

## LETTER 120

Seneca to Lucilius, greetings:

1. Your letter rambled through many minor questions, but settled on one and asks that it be dealt with: how we have acquired the concept of the good and the honourable. These two are, in the view of others, different: in our view they are merely distinct.

2. I will explain. Some think that the good is that which is useful. Therefore they apply this term to wealth, to a horse, to wine, and to a shoe. That is how cheap they think the good is and how utterly they think it descends into vulgarity. They think that the honourable is that which is characterized by a reasoning out of one's correct responsibility; e.g., the faithful care of one's father in old age, relief of a friend's poverty, courageous behaviour on campaign, the utterance of sensible and moderate views [in the Senate].

3. We contend that these are indeed two things, but that they are rooted in one. Nothing is good except what is honourable; what is honourable is certainly good. I think it unnecessary to add what distinguishes them, since I have said it often. I will say just this one thing, that we believe that nothing is <good> which someone can also use badly; however, you see how many people make bad use of wealth, high birth, and strength.

So now I return to what you want me to discuss, how we have acquired our initial concept of the good and the honourable.

4. Nature could not have taught us this; she has given us the seeds of knowledge but has not given us knowledge. Certain people say that we just happened on the concept; but it is implausible that anyone should have come upon the form of virtue by chance. We believe that it has been inferred by the observation and comparison of actions done repeatedly. Our school holds that the honourable and the good are understood by analogy. (Since this term [*analogia*] has been naturalized by Latin grammarians, I think it need not be condemned; rather, it should be promoted to full citizenship. So I will use it not just as an acceptable word, but as a common one.) Let me explain what this analogy is.

5. We had a familiarity with bodily health; from this we realized that there is also a certain health of the mind. We had a familiarity with bodily strength, from this we inferred that there is also mental power. Certain generous deeds, certain kindly deeds, certain brave deeds had amazed us; we began to admire them as though they were perfect. There were hidden in them many failings which were concealed by the form and splendour of some outstanding deed; these failings we pretended not to notice. Nature orders us to exaggerate what is praiseworthy, and there is no one who hasn't elevated glory beyond the truth. Hence it is from these actions that we have derived the form of some great good.

6. Fabricius rejected the gold of King Pyrrhus and thought that being able to depose royal riches was more important than a kingdom. When Pyrrhus' physician promised to administer poison to the king, Fabricius warned Pyrrhus to beware the treachery. It was a mark of the same character that he was not won over by gold and would not win by poison. We admired the great man who was swayed neither by the promises of a king nor by promises to harm the king, a man with a firm grip on sound precedent and (something very hard to achieve) blameless during war, a man who still thought that there was such a thing as an outrage committed against an enemy, a man who in the midst of the poverty which his honour had inflicted on him avoided riches just as he avoided poison. He said, 'Pyrrhus, live thanks to me, and rejoice at the fact which used to cause you grief—that Fabricius cannot be corrupted.'

7. Horatius Cocles stood alone blocking the narrow part of the bridge and ordered that his line of retreat be cut off behind his back, provided that the enemy be deprived of their route; he stood against his attackers until the timbers were torn apart and thundered massively as they collapsed. He looked behind himself and saw that his own danger had put his country out of danger and *then* he said, 'Come on, if any of you wants to pursue me on *this* escape route!' Then he threw himself headlong into the river; in the raging current of the river he was just as concerned to get out with his armour as he was to get out safe, and with the honour of his victorious armour intact he got back to his camp as safely as if he had crossed the bridge.

8. These deeds and ones like them have shown us the likeness of virtue. I shall add a point which might perhaps seem remarkable: that sometimes bad deeds have presented us with the appearance of the honourable, and that what is best has shone forth from its opposite. As you know, there are vices which are similar to virtues and a resemblance between what is right and what is corrupt and shameful. Thus a spendthrift falsely

resembles a generous person, though there is an enormous difference between knowing how to give and not knowing how to save. Lucilius, I say, there are many people who do not give money but toss it around; I don't call a person who is angry at his own money generous. Carelessness imitates easy-goingness, recklessness imitates bravery.

9. This resemblance forced us to pay attention and to distinguish things which are similar, in appearance at any rate, but which in fact differ enormously from each other. While watching those whom some outstanding act made famous we began to notice who did some action with a noble spirit and great élan, but only once. Here we saw a man brave in war but fearful in political life, taking poverty with courage and disgrace with humility. We praised what he did but held the man himself in contempt.

10. We saw another man who was kind to his friends and self-controlled towards his enemies, managing public and private affairs with piety and faithfulness; he did not lack endurance in situations which called for putting up with things, nor good sense in situations which called for action. We saw him providing generously where giving was called for and where struggle was called for we saw him determined, striving, and supporting his weary body with his courageous mind. Moreover, he was always the same and consistent with himself in every act; not 'good' by design, but so thoroughly habituated that he not only could act rightly but could not act other than rightly.

11. We understood that in him virtue was complete. We divided it into parts: it was appropriate to curb desires, suppress fears, show good sense in action, distribute what ought to be allotted; we grasped self-control, bravery, good sense, and justice, and assigned to each its own sphere. On the basis of what, then, did we come to understand virtue? It was shown to us by this man's orderliness and fittingness and consistency, the mutual agreement of all his actions and the greatness which rises above everything. This is the source of our understanding of the happy life, which flows smoothly and is completely autonomous.

12. How, then, did this very thing become clear to us? I will tell you. That man, the one who is complete and has attained to virtue, never cursed fortune, was never gloomy in his acceptance of what happened; believing that he is a citizen and soldier of the cosmos, he took on difficult tasks as though commanded to do so. He did not reject what happened to him as though it were something bad which fell to his lot by chance, but [accepted it] as though it had been assigned to him. He said, 'No matter

what this is like, it is mine; it is harsh, it is tough, but let's get to work on it.'

13. And so someone who never moaned over his misfortune and never complained about his fate necessarily appeared to be great. He provided an understanding of himself to many people and shone forth like a light in the darkness, turning the minds of all to himself, since he was calm and gentle, equally at ease with divine and human things.

14. He had a mind which was complete and brought to its own best condition—there is nothing higher than this except the mind of god, from which some part has flowed down even into this mortal breast, which is never more divine than when it reflects on its own mortality and knows that human beings were born in order to live and be done with life, that the body is not a home but a guest-house—and a short-stay guest-house at that, which you must leave when you notice that you are a bother to your host.

15. Lucilius my friend, the most powerful indication that a mind comes from some loftier place is if it judges the things it deals with to be base and narrow, if it is not afraid to take its leave. For the mind which remembers where it came from knows where it is going to go. Don't we see how many troubles plague us and how badly this body suits us?

16. We complain about headache sometimes, stomach ache other times, and again about chest troubles or a sore throat. Now our muscles trouble us, now our feet, then diarrhoea, then a runny nose. Sometimes our blood is too thick, sometimes too thin. We are besieged from all sides and then driven out. This is normally the experience only of those living in a foreign environment.

17. But even though we are struck with such a crumbling body we nevertheless aim at the eternal and with our ambition we seize the full extent of what the length of a human life can accommodate, not content with money or power in any amount. What could be more outrageous or more stupid than this? Nothing satisfies those who are about to die, indeed who are dying already. Every day we stand closer to the end and each day pushes us towards the place from which we must fall.

18. See what blindness afflicts our minds! What I refer to as future occurs at this very moment and most of it is already in the past. For the time that we have lived is in the same place as it was before we lived. So we are wrong to fear our final day, since each and every day contributes just as much to our death. The step during which we collapse is not the one which makes us tired; it just announces our fatigue. The final day reaches death; each day approaches it. Death plucks at us; it does not grab us all at

once. So a great mind, one aware of its better nature, certainly takes care to comport itself honourably and industriously in the post to which it is stationed, but it does not judge that any of its surroundings are its own. A traveller hurrying by, it uses them as though they are on loan.

19. When we see someone with this degree of consistency, why shouldn't we get the impression of an exceptional talent? especially, as I said, if this greatness is shown to be genuine by its uniformity. Continuity is a stable companion of what is genuine; what is not genuine does not last. Some people take turns being Vatinius and Cato: one moment Curius isn't strict enough for them, Fabricius not poor enough, Tubero not parsimonious enough, not sufficiently satisfied with simple things; the next minute they rival Licinius for his wealth, Apicius for his dinner parties, and Maecenas for his luxuries.

20. The clearest proof of a bad character is restlessness and constantly bouncing back and forth between pretending at virtue and loving vice.

Often he had two hundred slaves but often he had only ten; sometimes he spoke of kings and tetrarchs, and all manner of greatness, but sometimes he said 'All I want is a small table, a pinch of plain salt, and a cloak, no matter how coarse, to ward off the cold.' If you had given this parsimonious man, content with little, the sum of 1,000,000 sesterces, in five days he'd have had nothing.<sup>1</sup>

21. Many people are like the one Horace describes here, never the same as himself, not even similar; that's how far off course he goes. 'Many,' did I say? Virtually everybody. There isn't anybody who doesn't change his advice and his wishes every day. First he wants a wife, then a mistress; first he wants to be king; then he behaves in such a way that no slave could be more fawning; first he puffs himself up in order to attract envy, and then backs down and sinks below the level of the genuinely humble; at one moment he scatters money around, and the next minute he steals it.

22. This is the most powerful proof that a mind is unwise. It goes around as one person after another and is inconsistent with itself, and I think nothing is more shameful than that. Consider it a great thing to play the role of one person. But except for the wise person, no one plays a single role; the rest of us are multiple. At one point we will seem prudent and serious to you, at another financially reckless and frivolous. We change roles frequently and put on a mask opposite to the one we just removed. So demand this of yourself. You undertook to present yourself in a certain

<sup>1</sup> Horace, *Satires* 1.3.11–17.

way; keep yourself in that condition right through to the end. Make it possible that you can be praised, or at least that you can be identified. It could fairly be said of the person you saw yesterday, 'Who is he?' That is how much he has changed.  
Farewell.