

## LETTER 58

Seneca to Lucilius, greetings:

1. Today more than ever I understood how impoverished, indeed destitute, our vocabulary is. When we happened to be discussing Plato, a thousand things came up which needed names but lacked them; but there were some which, though they used to have names, had lost them owing to our fussiness. But who would tolerate fussiness in the midst of destitution?

2. What the Greeks call the 'gadfly', which stampedes livestock and drives them all over their pastures, used to be called *asilus* by Romans. You can trust Vergil on the point:

There is, near the grove of the Silarus River and the Alburnus green with holm-oaks,

A multitude of flies, whose Roman name is *asilus* but which the Greeks have translated and call 'gadfly'

—harsh, with a strident sound, by which whole herds of cattle are terrified and driven throughout the forest.<sup>1</sup>

It can, I think, be understood that the word had become obsolete.

3. Not to keep you unduly, certain non-compound verbs used to be current; e.g., they used to say 'settle it [*cernere*] by the sword'. Vergil will prove this for you too:

Powerful men, born in various parts of the world,  
Clashed and settled it by the sword.<sup>2</sup>

We now say '*decernere*' for this. The currency of that non-compound verb has been lost.

4. The ancients said 'if I command', i.e., if I should command. I don't want you to take my word for this, but Vergil's again:

Let the rest of the soldiers charge alongside me, where I command.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Vergil, *Georgics* 3.146–50.

<sup>2</sup> Vergil, *Aeneid* 12.708–9.

<sup>3</sup> Vergil, *Aeneid* 11.467.

5. My present aim with this attention to detail is not to show how much time I have squandered on grammatical commentators, but to help you understand how many words in Ennius and Accius have been overtaken by disuse—since some terms even in Vergil, who is studied daily, have been lost to us.

6. You're asking, 'What is the point of this introduction? What's the purpose?' I won't hide it from you. I want, if possible, to use the term '*essentia*' with your approval; but if that is not possible I will use the term even if it annoys you. I can cite Cicero as an authority for this word, an abundantly influential one in my view. If you are looking for someone more up-to-date, I can cite Fabianus, who is learned and sophisticated, with a style polished enough even for our contemporary fussiness. For what will happen, Lucilius [if we don't allow *essentia*]? How will [the Greek term] *ousia* be referred to, an indispensable thing, by its nature containing the foundation of all things? So I beg you to permit me to use this word. Still, I shall take care to use the permission you grant very sparingly. Maybe I'll be content just to have the permission.

7. What good will your indulgence do when I can find no way to express in Latin the very notion which provoked my criticism of our language? Your condemnation of our Roman imitations will be more intense if you find out that there is a one-syllable word for which I cannot find a substitute. What syllable is this, you ask? *To an*. You think I am dull-witted—it is obvious that the word can be translated as 'what is'. But I see a big difference between the terms. I am forced to replace a noun with a verb. But if I must, I will use 'what is'.

8. Our friend, a very learned person, was saying today that this term has six senses in Plato. I will be able to explain all of them to you, if I first point out that there is such a thing as a genus and so too a species. But we are now looking for that primary genus on which other species depend and which is the source of every division and in which all things are included. It will be found if we start to pick things out, one by one, starting in reverse order. We will thus be brought to the primary [genus].

9. Human is a species, as Aristotle says, horse is a species, dog is a species. So we have to look for something common to them all, a linkage which contains them and is ranged above them. What is this? Animal. So there starts to be a genus for all those things I just mentioned (human, horse, dog), viz. animal.

10. But some things have a soul but are not animals. For it is generally agreed that plants too have a soul, and so we say that they live and die. Therefore 'ensouled [living] things' will have a higher rank because both

animals and plants are in this category. But some things lack soul (rocks, e.g.). Therefore there will be something more basic than ensouled things, viz. body. I will divide it in such a way as to claim that all bodies are either ensouled or soulless.

11. Furthermore, there is something superior to body; for we say that some things are corporeal and some are incorporeal. So what will the source of these things be? That to which we just now assigned the inappropriate name 'what is'. For it will be divided into species in such a way that we can say: 'what is' is either corporeal or incorporeal.

12. This, therefore, is the primary and most basic genus—the generic genus, so to speak. The others are genera, to be sure, but specific genera. For example, human is a genus, since it contains within itself as species nationalities (Greeks, Romans, Parthians) and colours (white, black, blond-haired); it also contains individuals (Cato, Cicero, Lucretius). So in so far as it contains many, it is classified as a genus; in so far as it falls under some other, it is classified as a species. The generic genus 'what is' has nothing above itself; it is the starting point for things; everything falls under it.

13. The Stoics want to put above this yet *another* genus which is more fundamental. I will address this presently, once I have shown that it is right to treat the genus I have already spoken of as primary, since it contains everything.

14. I divide 'what is' into these species: things are corporeal or incorporeal; there is no third possibility. How do I divide body? So that I can say: they are either ensouled or soulless. Again, how do I divide ensouled things? So that I can say this: some have mind, some merely have soul—or this: some have impulse, move, and relocate; and some are fastened in the ground, nourished by roots, and grow. Again, into what species do I divide animals? They are either mortal or immortal.

15. Some Stoics think that the primary genus is 'something'. I will add an account of why they think so. They say, 'in nature, some things are, some are not, but nature embraces even those things which are not and which occur to the mind (such as Centaurs, Giants, and whatever else is shaped by an erroneous thought process and begins to take on some appearance, although it does not have reality).'

16. Now I return to the topic I promised you: how Plato divides all the things that are into six senses. The first 'what is' is not grasped by vision, by touch, or by any sense. It is thinkable. What is in a generic way, e.g., generic human, is not subject to being seen. But a specific human is, such as Cicero and Cato. Animal is not seen; it is thought. But its species, horse and dog, are seen.

17. Plato puts second among things which are that which is outstanding and surpasses everything. He says that this 'is' *par excellence*. 'Poet' is a common description—for this name is given to all who compose verses; but among the Greeks it has yielded to the fame of one. When you hear 'the poet' you understand 'Homer'. So what is this [which Plato says 'is' *par excellence*]? God, of course, greater and more powerful than everything else.

18. There is a third genus of things which 'are' in the proper sense. They are countless but located beyond our view. What, you ask, are they? It's a bit of Plato's personal baggage; he calls them 'ideas'; they are the source of everything we see and all things are shaped by reference to them. They are deathless, unchangeable, immune to harm.

19. Listen to what an 'idea' is, i.e., what Plato thinks it is. 'An idea is the eternal model of those things which are produced by nature.' I will add to the definition an interpretation so that it will be clearer to you. I want to produce an image of you. I have you as a model for the painting; from which our mind derives a certain disposition which it imposes on its work. In this way the appearance which teaches me and guides me, the source of the imitation, is an idea. Nature, then, contains an indefinite number of such models—of humans, fish, trees. Whatever is to be produced by nature is shaped with reference to them.

20. 'Form' will have fourth place. You need to pay close attention to the account of what 'form' is. Blame Plato, not me, for the difficulty of the topic: there is no technicality without difficulty. A moment ago I used the example of a painter. When he wanted to render Vergil with colours, he looked at Vergil himself. The 'idea' was Vergil's appearance, a model for the intended work. The form is that which the artisan derives from the appearance and imposed on his own work.

21. You ask, what is the difference between idea and form? The one is a model, while the other is a shape taken from the model and imposed on the work. The artisan imitates the one and produces the other. A statue has a certain appearance—this is its form. The model itself has a certain appearance which the workman looked at when he shaped the statue. This is the idea. If you still want a further distinction, the form is *in* the work and the idea outside it—and not only outside it but prior to it.

22. The fifth genus is of those things which 'are' in the ordinarily accepted sense. These begin to be relevant to us; everything is here—humans, herds, possessions. The sixth genus is of those things which 'as it were' are, such as the void, such as time.

Plato does not count the things we see or touch among those that he thinks 'are' in the strict sense. For they are in flux and constantly engaged in shrinkage and growth. None of us is the same in old age as in youth. None of us is the same the next day as he was the day before. Our bodies are swept along like rivers. Whatever you see runs with [the passage of] time. None of what we see is stable. I myself, while saying that those things are changing, have changed.

23. This is what Heraclitus says: we do and do not enter the same river twice. The name of the river stays the same, the water has passed on. This is more apparent in a river than in a human being, but a current no less rapid sweeps us along too. And so I am puzzled by our madness, in that we are so in love with a thing so fleeting—our body—and fear that we might die someday when in fact every moment is the death of a prior state. You oughtn't to be afraid that what happens daily might happen once!

24. I referred to a human being, a fluid and perishable bit of matter prey to all sorts of causes. The cosmos too, an eternal, invincible object, changes and does not stay the same. Although it contains within itself all that it ever had, it has them differently than it did before. It changes the order.

25. 'What good,' you ask, 'will this technicality do for me?' None, if you ask me. But just as the engraver relaxes, refreshes and, as they say, 'nourishes' his eyes, tired from lengthy concentration, so too we should sometimes relax our mind and refresh it with certain amusements. But let the amusements themselves be work and from them too, if you pay attention, you will gain something which could turn out to be good for you.

26. This, Lucilius, is what I normally do: from every notion, even if it is quite remote from philosophy, I try to dig out something and make it useful. What is more remote from the improvement of our habits than the discourse I just gave? How can the Platonic ideas make me better? What could I derive from them that might control my desires? Maybe just this, that all those things which serve the senses, which enflame and stimulate us—Plato says that they are not among the things which truly are.

27. Therefore they are like images and have a merely temporary appearance; none of them is stable and reliable. And yet we desire them as though they would be forever or as though we would possess them forever. We are weak and fluid beings amidst emptiness. Let us direct our mind to what is eternal. Let us soar aloft and marvel at the shapes of all things and god circulating among them, taking care that he keep from

death what he could not make immortal due to the impediments of matter and that he conquer bodily defects with rationality.

28. For all things endure not because they are eternal but because they are protected by a ruler's concern; immortal things would need no protector. The craftsman keeps them safe by conquering the fragility of matter with his own power. Let us despise all things which are so far from being valuable that it is open to question whether they even *are*.

29. Let us at the same time consider this, that if he by his foresight protects the cosmos itself (which is no less mortal than we are) from dangers, then to some extent by our own foresight our sojourn in this pathetic body can also be prolonged considerably—if we can rule and rein in the pleasures, by which most people perish.

30. Plato himself extended his life into old age by taking care of himself. To be sure, he was fortunate enough to have a strong and healthy body (his broad chest gave him his name), but his voyages and dangerous adventures had greatly diminished his strength. But frugality, moderation with respect to things that elicit greed, and attentive care for himself got him through to old age despite many adverse factors.

31. For I think you know that thanks to his attentive care for himself it was Plato's fortune to die on his own birthday, having lived exactly 81 years. So the *mazi* who happened to be in Athens sacrificed to him in death, supposing that his fortune was superhuman in that he had lived out the most perfect number—which they make by multiplying nine times nine. I am pretty sure that *you* would be willing to give up a few days from the total and also the cult offering.

32. Parsimonious living can prolong one's old age, and though I don't think it should be longed for I also don't think it should be rejected either. It is pleasant to be with oneself as long as possible when one has made oneself worth spending time with. And so we will render a verdict on the question whether it is appropriate to be fussy about the final stages of old age and not to just wait for the end but to bring it about directly. Someone who sluggishly considers his approaching fate is close to being fearful; just as someone who drains the wine jar and sucks up the dregs too is immoderately devoted to wine.

33. Still, we will investigate this issue: is the final stage of life dreary or something very clear and pure—if only the intelligence is undamaged and sound senses assist the mind and the body is not worn out and dead before its time. For it makes a big difference whether it is life or death that one is prolonging.

34. But if the body is useless for its duties, why wouldn't it be appropriate to escort the failing mind out the door? And perhaps it is to be done a little before it needs to be, to avoid the situation where you are unable to do it when it needs to be done. And since there is a greater danger in living badly than there is in dying swiftly, he is a fool who doesn't buy out the risk of a great misfortune by paying a small price in time. Few make it to their deaths intact if old age is greatly prolonged; many have a passive life, lying there unable to make use of themselves. In the end, there is no crueler loss in life than the loss of the right to end it.

35. Don't listen to me reluctantly, as though this maxim already applies to you, and do evaluate what I am saying. I will not abandon my old age if it leaves me all of myself, but that means all of the better part. But if it starts to weaken my intelligence, to dislodge its parts, if what it leaves me is not *a life* but just being alive, then I shall jump clear of a decayed and collapsing building.

36. I shall not flee disease by means of death, as long as it is curable and does not impede the mind. I will not do violence to myself because of pain. Such a death is a defeat. But if I see that I have to suffer pain ceaselessly, I will make my exit, not because of pain but because it will be an obstacle for me with regard to the whole point of living. He who dies because of pain is weak and cowardly, but he who lives for pain is a fool.

37. But I digress too long. It is still a topic one could spend the day on—but how can someone put an end to his life if he cannot put an end to his letter? So be well: you'll be happier to read that than non-stop talk about death.

Farewell.