

LETTER 118

Seneca to Lucilius, greetings:

1. You demand from me more frequent letters. Let's compare accounts: you'll be in no position to pay your debt. Our agreement was that your contributions would come first, that you would write and I would reply. But I won't be intransigent; I know you are a good credit risk. So I will give in advance and will not do what Cicero, an extremely eloquent man, asks Atticus to do, that is to 'jot down whatever came into his head, even if he had nothing to say.'
2. There can never be a lack of things for me to write about, even though I pass over all those things which fill Cicero's letters: who is having trouble with his election campaign, who is campaigning with someone else's resources and who with his own, who relies on Caesar in seeking the consulship, who relies on Pompey, and who relies on money, what a heartless lean shark Caecilius is—those near and dear to him cannot get a penny out of him at less than one percent a month! It is better to deal with one's own faults than those of other people, to examine oneself and to see how many things one is campaigning for, and not to canvass for someone else.
3. Lucilius, it is a splendid thing, a source of tranquillity and independence, to seek nothing and to ignore completely fortune's political campaigns. Don't you think it delightful to stand by at your leisure and to watch the electoral marketplace without having to buy or sell anything—while the candidates wait anxiously in their precincts and one promises money, another works through an agent, someone else smothers with kisses the hands of people whose hands he will refuse even to touch once he is elected, all of them waiting open-mouthed for the announcement of the results?
4. How much greater the pleasure enjoyed by the man who watches in tranquillity not the praetorian or consular elections but those greater contests in which some people seek annually recurring honours, or seek permanent political power, or successful outcomes for their military campaigns and triumphal parades, or wealth, or marriage and children, or health for themselves and their families! It takes a truly great character just to seek nothing, to ask for no one's support, and to say 'I have no business with you, fortune; I am not letting you get at me. I know that you permit people like Cato to lose at the polls and people like Vatinius to be elected. I ask for nothing.' This is what it means to reduce fortune to the ranks.
5. So one can write about these things back and forth and set out this material—it is always fresh and new—since we look around and see so many thousands of people who are troubled. In order to achieve a disastrous result, they struggle to overcome hardships on their way to misery and pursue things which they will soon have to flee from or sneer at.
6. Who has ever been satisfied by getting something which was too much to hope for? Prosperity is not insatiable, as people think; it is puny. So it doesn't satisfy anyone. You think those things are lofty because you are situated far below them. The person who has reached them thinks they are small. I guarantee you that he will try to climb higher still. What you think of as the top is a mere step to him.
7. But ignorance of the truth puts everyone in a bad way. They are misled by false report and so rush off towards what they think are good things; then, when they have suffered so much to get them, they see that they are actually bad or empty or less important than they had hoped. The majority of people admire things which deceive from a distance; what the crowd *thinks* good is the standard of importance for them.
8. Let's enquire what the good is, so that this doesn't happen to us. There are several accounts of it, and different people articulate it differently. Some define it thus: 'the good is what entices our mind, what draws it to itself.' Right away there is an objection to this account: what if it entices our mind, but entices it into ruination? You know how many bad things are alluring. What is true and what is merely similar to the truth are different. So, what is good is linked to what is true; for it isn't good unless it is true. But what entices us to itself and lures us is merely *like* the truth. It insinuates, it pesters, it leads us on.
9. Some people have defined it thus: 'the good is what stimulates desire for itself; or, what stimulates an impulse of the mind which strives towards it.' The same objection is made to this formulation. For many things which stimulate a mental impulse are pursued to the detriment of those pursuing them. Those who defined the good as follows did a better job: 'the good is that which stimulates a mental impulse towards itself in accordance with nature and is worth pursuing only when it begins to be worth choosing.' Right away this is something honourable, for the honourable is what is completely worth pursuing.

10. This point reminds me to mention the difference between the good and the honourable. They do share something with each other which is inseparable from them. Only what has something honourable in it can be good, and the honourable is certainly good. So what is the difference between them? The honourable is the *perfected* good, by which the happy life is made complete and by contact with which other things are also made good.

11. Here is the kind of thing I mean. There are certain things which are neither good nor bad, like military service, diplomatic service, and service as a judge. When they are conducted honourably, they start to be good and make the transition from being uncertain to being good. Alliance with the honourable makes something good, but the honourable is good all on its own. Good flows from the honourable; the honourable depends only on itself. What is good could have been bad. What is honourable couldn't have been otherwise than good.

12. Certain people have advanced this definition: 'the good is what is according to nature'. Note what I am saying: what is good is according to nature, but it is not automatic that what is according to nature is also good. Indeed, many things agree with nature but are so petty that the label 'good' is not appropriate to them; they are trivial, even contemptible. There is no such thing as a miniscule and contemptible good, since as long as it is small it is not good. When it starts to be good, it is not small. How is the good recognized then? If it is *completely* according to nature.

13. You say, 'You admit that what is good is according to nature. This is its characteristic feature. You admit that other things are certainly according to nature but not good. So how can that be good when these are not? How does it attain a different characteristic feature when both have that one outstanding feature in common, being according to nature?'

14. Because of the magnitude itself, of course. And this is nothing new. Certain things change by growing. He was an infant and became an adult. He has a different characteristic feature. For the infant lacked reason and the adult is rational. Certain things don't just become bigger by growing; they become different.

15. He says, 'It doesn't become different because it becomes bigger. Whether you fill a bottle or a barrel with wine makes no difference; in each there exists the characteristic feature of wine. A small and a large amount of honey both taste the same.' The examples you adduce are not of the same kind; for in those cases they do have the same quality; however much they increase, it persists.

16. Certain things when made bigger do retain their own type and characteristic feature. But certain things, after many increases, are finally converted by the final addition, which imposes on them a condition different from the one they were in before. One stone makes an arch, the one which wedges against the sloping sides and binds them by being placed between them. Why does the final addition, even if it is miniscule, make such a big difference? Because it does not increase something but fills it up.

17. Certain things slough off their previous shape as they advance and make the transition to a new shape. When the mind extends something for a long time and has become worn out by tracking its magnitude, then it starts to be called 'infinite'. It becomes very different from what it was when it looked big, but finite. In the same way we got the idea that something was difficult to cut; as this difficulty grew, in the end the 'uncuttable' was discovered. This is how we progressed from what could barely be moved with great effort to that which is unmovable. In the same way something was according to nature; it was its own magnitude that gave it a new characteristic feature and made it good.

Farewell.