Seneca – Letter 71 – On the Highest Good[1]

From Seneca to Lucilius
Greetings

[1] You are continually asking me for specific bits of advice, forgetting that a vast stretch of sea separates us. Since, however, the value of advice depends mostly on the time when it is given, it must necessarily result that by the time my opinion on certain matters reaches you, the opposite opinion is the better. For advice conforms to circumstances; and our circumstances are carried along, or rather whirled along. Accordingly, advice should be produced on short notice; and even this is too late; it should be given "on the spot" as the saying is.

Here I propose to show you how you may discover the method for this. [2] As often as you wish to know what is to be avoided or what is to be sought, look to your Highest Good, to the purpose of your whole life. For whatever we do ought to be in harmony with this; no man can set in order the details unless he has already set before himself the chief purpose of his life. The artist may have his colors all prepared, but he cannot produce a likeness unless he has already made up his mind about *what* he wishes to paint. The reason we make mistakes is because everyone considers the *parts* of life, but never life as a *whole*. [3] The archer must know what he is seeking to hit; only then must he aim and control the weapon by his skill. Our plans miscarry because they have no aim. When a man does not know what harbor he is sailing for, no wind is the right wind.

Chance must necessarily have great influence over our lives, because we live by chance. [4] It is the case with certain men, however, that they do not know that they know certain things. Just as we often go searching for those who stand beside us, so we are apt to forget that the goal of the Highest Good lies near us. To infer the nature of this Highest Good, one does not need many words or any round-about discussion; it should be pointed out with a finger, so to speak, and not be dissolved into many parts. For what good is there in breaking it up into tiny bits, when you can say: the Highest Good is that which is honorable? Besides (and you may be still more surprised at this), that which is honorable is the *only* good; all other 'goods' are like counterfeit coins.

[5] If you convince yourself of this, and if you come to *deeply* love virtue (for mere loving is not enough), anything that has been touched by virtue will be filled with blessing and prosperity for you, no matter how it shall be regarded by others. Torture—if only, as you lie suffering, you are more calm in mind than your very torturer; illness—if only you curse not Fortune and yield not to the disease; in short, all those things which others regard as ills will become manageable and will end in good, if you succeed in rising above them. Once it is clear that there is nothing good except that which is honorable, then all hardships will be properly called "good," provided that virtue has made them honorable. [6] Many think that we Stoics are holding out expectations greater than our human condition is capable of; and they have a right to

[1] Translated by Richard Mott Gummere, edited with notes by Benjamin Keoseyan

think so. For they have regard to the body only. But let them turn back to the soul, and they will soon measure mankind by the standard of God.[2]

Rouse yourself, most excellent Lucilius, and leave off all this word-play of pedantic philosophers, who reduce a most glorious subject to a matter of syllables, and lower and wear out the soul by teaching bits and pieces; then you will become like the men who discovered these ideas, instead of those who by their teaching try to make philosophy seem difficult rather than great. [7] Socrates, who recalled the whole of philosophy to guiding principles for human action, and asserted that the highest wisdom consisted in distinguishing between good and evil, said:

> Follow these rules, if my words carry weight with you, in order that you may be happy; and let some men think you even a fool. Allow any man who so desires to insult you and work you wrong; but if only virtue dwells with you, you will suffer nothing. If you wish to be happy, if you want to be a genuinely good person, let anyone at all despise you.[3]

No man can accomplish this unless he has learned to despise all things, regarding all goods as equal, for the reason that no good exists apart from that which is honorable, and that which is honorable is in every case equal. [8] You may say: "What then? Is there no difference between Cato's being elected praetor and his failure at the polls?[4] Or whether Cato is conquered or conqueror in the battle-line of Pharsalia? And when Cato could not be defeated, though his party met defeat, was not this goodness of his equal to that which would have been his if he had returned victorious to his native land and arranged a peace?" Of course it was; for it is by the same virtue that evil fortune is overcome and good fortune is controlled. Virtue, however, cannot be increased or decreased; its stature is uniform.

[9] "But," you will object, "Gnaeus Pompey will lose his army; the patricians, those noblest patterns of the State's creation, and the front-rank men of Pompey's party, a senate under arms, will be routed in a single engagement; the ruins of that great oligarchy will be scattered all over the world; one division will fall in Egypt, another in Africa, and another in Spain! And the poor State will not be allowed even the privilege of being ruined once for all!" [10] Yes, all this may happen; Juba's familiarity with every position in his own kingdom may be of no avail to him, of no avail the resolute bravery of his people when fighting for their king; even the men of Utica, crushed by their troubles, may waver in their allegiance; and the good fortune which ever attended men of the name of Scipio may desert Scipio in Africa. But long ago destiny saw to it

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[2] The Stoics—following Plato (see *Laws* 716)—held God to be the measure of all things, rather than man, as Protagoras taught. Remember this bit when you get to reading Boethius later in the semester!

[3] This appears to be a paraphrase of some of Socrates' speech in Plato's *Gorgias* (527c).

[4] Cato the Younger, the conservative Roman senator who opposed both Julius Caesar and Gnaeus Pompey, is a model of Stoic virtue, here and elsewhere in Seneca.

that Cato should come to no harm.[5] [11] "He was conquered in spite of it all!" Well, you may include this among Cato's 'failures'; Cato will bear with an equally stout heart anything that thwarts him of his victory, as he bore that which thwarted him of his praetorship. The day whereon he failed of election, he spent in play; the night wherein he intended to die[6], he spent in reading. He regarded in the same light both the loss of his praetorship and the loss of his life; he had convinced himself that he ought to endure anything which might happen.

[12] Why should he not suffer, bravely and calmly, a change in the government? For what is free from the risk of change? Neither earth, nor sky, nor the whole fabric of our universe, though it be controlled by the hand of God. It will not always preserve its present order; it will be thrown from its course in days to come. [13] All things move in accord with their appointed times; they are destined to be born, to grow, and to be destroyed. The stars which you see moving above us, and this seemingly immovable earth to which we cling and on which we are set, will be consumed and will cease to exist. There is nothing that does not have its old age; the intervals are merely unequal at which Nature sends forth all these things towards the same goal.

Whatever is will cease to be, and yet it will not perish, but will be resolved into its elements. [14] To our minds, this process means perishing, for we behold only that which is nearest; our sluggish mind, under allegiance to the body, does not penetrate to destinations beyond. If this were not so, we would endure with greater courage our own end and that of our loved ones, if only it could hope that life and death, like the whole universe about us, go by turns, that whatever has been put together is broken up again, that whatever has been broken up is put together again, and that the eternal craftsmanship of God, who controls all things, is working at this task. [15] Therefore the wise man will say just what a Marcus Cato would say, after reviewing his past life:

> The whole race of man, both that which is and that which is to be, is condemned to die. Of all the cities that at any time have held sway over the world, and of all that have been the splendid ornaments of empires not their own, men shall some day ask where they were, and they shall be swept away by destructions of various kinds; some shall be ruined by wars, others shall be wasted away by inactivity and by the kind of peace which ends in sloth, or by that vice which is fraught with destruction even for mighty

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[5] These passages describe some of the political turmoil that Cato the Younger endured throughout his life. The whole point of these references to the various Roman historical events in which Cato was caught up is made here—i.e., no matter what happened to him, whether it was fortunate or unfortunate, Cato was ultimately unharmed. This is because Cato was a Stoic; his stable, virtuous character enabled him to both "control" good fortune (i.e. not let good luck spoil his character) and to "overcome" evil fortune, such that no matter what happened to him in life, he was unharmed, because he did nothing dishonorable.

[6] Cato took his own life at Utica, in 46 B.C., after Scipio's defeat at Thapsus, believing death to be preferable to life under the dictatorship of Julius Caesar. As Seneca puts it elsewhere: "Freedom did not live after Cato, nor Cato after freedom."

The Stoics believed that suicide was morally permissible, under the right circumstances. Seneca himself would go on to be forced to commit suicide by the emperor Nero.

> dynasties,—luxury. All these fertile plains shall be buried out of sight by a sudden overflowing of the sea, or a slipping of the soil, as it settles to lower levels, shall draw them suddenly into a yawning chasm. Why then should I be angry or feel sorrow, if I precede the general destruction by a tiny interval of time?" [16] Let great souls comply with God's wishes, and suffer unhesitatingly whatever fate the law of the universe ordains; for the soul at death is either sent forth into a better life, destined to dwell with deity amid greater radiance and calm, or else, at least, without suffering any harm to itself, it will be mingled with nature again, and will return to the universe.

Therefore Cato's honorable death was no less a good than his honorable life, since virtue admits of no augmentation. Socrates used to say that truth and virtue were the same. Just as truth does not grow, so neither does virtue grow; for it has its due proportions and is complete. [17] You need not, therefore, wonder that goods are equal, both those which are to be deliberately chosen, and those which circumstances have imposed. For if you once adopt the view that they are unequal, deeming, for instance, a brave endurance of torture as among the lesser goods, you will be including it among the evils also; you will pronounce Socrates unhappy in his prison, Cato unhappy when he reopens his wounds with more courage than he showed in inflicting them, and Regulus[7] the most ill-starred of all when he pays the penalty for keeping his word even with his enemies. And yet no man, even the most effeminate person in the world, has ever dared to maintain such an opinion. For though such persons deny that a man like Regulus is happy, yet for all that they also deny that he is wretched. [18] The earlier Academics do indeed admit that a man is happy even amid such tortures, but do not admit that he is completely or fully happy. With this view we cannot in any way agree; for unless a man is happy, he has not attained the Highest Good;[8] and the good which is highest admits of no higher degree, if only virtue exists within this man, and if adversity does not impair his virtue, and if, though the body be injured, the virtue abides unharmed. And it does abide. For I understand virtue to be high-spirited and exalted, so that it is enlivened by anything that opposes it.

[19] This spirit, which young men of noble disposition often assume, when they are so deeply stirred by the beauty of some honorable object that they despise all the gifts of chance, is assuredly infused in us and communicated to us by wisdom. Wisdom will bring the conviction that there is but one good—that which is honorable; that this can neither be shortened nor extended, any more than a carpenter's rule, with which straight lines are tested, can be bent. Any change in the rule means spoiling the straight line. [20] Applying, therefore, this same figure to virtue, we shall say: Virtue also is straight, and admits of no bending. What can be made more

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[7] Marcus Atilius Regulus was a Roman consul who fought against the Carthaginians in the third century B.C. Roman legends say that upon being defeated by the Carthaginians, they sent him to Rome to negotiate peace terms, but made him swear an oath to return to Carthage. Refusing either to negotiate for peace on behalf of the enemy, or to break his oath to the Carthaginians, he returned and was tortured to death.

[8] Notice that what Seneca is saying here ('Unless one is happy, one has not achieved the highest good.') is logically equivalent to the claim that achieving the highest good (which the Stoics understand as virtue) is sufficient for happiness.

tense than a thing which is already rigid? Such is virtue, which passes judgment on everything, but nothing passes judgment on virtue. And if this rule, virtue, cannot itself be made more straight, neither can the things created by virtue be in one case straighter and in another less straight. For they must necessarily correspond to virtue; hence they are equal.

[21] "What?" you say, "Do you call reclining at a banquet and submitting to torture equally good?" Does this seem surprising to you? You may be still more surprised at the following,—that reclining at a banquet is an evil, while reclining on the rack is a good, if the former act is done in a shameful, and the latter in an honorable manner. It is not the material that makes these actions good or bad; it is the virtue. All acts in which virtue shows itself are of the same measure and value.

[22] At this moment the man who measures the souls of all men by his own is shaking his fist in my face because I hold that there is a parity between the goods involved in the case of one who passes sentence honorably, and of one who suffers sentence honorably; or because I hold that there is a parity between the goods of one who celebrates a triumph, and of one who, unconquered in spirit, is carried before the victor's chariot.[9] For such critics think that whatever they themselves cannot do, is not done; they pass judgment on virtue in the light of their own weaknesses.

[23] Why do you marvel if it helps a man, and on occasion even pleases him, to be burned, wounded, slain, or bound in prison? To a luxurious man, a simple life is a penalty; to a lazy man, work is punishment; the dandy pities the diligent man; to the lazy, studies are torture. Similarly, we regard those things for which we are too weak as hard and beyond endurance, forgetting what a torment it is to many men to abstain from wine or to be routed from their beds at break of day. These actions are not essentially difficult; it is we ourselves that are soft and flabby. [24] We must pass judgment concerning great matters with greatness of soul; otherwise, that which is really our fault will seem to be their fault. So it is that certain objects which are perfectly straight, when sunk in water appear to the onlooker as bent or broken off. It matters not only what you see, but with what eyes you see it; our souls are too dull of vision to perceive the truth.

[25] But give me an unspoiled and sturdy-minded young man; he will pronounce more fortunate one who sustains on unbending shoulders the whole weight of adversity, who stands out superior to Fortune. It is not a cause for wonder that one is not tossed about when the weather is calm; reserve your wonderment for cases where a man is lifted up when all others sink, and keeps his footing when all others are prostrate.

[26] What sort of evil is there in torture and in the other things which we call hardships? It seems to me that there is this evil,—that the mind sags, and bends, and collapses. But none of these things can happen to the sage;[10] he stands upright under any load. Nothing can subdue him; nothing that must be endured annoys him. For he does not complain that he has been struck by

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[9] viz. the conquered who is 'unconquered in spirit'.

[10] The sage, or the wise man, is the Stoic paradigm of a virtuous human.

that which can strike any man. He knows his own strength; he knows that he was born to carry burdens.

[27] I do not remove the wise man from the category of real humans, nor do I deny to him the sense of pain as though he were a rock that has no feelings at all. I remember that he is made up of two parts: the one part is irrational,—it is this that may be bitten, burned, or hurt; the other part is rational,—it is this which holds to unshakeable opinions, is courageous, and unconquerable. In the rational part is situated man's Highest Good. Before this is completely attained, the mind wavers in uncertainty; only when it is fully achieved is the mind fixed and steady. [28] And so when one has just begun, or is on one's way to the heights and is cultivating virtue, or even if one is drawing near the perfect good but has not yet put the finishing touch upon it, one will retrograde at times and there will be a certain slackening of mental effort. For such a man has not yet traversed the doubtful ground; he is still standing in slippery places. But the happy man, whose virtue is complete, loves himself most of all when his bravery has been submitted to the severest test, and when he not only endures, but welcomes that which all other men regard with fear, if it is the price which he must pay for the performance of a duty which honor imposes, and he greatly prefers to have men say of him: "how much more noble!" rather than "how much more lucky!"

[29] And now I have reached the point to which your patient waiting summons me. You must not think that our human virtue transcends nature; the wise man will tremble, will feel pain, will turn pale, for all these are sensations of the body. Where, then, is the abode of utter distress? Where is the real evil? In the other part of us, no doubt, if these trials drag down the mind, force it to a confession of its own servitude, and cause it to regret its existence.[11] [30] The wise man, indeed, overcomes Fortune by his virtue, but many who profess wisdom are sometimes frightened by the most unsubstantial threats. And at this stage it is a mistake on our part to make the same demands upon the wise man and upon the learner. I still exhort myself to do that which I recommend; but my exhortations are not yet followed. And even if this were the case, I should not have these principles so ready for practice, or so well trained, that they would rush to my assistance in every crisis. [31] Just as wool takes up certain colors easily, while there are others which it will not absorb unless it is soaked and steeped in them many times; so other systems of doctrine can be immediately applied by men's minds after once being accepted, but this system of which I speak, unless it has gone deep and has sunk in for a long time, and has not merely colored but thoroughly permeated the soul, does not fulfill any of its promises.

[32] The matter can be imparted quickly and in very few words: "Virtue is the only good; at any rate there is no good without virtue; and virtue itself is situated in our nobler part, that is, the rational part." And what will this virtue be? A true and never-swerving judgment. For therefrom will spring all mental impulses, and by its agency every external appearance that stirs our impulses will be clarified.

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[11] Notice how, despite the permissibility of suicide in the Stoic view, the state of regretting one's existence is described by Seneca as containing the "real evil".

[33] It will be in keeping with this judgment to judge all things that have been colored by virtue as goods, and as equal goods. Bodily goods are, to be sure, good for the body; but they are not good overall. There will indeed be some value in them; but they will possess no genuine worth, for they will differ greatly; some will be less, others greater. [34] And we are constrained to acknowledge that there are great differences among the very followers of wisdom. One man has already made so much progress that he dares to raise his eyes and look Fortune in the face, but not persistently, for his eyes soon drop, dazzled by her overwhelming splendor; another has made so much progress that he is able to match glances with her,—that is, unless he has already reached the summit and is full of confidence. [35] That which is short of perfection must necessarily be unsteady, at one time progressing, at another slipping or growing faint; and it will surely slip back unless it keeps struggling ahead; for if a man slackens at all in zeal and faithful application, he must necessarily lose ground. No one can resume his progress at the point where he left off.

[36] Therefore let us press on and persevere. There remains much more of the road than we have put behind us; but the greatest part of progress consists in becoming willing to make progress. I fully understand what this task is: it is a thing which I desire, and I desire it with all my heart. I see that you also have been aroused and are hastening with great zeal towards the most beautiful of ends. Let us, then, hasten; only on these terms will life be a boon to us; otherwise, there is delay, and indeed disgraceful delay, while we busy ourselves with revolting things. Let us see to it that all time belongs to us. This, however, cannot be unless first of all our own selves begin to belong to us.

[37] And when will it be our privilege to despise both kinds of fortune? When will it be our privilege, after all the passions have been subdued and brought under our own control, to utter the words “I have conquered!”? Do you ask me whom I have conquered? Neither the Persians, nor the far-off Medes, nor any warlike race that lies beyond the furthest Parthians; not these, but greed and ambition, and that which has conquered the conquerors of the world— the fear of death.

Farewell.