Letters from a Stoic Epistulae Morales Ad Lucilium Study Guide

Letters from a Stoic Epistulae Morales Ad Lucilium by Seneca the Younger

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

In this (abridged) collection of letters, Seneca presents his moral teachings, heavily influenced by the Stoic school of philosophy, to Lucilius, a young man who belongs to the same upper echelon of Roman society as Seneca. Though the letters cover a great breadth, one theme in particular permeates his thought: true happiness is achieved through inner peace and cannot be taken away by the winds of fortune.

Seneca wrote these letters as an old man and makes frequent reference to the various changes his age has brought with it. While some of these are negative—he complains of many illnesses, for example—for the most part he finds old age suits his philosophical lifestyle. His passions have withered away and he is less tempted to engage in immoral excesses and, in retirement, he can dedicate himself entirely to studying and writing. Nonetheless, he stills sees himself on the journey towards moral perfection. To help himself along this journey he engages in (and recommends) abstaining from even morally acceptable pleasures, like good food or a comfortable bed. While there is nothing wrong with such things, it is good for a man's soul because it makes him less beholden to the whims of fortune. After all, a person who is rich one day might find himself poor and homeless the next. The Stoic knows, though, that no matter what one's external circumstances are, true happiness comes from within.

Seneca's understanding of philosophy is thoroughly practical. While he engages, from time to time, in the abstract theorizing that is commonly associated with it, he views it as secondary to the real purpose of philosophy: learning how to live well. Philosophy is not a pastime or hobby; it is a way of life that must permeate through everything a man does. Though it may seem paradoxical for a philosopher to have an anti-intellectual streak in him, Seneca is explicitly dubious about the value of the liberal arts, like history and literary analysis. He asks what value those things can have—when will one ever need to know about the stylistic similarities between Homer and Virgil? Such studies, certainly, do not teach a man how to live better and, thus, they are only barely better than spending all of one's time exercising or seeing public shows (activities which he also condemns). Their only possible value is that they cultivate certain good intellectual habits in the mind and thus prepare one for the study of philosophy.

However, Seneca is not entirely uncritical of philosophy or, at least, what passes for philosophy. He is immensely frustrated by those who want to reduce philosophy to cleverly arranging words into meaningless and absurd syllogisms. Such an art is not really philosophy—the love of wisdom—but philology—the love of words. Instead, he prefers to argue through example. There is no need to give a logical argument against drunkenness: Just look at how foolishly drunk people act. It should be obvious to anyone, he says, that such behavior is not fitting for a wise man.

Letters II, III, V, VI, VII, VIII, and IX

Letters II, III, V, VI, VII, VIII, and IX Summary and Analysis

Letter II: Seneca praises Lucilius' virtue and devotion to his studies. He warns him not to spread his studies among too many books; rather, one ought to focus on a narrow range of writers. It is not possible to absorb the full meaning of a text if one quickly changes to something entirely different. He then interprets a quote from Epicurus (a writer whom he does not particularly like) which makes reference to "cheerful poverty." In Seneca's mind, such a thing is oxymoronic, because what truly causes poverty is not the lack of wealth, but desiring it. The virtuous man will want only what he needs to survive and nothing more.

Letter III: Seneca chastises Lucilius for not discussing his personal affairs with his "friend." For, when one is with a friend, one should hold nothing back. Trust must be preceded by judgment, however. One should trust a friend unconditionally, but one should only be friends with those who are worthy. Thus, while it is important to have trusting relationships with others, it is equally important not to be too trusting. Indeed, all virtue follows this same pattern: one must seek a balance between extremes in all matters.

Letter V: It is noble to devote one's life to philosophy but only if it is done for genuine self-improvement. Some are attracted to philosophy in order to draw attention to themselves; obviously, such false devotion is worthless. While a philosopher will distinguish himself from the rest of society by his virtuous lifestyle and cultivated intellectual life, he should nonetheless obey society's conventions. Though wealth, fine clothing, and hygiene are superfluous for a happy life, if a philosopher lacks these he will tarnish philosophy's reputation among outsiders.

Seneca then comments on a passage from Hecato, which, paradoxically, states that hope is the cause of fear. However unintuitive as this might seem, there is truth to it: Fear only arises when one desires to have something in the future. If one eliminates these desires, and focuses narrowly on the present, then one will have nothing to fear.

Letter VI: Seneca notes, with pleasure, how well his personal cultivation of virtue is coming along. He expresses his desire that his correspondent, evidently living somewhere abroad, come to live with him. For, he says, virtue cannot truly be learned only through reading; it is necessary to have living examples of it.

Letter VII: Seneca urges Lucilius to avoid mass crowds, for they present a great temptation away from virtue. In any large gathering of people, there are bound to be at least a few people with great vices and there is always the danger that they will make these vices look attractive. He recalls going to a show hoping to see some kind of "witty entertainment" (41) but, to his horror, there was a gladiatorial battle instead. Due to the

blood-thirsty whims of the masses, the spectacle was especially brutal. The fighters were not allowed to use armor to protect themselves and, when there was a lull between fights, the crowd cried out for someone to have his throat slit to keep them entertained. Seneca noted afterward how the experienced changed him: he began to assimilate some of the crowd's barbarity. He resolved, thenceforth, to avoid the crowds as much as was possible. A truly virtue-minded person will spend his time either alone or in the company of those he knows are capable of improving him. It is important to also be a boon to one's friend, and such is one of philosophy's chief purposes. There is little value in learning if one cannot share it with one's friends.

Letter VIII: In response to Letter VII, Lucilius points out the apparent hypocrisy that Seneca, a man whose years of public service have earned him fame and respect among the citizens of Rome, would counsel others to avoid the masses. Seneca responds by saying that he hardly counsels a life of inactivity. Though he has given up his public life, he is still dedicated to service; in particular, he hopes to pass his wisdom on to posterity. He counsels his correspondent, and mankind in general, to avoid clinging too dearly to what is given by fortune or the masses. One should be content only with what is minimally necessary for survival; inordinate attachment to wealth or public opinion makes a man miserable.

Letter IX: The essential goal of a Stoic is to achieve the state of "apatheia," often translated as "apathy" but more precisely rendered as "invulnerable." The Stoic feels emotions like any other person; what distinguishes him is that they do not affect his spiritual peace or make him rush into poor decisions. The virtuous man regrets the loss of a friend, but he is not troubled, for he can easily replace him. It is often said that a wise man is content in himself. While it is true that the wise man is happy with or without friends, he nonetheless desires to have them. This desire seems to stem from irrepressible, natural impulses. Indeed, so great is this desire that, without friends, life can seem not worth continuing. Yet, the wise man remains content all the same, because, above all, he feels that he is happy; a man cannot be happy unless he first believes he is.

Letters XI, XII, XV, XVI, XVIII, XXVI, XXVII, and XXVIII

Letters XI, XII, XV, XVI, XVIII, XXVI, XXVII, and XXVIII Summary and Analysis

Letter XI: Seneca praises one of Lucilius' friend. He notes that the friend has a tendency to blush, but does not hold that against him. No matter how wise and virtuous a person becomes, he can never overcome those weakness inherent in him by nature. He approvingly cites Epicurus' advice that one ought to imagine being watched by some great, virtuous figure at all times in order to check one's own behavior.

Letter XII: Seneca relates going to one of his properties and noticing how dilapidated the building has become. It is a reminder of Seneca's advancing years, for he cannot expect to weather time so well as a building of stone and it is younger than he is. Old age should not frighten a wise man, however, for it is healthy to constantly have death before one's eyes. When one contemplates death, the importance of the goods of fortune diminishes. Thus, even young people should always consider each day to be their last, for death can take anyone at any time.

Letter XV: It is necessary to have some diversions from study, but one must ensure that such diversions do not become too important. For example, singing is good recreation but if one starts taking singing lessons then one's life will be governed by music rather than by philosophy. Focusing overmuch on such trivial and fleeting activities makes one's life meaningless and not worth living.

Letter XVI: The unphilosophical life has no direction and is filled with the constant anxiety of fulfilling one's ever-expanding desires. The philosopher is impervious to the winds of fortune, for the philosopher does not care if he is rich or poor. Basic needs can be easily satisfied; anything beyond that is of no interest to the wise man.

Letter XVIII: At the time of his writing, the city is celebrating the Saturnalia. During these festivities—financed in full by the state—people do not have to work and take the opportunity to feast and get drunk. Despite how unbecoming these activities are to the philosopher, Seneca says that he should not abstain from the festivities altogether. The philosopher should try to fit in with the rest of the society, though of course he must not take part in their excesses. In order to ward off gluttony, he advises Lucilius to occasionally go a few days without nice food in order to train himself to resist the sting of bad fortune. In these fasts, there is the element both of preparation and personal transformation. It may happen one day that fortune will sweep away one's wealth and reduce him to eating the food of slaves and peasants. However, even if it never happens, the exercise is worthwhile, because it protects the mind from fears of what might come. He concludes the letter with an unrelated quote from Epicurus which says that excessive anger is a threat to one's sanity.

Letter XXVI: In the time that has elapsed since Letter XII, Seneca's physical condition has degenerated considerably. Spiritually, however, he feels as virile as ever. Some say that a quick, unexpected death is preferable to anticipating death during a slow, gradual decline. While there is nothing wrong with either, Seneca prefers the latter because it is easier. A slow death allows one time for preparation. Though the Stoics do not have any clear view of an afterlife, Seneca believes it is how one lives one's last moment that determines whether one lived well or not.

Letter XXVII: Though he plays the role of adviser to Lucilius, Seneca admits that he is not perfect. He finds that, despite all the progress he has made, he has many of the same vices he had as a child. One must constantly renew one's resolve to live a life of virtue dedicated to what will not perish or disappoint: wisdom. Nonetheless, virtue is something which is attained only slowly and gradually, but one must be patient, for it is not something which can be bought or sold.

Letter XXVIII: Lucilius, evidently experiencing some kind of melancholy, wrote Seneca that his mood remained unchanged no matter how far he traveled from home. Seneca points out that this should not be surprising, since the source of true unhappiness is in one's own soul, which is with him wherever he might travel. The truly happy man can be happy anywhere, though there are some places that he will want to avoid. Rome, for example, is so filled with wicked people that it could be a threat to even a wise man's soul.

Letters XXXIII, XXXVIII, XL, XLI, XLVI, XLVII, XLVIII

Letters XXXIII, XXXVIII, XL, XLI, XLVI, XLVII, XLVIII Summary and Analysis

Letter XXXIII: Seneca responds to Lucilius' request that he include Stoic aphorisms in his letters. Unlike other philosophers, he says, the Stoics did not write in a manner that easily lends itself to quotation. The quality of the writing and thought is generally so high that it is hard to distinguish one sentence or passage as exceptionally brilliant. In any case, one ought not to lean too much on the sayings of others. While memorizing aphorisms suits a young man, as he matures he should be the one who makes sayings for others to quote.

Letter XXXVIII: Seneca agrees with Lucilius that they ought to write one another more frequently. Unrehearsed communication, like talking or letter-writing, is more communicative than prepared speeches or lectures and, therefore, is especially fitting for friends.

Letter XL: Seneca discusses the different habits of speech, focusing particularly on pace. He finds that it is distracting when a person talks either too slowly or too quickly, but if one has to incline in either direction, it is best to talk slowly. A person who talks too quickly seems like a person who is disorganized and undisciplined, characters which should be alien to a wise man. The wise man is deliberate and prepared and, therefore, ought to proceed slowly but steadily as he talks.

Letter XLI: Each man has Divine power dwelling within his soul. Though the body is earthen, the soul is from heaven and still bears the marks of its origin. Man's only pride is in his soul. He should not care to perfect his body and he especially should not measure his or others' value by physical beauty. He should care only about the perfection of the soul, which consists in living according to his rational nature.

Letter XLVI: Seneca thanks Lucilius for the book he sent. He immediately found himself so engrossed in it that he read it all in one sitting. He defers commenting on it, though, until he has read it a second time.

Letter XLVII: Seneca praises Lucilius for treating his slaves well. Slaves, he points out, are just as human as their owners and would do their masters well to remember that it is only by fortune, and no merit of their own, that they are not the slaves. Many slave-owners, foolishly thinking that it is to their credit that they are the slave-owners, treat their slaves with cruelty and disrespect. This attitude, he notes, is a recent innovation; his ancestors did not treat slaves in this way. The owner ought to strive for his slaves to love him, not to fear him. He should only correct his slaves insofar as it helps make

them more virtuous and his corrections should only be verbal; no human being merits a beating.

Letter XLVIII: The goal of philosophy is to teach man how to live his life and be happy. Many so-called philosophers spend hours quibbling over meaningless logical puzzles, none of which help solve the questions most important to the human condition. He urges Lucilius to keep clear of such "quibblers" and keep his focus on becoming wise.

Letters LIII, LIV, LV, LVI, and LXIII

Letters LIII, LIV, LV, LVI, and LXIII Summary and Analysis

Letter LIII: Seneca recounts a recent trip he made in a boat. He became so sea-sick that he made the captain pull the ship to shore so he could swim to dry land. He notes that while one becomes more aware of one's physical ailments the worse they become, spiritual ailments become less obvious the more severe they are. The most wicked people think they are the most virtuous. The only cure for this ignorance is philosophy and, therefore, he urges Lucilius to devote his life to it.

Letter LIV: Seneca tells Lucilius that he is suffering from serious bouts of asthma. He realizes that, in all likelihood, it will take his life before long, but he is not afraid. He has already experienced death, or at least the same state of non-existence: before he was born. Though one may suffer more or less in life, the suffering is surrounded on either side by "deep tranquility" (105).

Letter LV: Seneca recounts taking a ride on his sedan chair recently. Though he despises the luxury, he finds it helps his asthma. In the course of the ride, he passes by the impressive estate of the late Vatia. He recalls how people used to say that Vatia knew how to live, because he retired to such a fine place. Seneca's opinion is rather different. Vatia retired out of fear of being persecuted by the Emperor and lives a worthless life of leisure which only superficially resembles the tranquil life of philosophy.

Letter LVI: Seneca has no trouble concentrating on his studies amid noise. As he writes the letter, he reports, there is all manner of activity around him. He finds that intermittent noises are more distracting than continuous ones and that voices are the worst of all, since the mind naturally pays attention to understand what is being said. Nonetheless, he finds that he can concentrate just fine no matter what the distraction. This invulnerability is a kind of metaphor for the Stoic soul, which is troubled by no external concerns. Indeed, he finds that those who are easily disturbed by noises generally have souls which are not at peace. Nonetheless, he does prefer studying in a quiet area and writes that he is going to move somewhere silent.

Letter LXIII: Lucilius' friend, Flaccus, passes away. Seneca writes to express his sympathies, but urges Lucilius not to grieve excessively. In fact, it would be best not to grieve at all, but that would probably be impossible. The death of a friend is a reminder that one ought to value his friends in life. So often people will neglect their friends while they are alive and then feign grief at their deaths. Even the wisest and most virtuous man is bound to feel some measure of grief, but he will quickly move on and find a new friend to replace him. While grief will naturally disappear with time, it is nobler to leave it behind willingly.

Letters LXV, LXXVII, and LXXVIII

Letters LXV, LXXVII, and LXXVIII Summary and Analysis

Letter LXV: Seneca recounts having a recent illness which made it difficult to pursue his studies. While much of the day was spent in bed, he forced himself to read and write as much as he could. Eventually, however, his friends forced him to stop and discuss a philosophical question. They tried to determine if the Stoic concept of causation is better than that of Aristotle and Plato. For the Stoics, there are two basic elements in any object: matter and cause (or reason). Matter is the formless substance with "unlimited potential"—that is, it has no qualities of its own, but is capable of being turned into anything. It receives qualities from cause, which makes it into what it wants. In the example of a bronze statue, the bronze is the matter which is shaped into the statue by the craftsman, who is the cause.

According to Aristotle, there are four causes. The first two are the same as those Stoics identify, matter and the maker. Next, there is form, which is the shape or configuration of the cause. This is considered a cause because it is necessary for an object to exist; a statue of a pig, for example, would not be what it is unless it were in the shape of a pig. Last, there is the purpose for which the object was created. Without this purpose, the object would never come to be; if the craftsman had not wanted to make money, say, he would not have created the statue. Plato adds a fifth cause to these four, what he calls the idea or model. This is the vision which guides the creator. The craftsman could not create the pig without having an idea—whether in his mind or on paper—of what the finished product will look like.

Seneca argues that the Stoic account is superior because Aristotle lists either too many causes or not enough. If one defines a cause simply as anything without which an object could not exist, it would be easy to find several others. For example, nothing can come into being without time or place, yet Aristotle does not include these on his list. Therefore, it is better to have the simpler account of the Stoic.

It may not seem worthwhile to consider questions like this; after all, they do not seem to directly relate to living a happy life. However, they are good insofar as they raise the mind to consider higher things; if nothing else, it distracts the soul from the body, which is constantly urging its gaze to fulfilling its crude, material desires. Moreover, there is a connection between the question and a good life. For, the principal power over the matter in the universe is God; he gives it form in accordance with his goodness. In like manner, the soul naturally rules over the body and directs it to act in accordance with reason. Not all people act this way, of course, but such is the nature of the human being and the wise man ought to obey nature.

Letter LXXVII: Seneca notes that in his old age he finds that he cares less and less about his financial affairs. His years make this easier because he knows that he will

have enough money to last the rest of his life no matter what happens, but even young people ought to have this attitude. For, death can come at anytime, but so long as a person dies nobly, his life is, in a certain sense, complete, as if he had been destined from all times to die in such a way. This includes even voluntarily taking one's life. Indeed, suicide can be a noble undertaking when life is no longer worth living. Seneca himself considered suicide for a time to escape his illness, but refrained only for the sake of his father. Indeed, there do not seem to be many good reasons to stay alive. One cannot rationally fear death, for death is either an unconscious state of non-existence or a better state than life. Nor can one appeal to duty: There is not a set amount of duty one must fulfill before his life and dying is a duty that all men are bound to eventually carry out. Seneca's praise of suicide seems to stem from the Stoic preference for activity over passivity. Just as it was better for Lucilius to overcome his grief voluntarily—rather than wait for it to subside on its own—it is better for a man to voluntarily end his own life.

Letter LXXVIII: Seneca provides Lucilius with advice about coping with illness. The pains which often accompany illness, he says, are never too great for a man to endure, for nature has a way of minimizing their effect. The sharpest pains are always confined to the smallest parts of the body where they are the least burdensome. Further, severe pains tend to either not last very long or at least have periods of subsidence. Excessive concern with pain is symptomatic of excessive attachment to the body. One who does not care for worldly goods and does not fear death will not allow an illness to conquer his spirit.

Letters LXXXIII, LXXXVI, and LXXXVIII

Letters LXXXIII, LXXXVI, and LXXXVIII Summary and Analysis

Letter LXXXIII: Seneca explains to Lucilius how he spends his days. Though most of his day is devoted to study, he spends a little time each day in exercise (though he finds in his old age that he is worn out very quickly) and then some time in his pool. He thinks it is a good exercise to share his actions with another because it makes him feel more accountable for how he spends his time.

He then turns to discussing a syllogism of Zeno's which is supposed to prove that a good man will not drink to excess. It says that one does not tell secrets to a drunk person, and since one does tell secrets to a good man, it follows that a good man does not drink. Though Seneca agrees with the conclusion, he finds the method flawed, for one might easily say the same about a sleeping person: The fact that one does not tell secrets to a person who is asleep does not imply that good men do not sleep. He thinks that one's life and actions ought to be guided by examples, not by the often-flawed words dressed up in the form of a syllogism. It is much more effective to point to the unruly, shameful behavior of drunks to prove that the wise man will avoid drunkenness.

Letter LXXXVI: Seneca is writing while on a vacation visiting the former house of Scipio, a renowned Roman general whom he praises for his decision to go into voluntary exile and thereby save Rome from political turmoil. He notes that Scipio went without many of the modern conveniences which have become customary for well-to-do Romans. Those people would likely deplore Scipio's living conditions, but Seneca points out that Scipio probably did not mind. First, everyone was used to those living conditions in his time. Second, Scipio's life was not concerned with comfort but with being an honorable soldier of Rome. Seneca concludes the letter with a digression about the transplantation of trees.

Letter LXXXVIII: Seneca responds to Lucilius' inquiry about the liberal arts—studies such as literature, rhetoric, and history. As these fields do nothing to make a man more virtuous, they have no intrinsic value. Indeed, many of the fields distract a person with thousands of worthless questions like, for example, where this or that scene in the "Aeneid" took place or where Homer lived. There is some value to liberal arts, though, insofar as they prepare the mind for philosophy. None of the knowledge of the liberal arts is necessary, strictly speaking, and a person without a liberal education could certainly become a wise man. However, they do create certain habits of study and thought which are useful when a man takes up philosophy. Seneca also notes that there is a special temptation to vanity in learning the liberal arts, for a person who is well-acquainted with poetry or history will often be impressive to the small-minded masses. One should not strive for the reputation of being a learned man, though, but for the reputation of a good man.

Letters XC and XCI

Letters XC and XCI Summary and Analysis

Letter XC: Both life and philosophy (which teaches men how to live well) are the gifts of gods, though in different ways. Life is given directly by the gods, but the gods only give man the capacity for philosophy. They could give the gift of philosophy directly to man, but that would deprive it of one of its chief advantages, namely, that it is not subject to fortune but is the fruit of man's own efforts.

In a past age—the so-called "Golden Age"—man lived in accord with his nature and was ruled by the wise. Posidinius, a historian, claims that philosophers ruled in that time and were responsible for the invention for various technological innovations. Seneca objects strongly to both claims. First, the study of philosophy had not yet developed in that time. Though people lived well—better, indeed, than the vast majority of men live in the present era—they did not live the life of perfect virtue known only to the philosopher. Further, a philosopher would have no concern with the development of such mundane technologies as architecture or log-cutting. The aim of such technologies is to make man comfortable or wealthy, neither of which is a concern for the wise man. Indeed, man in that original state had abundant access to those things which he needed. Food and shelter were on hand to any who needed it and men shared all they had. It was only when greed entered into the hearts of men that they began to claim pieces of land as their property and destroyed man's harmonic relationship with nature. Suddenly, nature's abundant gifts no longer sufficed and man found it necessary to spend all of his toil finding ways to increase his wealth.

Letter XCI: Seneca writes of how Lyons was destroyed by fire and how much it grieves his friend Liberalis. It is natural enough that he should grieve. Lyons was a great city and such total destruction is utterly unexpected, which only makes the pain the worse. However, one should always be aware that fortune often brings the most unusual tragedies. Since one is upset more by what is surprising, one should always try to consider that anything, no matter how unlikely it might seem, can happen. Though a person should be wealthy, famous, beloved, and respected one day, he should always have the possibility before his mind that he might be imprisoned and tortured the next. Such awareness will dull the pain caused by misfortune when it inevitably arrives.

Letters CIV, CV, CVII, and CVIII

Letters CIV, CV, CVII, and CVIII Summary and Analysis

Letter CIV: Seneca relates moving into the countryside in the hope that the cleaner air will have some beneficial effect upon his health. Though he does not care whether he lives or dies, he does what he can to keep his health up for his wife's sake, who loves him very much. He finds that the move has had a beneficial effect upon his studies and work ethic, but he is quick to point out that this is not due merely to a change of location. Changing one's location cannot help a person escape his troubles, because he carries his troubles with him. One cannot learn any art, let alone that greatest of all arts—wisdom—by traveling somewhere.

Instead, one is better off developing one's character such that any hardship can be endured with equanimity and even joy. Consider the example of Socrates who endured great hardship both in his private life and his public life. He suffered his whole life in poverty and had a wife and children who constantly nagged him. Meanwhile, he was drawn into a civil war which only ended when the Thirty Tyrants took control, who wound up executing him for blasphemy. Nonetheless, through all of this hardship, his commitment to and confidence in philosophy were never shaken.

Letter CV: The best way to stay safe is to live a quiet, private life which incites neither anger nor envy. A person makes others angry by giving some offense to them. It is true that some people will take offense when they ought not, but one can still avoid creating enemies by just avoiding such people altogether. Envy is caused by the flaunting of one's possessions. If one instead lives a simple, modest lifestyle, no one can possibly have cause for envy.

Letter CVII: Lucilius is grieving over some slaves of his that ran away. Seneca tells him that he should not let his peace of mind be disturbed by the vicissitudes of fortune. Indeed, since God is the author of all that happens in the world, one should accept with joy whatever fortune brings, even if it at first seems evil.

Letter CVIII: Many people find philosophy attractive for the wrong reasons. Some simply like the elegant philosophy often employed by philosophers. They will write down this or that poetic quote in a notebook and repeat it to all of their friends. Of course, the actual content of the quote is of no matter to them, and their life will in no way reflect a great devotion to wisdom or justice. Others, slightly more sophisticated, are moved by the sentiments expressed by philosophy, but are still under the sway of society to change their lives. Many so-called intellectuals even have a misguided interest in philosophy. Literary scholars, for example, will find some wise saying in Virgil, but, instead of understanding what it means and trying to apply it to their own lives, will dissect what words are used and how they parallel some other passage in Homer. Only the philosopher can truly appreciate wisdom, for his first instinct is to incorporate it into his life and actions.

Letters CXIV, CXXII, and CXXIII

Letters CXIV, CXXII, and CXXIII Summary and Analysis

Letter CXIV: Lucilius has asked why certain "corrupt" styles of writing seem to proliferate. Seneca responds by saying that a man's writing style is indicative of his character. If a person writes in a fashion which is meant to be entertaining and exciting, by delaying the important part of a sentence until the last moment, it often reflects a nature which loves attention but lacks real substance. Others write obscurely and awkwardly. Often this is due to more than merely a lack of skill; often such people write this way intentionally. The soul of such a person might be spoken of, metaphorically, as drunken, because it suffers from a kind of irrationality and rambling which no one else can understand.

Letter CXXII: A good man will always keep a regular routine which begins in the morning and does not extend very late into the night. It is a sign of a perverse character if one is constantly staying up all night and sleeping through daylight. By nature, man is a diurnal creature, and thus to sleep through the day is to invert one's own nature.

Letter CXXIII: Seneca notes how happy he is that he has reached the point where he is not bothered by the quality of his life. He is content to have just what is necessary and nothing more. He warns Lucilius about overmuch contact with the masses, for it is easy to adopt social conventions unconsciously and think that unvirtuous, superfluous customs are in fact rational and good. One must especially avoid those who try to intellectually justify such customs, for man is naturally inclined to listen to ways to rationalize his vices.

Characters

Seneca

Seneca was a Roman statesman and philosopher who was born around 0 C.E. He was well-known and respected for his long years of public service to the Roman Empire. At the time he wrote these letters, he was advanced in his years. He complains frequently of various illnesses, but especially of asthma, which is so severe that he winds up leaving Rome (which he does not like anyway) and moving out to a rural residence. He is married to Paulina, whom he mentions only once; however, it does seem that he genuinely loves her because he notes that the only reason he cares for his health is to stay alive for her sake. It is obvious from his letters that he is quite wealthy and, though he recognizes that all men, rich and poor, are united by their common human nature, his social consciousness seems to be confined only to the upper-class. Everything he speaks about assumes a personal familiarity with upper-class Roman society; he is not, however, uncritical of it.

Seneca has a particularly Roman brand of Greek Stoicism, a philosophy derived especially from the writings of Zeno. The Greek Stoics—and Greek philosophers in general—had a reputation of being strange, unconventional troublemakers. For the most part, this reputation was deserved. Philosophers took pride in shunning social customs and even actively provoking the disgust of others. As a well-to-do Roman with a reputation to uphold, such connotations are surely unattractive to Seneca. As such, his brand of Stoicism is a very polished form. He rejects any notion that one must shun social conventions; indeed, he argues that one must follow them, so long as none of it leads to acting immorally. Thus, while one should not engage in the excessive drinking of the masses during holidays, it is acceptable, and even obligatory, to take some part in the festivities and not make oneself too conspicuous.

Lucilius

Lucilius is Seneca's correspondent. It is historically uncertain whether Lucilius actually existed or whether he was a fictional device created to provide a context for Seneca's moral teachings. In favor of his existence is the fact that many of the letters seem to have a personal quality to them which would make little sense if there were no real recipient. For example, in Letter XLVI Seneca thanks Lucilius for sending a book and writes that he will give a more complete response once he has had a chance to read it a second. Nowhere in the letter does he mention the contents of the book. It is difficult to justify the existence of such a letter if Lucilius were indeed fictional.

If Lucilius did exist, it would seem that he is a slow learner. Though the amount of time that elapses between the letters is not known (though all of the letters were written when Seneca was quite old and retired from his public life), Seneca frequently repeats his lessons and it would seem that Lucilius often forgets advice given to him. For

example, Seneca says in Letter II that merely changing one's location will do nothing to overcome a troubled soul, for a person takes himself wherever he goes. However, Letter XXVIII seems to be a response to Lucilius' letter expressing consternation over the fact that his frequent and varied travels have done nothing to relieve his melancholy. Of course, this provides Seneca with an occasion to reiterate and expand upon the theme established in Letter II that simply traveling will do nothing to bring peace to a soul. He returns to the same theme in Letter CIV. It could be reasonably argued that Lucilius is a fictional construct on the basis that the context for Letter XXVIII seems contrived and unrealistic.

Epicurus

Epicurus was a philosopher who advocated living a life which, to whatever extent was possible, avoided pain or discomfort. He did not, as is commonly believed, advocate a life without any restraint upon desire.

Hecato

Hecato was a Stoic philosopher whom Seneca quotes from time to time.

Socrates

Socrates was a Greek philosopher whom Seneca sees as exemplary for his ability to remain calm and collected throughout a life filled with conflict and difficulty.

Aristotle

Aristotle was Greek philosopher. His followers are known as the Peripatetics. Seneca talks about him at length in Letter LXV where he discusses the differences between the Stoic and Aristotelian concepts of cause. Seneca naturally sides with the Stoics.

Plato

Plato was a Greek philosopher. His followers are known as the Academics and have a reputation for being skeptics.

Zeno

Zeno was widely considered to be the founder of the Stoic school of philosophy. Though Seneca praises his philosophy, he often criticizes his method.

Vatia

Vatia was a Roman general who retired from public life to avoid getting into trouble with the government. Many praised his leisurely lifestyle, but Seneca finds it despicable.

Scipio

Scipio was a Roman general who went into voluntary exile to avoid aggravating political turmoil in the Empire. Seneca praises his many achievements and seeming disinterest in material comforts.

Objects/Places

Philosophy

Philosophy is the love of wisdom. For Seneca, philosophy is primarily concerned with figuring out how to live one's life well.

Philology

Philology is the study of words. Seneca uses this term to deride those philosophers who spend all their time quibbling over arguments instead of reflecting on how one ought to live.

Rome

Rome is the capitol city of the Roman Empire. Seneca describes the city as polluted and unclean. He also condemns its moral frailty and says that a wise man would do well to avoid it.

Stoicism

Stoicism is a system of philosophy derived from Greek philosophers, particularly Zeno. The philosophy advocates developing a character which is calm and peaceful regardless of what adversity one encounters. It emphasizes living in accordance with one's rational nature.

Epicureanism

Epicureanism is a philosophy which derives much of its substance (and name) from the Greek philosopher Epicurus. Though it has the reputation for being hedonistic, it is actually similar to Stoicism in that it thinks the main goal in life is to achieve a state of mental peace.

Asthma

Seneca is afflicted with asthma. He often has severe bouts of difficult breathing and coughing that last for an hour or more.

Nomentum

In hopes of mitigating his asthma, Seneca moves to his country residence in Nomentum where the air will be fresher.

Apatheia

Apatheia is the Greek term for that state of mind in which a man cannot be affected by whatever misfortune or adversity he experiences. For the Stoic, it is the ideal towards which men should strive.

Fortune

The notion of Fortune—an almost personal force which gives and takes away material and social favors—is integral to Seneca's philosophy and ancient philosophy in general.

Suicide

Seneca argues that suicide can, in some cases, be not only acceptable, but actually obligatory. The Stoics have no great fear of death—they have, ideally, no fear of anything—and there is a tendency to prefer activity over passivity. Insofar as suicide is active and letting oneself die is passive, suicide, especially when one is terminally ill or facing political persecution, is often seen as honorable. Seneca committed suicide when Nero rose to power and began to persecute former politicians.

Themes

The Happy Man is Self-Sufficient

The essence of Stoicism is that the happy man—which is, they say, the same as the wise man—is a person whose happiness depends only upon interior perfection. He is impervious to the winds of fortune. He does not care whether he loses his property, his reputation, or even his health. For, throughout all of those misfortunes, he carries with him his greatest treasure: his wisdom. Seneca does note that all men, even the wise men, have certain natural impulses and desires, however, which can never be completely blotted out. There seems to be a certain minimum amount of comfort that is necessary, not for happiness, but for the satisfaction of these instincts. A person needs adequate food, modest shelter, and a few friends. Seneca believes that in man's primordial state—the so-called Golden Age—all of these goods were immediately accessible to everyone. However, greed gradually took over and people started claiming property for themselves. They were no longer satisfied by the modest provisions of nature and created technology to satisfy their insatiable desires.

For Seneca, the wise man is necessarily virtuous. Virtue is nothing more than the possession of a character which is in accordance with man's rational nature. Furthermore, wisdom is the art of living appropriately. Thus, virtue might be defined as having a character that is in accordance with reason. One of the essential characteristics of virtue is the avoidance of extremes. For example, one ought not to share his personal affairs with strangers but he also should have friends with whom he can share his life. It is contrary to reasonable living to be either too trusting or too untrusting.

Seneca's Stoicism as a Polished Form of Greek Stoicism

Greek Stoics, and Greek philosophers in general, had a bad reputation in Roman society. They were generally conceived of as unruly, unkempt troublemakers. In a way, this reputation was deserved. The Greek philosophers, especially certain schools, including the Stoics, often seemed to actually take pleasure in transgressing social conventions and arousing the disgust of their follow man. Many believed that society was an obstacle to living in accordance with nature, a sentiment which Seneca seems to share in Letter XC.

Such an unconventional and uncivilized lifestyle was likely unfathomable to Seneca. He was part of the Roman social elite. He had a good reputation as a public servant. In a society that was fixated on notions of honor and conformity, truly living up to the lifestyle advocated by the Greeks was probably a sacrifice too great for Seneca. There is, perhaps, a bit of irony in this hesitation; after all, even Seneca's brand of Stoicism explicitly disregards the value of reputation. All that matters is interior peace and the

truly wise man will not care even if he is thrown in prison and tortured. It may be mentioned in Seneca's defense that he himself noted that he was not yet perfected in virtue.

Philosophy as a Way of Life

To the modern reader, the term "philosophy" brings with it the connotation of abstract theorizing about such problems as the nature of existence, the fundamentals of logic, or the possibility of knowledge. For Seneca, however, philosophy is eminently practical. Indeed, philosophy is the most practical art. All other arts are concerned with a specific purpose and context; philosophy is concerned with living in general. Cobbling is concerned only with how to make shoes; archery is concerned only with how to shoot arrows; medicine is concerned only with maintaining health. Philosophy, however, is concerned with living well and, therefore, it embraces and directs all of the other arts, insofar as they are part of one's life.

Seneca indeed seems to have a kind of aversion to overly abstract forms of philosophy. He expresses his frustration with those philosophers (whom he derides by calling them philologists—lovers of words) who devise clever but deceptive syllogisms to prove their philosophical points. He even criticizes some of the most prominent members of the Stoic school, like Zeno. Seneca's preferred method is to use examples. Thus, if one wants to prove that the wise man does not drink excessively, one should point out people who are drunkards and show how obviously unfitting their behavior—puking, lack of control, seeming insanity—is not fit for a man who wishes to devote himself to wisdom. At times, Seneca seems to have a downright anti-intellectual streak in him. In Letter LXXXVIII Seneca has little good to say about the liberal arts, a term which encompasses such fields as literary analysis and history. Insofar as none of these arts teaches a man how to live well, they are no more than a distraction. Their only value is that they can serve as a kind of preparation for the study of philosophy by instilling a man with certain intellectual habits.

Style

Perspective

Seneca's philosophical work exhibits a careful balance of his two identities: first, a member of Roman high society and, second, as a philosopher. In Roman society, appearances were everything. One had to obey all of the prescribed customs and the notion of honor permeated everything. It is important to realize however that acting honorably did not always mean acting morally. In fact, sometimes it was quite the opposite. Some philosophers had even distinguished "noble" and "ignoble" vices. An honorable man might be proud, for example, but he would never be a drunkard.

On the other side is the world of philosophy. For the most part, Romans associated philosophy with the Greeks, and the association was not a pleasant one. The Greek philosophers had a (more or less deserved) reputation for being strange, unkempt, counter-cultural troublemakers. Disobeying social customs was a fundamental belief of many of the philosophical schools and many philosophers had gained notoriety for going out of their way to disgust others.

The difficulty for Seneca, then, is trying to reconcile continuing to live at the center of Roman society with a dedication to a decidedly eccentric Greek philosophy. The result is a polished-up version of Stoicism. There are, to be sure, still counter-cultural elements in Seneca's thought. He speaks openly about not liking Rome (77) and his discussion of the mythical Golden Age (177-183) implies a kind of general disdain towards civilization. Nonetheless, he also writes several times about the need for a philosopher to obey social customs, insofar as it is ethically possible (cf. 37, 66-67), in order to prevent people from developing negative associations with philosophers, or confirming those they already have.

Tone

Throughout the letters, Seneca assumes the role of teacher and master. Whether or not Lucilius is a real person, he at least represents a younger man who is trying to figure out how to live correctly in, more or less, the same society Seneca belongs to. Each letter generally focuses on one particular moral subject—whether one should grieve, whether one should fear death, how the wise man views fortune—and Seneca rarely qualifies his authority. Though from time to time he will corroborate his opinions with a quote from some acknowledged authority—sometimes a philosopher, like Zeno, and sometimes a poet, like Virgil—Seneca has a principled opposition to overly relying on the wisdom of authors. A fully-grown man, he says, ought not to rely on others, but should be "standing on his own feet" and develop his own philosophy (80).

That said, Seneca does make some attempts to at least affect humility. This is the explicit topic of Letter XXVII, in which he responds to Lucilius' question as to whether

he, Seneca, is perfect. It would seem unfitting, after all, for a person to give others advice when he is still struggling with his own moral problems. Seneca essentially agrees with this point and tries to re-frame the nature of his letters. He is not, he claims, a pedagogue dispensing his wisdom to sinful humanity; instead, he is a fellow sinner who is giving and receiving advice, in the hopes that both he and Lucilius will improve. It might be validly objected that this claim is inconsistent with the tone of the other forty-one letters in the collection.

Structure

This collection is composed of forty-two letters taken from the 124 letters of the "Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium." For the most part, the collection's editor included only letters he judged to be of interest to a student wishing to understand Seneca's flavor of Stoic philosopher. Accordingly, many of the letters which are included have been pruned of passages which are either superfluous or repeat themes that have been thoroughly discussed elsewhere.

It is unclear whether Lucilius, the ostensible recipient of these letters, was in fact a real person. It is possible that he was a fictional construction of Seneca's used to provide a context for writing down his lessons on morality. The book itself presents evidence that could be used to argue either position. In favor of Lucilius being a real person, some of the letters are of such a personal nature that it is difficult to find much value in them to anyone other than Lucilius. For example, in Letter XLVI, Seneca thanks Lucilius for sending him a book (the contents of which he never reveals) and writes that he will give his opinion on it after he has had a chance to give it a second reading. Nothing in the letter is of any obvious philosophical value. However, the contexts which Lucilius provides to Seneca are often suspiciously convenient. For one, Lucilius often seems to be a notably slow learner. In Letter II, Seneca writes that a person can never escape sorrow through travels. Yet, in Letter XXVII Lucilius seems to have made this exact mistake: he has tried traveling to overcome his melancholy soul. Quite naturally, Seneca uses this fact to reiterate and expand upon the theme touched upon in Letter II. It may be argued that the obviously contrived nature of this and other letters is evidence that Lucilius is a convenient fiction.

Quotes

"Nothing, to my way of thinking, is a better proof of a well ordered mind than a man's ability to stop just where he is and pass some time in his own company." (33)

"Each day, too, acquire something which will help you to face poverty, or death, and other ills as well." (34)

"'Avoid,' I cry, 'whatever is approved of by the mob and things that are the gift of chance. . . .'" (45)

"If God adds the morrow we should accept it joyfully. The man who looks for the morrow without worrying over it knows a peaceful independence and a happiness beyond all others." (59)

"Remaining dry and sober takes a good deal more strength of will when everyone about one is puking drunk; it takes a more developed sense of fitness, on the other hand, not to make of oneself a person apart, to be neither indistinguishable from those about one nor conspicuous by one's difference, to do the same things but not in quite the same manner. For a holiday can be celebrated without extravagant festivity." (67)

"So, my dear Lucilius, behave in keeping with your usual fair-mindedness and stop misinterpreting the kindness of fortune. She has given as well as taken away. Let us therefore go all out to make the most of friends, since no one can tell how long we shall have the opportunity." (115)

"The wise man and devotee of philosophy is needless to say inseparable from his body, and yet he is detached from it so far as the best part of his personality is concerned, directing his thoughts towards things far above. He looks on this present life of his, much like the man who has signed on as a soldier, as the term he has to serve out." (122)

"What in fact makes people who are morally unenlightened upset by the experience of physical distress is their failure to acquire the habit of contentment with the spirit. They have instead been preoccupied by the body. That is why a man of noble and enlightened character separates body from spirit and has just as much to do with the former, the frail and complaining part of our nature, as is necessary and no more, and a lot to do with the better, the divine element." (133)

"The things that are essential are acquired with little bother; it is the luxuries that call for toil and effort." (166)

"Nothing is durable, whether for an individual or for a society; the destinies of men and cities alike sweep onwards. Terror strikes amid the most tranquil surroundings, and without any disturbance in the background to give rise to them calamities spring from the least expected quarter." (179)

"I tell you all this just to show you the tremendous enthusiasm with which the merest beginner will see about attaining the very highest goals provided someone gives him the necessary prompting and encouragement. Things tend, in fact, to go wrong; part of the blame lies on the teachers of philosophy, who today teach us how to argue instead of how to live, part on their students, who come to the teachers in the first place with a view to developing not their character but their intellect. The result has been the transformation of philosophy, the study of wisdom, into philology, the study of words." (207)

"The spirit is our queen. So long as she is unharmed, the rest remains at its post, obedient and submissive. If she wavers for a moment, in the same moment the rest all falters." (220)

Topics for Discussion

Is Lucilius real or fictional?

Explain why Seneca believes that the philosopher ought to follow social conventions.

If a Stoic does not care about pain, why is it acceptable for a person to end his life to alleviate suffering?

Explain how a Stoic can be completely self-sufficient and yet still need friends.

Explain how Seneca's social circumstances influence his philosophy.

Why does Seneca not want to attribute technological innovations to philosophers?

Explain the relationship between God and fortune.