
Metaphorical Coherence: Studies in Seneca's Epistulae Morales by Aron Sjöblad

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Aron Sjöblad has previously published a study of Cicero's *On Old Age* in which he drew on the work of Lakoff and Johnson [1980] on metaphor and, particularly, on the idea of conceptual metaphor, to study the system of metaphors in that short work.¹ Here he extends his approach to Seneca's *Moral Epistles*. In the introduction, he reviews previous work on the role of metaphor and simile in Seneca's philosophical prose. Early studies focused on classifying the source-domains of Seneca's metaphors and often treated metaphor as little more than literary embellishment. But more recent contributions by Armisen-Marchetti [1989],² Bartsch [2009], Edwards [2009], Richardson-Hay [2009], and Watson and Watson [2009] all treat imagery as integral to Seneca's philosophy and several of them show in different ways how imagery from various source-domains can all contribute to an understanding of the same target-domain. Sjöblad aims to take this approach further and to show how there are 'master metaphors' that integrate groups of metaphors that previous scholars have treated as separate.

Chapter 1, 'The Metaphorical Connection between Body and Soul in the *Epistulae*' [23–41], shows that much of the language used to describe the mind can also be used to describe the body and goes on to argue that metaphors of health and disease, of travel, of warfare, and of athletic or gladiatorial competition can all be subsumed under the overarching body-soul metaphor. The conclusion is that metaphors previously treated as distinct must be interpreted in relation to each other.

¹ Sjöblad 2009, reviewed in Lavan 2010 and McConnell 2011.

² Sjöblad consistently misspells 'Armisen-Marchetti' with a double 's'.

Chapter 2, ‘Seneca’s Fortress of the Soul and Related Metaphors’ [43–59], argues that the ‘enclosed space’ of the human soul is another master metaphor. As Sjöblad acknowledges, Armisen-Marchetti and Bartsch have already recognized the importance of the metaphor of ‘inner space’. But, he claims, they have not realized its full extent, for it subsumes not only the metaphors of the defensive wall and the besieged city but also references to all the various inner and outer threats that we face (from Fortune, other people, luxury and other temptations, our own passions, and so on), as well as the metaphors of trade and money, the stage, and slavery.

Chapter 3, ‘The Relation between the *iter ad sapientiam* and the *iter vitae* Metaphors in the *Epistulae*’ [61–74], argues that the metaphors of the journey to wisdom and the journey of life have to be seen as distinct—they have different target-domains, namely, philosophical progress and life itself—but also as closely intertwined, in what Fauconnier [1997] calls a ‘blend’. In the life of the Stoic, the two ways should coincide—failure to recognize this, Sjöblad reasonably argues, led Lavery [1980] to see a conflict between Seneca’s doctrine of suicide and ‘the road of life’ metaphor.

What is new in the blend is that wisdom and death are identified with each other.... The similarity between the two metaphors makes it inevitable for the reader to identify wisdom and death. [72]

The general conclusion [75–77] recaps the view that these complexes of metaphors need to be taken together:

It is obvious that Seneca, rather than conveying the superficial messages inherent in the single metaphors, intends to create an *attitude* in Lucilius and in the readers of the *Letters* by describing the enclosed space of the ideal Stoic’s soul in so many different ways...

and the metaphors

add nuances and complexity to the general philosophical statements that Seneca makes. [76]

The acknowledgements [3] say that what was originally intended as an article has been developed into a book. But it still reads rather like a long article, and one wishes that Sjöblad had sometimes looked beyond the *Letters*—for instance, in discussing how the behavior of the body can reveal the state of the soul [25–27], there is no reference to the treatment of the physiology of anger in *On Anger*—and that at various points he had developed his views in more detail. The conclusion to chapter 1 merely asserts that all the body-

soul metaphors that he has described ‘must be interpreted in relation to each other’ and that they ‘influence each other and the separate examples must be interpreted in the light of the larger whole’ [41]. But one would welcome some close reading to show how this interpretation ‘in the light of the larger whole’ actually works and how it deepens our understanding of Seneca’s thinking, since the body of the chapter contains illuminating comments on a number of individual metaphorical passages but essentially still handles the metaphors separately from each other. The conclusion to chapter 2 makes a similar claim, i.e., that it is ‘necessary to interpret them [the whole range of “inner space” metaphors] together. They influence each other’ [59]. But again there is no close reading to show how this works. In the absence of such detailed demonstration, the master metaphors of body-soul and inner space seem rather abstract and, in the latter case particularly, the constituent metaphors identified by Sjöblad seem a very loosely-knit group.

There is a further claim, that

the main purpose of this imagery [of inner space] might be this: to form an attitude in the reader and to add complexity and depth to the general Stoic idea of independence from the outer world.³ [59]

That is an unexceptionable claim. But surely one can accept it without needing to accept the master metaphor as an additional level above the range of individual metaphors that are surveyed. Indeed, the final paragraph of the book [76–77] seems to bring us back to the importance of the variety and individuality of Seneca’s metaphors. As the concluding sentence puts it:

Because the metaphors and similes with related themes are so many, they acquire a nuance of trial and error; they are attempts to describe how one might approach—with very small and tentative steps—the idea and the ideal of the perfect Stoic sage. [77]

This is an intriguing suggestion that one would like to see developed further. But again, can one not accept this suggestion without seeing the need to invoke master metaphors?

Chapter 3 operates rather differently. The comparison between the two ‘ways’ is helpful. But the final conclusion—that they form a ‘blend’ which indicates that for Seneca wisdom and death are identified with each other

³ The general conclusion makes a similar claim: see the quotation from p. 76 [above](#).

(as being the goals of the two ‘blended’ metaphors)—is reached with such startling rapidity that this reviewer is left unconvinced. The argument seems to be that, because the metaphors of ‘the way of life’ and ‘the way towards wisdom’ are similar in their overall structure and in some of their details, their destinations must be identical—which is hardly compelling. Nor are doubts lessened by the comment that

Seneca’s recurring insistence on life and the human body as a prison for the soul is another reason why this identification lies close at hand, [72]

with citation of *Ep.* 65.16, since this passage describes the body as a drag on the soul but says nothing about death. And Sjöblad’s appeal to Seneca’s frequent references to the younger Cato and his suicide [73–74] do not really help either. In fact, in the general conclusion, Sjöblad seems to tone down his previous conclusion: ‘Death and wisdom are identified with each other, or almost so...’ [76, emphasis added].

The discussion of *Ep.* 65.16 is one example of how Sjöblad’s book could have been strengthened by widening the range of the bibliography. This bibliography is brief and mostly confined to discussions that expressly address either Seneca’s imagery or his *Letters*; hence, some significant contributions to the topic of Senecan metaphor are overlooked.⁴ Thus, in the discussion of *Ep.* 65.16 and throughout chapter 1 on the body-soul metaphor, Sjöblad makes no mention of the ongoing debate about whether Seneca inclined to a Platonizing dualism of body and soul or remained true to Stoic monism, or of how Seneca’s metaphorical language about body and soul should be handled in the context of that debate.⁵

In short, there are some illuminating observations in this book but the reviewer is not persuaded by its central thesis that our reading of Senecan metaphor is enhanced by the recognition of master metaphors.

⁴ The survey of Seneca’s metaphors and images in [Armisen-Marchetti 2015](#), which itself presumably appeared too late for Sjöblad himself to use it, refers to several earlier works not in his bibliography.

⁵ On the significance of imagery for the debate, see [Inwood 2005](#), 31–38 and *passim*; [Ker 2009](#), 176–182.

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