

LETTER 87

Seneca to Lucilius, greetings:

1. I suffered shipwreck even before I got on board. I won't add how this happened for fear that you might think that this too should be counted among the 'Stoic paradoxes'. When you want I will prove that none of these 'paradoxes' is false or so amazing as it seems at first sight to be—actually, I will do so even if you don't want me to. Meanwhile, this journey has taught me how many superfluous possessions we have and how easily we could choose to put aside those things whose loss we do not feel if necessary at some point takes them from us.
2. My dear friend Maximus and I are now passing an extremely happy couple of days with a very few servants—no more than would fit in a single carriage—and with no possessions except what we could carry on our persons. The mattress lies upon the ground and I upon the mattress. I have two cloaks, one used as a spread, the other as a cover.
3. The lunch was minimal. It had been prepared in under an hour. I go nowhere without dried figs (and am never without writing tablets). If I have bread, the figs serve as a relish; if I don't have bread, they serve as bread. They make every day a New Year's Day for me, which I make blessed and fortunate with good thoughts and greatness of mind—and the mind is never greater than when it puts aside what is foreign to it and makes itself calm by fearing nothing and makes itself rich by desiring nothing.
4. The carriage I travel in is rustic. The only evidence that the mules are even alive is that they are walking, and the mule driver is shoeless—but not because of the summer heat. I can scarcely bring myself to want that the carriage seem to be mine—my twisted sense of modesty about what is right is still hanging on, and whenever we meet some more fashionable party I blush unwillingly. This is an indication that the views which I prove and approve of do not yet have a stable and unmovable home. Someone who blushes at his lowly carriage will take false pride in a costly one.
5. I have made insufficient progress so far. I do not yet dare to go public with my frugality. I am still concerned about the views of other travellers.

I should have cried out against the views of the entire human race, 'You are mad, you are wrong, you are gawking at superfluous things, you don't value anyone at his true worth. When it comes to personal wealth, the most careful accountants set the credit of individuals to whom one might extend a loan or a favour (for favours too are carried on the books as expenditures) as follows: he has big estates, but owes a lot;

6. he has a beautiful house, but it is heavily mortgaged. No one can quickly put up for sale a more attractive set of house-slaves, but he cannot meet his debts. If he pays off his creditors, he will have nothing left. In other matters too you will have to do the same thing and to examine critically how much of his own each person really has.'

7. You think he is rich because he even brings gilded furniture with him when he travels, because he has estates in every province, because he reads from a fat account book, because his suburban estate is so big that it would provoke resentment even if it were located in the wastelands of Apulia. When you have said all of that, he is still poor. Why? Because he is in debt. How much does he owe? Everything—unless you happen to suppose that it makes some difference whether he has borrowed from a person or from fortune.

8. How is it relevant that one's well-fed mules are all of a uniform colour? How are those carriages with embossed ornament relevant?

And those fast steeds covered with purple and embroidered cloths:

Golden collars hang down on their chests,

And covered in gold they hold golden bits in their teeth.¹

These things improve neither the master nor the mule.

9. Cato the Censor, whose existence was as beneficial to the state as Scipio's was (for the one waged war on our enemies, the other on our characters), rode an old nag equipped with saddlebags so he could bring along what he needed. How I would love him to meet up with one of these young dandies who travel like rich men, herding his runners, his Numidian slaves and a cloud of dust before him! No doubt he would seem to have a better outfit and a better retinue than Marcus Cato had—this man who amidst all that fancy gear hesitated whether he should take a position as a gladiator or as a beast-fighter.

10. What a credit to his time, that a commander, winner of a triumph, a censor, and (what is greater than all of that) a Cato should be satisfied with one old horse, and not even all of that, since part of the horse was taken up with his saddlebags hanging down on either side. So, wouldn't

¹ Vergil, *Aeneid* 7.277–279.

you rank that one lonely horse, rubbed down by Cato himself, ahead of all those plump ponies, Asturian horses, and high-stepping trotters?

11. I can see that there won't be any end of this subject unless I put an end to it myself. So here I will be silent with respect to those things which are called 'impedimenta'—no doubt the term was coined by someone who foresaw that they would turn out as they have in fact turned out. Now I want to set out for you the arguments, still just a very few, dealing with virtue—which we maintain is sufficient for the happy life.

12. 'What is good makes people good (for in music too what is good makes a person musical); chance things do not make a person good; therefore they are not good.'

The Peripatetics respond to this by claiming that our first premiss is false. They say, 'people do not always become good because of what is good. In music there are goods (for example a reed-pipe or string or an organ used to accompany singing); and yet none of these makes a person musical.'

13. Our reply to them will be, 'You don't understand how we meant "what is good in music". For we are not referring to what equips the musical person but to what makes him musical. You are turning to the equipment used by the art, not to the art. However, if there is something good in the musical art itself, that will certainly make him musical.'

14. I want to make that point even clearer. 'Good in the art of music' is used in two senses, one according to which the musician's performance is assisted, the other according to which the art is assisted; the instruments (pipes, organs, strings) bear on the performance but not on the art itself. For he is an artist even without them, though perhaps he cannot practice his art. But this dual meaning does not apply to the case of a human being. For the good of a person and of a life are the same.

15. 'Something which the basest and most despicable person can have is not good; but pimps and gladiators can have riches; therefore riches are not good.'

They reply, 'Your premiss is false. For both in grammar and in medicine or navigation we see that the lowliest people can have good things.'

16. But those arts never promised greatness of mind, they do not rise to great heights nor do they turn up their noses at the works of chance. Virtue elevates a human being and places him above the things which are dear to mortals. It neither desires nor fears excessively those things which are called good and those things which are called bad. 'Swallow', one of Cleopatra's degenerates, had a huge estate. Recently Natalis, whose tongue was as wicked as it was unclean and whose mouth was used for

feminine hygiene, was the heir to lots of people and had lots of heirs himself. So what? Did the money make him unclean, or did he sully the money? Money falls to some people the way a penny falls into the sewer.

17. Virtue takes its stand above all such things. It is assessed at its own value and judges to be good none of those things which can turn up just anywhere. Medicine and navigation do not bar themselves and their practitioners from admiring such things; someone who is not a good man can nevertheless be a doctor, can be a navigator, can just as well be a grammarian, by God, as he can be a cook. Someone who cannot have just anything is not just any sort of person—the kind of things a person can possess show the kind of person he is.

18. A money bag is worth as much as it contains; rather, it counts as an adjunct to what it contains. Who puts any value on a full purse except the value of the amount of money it contains? The same thing applies to those who command great personal fortunes; they are adjuncts and appendages of their fortunes. So why is a wise person great? Because he has a great mind. Therefore it is true that what even the most despicable person can have is not good.

19. So I will never say that freedom from pain is a good—a grasshopper and a flea have that. I wouldn't even say that calmness and the absence of trouble are a good—what is more at leisure than a worm? You ask what it is that makes someone wise? The same thing that makes him a god. You have to give him something divine, heavenly, and splendid. Good does not come to everyone nor does it allow just anyone to possess it.

20. Consider

both what each region produces and what each declines to produce.

In one region there are grain crops, in another the grape harvest is richer;

In some place else fruit trees grow and grasses thrive

Without cultivation. Don't you see how the Tmolus produces fragrant saffron,

India produces ivory, the gentle Sabaeans produce their frankincense,

And the unclad Chalybes produce iron?²

21. Those products are allocated by region, so there is reciprocal trade in the products people need if each group takes its turn in importing something from the others. But the highest good we are talking about also has its very own region—it is not produced where ivory or iron come from. You ask, what is the region of the highest good? The mind. Unless it is pure and sacred, it cannot receive god.

² Vergil, *Georgics* 1.53–8.

22. 'Good does not come from bad; but riches come from greed; therefore riches are not good.'

The reply is, 'It is not true that good is not produced from bad; for money is produced as a result of temple robbery and theft. And so temple robbery and theft are certainly bad, but precisely because they produce more bad things than good. For they produce gain, but along with fear, worry, and anguish both mental and physical.'

23. Whoever says this must accept the proposition that temple robbery is partly good, since it produces some good, just as it is bad because it produces many bad outcomes. But what could be more monstrous than this? And yet we have in fact completely persuaded people that temple robbery, theft, and adultery should be counted as goods. Think of all the people who do not blush at theft, who boast of adultery! After all, small-scale temple robbery is punished, but large-scale temple robbery is celebrated with a triumphal parade.

24. Add to this the fact that an act of temple robbery, if it is in any degree good, will also be honourable and will be called a 'straight' deed (for it is an action of our own). But no human being's thought can accept that proposition. Therefore good things cannot be produced from something bad. For if, as you say, temple robbery is only bad because it causes a great deal of bad, then if you eliminate the punishment for it and guarantee its safety, then it will be completely good. And yet the greatest punishment for crimes is in the crimes themselves.

25. You are wrong, I say, if you postpone punishments until execution or imprisonment. The deeds are punished as soon as they have been done, in fact, while they are being done. Therefore good is not produced out of bad any more than a fig is produced from an olive tree: the seedlings correspond to the seed and good things cannot betray their lineage. Just as the honourable cannot be produced out of the shameful, so too good cannot be produced from what is bad; for the good and the honourable are the same.

26. Certain Stoics reply to this as follows: 'Let us suppose that money is a good no matter what its source; still, it does not follow that the money comes from temple robbery even if its source is temple robbery.' Think of it like this. There is some gold and a viper in the same jar. If you take gold from the jar, you do not take the gold because there is a snake in there too. It is not, I say, because it contains a snake that the jar yields me gold, but it yields gold even though it also contains a snake. In the same way gain comes from temple robbery not because temple robbery is shameful and criminal but because it also contains gain. Just as the snake in that jar is

something bad, while the gold which lies alongside the snake is not, so too in the case of temple robbery it is the crime which is bad, not the gain.'

27. I <disagree> with these Stoics. For the two cases are very different. In the one case I can remove the gold without the snake, but in the other I cannot get the gain without the act of temple robbery; the gain in question is not lying alongside the crime, but is in fact mixed in with it.

28. 'Something which, when we desire to get it, leads us to many bad outcomes is not a good. But when we desire to get riches we are led to many bad outcomes. Therefore riches are not good.'

The reply is, 'Your proposition has two meanings. One: when we desire to get riches we are led to many bad outcomes. But we are also led to many bad outcomes when we desire to get virtue. One man is shipwrecked while travelling for the purpose of study, and someone else might be kidnapped.

29. 'The other meaning is like this: that through which we are led to bad outcomes is not good. It will not follow from this proposition that we are led to bad outcomes through riches or pleasures; or if we are led to many bad outcomes through riches, then not only are riches not good, but they are bad. But you say only that they are not good. Moreover,' goes the reply, 'you concede that there is some use in having riches: you count them among the advantages. But by the same argument they will <not> even be advantageous, since through them many disadvantageous things happen to us.'

30. Certain people reply to them as follows: 'You are wrong to blame the disadvantageous outcomes on the riches. The riches don't hurt anyone. The harm is done either by each person's own stupidity or by someone else's wickedness, just as no one is killed by a sword—the sword is merely the weapon of the killer. Therefore the riches do not harm you just because harm is done to you on account of the riches.'

31. In my view Posidonius has a better reply. He says that riches are the cause of the bad outcomes, not because riches themselves do anything but because they instigate people to action. For there is a difference between the efficient cause (which must do harm immediately) and the antecedent cause. Riches have this antecedent causality; they inflame our minds, they breed pride, they attract envy, and they so disturb the intellect that a reputation for wealth gives us pleasure, even when it is bound to harm us.

32. But it is appropriate that all good things should be free of blame; they are pure, they do not corrupt our minds, they do not tempt us. To be sure, they uplift us and expand us, but without making us self-important. Things which are good produce confidence; riches produce boldness; things which

are good give us greatness of mind, riches produce arrogance. However, arrogance is nothing but a false semblance of greatness.

33. The reply is, 'I looked at that way, riches are also bad, not just not good.' They would be bad if they could themselves do harm, if, as I said, they had efficient causality. But as it is they have antecedent causality, which not only stimulates the mind but even attracts it. For riches produce a plausible appearance of goodness which is credible to the many.

34. Virtue too has antecedent causality with regard to envy; for many people are envied because of their wisdom and many because of their justice. But it does not have this causality from within itself nor is it a plausible cause. In fact, the more plausible appearance is presented to human minds by virtue, which summons them to love and awe.

35. Posidonius thinks one should make the following argument: 'those things which do not produce greatness or confidence or calmness in the soul are not good; but riches and good health and things like them produce none of those results; therefore they are not good.' He further intensifies this argument in the following manner: 'those things which do not produce greatness or confidence or calmness in the soul, but rather arrogance, self-importance, and presumption, are bad. But we are driven to these states by chance things. Therefore they are not good.'

36. The reply is, 'By this argument, those things are not even advantageous.' Advantageous things are of one kind, goods of another. The advantageous is that which has more usefulness than inconvenience. Good must be unalloyed and completely free of harm. The good is not what yields more benefit, but rather that which produces nothing but benefit.

37. Furthermore, advantage applies to animals, to imperfect humans, and to fools. And so what is disadvantageous can be mixed in with it; but it is labelled 'advantageous' because of its greater part. Good only applies to the wise person and it must be unalloyed.

38. Cheer up. Only one knot remains, though it is Herculean. 'The good is not made up of what is bad. But riches are made up of many instances of poverty. Therefore riches are not good.' Our school does not accept this argument, but the Peripatetics both pose the argument and solve it. However, Posidonius says that this sophism, which circulates in all the schools of dialectic, is refuted as follows by Antipater.

39. 'Poverty is said not with regard to possession but with regard to removal' (or, as the ancients said, 'privation'; the Greeks say *kata stersin*); it states not what it has but what it does not have. And so nothing can be filled up by many instances of emptiness; many things create riches, not many instances of want. 'Your understanding of poverty,' he says,

'is inappropriate. For poverty is not the state which possesses just a few things, but the state which does not possess many things. So it is not called poverty because of what it has but because of what it lacks.'

40. I could express my meaning more easily if there were a Latin word by which one could express *anhuparvia*. This is the word Antipater reserves for poverty. I do not see what poverty could be except the possession of just a little. When we have lots of free time we will consider what is the essence of riches and of poverty. But then we will also reflect on whether it might not be better to assuage poverty and to strip wealth of its haughtiness than to go to court over the words—as though a judgement had already been reached about the things.

41. Let us suppose that we have been summoned to an assembly. A law is proposed to abolish riches. Will we convince people for or against by using these arguments? Will we, by using these arguments, bring it about that the Roman people should seek out and praise poverty, the foundation and basis of its empire, but stand in fear of its own wealth; that it should reflect that it has discovered riches among the vanquished, that riches are the source of the bribery, corruption, and civil strife which have invaded a city of surpassing piety and self-control, that the spoils of foreign peoples are displayed with excessive luxury, and that what one people has taken from everyone else can even more easily be taken away by everyone from that one? It is better to argue in favour of this law, and to conquer the passions rather than to limit them. If we can, let us speak more bravely; if we cannot, let us at least speak more plainly.

Farewell.