

LETTER 121

Seneca to Lucilius, greetings:

1. I can see that you will haul me into court when I set out for you today's little question, one that has engaged us for quite a while now. Once again you will shout, 'What does this have to do with ethics?' Shout away, then, while I, first of all, give you other opponents to prosecute, Posidonius and Archedemus (they'll accept the court's jurisdiction), and then say to you, 'It is not the case that everything which is ethical makes our character ethically good.'
2. Some things bear on human nutrition, some on exercise, some on clothing, some on teaching, some on pleasure. But they all bear on human beings even if not all of them make humans better. Different things have different impacts on our character. Some things improve our character and make it orderly, while others investigate the nature and origin of our characters.
3. When <I ask> why nature made humans, why she made us superior to the rest of the animals, do you think I have left character far behind? Not so. For how will you know what character you should have unless you find out what is best for a human being, unless you look into its nature. You won't really understand what you should do and what you should avoid until you have learned what you owe to your own nature.
4. You reply, 'I want to learn how to reduce my desires and to reduce my fears. Rid me of superstition; teach me that what is *called* happiness is frivolous and empty, that it can very easily have one syllable prefixed to it [viz. 'un-']. I will satisfy your desire; I will both encourage the virtues and beat down the vices. Though someone might judge me excessive and immoderate in this area, I will not give up attacking wickedness, restraining the wild passions, reining in pleasures which are bound to end in pain, and railing against wishes and prayers. Why not? We have wished for the greatest evils and the source of all that demands consolation is what we give thanks to the gods for.'
5. Meanwhile, allow me to scrutinize some matters which seem a little more removed from our concerns. We were investigating whether all

animals have an awareness of their own constitution. The main reason why it seems that they do have such an awareness is that they move their limbs easily and effectively just as if they had been trained for doing so. Each of them is nimble with regard to its own parts. An artisan handles his tools with ease, the helmsman of a ship directs the rudder with skill, the painter arranges many different pigments to help him make a likeness and applies them with great rapidity, cheerfully and efficiently moving back and forth between the palette and his canvas. An animal is comparably agile in all the ways it makes use of itself.

6. We are regularly amazed at skilled dancers because their hands are able to represent all kinds of subjects and emotions and because their gestures are as quick as the words. What technique provides for them, nature provides for animals. No one has trouble moving its limbs; no one hesitates in making use of its parts. And they do so just as soon as they are born. They arrive with this knowledge. They are born fully trained.

7. 'The reason,' he replies, 'that animals move their parts appropriately is because if they moved them otherwise they would feel pain. So, as you yourselves say, they are compelled and it is fear rather than their wish which puts them on the right path.' But that is false. For things which are driven by necessity move slowly and what moves on its own has a certain nimbleness. Anyway, animals are so far from being driven to this action by pain that they strive for their natural motion even when pain impedes them.

8. Thus a baby who practices standing and getting used to moving around falls as soon as it begins to tax its strength. Over and over again it cries as it gets up again until despite the pain it works its way through to what nature asks of it. When certain animals which have a hard shell get turned upside down they twist themselves around and wave their legs and wrench them until they are again in an upright position. An upside-down turtle feels no pain, yet it is disturbed by a desire for its natural position and will not give up struggling and flailing itself until it gets onto its feet.

9. Therefore all animals have an awareness of their own constitution and that is the reason why they are so ready at managing their limbs; we have no better evidence that they come into life equipped with this knowledge than the fact that no animal is clumsy at using itself.

10. He objects, 'According to you, the constitution is the leading part of the soul in a certain disposition relative to the body. How can a baby comprehend this, which is so complicated and sophisticated that even you can scarcely explain it? All animals would have to be born dialecticians to understand that definition—which the majority of adult Romans find obscure.'

11. Your objection would be sound if I were saying that all animals understand the definition of their constitution rather than the constitution itself. Nature is more easily understood than explained. And so that baby does not know what a constitution is yet knows its constitution; and it does not know what an animal is yet is aware of being an animal.

12. Moreover, it does have a crude, schematic, and vague understanding of the constitution itself. We too know that we have a mind. But we do not know what the mind is, where it is, what it is like or where it comes from. Although we do not know its nature and its location, our awareness of our mind stands in the same relation to us as the awareness of their own constitution stands to all animals. For they must be aware of that through which they are aware of other things. They must be aware of that which they obey and by which they are governed.

13. Every one of us understands that there is something which sets in motion his own impulses, but does not know what this is. And he knows that he has a tendency to strive, though he does not know what it is or where it comes from. In this way too babies and animals have an awareness of their own leading part, though it is not adequately clear and distinct.

14. He objects, 'You say that every animal has a primary attachment to its own constitution, but that a human being's constitution is rational and so that a human being is attached to himself not *qua* animal but *qua* rational. For a human is dear to himself with respect to that aspect of himself which makes him human. So how can a baby be attached to a rational constitution when it is not yet rational?'

15. There is a constitution for every stage of life, one for a baby, another for a boy, <another for a teenager>, another for an old man. Everyone is attached to the constitution he is in. A baby has no teeth—it is attached to this constitution, which is its own. Teeth emerge—it is attached to this constitution. For even the plant which will one day grow and ripen into grain has one constitution when it is a tender shoot just barely emerging from the furrow, another when it has gotten stronger and has a stem which though tender is able to carry its own weight, and yet another when it is ripening, getting ready for harvest and has a firm head: but whatever constitution it has reached, it protects it and settles into it.

16. A baby, a boy, a teenager, an old man: these are different stages of life. Yet I am the same human as was also a baby and a boy and a teenager. Thus, although everyone has one different constitution after another, the attachment to one's own constitution is the same. For nature does not commend me to the boy or the youth or the old man, but to myself. Therefore the baby is attached to that constitution which is its own and

which the baby then has, not to that constitution which the youth will one day have. For though there remains something greater to grow into, it does not follow that the condition it is born into is not natural.

17. An animal has a primary attachment to itself, for there must be something to which other things can be referred. I seek pleasure. For whom? For myself. Therefore I am taking care of myself. I avoid pain. For whom? For myself. Therefore I am taking care of myself. If I do everything because I am taking care of myself, then care of myself is prior to everything. This care is a feature of all other animals; it is not grafted onto them but born in them.

18. Nature brings forth her offspring, she does not toss them aside. And because the most reliable form of protection comes from what is closest, each one is entrusted to itself. And so, as I said in earlier letters, young animals, even those just born from their mother or freshly hatched, immediately recognize what is threatening to them and avoid deadly dangers. Animals which are vulnerable to raptors tremble at the shadows of birds which fly overhead. No animal comes into life without a fear of death.

19. He objects, 'How can a newborn animal have an understanding of things which protect it or threaten death?' First, the question at issue is *whether* it understands, not *how* it understands. And that they actually do have this understanding is obvious from the fact that they would not do anything more if they did understand. Why is it that a hen does not flee from a peacock or a goose, but does flee from a hawk, though it is so much smaller and not even familiar to them? Why do chicks fear a cat but not a dog? It is obvious that there is within them a knowledge of what will cause harm which has not been derived from experience, for they display caution *before* they get the experience.

20. Next, so that you don't conclude that this happens by chance, they do not in fact fear anything other than what they should nor do they ever forget this form of responsible guardianship. Flight from danger is their lifelong companion. Further, they don't become more fearful as they live, which makes it obvious that they don't acquire this trait by experience but by a natural love of their own safety. What experience teaches is both slow and varied; what nature gives is uniform for all and immediate.

21. If, however, you demand it of me, I will tell you *how* it is that every animal is compelled to understand what is dangerous. It is aware that it is constituted of flesh, and so it is aware what can cut flesh, what can burn it, what can crush it, which animals are equipped to do it harm; it regards their appearance as hostile and threatening. These things are

interconnected, for as soon as each animal is attached to its own safety it also pursues what will help it and fears what will harm it. Its impulses towards what is useful are natural, as are its avoidances of the opposite. Whatever nature taught occurs without any thinking to prescribe it and without any deliberation.

22. Do you not see how technically sophisticated bees are at making their hives, how harmoniously they share the labour of the whole task? Don't you see how far beyond any human rivalry the spider's web is, how much work is involved in organizing the threads, some positioned in straight lines as stabilizers, others arranged in circles which become less closely spaced as one goes further from the centre, all in order to catch smaller animals (the intended victims of the web) as though in a net?

23. That skill is born, not learned. And so no animal is more learned than any other. You will notice that all spiders' webs are the same, that the cells of honeycombs are the same in every corner. What art teaches is variable and inconsistent. What nature hands out is uniform. She has given out nothing more than protection of oneself and skill at that, and that is why they also start life and learning simultaneously.

24. And it isn't surprising that the things without which an animal's birth would be pointless are born along with the animal. Nature has bestowed on animals this primary tool for survival, attachment to and love for oneself. They could not have been kept safe unless they wanted to be—not that this alone would have done them any good, but rather without it nothing else would have done them any good either. You won't find contempt for itself in any animal, <nor> even neglect of itself. Even mute and stupid beasts, sluggish in every other respect, are skilled at staying alive. You will notice that those which are useless to others do not let themselves down.

Farewell.