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*The Cosmic Viewpoint: A Study of Seneca's Natural Questions* by Gareth D. Williams

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The *Naturales quaestiones* (*Natural Questions*) by Seneca is one of the most important sources on ancient meteorology that has come down to us and Gareth Williams' monograph is a major contribution to the study of this treatise.

It is divided into eight books. Book 1 deals with lights in the sky; book 2, with lightning and thunder; book 3, with terrestrial water; books 4a and 4b—of which important sections are now lost—with the Nile and with clouds, rain, hail, and snow, respectively; book 5, with winds; book 6, with earthquakes; and book 7, with comets. The original order of the books is a matter of dispute. The order 1, 2, 3, 4a, 4b, 5, 6 and 7 is only one of three possibilities found in the manuscript tradition, the other two being 1, 2, 3, 4b, 5, 6, 7, 4a and 4b, 5, 6, 7, 1, 2, 3, 4a. As Williams explains, the latter, also known as the *Grandinem* order, is

demonstrably the order of the archetype from which the extant manuscripts descend, and this order is still upheld by some scholars. [13]

However, a fourth possible ordering—proposed by Carmen Codoñer and Harry Hine independently—is 3, 4a, 4b, 5, 6, 7, 1, 2. This is the order adopted by Williams in his study:

the position taken here is that the case for [this order]...is overwhelming: the preface to book 3 reads naturally as an introduction to the whole work, the displacement of books 3 and 4a in the archetype is readily explained, and the internal evidence derived from cross-comparison of the books further consolidates the overall case. [13]

The argument of *The Cosmic Viewpoint* follows closely the structure of the *Nat. quaest.* according to this ordering. Williams' analysis of books 3 and 1,

the first and the penultimate in the Codoñer-Hine sequence, is spread over several chapters. But he devotes individual chapters to each of the remaining books. After two initial chapters that tackle general questions of interpretation, chapter 3 concerns book 4a; chapter 4, book 4b; chapter 5, book 5; chapter 6, book 6; chapter 7, book 7; and chapter 8, book 2.

The place of *The Cosmic Viewpoint* in the existing scholarly literature on the *Nat. quaest.* is well explained in the introduction. First, following a line of interpretation suggested by Margaret Graver [2000] in a discussion of Brad Inwood's influential paper 'God and Human Knowledge in Seneca's *Natural Questions*' [pub. 2001], Williams argues that the *Nat. quaest.* is a work driven not primarily by concerns about epistemology and theology but by a genuine desire to study the cosmos from the perspective of meteorology as a distinct branch of knowledge in accordance with Aristotle's project in the *Meteorologica* and the subsequent meteorological tradition.

Second, complementing Graver's further suggestion that the *Nat. quaest.* has a strong Epicurean flavor and clear associations with book 6 of the *De rerum natura* by Lucretius, Williams claims that this treatise is in fact 'a Stoic response to the Lucretian undertaking' [9] in which the Stoic worldview of Seneca—who sees the cosmos as a bodily continuum run by divine providence—opposes the atomistic and non-providential cosmology of Lucretius. Despite this opposition, however, Seneca borrows from Lucretius literary and scientific techniques in his study of meteorological phenomena, as is shown by Williams in chapter 6.5 [230–250]. Interesting parallels are also drawn between the *Nat. quaest.* and Pliny's own *Nat. hist.* in chapter 1.5 [48–53].

Third, Williams stresses that, even though the *Nat. quaest.* is intended by Seneca as a contribution to a distinct scientific discipline, the large number of moralizing passages throughout the eight books are 'fully integrated with their surrounding material' [11]. Chapter 2—'Seneca's moralizing interludes'—discusses this issue at length and explains in detail how this integration works: these passages are meant to refer to examples of vices displayed by moral deviants, the study of which can help us to transcend them. This thesis is carefully contrasted with that of other scholars who have dealt with this major issue in the interpretation of the *Nat. quaest.* [see esp. 54–55].

For many years, scholarly interest in Roman Stoicism was chiefly instrumental. Seneca, but also Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, were read as sources for

early Stoicism and only in so far as they could shed light on early Stoic ideas. It was deemed that the differences between them and their predecessors did not reflect genuinely Stoic developments but were rather the expression of external influences alien to the true spirit of Stoicism. This conception of Roman Stoicism has been changing in the last three decades, however, and is gradually being replaced by the notion that these three authors, at least, are original philosophers who transformed Stoic thinking in several areas of great importance. Indeed, the subject of the place of Seneca in Stoicism is evident in *The Cosmic Viewpoint*. For instance, chapter 5.2 [174–182] is devoted to ‘Pre-Stoic and Stoic Theories of Wind’, while chapter 8.3A [319–323] deals with ‘Reconciling Prayer and Expiation with a Deterministic View of Fate’ and includes references to the early Stoic discussion of fate and free will. (Williams, however, does not take into account the recent and important work by Inwood on this specific issue, especially, Inwood’s ‘Seneca on Freedom and Autonomy’ and ‘The Will in Seneca’, both reprinted in [Inwood 2005](#).)

There are at least three central themes that Williams does not discuss in connection with Seneca’s role within Stoicism:

- (1) The idea that the study of nature is essentially related to ethics goes back not just to Epicurus, as Williams notes in connection with *Pyth.* 85 [7], but also to the earliest Stoics. And in Roman Stoicism it is present not just in Seneca but also in Marcus Aurelius in key texts such as *Med.* 2.9. It would be interesting to know how Williams construes Seneca’s position in this large debate within Stoic philosophy. This debate and its repercussion in Roman Stoicism have been intensively discussed by several modern scholars whose works are not even cited in the bibliography.<sup>1</sup>
- (2) One central concept in early Stoic meteorology is that of exhalation (*ἀναθυμίασις*), which plays a key role in the process leading up to the world-conflagration (*ἐκτόρωσις*). These two concepts are referred to by Williams [34n44, 125n112, 127, 176–177] but nothing is said about how they are linked to each other and, in general, about how Seneca’s analysis of the phenomenon of exhalation differs from or

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., [Menn 1995](#), 1–34; [Cooper 1999](#), 427–48; [Betegh 2003](#), 273–302; [Annas 2007](#), 58–87.

agrees with the early Stoic analysis. Chapter 1.2 [21–28] contains an interesting comparison between Seneca and Cicero regarding their approach to meteorology. But even though both Cicero and Seneca give a prominent role to exhalation in their account [cf. *De nat. deor.* 2.26–27, 2.42–43, 2.118; *Nat. quaest.* 3.9], this aspect of their theories is not highlighted.

- (3) Crucial to early Stoic meteorology is a theory of the reciprocal change of the four physical elements according to which they change into each other by expansion and contraction.<sup>2</sup> Williams gives a prominent role to elemental theory in Seneca's meteorology. For instance, an important passage expressing Seneca's own views on elemental change—*Nat. quaest.* 3.10.3–5—is cited and discussed in chapter 1 [19–21] and referred to further along in the book [231]. But we are left wondering how this theory is related to the early Stoic theory.

With the exceptions that I mentioned earlier, the general lack of detailed discussion of Seneca's Stoicism may disappoint readers with an interest in ancient Stoic philosophy and in the history of philosophy who are looking for a substantive account of the place of Seneca within the school.

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<sup>2</sup> Diels 1879, 458.12–459.10 or, as Williams [18n3] would have it, von Arnim 1903–1924, 2.413.

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