

Original citation:

Rimell, Victoria. (2017) Philosophy's folds : Seneca, Cavarero, and the history of rectitude. *Hypatia: a journal of feminist philosophy*, 32 (4). pp. 768-783.

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Philosophy's Folds: Seneca, Cavarero, and the History of Rectitude

Victoria Rimell

I.

Adriana Cavarero's characteristically wry critical account of rectitude in the Western philosophical tradition (*Inclinazioni: critica della rettitudine*, 2013), which is soon to appear in an English translation, <1> investigates how Western philosophy develops its distinctive orthopedia; that is, how canonical thinkers in the tradition come to celebrate *theoria* as a perfect, static verticality that makes ideas of rectitude, rightness, straightness and uprightness coincide. Rectitude, she observes, repeatedly contests, combats and opposes itself to the 'slippery slope' of inclination - the constantly shifting posture in which the subject evolves in time and in changing relations of care and desire towards others. Cavarero's recasting of a familiar tradition in terms of its geometries and postures is itself structured as a labyrinth of twists, turns, leaps and loops. Disrespectful of philosophic 'exclusivity', and insistent on the philosophical rigor of 'literary' analysis, she juxtaposes, entwines and contrasts landmark philosophical thinkers - Plato, Hobbes, Locke, Kant, Proudhon, Arendt, Levinas - with and alongside a dizzying array of novelists, anthropologists and visual artists (from Canetti to Woolf, Tolstoy to Proust, Barnett Newman to Da Vinci). In this way, she traces the multiple routes through which European thought inherits a naturalized, gendered lexicon of legal, ethical and sexual 'rightness', 'righteousness', or 'correctness', concepts hostile to all beings that lean, are bent, queer, wrong, morally crooked, deviant or ambiguous. Uprightness or lack of inclination - towards the other, towards desire - is what separates the self-sufficient, non-dependent *homo rectus* from the vulnerable child, from women (and in particular the supine, penetrated woman,

and the constantly arched-over, attentive mother) and from sexually passive or effeminate men, work-hunched slaves, and animals. Inclination itself, the ‘bending’ and accommodation to the needs of others that encompasses or is set up to define (physical and emotional) female labor, maternal care and ‘passive’ sexuality, is persistently envisioned as threatening to the equilibrium of identity: such schemata have carried and continue to carry great symbolic weight in the framing of women as morally or mentally unbalanced and as crooked or prone to deception before patriarchal law. <2> Inclination thus comes to figure not just attentiveness, care, duty and desire, but also a lack of moral virtue inseparable from an ‘undignified’ vulnerability and penetrability.

The paradigm, Cavarero argues, can be seen to develop from Plato (sewn into her tapestry *after* Kant, Newman and Woolf), and from the programmatic moment the proto-philosopher in book 7 of the *Republic* unbends himself from the crouched position in the cave and stands up as he emerges into the light of knowledge and truth: there remains, she notes, an unresolved, tragic strain in Plato between the pure and sublime form of philosophizing that Plato identifies with static verticality, and the diagonal, Socratic path back down to the cave that figures philosophy as a political praxis and way of living, and that ends in failure and forced suicide. For Cavarero, the extent to which Western philosophical truth has been predicated on a verticalized geometry (and thus on a flattening or forgetting of the enigmatic tensions that animate Platonic thought) remains unmapped, and its gendered nature - the subjects, kinds of thinking and behavior it excludes or marks as improper – remains at least partially concealed. In ‘uncovering’ the development of rectitude from its roots in antiquity – not just in (the reception of) Plato’s and Aristotle’s *orthos logos*, but also, she argues briefly, in Stoic ideals of *ratio recta*, particularly as they are interpreted in Christian

thought from Augustine onwards – Cavarero alludes often to metaphors of seeing. In re- or mis-appropriating a forensic, Platonic gaze (with an eye on Heidegger’s parsing of Platonic *a-letheia* as *orthotes* or ‘correctness of sight’ rather than ‘revelation’, 74), her task is to highlight that which has been concealed, or even that which is in clear sight but nonetheless remains unseen. This strategy of ‘highlighting’, at the risk of seeming to ‘exaggerate’, pays overt homage to Hannah Arendt’s rhetorical strategies (20-1). We are encouraged to ‘look with curiosity’ at the theme of inclination, as a new ‘transparency’ is laid over snapshots of what is later termed a ‘Western macrotext’ (61) that posits rectitude over and against ‘maternal’ leaning (25-6). As Cavarero recognizes, the underlying model of this proper philosophical and political subject – the autocratic, integral, self-referential, non dependent (and implicitly) Western, able-bodied male – has been under attack for at least a century: she explicitly positions herself within a feminist-deconstructive tradition when she offers not just an astute critique of the censoring and othering of inclination as ‘womanly’ care or as female ‘instability’ in Western thought, but also a corrective to the postmodern tendency to remake this subject by re-spinning her-him-it into an endless, performative play of differences and poses, which often does little to address the ontological structures of masculinity as they are implicated in the devaluing and limitation of female subjectivity (21). She draws inspiration from Arendt’s remarks in ‘Some questions of moral philosophy’, where Arendt recognizes that ‘every inclination turns outward; it leans out of the self in the direction of whatever may affect me from the outside world. It is precisely through inclination...that I establish contact with the world’. <3> This statement returns as a riff throughout *Inclinazioni*, leading up to a generous critique of Arendt’s disinterest in the mother and infancy in her ‘abstract’ representation of natality, a central concept in Arendt’s political thought

whose potential, for Cavarero, is both imprecisely defined, and unrealized (149-167).

Cavarero's project embraces and seeks to develop key contributions to feminist care ethics, from Eva Feder Kittay's *Love's Labor*, to the work of Carol Gilligan, Virginia Held and Sara Ruddick on maternal care, alongside Judith Butler's, Jacques Derrida's and Roberto Esposito's meditations on immunity and precarity.<4> Invulnerability, or what is now the liberal individualist model of the independent self, is a 'mirage', as Cavarero puts it, an 'invention' (181) which ensures both that care is undervalued and necessarily concealed (outsourced to people of lower social status and especially women), and also that those dignified subjects who cannot be seen to need or desire must choose between compromising that dignity and appropriating what they need as already theirs by right, either by obscurity or by violence. Thinking personhood otherwise is not a matter – as Alasdair MacIntyre would posit – of simply reconciling vulnerability and relationality with the virtue of rational independent agents, or of treating maternity and the relation between mother and baby as the exclusive locus of asymmetrical relationality that structures all other relations (a potential misconception of Ruddick's work).<5> It is to recognize relationality as constitutive of identity, and to honor inclination – or a 'continuous inter-webbing of singular and plural dependencies' (24) – as the prevalent posture of an ethical life lived in time.

II

My intention in this paper is to explore one direction in which Cavarero's infectious curiosity might lead us, and thus to showcase how her latest project might stimulate productive dialogue between feminist critics in different areas of the humanities that are not currently in close contact with one another. The suggestive blend of

provocatively broad strokes and intricate close readings in *Inclinazioni* creates multiple flashpoints in her text that might open up (onto) exciting future debates and critical encounters. I want to home in on just one of those points of aperture which as a classicist strikes me as especially significant, but which might come to stand for Cavarero's articulated and thematized point that (re-reading) the history of ideas *matters*, and matters especially for feminist philosophy as a political project engaged in stirring awareness of what has been sifted out or silenced over time, and why, and with what consequences for female subjectivity and flourishing. I refer to her momentary acknowledgement (105) of Seneca the Younger's crucial role in the evolution of the principles or ontology of rectitude, alongside her mention of another Roman philosopher whom she identifies as marking an 'unusual turn' (134) in the history of philosophy: Lucretius. Yet the cultural specificity of this connection - posited implicitly in *Inclinazioni* only as a contrast, across separate chapters - is rendered improbable by a broader construction of Roman philosophy as a deviant supplement to its canonical Greek counterpart (to the extent that that Hellenistic philosophy is often barely studied at all in modern philosophy departments, and Seneca in particular has long been disqualified as a 'proper' philosopher, or ignored). Lucretius' image of *clinamen*, the 'swerve' of atoms that results in the collisions necessary for the creation of life, lingers as an implicit metaphor for Cavarero's own maze of generative *incontri*, yet despite the rebellious intuitions that lead her to Lucretius, and briefly to Seneca, the 'otherness' of *Roman* philosophy remains unacknowledged and unexamined in her text. Here I am less concerned with accusing Cavarero of a scholarly omission (her account is necessarily and polemically tendentious) than with exploiting her own deviation into ancient Roman thought and her disregard for a disciplining canon (literally 'straight rod' or 'rule') so as to begin

to spy an important blindspot in the tradition. Looking here, at Seneca, and hearing the echoes of Senecan literariness and satire in Cavarero (and vice versa), helps us envision how the tensions Cavarero notes in Plato are sustained and energized with differing, unpredictable outcomes elsewhere, and therefore how the story of rectitude is always already a narrative not just of domination but of struggle and its necessary concealment. As Cavarero knows, it is only in fully understanding the paralyzing force of this concealment that we can summon the brazenness to make it move, or bend.

In what follows, I will examine ways in which the gendered ontology of rectitude is disturbed and transformed in Seneca's end of life magnum opus, the *Moral Epistles to Lucilius*, and so try to draw out the question of how exactly to reconcile Seneca as a thinker of precarity, and of philosophy as an imperfect, quotidian praxis, with the writer who posits a spatializing metaphysic of static impermeability as the regulative ideal and *telos* of Stoic philosophy. I argue that the *Epistles* become an intense laboratory for developing ways of moving towards an ontology of inclination that attends to an urgent need to confront and transform the consequences of political impotence and threats to bodily integrity for Roman aristocratic manhood in the 60sCE (the *Epistles* were written in the years leading up to Seneca's forced suicide in April of 65 following the so-called Pisonian conspiracy against Nero, when many other leading men were put to death). As such, I argue that the *Epistles* are an important and significantly underexplored text for feminist thinkers across the humanities who are interested in the ethical and political implications of acknowledging a 'primary vulnerability to others' (Butler 2004, xiv). The *Epistles* serve to remind us that such investigations have a (tortuous) history whose suppression or misreading has been and continues to be politically significant.

My starting point is the critical status quo that, as Roman historian Paul Veyne puts it, ‘Rectitude is a general principle’ in Seneca.<6> Indeed there is no shortage of evidence for this apparently incontestable observation. Senecan Stoicism promotes itself so insistently in terms of rectitude, while the discourse of rectitude (inseparable from that of citizen male impenetrability) is pervasive in Roman Republican and imperial thought from Cicero onwards, finding expression not just in literary, moral and philosophical texts, but also in Roman law.<7> Peppered throughout the *Epistles*, we find virtue and reason, *virtus* and *ratio*, defined in terms of height, verticality, and straightness: the aim is to get to the peak, *ad summa* (e.g. 71.28). Virtue itself cannot elevate itself any further (*ultra non potest surgere*), just as ‘you’ll find nothing straighter, more upright than rectitude’: *nil invenies rectius recto* (66.8). Virtue – which although it has many faces, is always the same divine principle – cannot grow, be twisted, or added to – it is perfect. At *Ep.*66.11, Seneca states – and this is typical of many other such statements – that there is only one rule (*regula*) for human virtue. There is a single *ratio* (reason, reasoning, reckoning) and it is ‘straight’ (*recta*) and ‘simple’ or ‘unmixed’ (*simplex*). This ‘one’ virtue is that which ‘renders the soul straight and unwavering’ (*quae animum rectum et indeclinabilem praestat*, 66.13). Compare letter 66.32: ‘virtue is nothing other than straight reasoning’ (*virtus non aliud quam recta ratio est.*). Virtue is ‘high-spirited and exalted’ (*animosam et excelsam*, 71.18): at 71.20, it can be ‘neither shortened nor extended, any more than a carpenter’s rule (*regula*), with which straight lines are tested, can be bent (*flectes*)’. Virtue admits of no bending (*et haec recta est, flexuram non recipit.*). At *Ep.*85.32, wisdom herself is ‘mistress and ruler’ (*domina reatrixque est*). *Ratio*, ever *recta*, keeps the soul from being bowed down (*haec enim sola non submittit animum*, 92.2). The *beatus* or truly happy man (again in 92.2) keeps to the heights (*summa*), and leans

on no one but himself (*ne ulli quidem nisi sibi innixus*). Our soul stands erect and looks towards the sky (*erigitur et spectat in caelum*, 92.30) - or at least this is what nature intends.

Seneca's vision is often explicitly gendered as masculine: the soul is 'made womanish' (*effeminatur*, 82.2) by 'softness' (*mollitia*) or 'luxury' (*luxuria*), until it matches the ease and laziness with which it lies down (*iacet*). It is better to avoid, as far as possible, the slippery slope of desire (*quantum possumus, nos a lubrico recedamus*, 116.6). The unmoving lying down of indulgent *otium* not only constitutes a slave-like lowering: it is also akin to death. The ultimate model for the horizontal subject is, after all, the corpse (or the dehumanized body being tortured on the rack <8>), uncovering just what fine upstandingness is poised to ward off (cf. *Ep.*82.2-3).

That the discourse of rectitude and verticality pervades Senecan philosophical thought as a regulative ideal is in many ways unmissable. Yet – and this is just the point made by Erik Gunderson, among other recent critics working in the field of Classics - the *Epistles* are not a Stoic handbook from which we can extract dogma and orthodoxy:<9> indeed, this is an extraordinarily unorthodox, unclosed and hospitable text, opening itself out laterally to what may seem 'opposing' doctrines. What's more, this is a text whose rich literary texture makes it multi-dimensional, meandering, hybridic. Much like Cavarero, Seneca pushes, *entices* us to interact and struggle with his literariness in the spirit of full immersion in resilience-building philosophical work. In the background of debates surrounding Senecan philosophy as literature is of course Plato's famous definition of the artist in the *Laws* (847a) as performing a dangerous leaning or inclination, in contrast to the philosopher whose inclinations are virtuous and ultimately transcendent: part of what both Seneca and Cavarero are doing when they write philosophy as literature, and demand that would-be

philosophers are also not just readers of literature but literary critics, is responding critically and provocatively to that distinction. Neither retreats, as it were, to the literary: both, rather, embrace the literary as a means to spur unexpected connections and to adopt surprising and even illicit postures. At *Ep.*59.6-7, Seneca defends his notorious ‘literary’ use of metaphors and similes arguing that in philosophy such figures serve as necessary ‘props’ (*adminicula*) to our ‘weakness’ (*imbecillitas*) and help to make key issues vivid. <10> Crucial here is the acceptance of vulnerability and the emphasis (much reminiscent of Ruddick’s maternal thinking) on fostering growth: <11> we all lean as we learn. It is worth noting also that the term *adminicula* (itself a metaphor) means literally the stakes that train vines to snake upwards, and derives from the verb *in-mineo* (‘to project towards’).

Such leanings, I would suggest, become paradigmatic of Seneca’s attitude and teaching in the *Epistles*, and constantly lead us away from, postpone, or remake static rectitude. Throughout this text, composed at a time in which radical *imbecillitas* had become undeniable, we can glimpse Seneca subtly reconfiguring rectitude as a striving for equilibrium that emerges out of oscillation rather than requiring the paralysis of movement and that does not continually return the subject to himself. In this process, inclination (*inclinatio*) – which is associated with living consciously in time, with erotic desire, friendship, and parental care - is conceived as not necessarily in conflict with the *telos* of rectitude and not at all incompatible with traditional Roman Stoic emphasis on compassion, social responsibility, and duty towards others. <12> At the same time, Seneca’s uneven and unfinished working out of the ontological tension between the ideal Stoic *sapiens* (constant, unchanging, impervious) and the real-life philosopher who must cope with the daily psychological and physical challenges of inhabiting a vulnerable, ever-mutating body, demands a

radical renegotiation of dignified Roman masculine identity as strictly predicated on inviolability and self-sufficiency. <13> What Gretchen Reydamsh-Shils (2005, 17) calls the ‘embedded’ Stoic self will, in Seneca’s hands, raise multiple, culturally specific provocations.

Crucial here is the fact that Seneca chooses to write his longest (and as it turns out, most influential) work in the form of epistles, addressed to Lucilius – a younger man of equestrian status who was a successful politician but also a writer-poet. By adopting the letter form, Seneca inserts himself into a long tradition of philosophical letter writing, beginning perhaps with Plato’s letters (although their authenticity remains controversial), but extending through Aristotle, pseudo-Pythagorean letters from the Hellenistic era, Cynic epistles, and most importantly the corpus of letters by Epicurus.<14> The epistolary form also nods towards Socratic dialogue (unfortunately the extent of Seneca’s play with and indebtedness to the figure of Socrates is beyond the scope of this paper) and there is a didactic point, too, of course: letters are engaging, intimate, seductive; they foster a close relationship between teacher and pupil. And because the fiction or reality is that they are regular, even daily letters, they can offer context-specific therapy that attends to, performs and tracks the progress to be made by the *proficiens*, which itself involves dealing with time – that is with mortality, ageing, accidents, change, as well as with Stoic theories of time.

Indeed, (Seneca’s play with) the epistle’s live absent-presence makes patent the difficulty of dealing with separation, change over time, as well as with the impossibility of stilling time.<15> With Sara Ruddick, and indeed with Cavarero, Seneca recognizes that ‘those who change with change and welcome its challenges acquire a special kind of learning’,<16> and he promotes this idea by fully inhabiting

the implications of giving philosophical guidance in letter form. At *Ep.*71.1, for example, he is aware that the value of advice depends on the specific time it is given. The problem is that circumstances *volvuntur* - they shift and roll onwards - so that what is great advice at the moment of writing may have lost its force by the time it is read.<17> At *Ep.*49.1-2, Seneca is overcome with desire to see Lucilius, and reflects on how time slips from our grasp even as the letter strives to (di)still it and to conjure up memories of the past in the present. The motivations of philosophy in letter form are, fundamentally, about dealing with desire and being in time and about interrogating the extent to which conventional, aristocratic Roman virility precludes this. As it tracks and moves with time, the epistle offers the transcendence of presence – or the *telos* of static rectitude – as a seductive impossibility, and at the same time posits the philosopher’s responsibility towards and yearning for his interlocutor as extending in the face of the other’s unreachability and distance. The letters are ‘an unfolding portrait’, as Ker writes, and it is in their ‘flow’, as Gunderson remarks, that we experience ‘the spirit and its vicissitudes’.<18>

III.

It is therefore within an epistolary frame, which will not permit the disavowal of duration, that Seneca regularly qualifies what is meant by an ethics of rectitude. Gradually, in this text, virtual postures are tilted and new, often counterintuitive spatial perspectives entertained. Already in *Ep.*20, the positive counterweight to a wavering, discordant mind is not rectitude, but *tenor* (20.3), which means a sustained movement or process. In letter 84, Seneca writes, ‘it is a rough road that leads to greatness, but if you want to scale this peak, which lies far above the range of Fortune, you will indeed look down from above upon all that men regard as most

lofty, yet you can proceed to the top over level ground (*sed tamen venies ad summa per planum* 84.13, where *planum* signifies flat or level ground, but also ‘humble position’). The journey towards divine rectitude itself involves leaning into the effort of it, and figuratively if not literally tilting off a vertical axis (*ad summa nititur*, ‘[the soul] struggles/leans <19> towards the heights’, 92.30). Indeed the whole emphasis or direction of Senecan philosophy is not so much to get us to the end point but to offer compassionate guidance as to how to tolerate, virtuously, the journey itself.<20> Rather than necessarily embodying the crooked, or being thrown off balance by desire, *inclinatio* is made-over as the movement of nature, which we both emulate and flow with in our striving, as carefully charted and performed in the epistles themselves. It is no accident that the epistles frame Seneca’s experience of old age, which is perceived as a slope, an ‘incline’ (*inclinatio*) from adolescence onwards to old age (*ad senectutem*, 49.3) which constitutes not the ‘dregs’ of life at the bottom of the bottle (Seneca’s metaphor at *Ep.*58.33) but the ‘highest part of life’ (*pars summa vitae*, *Ep.*58.33). Indeed, as he writes elsewhere, ‘We all fall into the error of thinking that only those who are old and already on the downward path (*inclinatosque*) are tending towards death (*ad mortem ...vergere*), whereas earliest infancy, middle age, every period of life in fact, leads in that direction.’ (*Consolatio ad Marciam* 21.6).

To an extent, living virtuously in time is apparently a matter of distinguishing in a conventional way between good and bad, virtuous and depraved, upstanding (masculine) and feminine proclivities. See for example *Ep.*31.4, where Seneca sings the praises of those who don’t indulge in Sisyphean toil, but ‘are leaning towards good things’ (*ad honesta nitentes*). Similarly in 81.15, the good man (*vir bonus*) has good proclivities (*in hanc erit partem proclivior*). Compare the ethical inverse at *Ep.*94.40, commenting on those who ‘lean towards the deviant’ (*inclinabiles in*

pravum). However Seneca also labors, I would argue, to alter our perception of *inclinatio* as necessarily ‘feminized’, perverse or weak, while at the same time figuring virtuous rectitude in terms of courageous movement, flexibility, care, affection and responsibility. Look for example at *Ep.*81. Returning here to the much used metaphor of accountancy, Seneca reminds his interlocutor Lucilius that the *sapiens* will act as though he owes something even when he does not:

‘[The good man] will be unwilling to pay a benefit by balancing the injury against it. The side he will lean towards (*in hanc partem inclinabit*), the tendency he will exhibit, is that he will desire (*cupiat*) to owe a favor, and desire (*cupiat*) to return it.’

*Ep.*81.17

At the end of this discussion, which is reminiscent of similar passages in Cicero’s *de Officiis* and Seneca’s own *de Beneficiis*, Seneca states that when ‘balancing the accounts’ of social life, the good man weighs benefits against injuries, but when the injury meets the benefit, some kindly feeling (*benevolentia*) is left over (*remanet*, 81.25). This virtual disequilibrium or excess is positively charged, and has to do with a generous dis-position towards the other: like Cavarero, and alongside contemporary theorists of care ethics, Seneca challenges the ontological presumption that the more separate the self is from others, the more developed it is. Just as the spirit of human kindness inclines every doubtful case towards the better, Seneca continues (*quicquid dubium est ... inclinatur in melius*), so the mind of the good man, when another’s merits equal his bad deeds, will for sure cease to feel an official obligation (*desinet quidem debere*), but will not stop desiring to feel it (*sed non desinit velle debere*, 81.26).

Indeed, he acts precisely like the man who pays his debts even after they have been legally cancelled. In other words, virtue motivates the subject to continue to lean in, to desire responsibility for and connection with the heteronomous other to whom he will always feel ethically indebted.

Thus the often-repeated slogan of the ‘straight path’ (*rectum iter*) in Seneca does not describe (or enfolds the paradox of) the posture involved in proceeding, diagonally, along it. Letter 123 is indicative. Amid deliberation of how to avoid fearing things we are repelled by, and how to avoid desiring, excessively, those things that attract us, Seneca urges Lucilius to counteract pre-existing inclinations if he wants to take control of his mental life. Yet this is achieved not through replacing inclination with static verticality – on the contrary, we need to actively bend in order to sustain equilibrium as we rollercoaster through time. Thus:

‘Men coming down a slope bend their bodies backwards (*resupinant corpora*); men ascending a steep place lean forward (*incumbent*). For, my dear Lucilius, to allow yourself to put your body’s weight ahead when coming down, or, when climbing up, to throw it backward, is to comply with vice. The pleasures take one downhill, but one must work upwards toward that which is rough and hard to climb. In the one case let us throw our bodies forward, in the others let us put the reins on them (*hic impellamus corpora, illic refrenemus*).’

*Ep.*123.14

This passage is reminiscent of *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.9.1109b6-7, where Aristotle notes that we must bend sticks in the opposite direction to make them straight. <21> But the exigency, in Seneca, is to achieve not straightness, but a degree of balance in

forward movement; it is to validate the inclination of the subject in order to make virtue compatible with (the acceptance of) being in time that is a condition for human flourishing. Bending, then, is not necessarily the posture of one who is a slave to vice, in opposition to the *sapiens* who – at 71.26 for example – stands ‘straight under any weight’ (*rectus sub quolibet pondere*). Neither does it necessarily figure failure, or inadequacy: yes, in human beings, the mind tends to curve and sag (*incurvari et succumbere*, 71.26), and on the path towards an ever-distant regulative ideal, the philosopher will slide back at times and ‘is habitually turned/twisted/bent on slippery terrain’ (*versatur in lubrico*, 71.28). Yet this is unavoidable, a condition of the journey itself and not at all incompatible with being *honestus*; that which is short of perfection must necessarily be unsteady, at one time progressing, at another slipping or sinking under (*modo sublabantur aut succidant*, 71.35).

Moreover, it is only by reading Seneca’s Latin closely that we can observe how, in the climax to this thesis in *Ep.71*, he begins to reconfigure the bending or leaning of philosophical praxis (represented by the verb *nitor*) as distinct from the bodily ‘dislocations’ that figure imperial ‘extravagance’ or ‘luxury’ (*luxuria*). The noun *luxus* in Latin means both ‘excess’ and ‘dislocation’ (from the Gk. *loxós*, ‘oblique’ or ‘slanting’), to which the corresponding verb *luxuriare* (to be exuberant, to swell, to run to excess, with the implication of self-indulgence and disregard for moral restraints) is almost certainly etymologically connected. Seneca writes here (71.35) that ‘imperfect things/beings’ will slip back (*sublabentur*) unless they keep leaning ahead (*nisi ire et niti persaveraverint*); for if they ‘go slack’ (*laxaverint*) in determination and faithful application, they will certainly go into reverse (*retro eundum est*). This passage marks an important and productive moment in the *Epistles*’ journey towards re-envisaging *inclinatio* (distinct from *luxuria*) as the necessary and

courageous posture of the dignified male philosophical subject, particularly (although this is never made explicit in Seneca's text) one who is struggling with the realities of extreme vulnerability under the worst years of Neronian tyranny (including the prospect of being tortured: *torquere*, the Latin verb for 'to torture' much used by Seneca, literally means to twist/distort/bend).

Yet curving and leaning is not just the condition of the life of the *proficiens*. Significantly, Senecan virtue (*virtus*) herself 'inclines', and even more strikingly, the model for this is the mother. In *Ep.66*, a letter exploring various different aspects of virtue which explains the notion that virtue has many forms or vehicles, having nothing to do with physical appearance, Seneca gives the example of how parents treat their children: we do not judge one unfairly, if the child happens to be sickly rather than healthy, just as we love our country not because it is necessarily great, but because it is our own (66.22-26) He concludes this section by saying:

And what is the purpose of all this? That you may know that virtue regards all her works in the same light, as if they were her children (*velut fetus suos*) showing equal kindness to all, and still deeper kindness to those who encounter hardships: for even parents lean with more affection towards those of their offspring for whom they feel pity (*quoniam quidem etiam parentium amor magis in ea, quorum miseretur, inclinatur*.)

Ep.66.27

Like Cavarero, whose privileging of inclination now seems to reverberate through Seneca's account, Seneca performs this 'parental' posture as he leans towards Lucilius, 'embracing' him in and through the epistolary relationship. 'It is one sort of

kiss which men give their girlfriend (*amicam*), he states at *Ep.*75.3, ‘and another which they give their children (*aliter liberos osculantur*). Yet in this latter embrace also, holy and restrained as it is, plenty of affection is disclosed (*tamen in hoc quoque amplexu tam sancto et moderato satis apparet adfectus*).’ The noun *amplexus* (‘embrace’), from *am*(bi)+*plecto*(r), ‘I weave around’, evokes an enveloping, a coiling around or affectionate curvature. Back in letter 13, Seneca explained that the letter as *sermo* or ‘conversation’, one half of a dialogue continually turned and responsive towards an other who is moving forward in time, requires a voice, a tongue, which is not traditionally Stoic but *submissior* (*Ep.*13.4). The phrase *submissiore voce* is usually translated as ‘in a milder or softer voice’, and taken to refer to volume and tone. Yet *submissus* also means lowered, stooped, even submissive and servile.<22>

In order to give Lucilius genuine, practical instruction about how to deal with real-life crises, Seneca will have to steer clear of Stoic grandiosity and pretentiousness, speaking in a softer manner, but he will also have to incline himself towards his friend, constantly shifting his posture according to the other’s changing needs, empathizing with his partner’s troubles and sharing or acting out his own.

It is worth underlining once more that experiencing and living out the ‘slope’ of old age is the on-going backdrop to rethinking not just physical but psychic and moral rectitude in the *Letters*, which track and mimic daily life, the passing of time as a pattern of circles - or better waves - that ‘open’ and ‘close’ at the beginning and end of each day. <23> Programmatically, in *Ep.*12, the final letter of the introductory first book where Seneca is forced to confront his own decrepitude as mirrored and magnified in the crumbling exterior of his country villa, *inclinatio* as the patriarch’s horror of falling into the abyss gives way to an acceptance and delight in gravity. In the course of this letter, anxieties about ageing are voiced but also processed, and

Seneca reaches a point at which he can advocate ‘let us embrace and love old age’ (*complectamur illam et amemus*, 12.4). ‘Life is most pleasant’ he writes, ‘when it is on the downward slope, before rapid decline at the end’ (*iucundissima est aetas devexa iam, non tamen praeceps*, 12.5). But then he adds, ‘Actually, I believe that the period which stands so to speak on the edge of the roof (*in extrema tegula*) possesses pleasures of its own.’ (12.5). We might compare Cavarero’s remarks on the joy or ekstasis experienced by small children on slides, which she suggests testifies to the (for adults, often forgotten) pleasure of abandoning oneself to the laws of gravity, without resistance. <24> It is perhaps not surprising then, that *Ep. 12* also offers a test case for documenting the orthopaedics of philology at work in Seneca’s reception by textual critics. Although the best manuscripts have *tegula* at 12.5, meaning tile, and referring to the edge of the roof, as if Seneca is on top of the villa about to jump off into oblivion, editors have proposed alternatives: Summers prints *regula* (‘rule’, which appears in a few lesser mss., and has been thought by some to refer to the horizon line), while Madvig prints *specula*, meaning ‘summit’. When editors read *regula* or *specula* over *tegula*, the banal, shaky roof tile of this tumble-down building, on which the philosopher stands as he takes gentle pleasure in anticipation of the fall, is written over with the vertical pleasure of reaching the peak, or of standing at the edge of straightness itself.

Indeed, the conventional response to the *Letters*’ suggestive leanings in the direction of ‘feminine’ postures (admitting erotic desire and a ‘dangerous’ degree of openness to the other that pushes at the edges of standard Roman *amicitia*) involves inferring a strong mind-body dichotomy that preserves the ideal of virile invulnerability at the risk of misrepresenting Senecan thought. Despite the fact that according to traditional Stoic doctrine the soul was dispersed through the body

(indeed, attending to the body's health and needs as inseparable from psychic ones is an important part of Seneca's philosophical program in the *Letters*), this view suggests that Seneca is invested in simply unyoking *libertas* – traditionally defined in Roman thought in terms of bodily integrity – from the fate of the actual body. Instead, as Shadi Bartsch writes, we should cultivate mental or psychic impenetrability, which will become the 'new sign of masculinity', using philosophy to build a fortress around the soul. In this, Bartsch suggests, Seneca offers an indirect answer to the charge of Stoic passivity and appeals cleverly to Roman ideals of military valor. <25> Yet the notion that bodily rectitude, the defining feature of the self-referential, in-dependent Roman citizen male, is straightforwardly traded in or sacrificed in the *Epistles* for a higher level and sublime psychic walledness radically underestimates both the significance of that loss and the process by which Seneca attempts not just to 'compensate' for it, but to understand, accept and rewrite its implications for masculine identity. We can trace in the *Letters* both a reassuring architecture for impregnable Roman masculinity and at the same time glimpse this same structure being transformed - or bent – into something almost unrecognizable.

IV.

In order to illustrate this development in greater detail, I want to look finally, at *Ep.53*, before returning to Cavarero. Critics rightly draw attention to passages in Seneca – and the crucial ones appear in the *Epistles* – e.g. 82.5, 74.19 and 49.9– in which philosophy is envisaged as an 'impregnable wall' (*inexpugnabilis murus*), within which the elite Roman male is still master of his domain. That the philosopher's 'siege mentality' is a key image for Seneca is clear. But we must also be alert to the ways in which this figure evolves in synch with the dialectical

movement of the *Epistles* themselves and with Seneca's continued emphasis, within the energetic epistolary frame, on accepting vulnerability and on performing *inclinatio* as the basis of a life of virtue. What we encounter, at several points, and in place of the static, upright wall, is the *sinus* - philosophy's lap, haven, or womb. In *Ep.*103.4, for example, Philosophia herself is a motherly figure offering her womb or lap as a haven. Seneca instructs: 'As much as you are able (*quantum potes*), seek refuge in philosophy. She will protect you in her *sinus*, and in this holy shrine you will be safe or at least, safer (*aut tutior*).' Notice the emphasis on degrees of commitment and the qualification *aut tutior*, which marks a subtle stepping away from the ideal of absolute security that is coextensive with vertical self-sufficiency. Well before 103, Seneca has fleshed out this vision of philosophy-as-mother at *Ep.*53. This letter is concerned with how the body constantly reminds us of our human weakness and failings, so that physical symptoms point towards and come to figure psychic ones. This is why we must turn to philosophy, Seneca writes. In paragraphs 9-11, the relationship between student and 'mistress' Philosophia is envisaged as a mutual, quasi-erotic one, couched in the specular poetics of Roman love elegy. Typically, we must engage with the dense literary texture of the letter in order to work through what it might teach us. At 53.12, the final sentences of the letter, philosophy's power is revealed:

'The power of philosophy to blunt the blows of chance is beyond belief. No missile can settle in her body (*nullum telum in corpore eius sedet*); she is well protected and impenetrable (*munita est, solida*). She spoils the force of some missiles and wards them off (*eludit*) with the loose folds of her gown (*laxo sinu*), as if they were flimsy arrows (*velut levia tela*);

others she dashes aside, and hurls them back with such force that they
recoil upon the sender.’

Commentators note the ‘virilization’ of Philosophia in this passage, and focus on the adjectives *munita* and *solida* (well-protected, solid). <26> Yet Philosophia, as she is represented here, is no Roman soldier, more a black belt in jujitsu (which means literally ‘flexible’ or ‘soft’ art). As much as the female is a mediating instrument and metaphor for male discourse in this letter, <27> Seneca also shows here that he will not delete female bodiliness from our ideal of male psychic invulnerability, which we can perhaps already parse as ‘high level psychic defense mechanisms’, rather than in terms of rectitude, as conventionally understood, or of absolute, wall-like security. Seneca’s Philosophy never uses a weapon, only the weapons of others, and she is both solid and bendy: she defends herself by ‘eluding’, and by leaning this way and that, moving her *laxus sinus*, the ‘roomy’, ‘slack’, ‘relaxed’ ‘fold (of her dress). *Sinus* ostensibly refers here to the loose curves of a gown, but (as in *Ep.*103.4) also suggests a curved recess, the unclosed cavity of a woman’s lap or womb.<28> We might note that the image of Philosophia’s protection here is not one of fortress-like containment but of embrace (Lucilius is to turn towards her, *huc converte*, 53.11): the *sinus* is not an enclosure but a swishing fold. Moreover, with the adjective *laxus*, it seems to stand in near contradiction to the adjectives *munita* and *solida*. *Laxus* means loose, ample, wide, but also having openings, breached. We might recall the storm at the beginning of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, when the Trojan hulls, their ‘bolts loosened’ (*laxis...compagibus*, *Aen.*1.122), begin to take on water - a preview of Sinon’s ‘feminine’ wiles as he opens of the *uterus* of the Trojan horse in book 2 (*laxat claustra Sinon*, 2.259). In the erotic elegies of Tibullus, the poet-lover warns his girl’s

husband not to let her recline at dinner ‘with loose folds of her dress draped over an exposed cleavage’ (*laxo pectus aperta sinu*, 1.6.18), and likewise to send packing any dapper suitor ‘whose toga falls slack with copious folds’ (*fluit effuso cui toga laxa sinu*, 1.6.40). Similarly, in *Amores* 1.8, Ovid has the old procuress Dipsas recommend to his *puella* that she not be too available to her lover but should keep her doors open (*laxa*) to material gifts, while in the *Remedia Amoris*, the phrase *laxo sinu* marks the attire of the metrosexual urbane lover, where the ‘loose fold’ is itself seductive, the sartorial pose to avoid if you want to ditch the torture of eros (680).

Applied to passive sexual bodies, *laxus*, and the verb *laxare*, are also used in Latin to imply a ‘looseness’ created by penetration. The *Priapea*, a collection of ninety-five erotic epigrams of unknown provenance from the classical period, include a two line poem which runs: ‘It’s a great advantage having such a large penis: no woman can ever be too loose (*laxa*) for me’ (*Priapea* 18). The last sentence of *Ep.*53 is reminiscent, too, of the vicious poetic sparring between Catullus and his friend Gellius in *Cat.*116.7-8: ‘I will evade the missiles (*tela*) launched against me: / but you shall be pierced by mine and pay the price’. Such echoes help generate a striking sense of poetic dissonance and ‘thickness’ within the philosophical letter. However, unlike Catullus, *Philosophia* casts back only the weapons used to attack her, and transforms them into ‘light weapons’ (*levia tela*), like so many Cupid’s arrows. *Levis* is a buzzword of Ovidian love elegy in particular (see e.g. Ovid *Amores* 2.1.21).

In short, far from moving away from Roman erotic elegy here, Seneca sustains and densifies the metaphor. Philosophy’s self-defense is actively, playfully elegizing: she makes ‘weapons’, or the elements in life that threaten the *proficiens* (including, presumably, the wrong kind of pleasure or *voluptas*) seem like Cupid’s arrows. And she channels the vulnerable, gender-fluid Ovidian lover, reproducing and inviting the

vulnus ('wound') of desire even as she 'dashes it aside' and remains 'well-protected'.

V. Conclusions

This passage in *Ep.53* exemplifies how Seneca in the *Epistles* finds a way to strive for invulnerability while acknowledging that this is a state of being that is always yet to come. Seneca envisages here a dignified male subject associated, in the lap or folds of *Philosophia*, not with a posture of static straightness but with sinuosity, flexibility and the stamina required for continual movement. *Philosophia's sinus* mutates elegiac *otium* into a figure for self-defense and philosophical engagement that has nothing to do with sloth or passivity. Like the Derridean hymen, this ever-moving dress-as-shield, both surface and depth, invites and envelops the weapons or forces that threaten it even as it spits them back, so that the quasi-erotic 'embrace' of the *proficiens* by Philosophy, and vice versa, as well Seneca's affectionate leaning towards and enfoldment of Lucilius in these letters, projects a transformative power to alter the nature of every encounter with the other and with fate. <29> The epistolary form itself, and more specifically Seneca's radically hospitable letter (open not just to other different philosophical schools but to literary texts of varying genres and to oblique, 'literary' ways of thinking about and interpreting philosophical ideas) sets the stage here for the enfolding of Roman erotic elegy and epigram into a ludic, fertile dramatization of Stoic praxis. The scene speaks to what I have suggested in this paper is an emerging model of virtuous leaning in the *Epistles*, a text whose significance in the Western philosophical tradition has continually been underestimated in part precisely because of negative, orthopedic interpretation of its 'Roman' twists and turns, its holding and spinning out of paradox or undecidability. Seneca puts 'doing philosophy in Latin' to work in the precarious conditions of late Neronian Rome so as

to radically shift perspectives on what it means for a man to yield, slide, bend and desire.

What we see in Seneca's *Epistles*, then, might represent (alongside fellow Roman Lucretius, noted by Cavarero, 132-4) another 'unusual turn' in the tradition. To 'add' Seneca to *Inclinazioni* in no way weakens Cavarero's argument for the overwhelming normativity of the posture of rectitude; nor does it undermine her key point that confronting and dealing in 'stereotypes' (*stereotipi*, 25, 61, 167), generalities, even simplifications (61) is both politically exigent from a feminist perspective and by no means in conflict with philosophical-philological rigor and precision. It is rather to take up Cavarero's own incentive in *Inclinazioni* to refuse to read the canon 'straight', and to find oblique and hence revealing points of entry into a tradition which, in naturalizing its postures, continues to delegitimize and erase others. Cavarero teaches us to be suspicious of Seneca's near-total absence from the canon, and to be alert to the ways in which literary density and playful shape-shifting in the *Epistles* (urge us to) do challenging philosophical work. Likewise, Seneca offers us a new frame within which to understand and debate Cavarero's politically charged literariness, together with a stimulus to imagine a 'new political order' (182) in which a fierce courage and an ethics of care are not mutually exclusive, and in which the curving of a mother's or lover's body can model rectitude as resilience.

Notes

1. Trans. A. Minervini and A. Sitze, Stanford University Press.
2. Cf. De Beauvoir 1949, 15.
3. Arendt 2003, 81. Cf. Cavarero 2013, 20, 45, 48, 138.
4. Esp. Gilligan 1982, Ruddick 1989, Kittay 1999, Esposito 2002, Butler 2004, Held

- 2006, Derrida (e.g. 2005, 2007).
5. MacIntyre 1999.
 6. Veyne 2003, 94
 7. See Walters 1997.
 8. On torture in the *Epistles* see e.g. 14.3ff., 24.3ff., 44.18ff., 47.3ff., 78.7ff., 101.10ff.)
 9. Gunderson 2012.
 10. Cf. Quintilian 10.1.125-131 on Seneca's 'perverse' style.
 11. Ruddick 1989.
 12. See esp. Nussbaum 1994, Reydams-Schils 2005.
 13. Cf. Walters 1997.
 14. See Inwood 2007a: xii-xv, and 2007b.
 15. Cf. Edwards 2015, Williams 2015.
 16. Ruddick 1989, 90-91. Berges 2015, 157-61 suggests that Stoic *oikeiōsis* is essentially a model of care that moves outwards from loved ones to world, and compares this to Noddings's expanding 'circles of care' (Noddings 2010, 95, 222, 240-1).
 17. See also *Ep.*40.1 (the letter brings 'traces' of an absent friend), cf. 50.1.
 18. Ker 2009, 149; Gunderson 2015, 88.
 19. *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (henceforth OLD) *nitor*.
 20. Cf. Henderson 2006.
 21. Inwood 2007 *ad loc.*
 22. OLD *submissus*.
 23. Cf. Ker 2009, 147-76.
 24. Cavarero 2013, 15

25. Bartsch 2009, 204.
26. Berno 2006 *ad loc.*
27. Cf. Spivak 1997.
28. OLD *sinus*.
29. Cf. Derrida 1980 and 1981, 197-309.

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