

LETTER 76

Seneca to Lucilius, greetings:

1. You threaten me with hostility if I leave you in the dark about any of my daily activities. Look how straightforwardly I share my life with you. I will entrust you with this information too. I am studying with a philosopher, and indeed I have been attending his school for five days now and hearing his lectures starting in the early afternoon. You say, 'It's a great time of life for that!' Well of course it's a great time of life. What could be more foolish than not to learn just because you haven't been learning for a long time?

2. 'What? Should I do the same as the gilded youth do?' I'm in good shape if this is the only disgrace that mars my old age. This school accepts people of all ages. 'Are we to grow old only to follow the young?' I'll go to the theatre in my old age and I'll ride to the circus. I won't miss a single gladiatorial fight. Am I supposed to blush about attending on a philosopher?

3. You have to learn as long as you're ignorant, if we believe the maxim, that's as long as you live. This maxim coheres best with the following: you have to learn how to live as long as you live. Anyway, I also teach them something at the school. You ask what I teach? That even an old man has to learn.

4. But every time I go to the school I feel ashamed of the human race. As you know, while going to the house of Metronax one has to pass right by the Neapolitan theatre. It certainly is packed and there is hotly contested debate about who is a good piper. Even a Greek trumpeter and an announcer draw a crowd. By contrast, in the place where the good man is the topic of discussion, where the good man is what they learn about, there is a tiny audience and most people think that the students have no proper business to conduct—they are called useless and lazy. Let their mockery hit me too. I have to listen to the abuse of the ignorant with equanimity, and since I am going about honourable business I have to hold their contempt in contempt.

5. Carry on, Lucilius, and hurry up, so you don't get into my situation and wind up learning as an old man. Actually, hurry all the more since

you've already started in on a topic which you could scarcely master as an old man. 'How much progress will I achieve?' Only as much as you attempt.

6. What are you waiting for? Wisdom doesn't come to anyone by chance. Money will come on its own; high office will be handed to you; maybe favour and rank will be heaped on you—but virtue will not drop into your lap. Nor is it learned by just a bit of work or by a small effort; but the work is worth it for someone aiming to possess every good thing all at once. For the honourable alone is good—you won't find anything true or reliable in the things that public opinion approves.

7. I will explain to you why only the honourable is good (since you think I didn't accomplish very much with my earlier letter and believe this point was approved rather than proven) and I will condense what has been said on the topic.

8. Everything depends on its own good. Productivity and the flavour of the wine commend a vine, speed commends a stag; you ask how strong a back draught animals have, for their sole function is to haul a load; in a dog the most important thing is keen smell if it is supposed to track beasts, running if it is supposed to catch them, boldness if it is to attack and bite them. In each thing, that for which it is born and by which it is judged ought to be its best.

9. What is best in a human being? Reason. By this humans surpass the animals and follow the gods. Therefore perfected reason is our proper good; humans share all other traits to some degree with animals and plants. A human being is strong—so are lions. He is handsome—so are peacocks. He is swift—so are horses. I don't say that he is outdone in all these respects; I am not asking what his greatest feature is, but which one is his very own. He has a body—so do trees. He has impulse and voluntary motion—so do beasts and worms. He has a voice—but how much more ringing is the voice of dogs, how much sharper that of eagles, how much deeper that of bulls, how much sweeter and more flexible that of nightingales.

10. What is proper to human beings? Reason. This, when it is straight and complete, has filled out the happiness of a human being. Therefore if each thing, when it has perfected its very own good, is praiseworthy and attains the goal of its own nature, and if reason is a human being's very own good, then if he has perfected this he is praiseworthy and has reached the goal of his own nature. This perfected reason is called virtue and this same thing is what is honourable.

11. Thus the unique good in a human being is that which uniquely belongs to humans. For at this point we are asking not what is good but what is the good of a human being. If there is no other [unique trait] in human beings except reason, this will be their sole good, but it should be treated as offsetting everything else. If someone is bad, he will, I guess, meet with disapproval; if good then with approval, I guess. Therefore in human beings this is the primary and only thing by which he is both approved and disapproved of.

12. You do not doubt whether this is good; you doubt whether it is the only good. If someone has everything else—health, wealth, many ancestral busts, a crowded foyer—but is admittedly bad, then you will disapprove of him. Similarly, if someone has none of the things I have mentioned, if he is lacking in money, in clients, in the nobility which derives from a long string of ancestors—but is admittedly good, then you will approve of him. Therefore, the sole good of a human being is that which, by its possession, makes him praiseworthy even if he is bereft of the rest and which by its absence causes condemnation and rejection despite an abundance of everything else.

13. The situation for people is the same as it is for things. A ship is called good not if it has been painted with expensive colours or if its ram is covered with silver or gold or if its figurehead is inlaid with ivory or if it is heavily laden with treasure and regal wealth; but rather if it is stable, solid, tightly built with seams that keep water out, sturdy enough to resist the sea's attack, easy to steer, swift, and not swayed by the wind.

14. You will say that a sword is good not if it has a gilded belt or its scabbard is studded with jewels; but rather if it has a fine cutting edge and a point which can pierce any armour. We don't ask how beautiful a ruler is, but how straight. Each thing is praised with reference to that against which it is judged and that which is proper to it.

15. Therefore in a person too it is quite irrelevant how much land he tills, how much money he has invested, how many clients greet him, how expensive a couch he reclines on, how translucent a cup he drinks from; what matters is how good he is. But he is good if his reason is fully deployed, straight, and adapted to the inclinations of his nature.

16. This is termed virtue, that is, the honourable and the sole good of a human being. For since only reason completes a human being, only reason makes him perfectly happy. But this is the only good thing and the only thing by which he is made happy. We also say that those things which originate in virtue or are caused by it are good, i.e., all of its products. But it alone is good precisely because there is no good without it.

17. If every good is in the mind, then whatever strengthens, exalts, or expands it is good. But virtue makes the mind stronger, loftier, and fuller. For other things which stimulate our desires also degrade the mind and make it weak; when they seem to raise it up, they are inflaming it and tricking it with their profound emptiness. Therefore the only good thing is that which makes the mind better.

18. All our actions throughout our life are regulated by a consideration of what is honourable and shameful. Our reasoning about doing and not doing is guided by reference to them. I'll tell you what this is. A good man will do what he believes would be honourable for him to do, even if it is hard work; he will do it even if he suffers a loss; he will do it even if it is dangerous. Conversely, he will not do what is shameful, even if it gets him money, pleasure, or power. Nothing will keep him from what is honourable; nothing will entice him to shameful actions.

19. Therefore, if he is going to pursue the honourable unconditionally and avoid the shameful unconditionally; and if he is going to look to these two things in every action of his life; and if there is no other good except the honourable nor anything bad except what is shameful; if only virtue is uncorrupted and it alone adheres to its course, then virtue is the only good and it cannot come to pass that it is not a good thing. It is immune to the risk of change. Folly creeps towards wisdom. Wisdom does not fall back into folly.

20. I said, if you happen to recall, that many people impetuously have scorned the things which are generally desired or feared. A person has been found who would reject wealth; a person has been found who would put his hand in the flames, whose laughter the torturer could not stop, who would shed no tear at his children's funeral, who would meet his own death untrebling. It was love, anger, and desire that insisted on courting dangers. Short-lived stubbornness driven on by some stimulus can do it. How much more can virtue do! Its strength is not impulsive or sudden, but consistent; its strength is long-lasting.

21. It follows that the things which are often despised by the reckless and always by the wise are neither good nor bad. Therefore virtue itself is the only good; it walks proudly amidst good and bad fortune with deep contempt for both.

22. If you do adopt the view that anything is good except what is honourable, then every virtue will be vulnerable; for no virtue can be secure if it looks to anything beyond itself. If this is the case, then this view conflicts with reason (the source of the virtues) and truth (which is nothing without reason). But any opinion which conflicts with truth is false.

23. You might grant that a good man must have the greatest piety towards the gods. Therefore he will endure with equanimity whatever happens to him; for he will know that it happened under the divine law according to which all things progress. If this is so, his only good will be what is honourable—for in this life his obedience to the gods, not flaring up in anger at unexpected events and bewailing his lot in life, but accepting fate with patience and obeying its commands.

24. If anything except the honourable is good, then greed for life will dog us, and so will a greed for the things which equip our life—and that is unsustainable, limitless, unstable. Therefore the honourable, which has a limit, is the only good.

25. We said that human life would turn out to be happier than that of the gods if things which are of no use to the gods are good, such as money and public office. Now add to that argument the consideration that if souls do persist when released from the body a condition awaits them which is happier than what they have while they sojourn in the body. Yet if the things we use by means of our bodies are good, then liberated souls will be worse off. But it violates our confident belief if souls which are enclosed and besieged are happier than those which are free and entrusted to the universe.

26. I had also said that if those things are good which fall to the lot of men and brute animals alike, the brute animals will live a happy life. And that is absolutely impossible. All things are to be endured for the sake of what is honourable; but one would not have to do so if anything except the honourable were good.

Although I had gone over these points quite fully in my earlier letter, I have here condensed them and given them a quick run-through.

27. But this sort of view will never seem true to you unless you arouse your mind and ask of yourself: if circumstances should demand that you die for your country and purchase the well-being of all the citizens at the cost of your own, would you be ready to extend your neck not just with endurance but even cheerfully? If you are ready to do this, there is no other good; for you are giving up everything in order to have it. Consider how much being honourable commits you to: you will die for the state even if it means being ready to do so the minute you know it should be done.

28. Sometimes one can take great pleasure from a splendid action, even if it is only for a very short time. Although no enjoyment derived from the action once done can reach someone who is dead and finished with human experience, nevertheless mere reflection upon the future action

gives satisfaction, and when a man who is brave and just sets before himself as the reward for his death the freedom of his homeland and the well-being of everyone on whose behalf he sacrifices his life, he has the highest pleasure and gets enjoyment from his own danger.

29. But even someone who is deprived of the joy which comes from reflection upon his last and greatest deed will plunge into death with no hesitation, content to act correctly and piously. Confront him even now with the many considerations which might dissuade him, tell him 'Your deed will be quickly forgotten and the citizens will be ungrateful to you when they think of you.' He will answer you 'All of that is beyond my job, and I only consider that; I know that this is honourable, and so I go wherever it leads and summons me.'

30. So this alone is good and it is not only the perfected mind which is aware of it but also a mind which is noble and talented. Everything else is fickle and changeable, and so one worries even while possessing them. Even if fortune smiles and they are all heaped together, they weigh heavily on their masters and always oppress them; sometimes they even crush them.

31. None of those whom you see clad in purple is happy any more than those who are given a sceptre and robe on stage in order to play their roles in a tragedy. As soon as they make their entrance, carried along by the throng and wearing the high boots of tragedy, they immediately exit: they remove their boots and return to their normal size. None of those whom wealth and office elevate is actually tall. So why does *he* seem tall? You measure him together with his pedestal. A dwarf isn't tall though he stands on a mountaintop; a giant will retain his height even if he is standing in a well.

32. We suffer from this mistake, this is how we are duped, because we don't evaluate anyone by what he is but we add to him the things by which he has been decorated. But when you want to undertake a true valuation of a person and want to know what he is like, do the inspection when he is naked. Let him set aside his inheritance, set aside his public offices and the other trickeries of fortune, let him shed his very body. Inspect his mind, what it is like, how great it is—whether it is great by its own resources or someone else's.

33. If he looks at the flashing swords with unswerving eyes and if he knows that it makes no difference whether his life's breath exits through the mouth or the throat, call him happy. If, when he is threatened with physical torments—both those inflicted by chance and those inflicted by the injustice of the powerful—if he hears about prison, exile, and the empty fears of human minds calmly and says,

Maiden,
no prospect of hardship comes to me new or unexpected
I anticipated it all and have rehearsed it in the privacy of my mind.
You make these threats today—I have always threatened myself and prepared my
human self for human possibilities.¹

34. Gentle comes the blow of misfortune that has been anticipated. But to fools who trust fortune every prospect seems 'new and unexpected'. For the inexperienced a great part of the misfortune lies in the novelty. To understand this, reflect that people can endure what they thought were hardships more bravely when they have gotten used to them.

35. And so a wise person gets used to future misfortunes and what other people make bearable by long suffering he makes bearable by prolonged thinking. Sometimes we hear the voices of inexperienced people saying, 'I knew this was in store for me.' The wise person knows that everything is in store for him. Whatever happened, he says 'I knew it.'
Farewell.

¹ Vergil, *Aeneid* 6.103-5.