

LETTER 124

Seneca to Lucilius, greetings:

I.

I can recount for you many precepts from earlier generations
If you don't recoil and it isn't repellent to learn such trivial matters.¹

But you do not recoil and no amount of technicality drives you away. Your technical sophistication does not limit you to pursuing the big questions; similarly, I approve of the fact that you judge everything by whether it makes any contribution to moral progress and only get annoyed when the extremes of technicality accomplish nothing. I will try to make sure that doesn't happen even now.

The question is whether the good is grasped by sense perception or by reasoning. Connected with this is the fact that the good is not present in dumb animals and in infants.

2. All those who treat pleasure as the most important thing take the view that the good is perceptible; but we, who locate what is most important in the mind, think it is intelligible. If the senses passed judgement on the good then we would never reject a pleasure, for every pleasure entices us and all of them please us. And conversely we would never willingly undergo any pain, for every pain hurts our senses.

3. Moreover, people who get excessive satisfaction from pleasure and those whose fear of pain is extreme would not deserve our condemnation. But in fact we do disapprove of those who are enslaved to gluttony and lust and we hold in contempt those whose fear of pain prevents them from ever undertaking a manly endeavour. Yet what is their offence if they are just listening to their senses, that is, to the judges of what is good and bad? For you have surrendered to the senses the power to decide about what to pursue and what to avoid.

4. But of course it is reason which is in charge of that business. Just as reason decides about the happy life and about virtue and about what is honourable, so too reason decides about what is good and what is bad. For on their view jurisdiction over the better part is granted to the part that

¹ Vergil, *Georgics* 1.176-7.

is least worthy: sense perception, a dull and blunt sort of thing, and even more sluggish in humans than in the other animals, passes judgement on the good.

5. What if someone wanted to distinguish among very small objects not with his eyes but with the touch. For this task no discrimination is keener and more focussed than that of the eyes, ... to distinguish good and bad. You see that someone whose sense of touch makes the judgements about what is good and bad in the most important area of life is wallowing in the depths of ignorance about the truth and has tossed to the ground what is lofty and divine.

6. He replies, 'Just as every science and art ought to have something self-evident and grasped by the senses from which it may arise and grow, so the happy life derives its foundation and starting point from what is self-evident and subject to sense-perception. Surely you say that the happy life takes its starting point from what is self-evident.'

7. We say that what is according to nature is happy, and that it is obvious and immediately apparent what is in fact according to nature, just as it is evident what is unimpaired. I do not claim that what is natural and is immediately present to a newborn is good, but rather the starting point for the good. You grant to infancy the highest good, pleasure, and the result is that the newborn starts out in the situation which the fully developed human being eventually attains; you put the tree-top down where the roots belong.

8. If someone were to say that the foetus lurking in its mother's womb with its sex still undefined, soft, incomplete, and unformed, was already in possession of something good, then he would be blatantly in error. But there is an awfully small difference between the one who is just receiving the gift of life and the one who is lurking like a lump in its mother's innards. As far as understanding what is good and bad is concerned, both are equally mature, and an infant is no more capable of the good than is a tree or some speechless animal. But why is the good not present in a tree and in a speechless animal? Because reason is not there either. This is why it is also not present in the infant, since it too lacks reason. It gets to the good when it gets to reason.

9. Some animals are non-rational; some are not yet rational; some are rational but still incomplete. The good is in none of these; reason brings the good along with itself. So what is the difference between the things I have listed? The good will never be in an animal which is non-rational; the good cannot now exist in an animal which is not yet rational; the good *can* now exist in an animal which is rational but still incomplete, but it is not actually present.

10. This is my point, Lucilius. The good is not to be found in just any body nor in just any age, and it is as far removed from infancy as the last is from the first, as what is complete is from its starting point. Therefore it is not present in a body which is soft and just starting to become unified. Of course it is not present, any more than it is present in the seed.

11. You might put it this way. We are familiar with a kind of good for a tree and for a plant. But it is not present in the seedling at the moment when it first breaks through the soil. There is a kind of good for wheat. But it is not yet present in the young green shoot nor when the tender head of grain first pokes out from the husk, but when the summer sun and the appropriate passage of time have brought the grain to ripeness. Every nature only produces its own good when it is fully developed, and so likewise the good of a human being is not present in a human being except when his reason has been completed.

12. But what is this good? I will tell you: an independent mind, upright, subordinating other things to itself and itself to nothing. Infancy is so far from having this kind of good that even childhood cannot aspire to it, and adolescence can only aspire to it with impudence; things are going well in old age if it is achieved after prolonged and focussed attention. If this is good, then it is intelligible too.

13. He says, 'You said that there was a kind of good for a tree, a kind of good for a plant; so there can be a kind of good for an infant too.' The genuine good is not present in trees, nor in dumb animals. What is good in them is called 'good' by courtesy. You say, 'What is it?' That which is in accordance with the nature of each thing. Certainly the good cannot in any way occur in a dumb animal; it belongs to a better and more fortunate nature. There is no good except where there is room for reason.

14. Here are four natures: tree, animal, human, god. The latter two, which are rational, have the same nature, different only in that the one is immortal and the other is mortal. So of these two, nature completes the good of one (god, that is), and effort that of the other (human). The others, the ones which lack reason, are only complete in their own nature, not genuinely complete. In the end the only complete thing is that which is complete in accordance with the nature of the cosmos; but the nature of the cosmos is rational; the rest can be complete in their own kind.

15. In natures where there cannot exist the happy life, there also cannot exist that which produces the happy life. But the happy life is produced by good things. The happy life does not exist in dumb animals <nor does that which >produces <the happy life>: the good cannot exist in a dumb animal.

16. A dumb animal grasps things which are present by means of sense perception; it recalls past events when it encounters something that can remind sense perception, just as a horse recalls the road when it is brought to the starting point of the road. Certainly when it is in the stable it has no recollection of the road, no matter how often it has travelled it. The third part of time, the future, is utterly irrelevant to dumb animals.

17. So how can we think that the nature of animals is complete when they do not have access to the complete range of time? For time consists of three parts, past, present, and future. Animals have only the part which is shortest and most transitory, the present. They rarely remember the past and even it is never recalled except by the stimulus of things which are present.

18. So the good of a complete nature cannot exist in an incomplete nature. Alternatively, if that sort of nature has the good, then so do plants. I do not deny that there are in dumb animals powerful and energetic impulses towards what seems to be according to nature, but those impulses are disorderly and confused. The good, however, is never disorderly or confused.

19. 'What, then?' you say, 'are dumb animals moved in a disturbed and disorganized manner?' I would say that they move in a disturbed and disorganized manner if their nature were capable of order. But as it is, they move in accordance with their own nature. For something can be disturbed if it can sometimes be undisturbed; something can be worried if it can sometimes be free of worry. Vice is only present in what can have a virtue. Dumb animals have this sort of movement by their own natures.

20. But to avoid detaining you too long: there will be a kind of good in a dumb animal, there will be a kind of virtue, there will be something complete, but not the good or virtue or something complete in an unrestricted sense. For these attributes only inhere in rational things, who are granted the ability to know *why*, to *what extent*, and *how*. So, the good is in nothing which does not have reason.

21. What, you ask, is the relevance now of this debate, and how will it benefit your own mind? I'll tell you. It exercises and sharpens the mind and, at the least, since the mind is bound to be doing something in any case, keeps it busy with an honourable employment. And it is also beneficial in that it slows down people who are rushing into moral error. But I will <also> say this: I can in no way be of greater benefit to you than if I show you what your good is, if I distinguish you from the dumb animals, if I place you alongside god.

22. Why, I say, do you nourish and exercise the strength of your body? Nature has given greater strength to cattle and beasts. Why do you cultivate physical beauty? Whatever you do, you will be outdone in attractiveness by dumb animals. Why do you pour enormous effort into doing your hair? Whether you have it flowing in the Parthian style or bound up in the German mode or in disarray as the Scythians wear it, still, any horse's mane will be thicker and the mane on a lion's neck will be more beautiful. Though you train yourself for speed, you won't be as fast as a hare.

23. You ought to give up on competitions you are bound to lose, since you are striving for goals that are not yours, and turn back to your own good. What is it? Obviously, it is a mind improved and pure, rivaling god, rising above human limitations, regarding nothing that is beyond itself as its own. You are a rational animal. So what is the good in you? Reason brought to completion. Challenge reason to go from where it is now to its own final goal, <allow> it to grow as great as it can.

24. Decide that you are happy when all of your joy comes from within you, when you gaze upon the things which people seize, wish for, protect and yet find nothing which you would—I don't say 'prefer', but nothing yourself, by which you can tell that you have become complete: you will only have what is yours when you come to understand that the least fortunate are fortunate.

Farewell.