

## LETTER 71

Seneca to Lucilius, greetings:

1. You often ask my advice about particular matters, forgetting that we are separated by a wide ocean. Since the most important part of advice depends on the circumstances, it must follow that on certain matters my opinion reaches you when the opposite advice has already become preferable. For advice is adjusted to situations; our situations are in movement, or rather in flux. Therefore advice should be generated immediately beforehand. And even this is too late. Let it be generated, as they say, right on the spot. However, I will show you how advice can be found.

2. Whenever you want to know what is to be avoided or what is to be sought, look to the highest good, the purpose of your entire life. For whatever we do ought to agree with that. Only someone who has before him a general purpose for his whole life will put individual things in order. No matter how ready one's pains might be, no one will produce a likeness unless he has a clear notion of what he wants to pain. So we make mistakes because we deliberate about the parts of life; no one deliberates about the whole.

3. He who wants to shoot an arrow ought to know what he is aiming at and then direct and guide the weapon with his hand. Our counsels go astray because they do not have a target to be aimed at. If you don't know what harbour you sail for, no wind is favourable.

Because we live by chance, chance necessarily has great power over our lives.

4. However, it turns out that certain people do not know that they in fact know certain things. Just as we often look for the very people we are standing beside, in the same way we generally do not know that the goal and highest good is right in front of us. You don't need many words or a roundabout path to infer what the highest good is. If I may say, it should be pointed out with one's finger and not scattered all around. For what is the point of breaking it up into small bits when you can say, 'the highest good is that which is honourable', and (you will be even more struck by

this claim) 'the only good is what is honourable; all the others are false and counterfeit goods'.

5. If you convince yourself of this and fall passionately in love with virtue (just loving it is not enough), then whatever befalls because of virtue will bring good fortune and happiness to you, no matter what others may think of it. Torture (if only you lie there more serene than the torturer himself) and sickness (provided that you don't curse your luck and give in to the illness) and in a word everything which other people think of as bad—all of these things will be tamed and turn out for the best, if you rise above them. Let this much be clear: that there is nothing good except the honourable. Everything which is 'inconvenient' in its own right will be labelled 'good' provided that virtue brings it honour.

6. Many people think that we are promising more than human nature can handle—and not without reason. For they are considering the body. Let them turn their attention to the mind and they will soon be measuring humans by the standard of god. Raise yourself up, my excellent Lucilius, and leave behind those grammar-school philosophers who bring something which is truly splendid down to the level of syllables and, by teaching petty matters, depress and wear out the mind. You will come to resemble those who discovered those things, not those who teach them and make philosophy difficult rather than great.

7. Socrates, who brought all of philosophy back to ethics and said that the highest wisdom is to distinguish good from bad, said 'If I have any influence with you at all, follow them in order to be happy, and let some think you a fool. Let whoever wishes insult you and harm you, but you still won't suffer at all provided that you have virtue. If, he says, 'you want to be happy, if you want to be a genuinely good man, let someone hold you in contempt.' No one will achieve this if he hasn't himself held all things in contempt first and come to treat all goods as equal. For there is no good without the honourable and the honourable is equal in all instances.

8. 'What, then? Is there no difference between Cato winning the election for praetor and his losing it? Is there no difference between Cato being defeated at the Battle of Pharsalus and his winning? Is the good he gets from being unconquerable when his faction is conquered equal to the good he gets from returning to his homeland as victor and making arrangements for a peace settlement?' Why shouldn't they be equal? For it is by the same virtue that bad fortune is overcome and good fortune is regulated. But virtue cannot be greater or lesser—it is of uniform standing.

9. 'But Gnaeus Pompeius will lose his army, and that most splendid glory of the state, the aristocracy, and the front line of the Pompeian

faction, the Senate bearing arms, will all be crushed in one battle and the remains of so great a power will scatter all over the world—part of it will collapse in Egypt, part in Africa, part in Spain. The wretched state cannot even manage to collapse only once.'

10. Suppose all of this happens: familiarity with the terrain in his own kingdom doesn't help Juba, and neither does the determined courage of his people fighting for their king; the loyalty of the citizens of Utica fails, beaten down by misfortunes; and the fortune of his family heritage deserts Scipio in Africa—it was determined long ago that Cato should suffer no harm.

11. 'But still, he was beaten.' Count this too among the defeats suffered by Cato—he will bear the obstacles to his victory with the same spirit that he bears the obstacles to his praetorship. On the same day that he lost the election, he played; on the night when he was about to die, he read. He put the same value on losing the praetorship and on losing his life. He was convinced that everything which might happen should be endured.

12. Why wouldn't he endure that political change with a brave and steady mind? For what is there which is immune to the risk of change? Not the earth, nor the sky nor the whole structure of this cosmos, even though it is guided by the agency of god. It will not always preserve its present order; some day it will be driven out of this path.

13. All things develop at fixed times. They have to be born, to grow, and to pass away. Whatever you see pass by over our heads and all things we rely on and stand on, as though they were completely stable, these things will waste away and come to an end. Everything gets old in its own way. Nature sends them to the same destination at different rates; whatever is will someday not be, but it won't perish—it will be dissolved.

14. For us, being dissolved is to perish, for we limit our gaze to what is right next to us and our mind, which is dull and has devoted itself to the body, does not look ahead to things further off. Otherwise, if it expected that (<like> everything else) life and death take turns, that what is put together dissolves and that what is dissolved is put together, and that in this work the eternal craft of a god who governs all things is at work, then it would endure with greater courage the death of itself and those dear to it.

15. And so like Marcus Cato, when it has thought its way through life, it will say, 'the whole human race, present and future, is doomed to death. Of all the cities which flourish anywhere and are great adornments for foreign empires it shall be asked "where were they?" and they will be eliminated by various kinds of destruction. Some will be destroyed by

wars, others eaten up by laziness, by peace which has degenerated into sloth, and by luxury, a thing which is pernicious even to great wealth and power. A sudden flooding of the sea will carry off all these fertile fields, or they will be carried off by the sudden subsidence as the ground falls into a subterranean cavern. So why should I get outraged or grieve if I meet the fate shared by all just a little ahead of the rest?

16. Let a great mind obey god and let it endure without hesitation whatever the law of the universe commands. Either it is released into a better life, to live more clearly and calmly among the divine, or at least it will be free of any future inconvenience if it is mixed again with nature and returns to the cosmos. Therefore the honourable life of Marcus Cato is no greater good than his honourable death, since virtue cannot be increased. Socrates said that truth and virtue are the same thing. Just as the former does not become greater so too virtue does not either. It has its complement; it is full.

17. Therefore there is no reason for you to be amazed at the claim that all goods are equal, both those which are to be chosen on purpose and those which are only to be chosen if circumstances dictate. For if you admit that goods are unequal, so that you count courageous endurance of torture among things which are lesser goods, then you will also count it among things which are bad and you will say that Socrates was unhappy in prison, that Cato was unhappy when he tore open his wounds more courageously than he had inflicted them in the first place, that Regulus was most unfortunate of all when he paid the penalty for keeping his word even to the enemy. But no one has had the nerve to say this, not even the most degenerate of men; they say that he isn't happy, but still they say that he isn't miserable either.

18. The Old Academics concede that he is happy even amidst these tortures, but not completely or absolutely happy—but this cannot be accepted. Unless he is happy he is not in the highest good. But the highest good has no level above it, provided that it contains virtue, provided that adverse circumstances do not diminish it, provided that it remains safe even as the body is shattered; it still remains. I understand by virtue something that is bold and lofty, which is stimulated by whatever threatens it.

19. Certainly it is wisdom which pours into us and passes on to us this spirit, which young men of noble temperament, inspired by the beauty of an honourable deed, often adopt, with the result that they hold all contingency in contempt. Wisdom will convince us that the only good is what is honourable and that this cannot be lessened or intensified any more

than you can bend the ruler which is normally used to test straightness. Whatever you change in it is a detriment to its straightness.

20. We will make the same claim about virtue. This too is straight; it does not admit of bending. It is rigid. What could be made more taut? If its virtue which passes judgement on everything; nothing passes judgement on it. If it cannot itself be any straighter, then neither can any of the things which are straight because of it be straighter than the others. They must match virtue and so they are equal.

21. 'What, then?' you say, 'are reclining at a dinner party and being tortured equal?' Does this seem remarkable to you? You might be more amazed at the following: reclining at a dinner party is bad and reclining on the rack is good—if the former is done shamefully and the latter honourably. It is not the raw material which makes them good or bad, but the virtue; wherever it appears, everything is of the same dimensions and of the same value.

22. The person who assesses everyone's mind on the basis of his own is now shaking his fists in my face, because I claim that the goods of one who sits honourably in judgement are equal to those of <someone who behaves honourably as a defendant>, because I claim that the goods of him who holds a triumph are equal to those of the person who is carried before his chariot with unconquered mind. They think that anything that they cannot themselves do cannot be done. They pass judgement on virtue by the standards of their own weakness.

23. Why are you surprised if it is useful, sometimes even pleasant, to be burned, wounded, slaughtered, or imprisoned? Frugality is a punishment for someone addicted to luxury, for the sluggard work is like a penalty, the fop takes pity on the hard-working man, and it is sheer torture for the slothful person to study. In the same way we think that the things at which we are all weak are harsh and intolerable, and we forget that for many people it is torment to do without wine or to be awoken at dawn. Those things are not difficult by nature, but we are soft and weak.

24. One must pass judgement on great things with a great mind; otherwise what is actually our own defect will seem to be the defect of those things. It is thus that some things which are absolutely straight, when they are put into water, appear to observers as being curved and bent. It doesn't just matter what you look at, but how. Our mind has weak vision when it comes to looking at the truth.

25. Give me a young man unspoiled and with a lively wit; he will say that he thinks that the person who bears all the burdens of adversity with neck unbowed and who rises above fortune is the more fortunate. It is not

surprising if he is not troubled amidst tranquility; be amazed at the fact that one person is in excellent spirits where everyone else is downcast, that he stands where everyone else is prostrate.

26. What is it that is bad in torture, what is bad in the other things which we call adversities? Just this, I think, that the mind capitulates, bends under the load and caves in. None of this can happen to the wise man: he stands up straight under any weight. No situation diminishes him, none of the things which are bearable upsets him. For he does not complain that whatever can befall a person has befallen him. He knows his strength; he knows that he is built for carrying burdens.

27. I do not deny that the wise person is a human being nor do I exempt him from pain like some rock which has no feeling. I remember that he is made up of two parts, one irrational—this is bitten, burned, pained—and the other rational—this has unshaken convictions, is fearless and unconquered. The highest good of a human being is located in the latter. Before it is filled out, there is an unstable restlessness in the mind; but when it has been completed its stability is immovable.

28. And so the beginner and he who makes maximal progress and cultivates virtue, even if he approaches the complete good but has not yet put the finishing touches on it, will sometimes backslide and slacken somewhat his mental concentration; for he has not yet gotten past the uncertain territory and even now is on slippery ground. But he who is truly happy and whose virtue is fully developed loves himself most when he has made the bravest efforts, not only bears but even embraces things which others would fear, if they are the price to be paid for some honourable and appropriate action; he greatly prefers to hear 'how much better you are' than 'how much luckier you are'.

29. Now I come to the point to which your anticipation summons me. So that our virtue should not seem to roam beyond the nature of things, [we admit that] the wise person will tremble and feel pain and grow pale. For these are all bodily feelings. So where is misfortune, where is the true badness? Obviously, it will be there if these feelings drag down the mind, if they bring it to an admission that it is enslaved, if they inflict on it regret for being what it is.

30. The wise person indeed conquers fortune with his virtue, but many who claim to have wisdom have often been terrified by the most trivial threats. Here the fault is our own, since we demand the same thing of a wise person and of a progressor. I am still urging on myself the things which I praise, but I don't yet convince myself about them. Even

if I had convinced myself, I would not yet have things in readiness or so thoroughly practiced that they could successfully confront all chance events.

31. Just as wool accepts some colours on one dipping but cannot absorb others unless it has been repeatedly steeped and boiled, so too our temperament immediately shows the results of some studies as soon as it has been exposed to them, but this one shows none of the results it promises unless it penetrates deeply and settles for a long time, unless it doesn't just colour the mind but dyes it.

32. The point can be communicated quickly and in a very few words: the only good is virtue (certainly there is no good without virtue), and virtue itself is located in our better part, that is the rational part. So what will this virtue be? A true and immovable judgement; for from this come the impulses of the mind, and by this every presentation which stimulates impulse is made transparent.

33. It will be in accordance with this judgement to make the judgement that all things touched by virtue are both good and equal to each other. The goods of the body are certainly good for the body, but they are not good overall. They will have a certain value, but they will not possess excellence: they will differ from each other by substantial margins, and some will be smaller, others greater.

34. And we must also admit that there are big differences among those who pursue wisdom. One person has already made so much progress that he can lift his eyes against fortune, but not with resolute consistency (for his eyes are downcast when stunned by excessive brightness); another has progressed so much that he can meet her gaze—unless he has already reached perfection and is full of self-confidence.

35. Things which are incomplete must totter and alternate between making progress and sinking or collapsing. But they will sink, unless they have made a firm resolution to go forward and press on. If they slacken their zeal and their firm concentration even a bit, they must backslide. No one finds moral progress where he last left it.

36. So let us press on and persevere; more remains than we have squandered, but a great part of progress consists in the desire to make progress. I am fully aware of this, that I want it and want it with my whole mind. I see that you too are enthusiastic for it and hastening towards the finest destination with a great impetus. Let us hurry. This is how life at last becomes a benefit; otherwise it is just waiting around—a shameful kind of stalling by people who pass their time amidst shameful practices.

Let us strive to make all of our time our own. But it will not be our own unless we ourselves start to belong to ourselves.

37. When will it come about that we hold both good and bad fortune in contempt, when will it come about that all our passions are suppressed and brought under our own control and we can utter this claim, 'I have conquered'? Whom do you wish to conquer? Not the Persians nor the remote Medes nor any warlike peoples there may be beyond the Dahae, but greed, ambition, and the fear of death which has itself conquered those who conquer foreign races.

Farewell.