

## LETTER 65

Seneca to Lucilius, greetings:

1. I shared yesterday with my poor health. It claimed the morning for itself and yielded to me in the afternoon. So I first rested my mind by reading; then, when it tolerated this activity I made bold to ask more of it—rather, to allow it more. I wrote a bit, more vigorously than usual, in fact, since I was grappling with tough material and didn't want to be beaten. I wrote until some friends interrupted me to bar me forcibly from working, as though I were an obstreperous patient.

2. Talking replaced writing, and I will report to you the part of our conversation which remains contentious. We have made you our arbitrator. It is a bigger job than you think: the case has three parts.

As you know, those of our school, the Stoics, say that there are two things in nature from which everything comes to be, cause and matter. Matter is passive, suitable for anything and bound to remain idle if no one moves it. But cause, i.e., reason, shapes matter, turns it wherever it wishes, and generates from it a wide range of works. So a thing must have a source of becoming and an agent of becoming. The former is its matter and the latter its cause.

3. Every craft is an imitation of nature, and so apply what I was saying about the universe to the artefacts which humans make. A statue had matter, to yield to the artisan, and an artisan, to give a shape to the matter. So in the case of the statue the material was the bronze and the cause was the workman. The same state of affairs holds for all things—they consist of that which becomes and that which makes.

4. The Stoic view is that there is one cause, that which makes. Aristotle thinks that cause is said in three ways. The first cause, he says, is the material itself, without which nothing can be produced. The second is the workman. The third is the form, which is imposed on each work as it is on a statue. For Aristotle calls this the form. 'A fourth cause,' he says 'accompanies these: the purpose of the entire product.'

5. I will explain what this is.

The bronze is the first cause of a statue; for it never would have been made if there had not existed the material from which it could be cast or shaped. The second cause is the artisan. For the bronze could not have been shaped into the configuration of a statue unless skilled hands were applied to it. The third cause is the form. For the statue would not be called the 'spear-carrier' or the 'boy tying up his hair' unless *this* shape had been imposed on it. The fourth cause is the purpose of making it. For if there had been no purpose the statue would not have been made.

6. What is the purpose? It is what motivated the artisan, what he sought in making it. Either it is money (if he produced it for sale) or glory (if he worked for renown) or piety (if he made it as a temple offering). Therefore this too is a cause on account of which it is made. Or do you not think we should count as a cause that in whose absence the artefact would not have been produced?

7. To these causes Plato adds a fifth, the model, which he himself calls an 'idea'. For this is what the artisan looked to in making what he planned to make. And in fact it is not relevant whether he has an external model to which he can direct his gaze, or an internal model which he himself conceived of and placed there. God has within himself models of all things and he has grasped with his intellect the aspects and modes of every thing which is to be done. He is full of the shapes which Plato calls 'ideas'—immortal, unchanging, and uniting. So humans pass away, of course, but human-ness itself, with reference to which a human being is shaped, persists. Human beings may struggle and die, but it suffers nothing.

8. So, on Plato's view, there are five causes: that from which, that by which, that in which, that with reference to which, that because of which. Last of all is that which comes from them. For example, a statue (since I have already begun to use this example). The 'from which' is bronze, the 'by which' is the artisan, the 'in which' is the form which is fitted to the matter, the 'with reference to which' is the model which the maker initiates, the 'because of which' is the purpose of the maker, and 'what comes from them' is the statue itself.

9. The cosmos too, according to Plato, has all of them: a maker (this is god), a 'from which' (this is matter), a form (this is the configuration and order of the visible cosmos), a model (i.e., what god looked to in making this vast and most beautiful work), and a purpose because of which he made it.

10. You ask, what is god's purpose? Goodness. So, to be sure, Plato says, 'What was the cause for god making the cosmos? That he is good.'

A good person does not begrudge any good thing, and so he made it as good as possible.'

All right, then, you be the judge and give a verdict, proclaim which one seems to say what most closely resembles the truth, not which one says what is truest—for that is as far above us as its truth itself.

11. The swarm of causes which is posited by Plato and Aristotle includes either too many or too few. For if they decide that the cause of making something is anything whose absence means that the thing cannot be made, then they have stated too few. Let them include 'time' among the causes; nothing can be made without time. Let them include place; if there isn't a place for something to be made it surely won't be made. Let them include motion. Nothing is either done or perishes without it; there is no craft without motion, no change.

12. But what we are now looking for is a primary and generic cause. This should be simple, since matter too is simple. Do we ask what cause is? To be sure, it is reason in action, i.e., god. For all those things you people have cited are not many distinct causes; rather, they depend on one, the active cause.

13. Do you say that the form is a cause? The artisan imposes it on his work. It is a part of the cause, not the cause. The model too is not a cause but a means necessary for the cause. The model is necessary for the artisan just as the scraper and the file are necessary. Without these the craft cannot make progress, but still they are not parts or causes of the craft.

14. He says, 'The purpose of the artisan, because of which he proceeds to make something, is also a cause.' Granted that it is a cause, it is not an efficient cause but a subsequent cause. But there are countless causes of this sort, and we are asking about a generic cause. But they weren't using their customary sophistication when they said that the entire cosmos, i.e., the finished work, is a cause. For there is a big difference between the work and the cause of the work.

15. Either give a verdict, or, as is easier in such matters, say that it is not clear to you and tell us to re-argue the case.

You say, 'What pleasure do you take in wasting time on those issues, ones that do not strip you of any passion or ward off any desire?'

In fact I *am* dealing with those more important issues, the ones that soothe the mind, and I investigate myself first and *then* this cosmos.

16. And I am *not* wasting time even now, as you think. For if all those issues are not chopped up and dispersed into this kind of pointless technicality, they elevate and relieve the mind, which, being burdened by

its great load, desires to be set free and to return to the things it used to be part of. For this body is a burden and a penalty for the mind. It is oppressed by its weight and is in chains unless philosophy comes to it and urges it to take its ease before the sight of nature and directs it away from what is earthly and towards the divine. This is its freedom, this is its escape. From time to time it slips away from the prison in which it is held and is refreshed by the [sight of the] heavens.

17. Just as artisans who work on some quite detailed job which wears their eyes with concentration, if they have to rely on bad and uncertain lighting, come out in the open and treat their eyes to the light in some area devoted to the public leisure—so too the mind, enclosed in this sad and gloomy dwelling, seeks the open air and takes its ease in the contemplation of nature as often as it can.

18. He who is wise and pursues wisdom clings to his body, but even so with the best part of himself he is elsewhere and focusses his thoughts on higher matters. Like a soldier under oath he thinks of this life as a tour of duty; and he has been trained to neither love nor hate life, and he puts up with mortal matters though he knows that higher things await him.

19. Do you ban me from an investigation of nature, drag me away from the whole and confine me to a part? Shall I not investigate the principles of all things? Who gave them form? Who made distinctions among things which were melded into one and enmeshed in passive matter? Shall I not enquire who is the artisan of this cosmos? How so great a mass was reduced to lawlike structure? Who gathered the scattered bits, who separated what was combined and brought shape to things lying in unsightly neglect? Where did this great light come from? Is it fire or something brighter than fire?

20. Shall I not ask these questions? Shall I remain ignorant of my origins? Am I to see these things just once or am I to be born many times? Where am I to go from here? What residence awaits the soul when it is freed from the laws of human servitude? You forbid me to meddle with the heavens, i.e., you order me to live with bowed head.

21. I am greater than that and born for greater things than to be a slave to my body, which I think of as no different than a chain fastened about my freedom. So I position it as a defence against fortune, so that she will stop right there; I permit no wound to get through the body to *me*. This is the only part of me which can suffer wrongs. A free mind lives in this vulnerable dwelling.

22. That flesh will never drive me to fear, never to pretence unworthy of a good person; I shall never lie to show 'respect' for this paltry body.

When I see fit, I shall dissolve my partnership with it. Even now, however, while we cling together, we will not be partners on equal terms. The mind will reserve all rights to itself. To despise one's body is a reliable freedom.

23. To return to my point, even the investigation we were just discussing will make a substantial contribution to this freedom. To be sure, all things are formed from matter and god. God regulates those things which surround and follow him as guide and leader. But the active principle, i.e., god, is more powerful and more valuable than the matter which submits to god.

24. The place which god occupies in this cosmos corresponds to mind's place in a human being. Matter there corresponds to the body in us. So let the inferior serve the better. Let us be brave in the face of chance circumstances; let us not tremble at wrongs nor at wounds, neither at chains nor at want. What is death? Either an end or a transition. I am not afraid to come to an end—that is the same as not having started—nor to move on—because I will not be so confined anywhere else.  
Farewell.