carmen*, 3, 29, 27; 4, 15, 23; Ovid, *Amores*, 1, 14, 6.

*The Question of 'Quid' [13-15].*

In these paragraphs Seneca introduces the issue of the "*Quid*" (Something). The "*Quid*" is another genus that the Stoics have placed over the *Quod Est*, stating that only the former is the true "*genus generale*". In despite of his Stoic connections, Seneca defends the primacy of *Quod Est*. In fact, in [14] he institutes a division to demonstrate the primacy of *Quod Est*. Seneca's division is briefly summarized here:



The way in which this division demonstrates the primacy of *Quod Est* is not immediately clear, but the next paragraph clarifies the question, explaining what is the *Quid*. In [15] Seneca describes the Stoic "*Quid*", saying that it is that which embraces both "what is" and "what is not", because, for the Stoics, if we do not put something over the *Quod Est* we cannot explain things like centaurs or giants, which surely do not exist. Hence this should be the division for the Stoics:



If Seneca has failed to demonstrate his point, the question is open. In fact there are both those who think in this way, such as Brunschwig<sup>1</sup>, and those who hold the opposite view, like Inwood<sup>2</sup>. I am in agreement with Inwood, because

<sup>1</sup>See Brunschwig J., *Papers in Hellenistic Philosophy*, Cambridge 1994, pp. 111-113.

<sup>2</sup>See Inwood B., *Seneca Selected Philosophical Letters*, Oxford University Press, 2007 Oxford, p. 121.

I believe that the species of the “*Quod non Est*” ought to be included in *Quod Est*, for the reason that what is *Quod non Est* in some way is still *Est*, since it is formed by *Quod+non+Est*, and so it is also composed by *Est*; hence when Seneca talks about imaginary things, like Centaurs or Giants, he clearly considers them *incorporalia*.

*Six Ways to Be for Plato(-nists) [16-22].*

In this section Seneca begins to explain how Plato divides into six classes all existing things.

1st.[16]As we have said, the first genus is the “*Quod Est*” (what is). It is something that cannot be grasped by the senses, but it can be only grasped by the thought.

2nd.[17] The second class of being is that “*which is prominent and stands out above everything else*”<sup>1</sup>. To explain it Seneca takes as an example the word “poet”. This word indicates everyone who composes poems, but if we are talking about “the Poet”, we know that we are talking about Homer, since he was the greatest poet. For the same reason, according to Seneca, if we are talking about the prominent Being, we are surely talking about God, so he is the second type of being.

3rd.[18-19] The third class<sup>2</sup> is that of ideas (*ideae*). [18] They are imperishable (*immortales*), immutable (*inmutabiles*), inviolable (*inviolabiles*), and everything is originated from these. [19] To make clear the comprehension of this concept: first Seneca gives its definition, namely 'eternal model of everything that it is formed in Nature'; and second he takes the example of the painting<sup>3</sup> to better clarify what the ideas are – according to this example the idea is represented by the person whom the painter has painted in the painting.

Moreover, this passage serves to underline the use of this reference “*Propria Platonis supellex est*”<sup>4</sup> about this class. As Inwood<sup>5</sup> has well pointed out, this could be understood in two ways: (1) Seneca is telling to us that this theory as a whole is Platonic, while this specific point of the theory is a personal contribution of Plato; or (2) *that this mode is Platonic and not shared by any other school*<sup>6</sup>.

4th.[20-21] At the fourth level Seneca places the *idos*<sup>7</sup> (form). To describe this notion he reuses the example of painting, stating that the *idos* is the image of the person in the painting, in other words it is the shape of the idea impressed within the sensible thing.

<sup>1</sup>Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, 58, 15, trans. Eng. By R. M. Gummere, Harvard University Press, London 1961, vol. I p. 397.

<sup>2</sup>See Plato, *Timaeus* 28a; *Euthyphro* 6e; *Cratylus* 390e; *Hippias Major* 299e; *Republic* 472c, 477c, 484c; *Symposium* 211a.

<sup>3</sup>Cicero uses an example like this at *Orator* 8-10 to explain the notion of *idea*.

<sup>4</sup>Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, 58, 18.

<sup>5</sup>See B. Inwood, *Seneca Selected Philosophical Letters*, Oxford University Press, 2007 Oxford, p. 125.

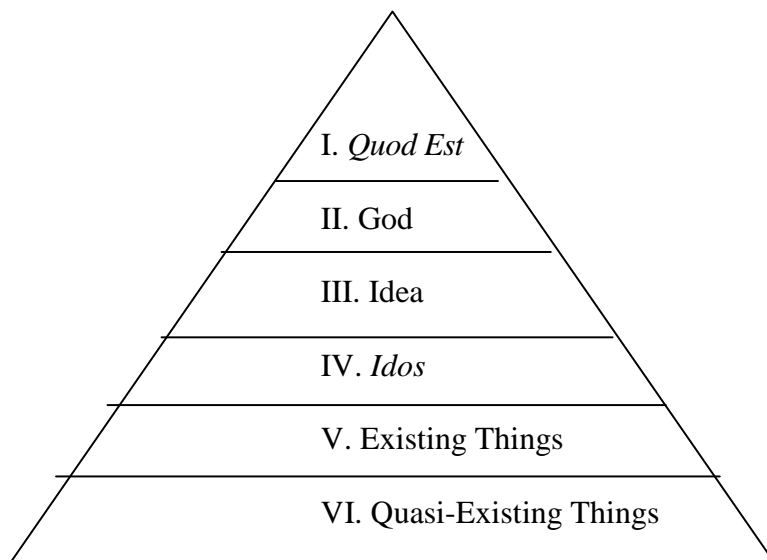
<sup>6</sup>Id.

<sup>7</sup>Compare with Cicero *Acad.* 1, 30 and *Tusculan Disputations* 1, 58; and with Plato, *Timaeus* 28-29.

5th.[22] The fifth level includes everything that has existence: human beings, animals, vegetables, and so on.

6th[22] Finally, belonging to the sixth level are those things which “quasi-exist”<sup>1</sup>, such as the time and the void.

This graphic summarizes the situation:



At the end of this list, Seneca summarizes and explains what has been said, underlining that, for Plato, physical reality has not true existence, since it changes constantly.

*Quidquid Vides Currit cum Tempore*<sup>2</sup>[23-24].

At the beginning of this section Seneca quotes [23] this verse of Heraclitus<sup>3</sup>: “we go down twice into the same river, and yet into a different river”<sup>4</sup>; consequently [23] he notes that in the same way both the river and the human being change constantly, and so he criticizes human stupidity, which has fear of death, not understanding that actually we die every moment; finally [24] he states that also the universe, although immortal, changes in every instant.

<sup>1</sup>Inwood translates the concept of “*quasi sunt*” (Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, 58, 22.) in this way: “as it were are”(B. Inwood, *Seneca Selected Philosophical Letters*, Oxford University Press, 2007 Oxford, p. 6) while Gummere in this other way: “fictitious existence” (Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, 58, 15, p. 401), I would rather translate as “quasi-exist”, since I believe that this meaning is farther from misunderstanding, because the other two translations carry the idea of a pretended existence, which is not present at this stage of the text, but which will appear a few lines later [26], when Seneca will attribute a fake existence to all the things placed below the third level, and not just at to the things belonging to the sixth level.

<sup>2</sup>Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, 58, 22.

<sup>3</sup>This passage is a clear reference to Plato, *Cratylus*, 402a-b. On this Platonic passage see N. Gully, *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*, Methuen & Co. Ltd., London 1962, p. 70.

<sup>4</sup>Fr. 49a Diels., See also Plato, *Cratylus*, 402a, where you can find the same verse.



*Close to God [25-31].*

In this passage, Seneca first explains how this theory can be useful for us [25-26], stating that it shows to us that everything which we desire has no real existence, so we are fools to crave those things. For this reason we have to direct our attention towards what is constant and imperishable, namely towards God, and to becoming like him [27].

This is strange, because if one has to think about something that is constant and imperishable towards which to direct one's soul, instantly one thinks of the Ideas, and not God. This shows us that probably at this point Seneca is not following Plato, but maybe a Middle Platonic commentator. Nevertheless we cannot be sure of this, because the description of the Demiurge<sup>1</sup> in the *Timaeus* is quite close to this God, who like the former keeps alive what he cannot make imperishable – like the universe, that is immortal through the action of the latter[28].

In this part there is need of a clarification, because according to Inwood<sup>2</sup> in [29], saying that the universe is perishable like ourselves, as human beings, Seneca is in conflict with his own account of the cosmos, since in [24] he had said that the cosmos was immortal. In my opinion here there is only an apparent conflict, because although he says in [24] that the cosmos is immortal, he is only relating a common point of view, because in [28] he clearly says that all things in the “*mundus*”(cosmos) “*manent*” (endure) because there is someone, (God), who allows them to endure. Moreover, since the “*mundus*” is part of the fifth genus, it cannot be imperishable because only in the third genus do things start to become imperishable. So it is reasonable to think that in [24] Seneca is only referring to wrong common opinion about universe, pointing out afterwards, in [29], in what way the universe is imperishable<sup>3</sup>.

The last part of this section is devoted to the exemplary life of Plato[29-31]. Plato with his temperance and wisdom was a clear example of a man close to God. A sign of this union is the date of his death, that happened on his eighty-first birthday – this number had a great significance in antiquity, especially in the Pythagoric tradition, since the number nine was believed the perfect number, and, being nine times nine, this number represented the most perfect number – and was followed in the religious tradition of the *magi*.

*Only the 'Animus' Worth Enough to Live [32-37].*

The final section of this letter deals with old age and the necessity of ending life, if it becomes an unbearable burden. In this sense [35-36], through

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<sup>1</sup>See Inwood B., *Seneca Selected Philosophical Letters*, Oxford University Press, 2007 Oxford, p. 132-133.

<sup>2</sup>See id.

<sup>3</sup>In fact he defines the earth as perishable also in Seneca, *Naturales Quaestiones*, VI, 2, 9. Of course, he could be thinking of the Stoic concept of *ekpyrosis*, but conversely from the Stoics, Seneca adds to this notion a new element: God. In fact, there is no God in the account of Stoics. For them, Nature automatically destroys and rebuilds itself when the time comes; it is like a bell that regularly tolls. But for Seneca it is different, since, in his account, there is a God, who judges when the time is came for the rebirth of cosmos. See id., III, 28, 7.

the dichotomy between *animus* and *anima*<sup>1</sup> – already present in [10] – it is stated that a life with only the *anima* is not a life worth living.

### The “Pyramid” of Beings in Seneca's Works

Seneca's philosophy is mainly centred on the concept of becoming a better person, aiming, at the end, at becoming wise. In this way the “pyramid” of beings, appearing in this letter, represents the way to become wise, and so like to God. In fact, by “climbing” every step of this “pyramid”, man can reach a superior level of being until he vies with Jupiter<sup>2</sup> in happiness. But what does “to climb the steps” mean? It means, as in the *Theaetetus*<sup>3</sup>, to have a “correct belief” on every step of the “pyramid”, because unhappiness<sup>4</sup> derives from a wrong understanding<sup>5</sup> of things or situations, so only by knowing what the things are we can be happy, since we can handle them. Hence, the more you know, the more you shall be happy, and for this reason it is possible to find exact references to every step of the “pyramid”, except for the top<sup>6</sup>.

*Step Six: the “Quasi-Existing”.*

As we have seen, the lower step of the “pyramid” is represented by the “quasi-existent” things, which count among them things like the void and time. Although there is nothing related to the void<sup>7</sup> in Seneca's works, we have a lot of passages about time. In this sense the first concern of Seneca is not to waste time<sup>8</sup>. This concept is so important<sup>9</sup> that it is placed at the beginning of his *Epistles*, and it is summarized by this phrase: “*vindica te tibi, et tempus quod adhuc aut auferebatur aut subripietur aut excidebat collige et serva.*” (“set

<sup>1</sup>The Latin language distinguishes between *animus*, core of psychic life, and *anima*, origin of life. As Seneca said in *Ep.* 58, 10, plants only have the latter, while animals have also the former.

<sup>2</sup>See Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, 73, 12.

<sup>3</sup>See Plato, *Theaetetus* 209d-e.

<sup>4</sup>It is paradigmatic of the condition of the *stultus* described in Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, 52, 2.

<sup>5</sup>In this connection a passage could be enlightening: Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, 4, 2. This passage shows us, especially in the last sentence, how works the pyramid of beings. In fact shows two different degrees of pyramid the fifth and the sixth. In one hand we have the boy, who are afraid from trifles, and in the other hand we have the children, who are afraid from the shadows: both of them are unhappy, because they do not understand the meaningless of the things that scare them, so for both the situations there is a problem of incomprehension, that does not allow to go up on the pyramid.

<sup>6</sup>We will explain it in the following pages.

<sup>7</sup>Unless, following Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, 26, 4, we relate the notion of void to the notion of death, meaning the death as dissolution of everything and since as void. To do this is possible and reasonable too, because, as we have already seen in part 1.VI, elsewhere these notions are related too. See *Ep.* 58, 22-24. Anyway to demonstrate our point what follows it is enough.

<sup>8</sup>See for instance Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, 1, 1-3 and 22, 17.

<sup>9</sup>To underline the importance of the time in Seneca's thought A. L. Motto says that the “time is a powerful subject for Seneca”, A.L. Motto, *Essays on Seneca*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main 1993, p. 51.

yourself free for your own sake; gather and save your time, which till lately has been forced from you, or filched away, or has merely slipped from your hands”<sup>1</sup>. In this way Seneca tries to tell us that time, which we often have no care for, is actually very important, because at the end it is the only thing that we really have<sup>2</sup>. So to understand the importance of time is the first step towards moral progress, denoting a level up on the pyramid of beings, since to claim (*vindicare*) your own time signifies setting yourself to become wise, since it indicates that you have become aware that you have not much time to become wise, and hence it means that you become aware that every day you are dying<sup>3</sup>. For these reasons you cannot be made afraid by death, since it is a thing which happens at every instant of your life, and beyond the fact that *the major portion of death has already passed*<sup>4</sup>.

*Step Five: the “Existing”.*

Belonging to the class of the existing are all the things that have a real existence: like animals, human beings, or objects in general. All that has a material consistency is part of this genus. In this sense we can find in Seneca's works several references to the necessity to go beyond material reality, since is inconsistent and changeable. As we have already seen, we have a reference in *Letter LVIII*, 22-24, where Seneca, following Plato and Heraclitus, emphasises the instability of things, and so the necessity not to count on them. Also important is *Letter VIII*, which could be summarized by this quotation: “Avoid whatever pleases the throng: avoid the gifts of Chance”<sup>5</sup>. Here Seneca is underlining both the necessity of distrusting the “gifts of Chance”, since they are changeable, like riches, and to avoid the throng, since it is a clear source of vices. Moreover this *Epistula* underscores the necessity to become a better person too, to go beyond material things; in fact, when he says: “understand that a man is sheltered just as well by a thatch as by a roof of gold”<sup>6</sup>, he means to highlight that things that apparently have different value, such as a thatch and a golden roof, indeed have the same value<sup>7</sup>, because both shelter us from the bad weather in the same way. So we do not need to crave these things, which are so difficult to obtain and cause to us so many troubles; hence: a thatch is enough!

*Step Four: “Idos”.*

With the *Idos* (forms) we enter into the higher spheres of our pyramid. As we have seen above, the *Idos* are the Ideas “embodied” in sensible things. For this reason the study of nature becomes the way to climb the pyramid and in this sense the *Naturales Quaestiones* naturally represent the royal road towards

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<sup>1</sup>Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, 1, 1, pp. 2-3.

<sup>2</sup>See further in letter: id., 1, 3.

<sup>3</sup>See id. 1, 2, pp. 2-3.

<sup>4</sup>Id. 1, 2, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup>Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, 8, 3, p. 39.

<sup>6</sup>Id. 8, 5.

<sup>7</sup>A similar concept is in id., 90, 10; see also Seneca, *Naturales Quaestiones*, I praef., 7.

the top of the pyramid. In fact, in these Seneca underlines the necessity to see what happens not with one's eyes but with the reason<sup>1</sup> to see clearly what the reality is, and so, to dissolve fears of the unknown<sup>2</sup>. Indeed it is just this movement, from the eyes to the reason, within the gnoseological process, which signifies the progress towards the next step, because it represents the necessary training to capture the Ideas<sup>3</sup>. This idea is well explained by this passage: “On this point it will help us to study nature. In the first place we will get away from sordid matter. Second, we will free the mind – and we need one that is sound and great – from the body. Third, subtlety of thought exercised on the mysteries of nature will be no less successful in dealing with plain problems”<sup>4</sup>. Here we have three reasons concerning the motivations to study nature. The first one is connected to the previous step of the pyramid, in fact the benefit that you will gain studying nature will be “get away from sordid matter”, namely, to get away from craving the “existing”; the second benefit has a clear Platonic flavour, since “to break the chains of the body” is a topic widely present in Plato's works; while the last one is the key to climbing the pyramid, namely the exercise on studies. Here we have something like an imaginary bridge towards wisdom, but what is striking is that what holds together the two extremities of this bridge is Plato's concept that sees the body as a prison for the mind, as though Plato himself was the way towards wisdom<sup>5</sup>.

*Step Three: “Idea”.*

Finding references to the Ideas in Seneca's works is quite easy, since one of the main goals of Seneca's philosophy is to find the definition of the idea of “Wise Man”. In this sense the *De Constantia Sapientis* is very important, being centred on the definition of the idea of the “sage”. It moves from the question if is possible for the Wise Man to receive injuries or insults<sup>6</sup>, and it proceeds to try and demonstrate to his sceptical friend the main feature of the “Wise Man” – “unconquered by labours, despiser of pleasure, and superior to all terrors<sup>7</sup>”. In this sense, by illustrious examples, such as Cato<sup>8</sup> or Stilbo<sup>9</sup>, and subtle accounts<sup>10</sup>, he defines this mythological figure as one who is “next-door and neighbour to the gods and like a god in all save his mortality. As he struggles and presses on towards those things that are lofty, well-ordered, undaunted, that flow on with even and harmonious current, that are untroubled, kindly, adapted to the public good, beneficial both to himself and to others, the Wise Man will covet nothing low, will never repine. The man who, relying on

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<sup>1</sup>See id., VI, 3, 2.

<sup>2</sup>See id. 3, 1-4.

<sup>3</sup>See id. III pref. 18.

<sup>4</sup>Id.

<sup>5</sup>As we have already seen, in *Ep.* 58 Plato's life is the image of the “Wise”.

<sup>6</sup>See the beginning of Seneca, *De constantia Sapientis*.

<sup>7</sup>Id., *De constantia Sapientis*, 2, 1, trans. Eng. By A.Stewart, London 1900.

<sup>8</sup>See id., 1, 3 – 2, 3.

<sup>9</sup>See id., 5, 6-7.

<sup>10</sup>See id., 7, 3-5.

reason, marches through mortal vicissitudes with the spirit of a god, has no vulnerable spot where he can receive an injury”<sup>1</sup>. This passage is important for at least four reasons: first, it gives us a clear description of the ideas, as things that are lofty, well-ordered, undaunted, that flow on with even and harmonious current; second, it tells us that reason is the way to climb the pyramid; third, it confirms our thesis about an ascensional movement present in Seneca's works; and fourth, by establishing the relation between the Wise Man and God, it connects this step with the next.

*Step Two: God.*

Now our climbing is over, because it is impossible to surpass the divinity, since he is by definition the being “more powerful than anyone else”<sup>2</sup>. So to go further than this step is out of the question, but at least we can see his main features. Actually in Seneca's works there are several references to God. This figure is quite ambiguous<sup>3</sup> because it is midway between the Stoic Logos and Plato's Demiurge. As we have seen above, in *Letter LVIII* we have the image of God as the Demiurge<sup>4</sup>, who with his power moulds matter and keeps safe his creation<sup>5</sup>. In *Naturales Quaestiones* there is another passage of the same kind, which describes God as the “*magnus artifex*”<sup>6</sup> who shapes matter. In the other hand we have passages that describe God as Nature in the Stoic manner. For instance, in *De Beneficiis* Seneca clearly connects God to the Stoic Logos saying: “«Nature,» you say, «who supplies me with these things.» But do you not understand that, when you say this, you merely give another name to God? For what else is Nature but God and the Divine Reason that pervades the whole universe and all its parts?”<sup>7</sup>. Also in *Naturales Quaestiones*, God is indissolubly connected with the Reasons, in fact he “*totus est ratio*” (“he is entirely reason”)<sup>8</sup>. Nonetheless in the *Apocolocyntosis (divi) Claudii* he mocks the Stoic God, correlating it to Claudius<sup>9</sup>, so it seems as though there was a moment wherein he abandoned the Stoic view about the divinity, preferring probably, on this particular aspect, the Platonic theory.

*Step One: “Quod Est”.*

This step is totally inaccessible, in fact it can be only thought<sup>10</sup>. None can reach this level, it can be only vaguely understood. It is defined as “*genus*

<sup>1</sup>Id., 8, 2-3.

<sup>2</sup>Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, 58, 17, trans. Eng. By R. M. Gummere, Harvard University Press, London 1961, vol. I p. 39.

<sup>3</sup>About this ambiguity see S. Gersh, *Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism the Latin tradition*, Vol. I, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame (Indiana) 1986, pp. 165-168.

<sup>4</sup>For the image of the Demiurge see also: Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, 65, 19.

<sup>5</sup>See id., 58, 27-28.

<sup>6</sup>Id., *Naturales Quaestiones*, I, pref. 16.

<sup>7</sup>Id., *De Beneficiis*, IV, 7, trans. Eng. By J. W. Basore, *Seneca. In ten volumes. III. Moral Essays Vol. III*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London 1989, pp. 216-217.

<sup>8</sup>Id., *Naturales Quaestiones*, I, pref. 14.

<sup>9</sup>See id., *Apocolocyntosis (divi) Claudii*, 8.

<sup>10</sup>See id., *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, 58, 16.

*generale*”, but what that is precisely nobody can tell. Unfortunately, there are not any other passages, except that in *Letter LVIII*<sup>1</sup>, referring to it, and also in this passage it is barely explained. So regarding this level nothing can be said. The reasons for this impenetrability rely, I think, on the nature of the “*Quod Est*”. In fact, since it is the most general thing, it is also indeterminate, and by definition what is indeterminate cannot be completely grasped, and so nobody can really explain what the “*Quod Est*” is. So, I believe that it is just a liminal concept, useful for avoiding the *regressus ad infinitum*.

## Conclusion

From what has been said, the connections between Seneca and Plato – and also with the Platonic tradition – seem clear. However, what is striking is that the Platonic philosophy is not a merely corollary to the essentially Stoic philosophy of Seneca, rather it constitutes the backbone of his whole theoretic system. In fact, the presence of the “pyramid of beings” in the works of Seneca demonstrates how deeply the Platonic philosophy is rooted in his soul. Indeed, in his works, Plato almost becomes a mythological figure, like Stilbo, Mucius Scaevola or Cato<sup>2</sup>, and in the same way of these, he is the paradigmatic example of what means acquiring “Wisdom” through the philosophy, since it “did not find Plato already a nobleman; it made him one”<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>Id.

<sup>2</sup>See id., *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, 64, 10.

<sup>3</sup>Id., p. 288-289.