

On the Happy Life

Lucius Annaeus Seneca

Lucius Annaeus Seneca was born in about 4 B.C.E. in Córdoba, Spain, where his father was a Roman official and a noted orator. While still an infant, he was brought to Rome by an aunt, who raised him there. In school he studied rhetoric and then philosophy. He pursued a career as a lawyer and politician, but also continued his study of philosophy. His eloquence in the Senate aroused the jealousy of the Roman emperor Caligula, who planned to execute him but then changed his mind. When Claudius became emperor in 41, Seneca was accused of committing adultery with Claudius's niece. The Senate condemned him to death, but Claudius commuted the sentence to banishment. Eight years later he was recalled to Rome to tutor the young Nero, the son of Claudius's wife by a previous marriage. When Nero became emperor in 54, he made Seneca one of his principal advisors. But in 65 Seneca was accused of conspiracy and, presented with the choice of execution or suicide, he calmly slashed his wrists.

Seneca's works include twelve essays on practical moral philosophy (his main area of interest), a treatise on natural science entitled *Natural Questions*, three *consolations* (works intended to comfort individuals who have suffered a personal loss), nine tragedies, and numerous letters on philosophical topics.

Our selection is from Seneca's essay *On the Happy Life*, written in about 58 C.E. and addressed to Gallio, his older brother. (Gallio, incidentally, was the Roman official who refused to judge Paul; see Acts 18:12–17.) Seneca begins with the observation that by nature all human beings desire happiness. But what is happiness? Following the tradition of Stoicism (a philosophical school that began in the third century B.C.E. with the Greek philosopher Zeno of Citium), Seneca maintains that to be happy is to follow the guidance of nature. (In Stoicism, *nature* has a twofold sense: the divine power that rules the universe and the rational nature of the individual person, which is a portion of the divine power.) To follow nature is to live a life of virtue. A virtuous life is one of tranquility and harmony of soul: One is content with one's lot, indifferent to the vagaries of fortune, and beyond both fear and desire. Seneca explains that although virtuous living brings a certain kind of pleasure as a by-product, pleasure is not identical with happiness and should not be our goal in life. At the end of his essay, Seneca (who was very wealthy) points out that it is not inconsistent for a Stoic to possess wealth: The moral error lies not in owning riches but in letting riches own us.

To live happily, my brother Gallio, is the desire of all men, but their minds are blinded to a clear vision of just what it is that makes life happy. And so far from its being easy to attain the happy life, the more eagerly a man strives to reach it, the farther he recedes from it if he has made a mistake in the road; for when it leads in the opposite direction, his very speed will increase the distance that separates him.

First, therefore, we must seek what it is that we are aiming at. Then we must look about for the road by which we can reach it most quickly; and on the journey itself, if only we are on the right path, we shall discover how much of the distance we overcome each day, and how much nearer we are to the goal toward which we are urged by a natural desire. But so long as we wander aimlessly, having no guide and following only the noise and dis-

cordant cries of those who call us in different directions, life will be consumed in making mistakes—life that is brief even if we should strive day and night for sound wisdom. Let us, therefore, decide both upon the goal and upon the way, and not fail to find some experienced guide who has explored the region towards which we are advancing; for the conditions of this journey are different from those of most travel. On most journeys some well-recognized road and inquiries made of the inhabitants of the region prevent you from going astray; but on this one all the best beaten and the most frequented paths are the most deceptive. Nothing, therefore, needs to be more emphasized than the warning that we should not, like sheep, follow the lead of the throng in front of us, travelling, thus, the way that all go and not the way that we ought to go. Yet nothing involves us in greater trouble than the fact that we adapt ourselves to common report in the belief that the best things are those that have met with great approval—the fact that, having so many to follow, we live after the rule, not of reason, but of imitation. The result of this is that people are piled high, one above another, as they rush to destruction. And just as it happens that in a great crush of humanity, when the people push against each other, no one can fall down without drawing along another, and those that are in front cause destruction to those behind—this same thing you may see happening everywhere in life. No man can go wrong to his own hurt only, but he will be both the cause and the sponsor of another's wrongdoing. For it is dangerous to attach oneself to the crowd in front, and so long as each one of us is more willing to trust another than to judge for himself, we never show any judgement in the matter of living, but always a blind trust; and a mistake that has been passed on from hand to hand finally involves us and works our destruction. It is the example of other people that is our undoing. Let us merely separate ourselves from the crowd, and we shall be made whole. But as it is, the populace, defending its own iniquity, pits itself against reason. And so we see the same thing happening that happens at the elections, where, when the fickle breeze of popular favour has shifted, the very same persons who chose the praetors¹ wonder that those praetors were chosen. The same thing has one moment our favour, the next our disfavour; this is the outcome of every decision that follows the choice of the majority.

When the happy life is under debate, there will be no use for you to reply to me, as if it were a matter of votes: "This side seems to be in a majority." For that is just the reason it is the worse side. Human affairs are not so happily ordered that the majority prefer the better things; a proof of the worst choice is the crowd. Therefore let us find out what is best to do, not what is most commonly done—what will establish our claim to lasting happiness, not what finds favour with the rabble, who are the worst possible exponents of the truth. . . .

I shall pass over in silence the opinions of other philosophers, for it would be tedious to enumerate and refute them all. Do you listen to ours.

But when I say "ours," I do not bind myself to some particular one of the Stoic masters; I, too, have the right to form an opinion. Accordingly, I shall follow so-and-so, I shall request so-and-so to divide the question. Perhaps too, when called upon after all the rest, I shall impugn none of my predecessors' opinions and shall say: "I simply have this much to add." Meantime, I follow the guidance of nature—a doctrine upon which all Stoics are agreed. Not to stray from nature and to mould ourselves according to her law and pattern—this is true wisdom.

The happy life, therefore, is a life that is in harmony with its own nature, and it can be attained in only one way. First of all, we must have a sound mind and one that is in constant possession of its sanity. Second, it must be courageous and energetic and, too, capable of the noblest fortitude, ready for every emergency, careful of the body and of all that concerns it, but without anxiety. Lastly, it must be attentive to all the advantages that adorn life, but with overmuch love for none—the user, but not the slave, of the gifts of fortune. You understand, even if I do not say more, that, when once we have driven away all that excites or affrights us, there ensues unbroken tranquillity and enduring freedom. For when pleasures and fears have been banished, then, in place of all that is trivial and fragile and harmful just because of the evil it works, there comes upon us first a boundless joy that is firm and unalterable, then peace and harmony of the soul and true greatness coupled with kindness; for all ferocity is born from weakness. . . .

It will come to the same thing if I say: "The highest good is a mind that scorns the happenings of chance and rejoices only in virtue," or say: "It is the power of the mind to be unconquerable, wise from experience, calm in action, showing the while much courtesy and consideration in intercourse with others." It may also be defined in the statement that the happy man is he who recognizes no good and evil other than a good and an evil mind—one who cherishes honour, is content with virtue, who is neither puffed up nor crushed by the happenings of chance, who knows of no greater good than that which he alone is able to bestow upon himself, for whom true pleasure will be the scorn of pleasures. It is possible, too, if one chooses to be discursive, to transfer the same idea to various other forms of expression without injuring or weakening its meaning. For what prevents us from saying that the happy life is to have a mind that is free, lofty, fearless, and steadfast—a mind that is placed beyond the reach of fear, beyond the reach of desire, that counts virtue the only good, baseness the only evil, and all else but a worthless mass of things which come and go without increasing or diminishing the highest good, and neither subtract any part from the happy life nor add any part to it? . . .

The happy man is one who is freed from both fear and desire because of the gift of reason; since even rocks are free from fear and sorrow, and no less are the beasts of the field, yet for all that no one could say that these things are "blissful," when they have no comprehension of bliss. Put in the

same class those people whose dullness of nature and ignorance of themselves have reduced them to the level of beasts of the field and of inanimate things. There is no difference between the one and the other, since in one case they are things without reason, and in the other their reason is warped and works their own hurt, being active in the wrong direction. For no man can be said to be happy if he has been thrust outside the pale of truth. Therefore the life that is happy has been founded on correct and trustworthy judgement, and is unalterable. Then truly is the mind unclouded and freed from every ill, since it knows how to escape not only deep wounds, but even scratches; and, resolved to hold to the end whatever stand it has taken, it will defend its position even against the assaults of an angry fortune. For so far as sensual pleasure is concerned, though it flows about us on every side, steals in through every opening, softens the mind with its blandishments, and employs one resource after another in order to seduce us in whole or in part, yet who of mortals, if he has left in him one trace of a human being, would choose to have his senses tickled night and day, and, forsaking the mind, devote his attention wholly to the body?

"But the mind also," it will be said, "has its own pleasures." Let it have them [indeed], and let it pose as a judge of luxury and pleasures; let it gorge itself with all the things that are wont to delight the senses, then let it look back upon the past, and, recalling faded pleasures, let it intoxicate itself with former experiences and be eager now for those to come; and let it lay its plans, and, while the body lies helpless from present cramming, let it direct its thoughts to that to come—yet from all this, it seems to me, the mind will be more wretched than ever, since it is madness to choose evils instead of goods. But no man can be happy unless he is sane, and no man can be sane who searches for what will injure him in place of what is best. The happy man, therefore, is one who has right judgement; the happy man is content with his present lot, no matter what it is, and is reconciled to his circumstances; the happy man is he who allows reason to fix the value of every condition of existence.

Even those who declare that the highest good is in the belly see in what a dishonourable position they have placed it. And so they say that it is not possible to separate pleasure from virtue, and they aver that no one can live virtuously without also living pleasantly, nor pleasantly without also living virtuously. But I do not see how things so different can be cast in the same mould. What reason is there, I beg of you, why pleasure cannot be separated from virtue? Do you mean, since all goods have their origin in virtue, even the things that you love and desire must spring from its roots? But if the two were inseparable, we should not see certain things pleasant but not honourable, and certain things truly most honourable but painful and capable of being accomplished only through suffering. Then, too, we see that pleasure enters into even the basest life, but, on the other hand, virtue does not permit life to be evil, and there are people who are unhappy not without pleasure—nay, are so on account of pleasure itself—and this

could not happen if pleasure were indissolubly joined to virtue. Virtue often lacks pleasure, and never needs it. Why do you couple things that are unlike, nay, even opposites? Virtue is something lofty, exalted and regal, unconquerable, and unwearied; pleasure is something lowly, servile, weak, and perishable, whose haunt and abode are the brothel and the tavern. Virtue you will find in the temple, in the forum, in the senate-house; you will find her standing in front of the city walls, dusty and stained, and with calloused hands. Pleasure you will more often find lurking out of sight, and in search of darkness, around the public baths and the sweating-rooms and the places that fear the police—soft, enervated, reeking with wine and perfume, and pallid, or else painted and made up with cosmetics like a corpse. The highest good is immortal, it knows no ending, it permits neither surfeit nor regret; for the right-thinking mind never alters, it neither is filled with self-loathing nor suffers any change in its life, that is ever the best. But pleasure is extinguished just when it is most enjoyed; it has but small space, and thus quickly fills it; it grows weary and is soon spent after its first assault. Nor is anything certain whose nature consists in movement. So it is not even possible that there should be any substance in that which comes and goes most swiftly and will perish in the very exercise of its power; for it struggles to reach a point at which it may cease, and it looks to the end while it is beginning.

What, further, is to be said of the fact that pleasure belongs alike to the good and the evil, and that the base delight no less in their disgrace than do the honourable in fair repute? And therefore the ancients have enjoined us to follow, not the most pleasant, but the best life, in order that pleasure should be, not the leader, but the companion of a right and proper desire. For we must use nature as our guide. She it is that reason heeds; it is of her that it takes counsel. Therefore to live happily is the same thing as to live according to nature. What this is, I shall proceed to make clear. If we shall guard the endowments of the body and the needs of nature with care and fearlessness, in the thought that they have been given but for a day and are fleeting; if we shall not be their slaves, nor allow these alien things to become our masters; if we shall count that the gratifications of the body, unessential as they are, have a place like to that of the auxiliaries and light-armed troops in camp; if we let them serve, not command—thus and thus only will these things be profitable to the mind. Let a man not be corrupted by external things; let him be unconquerable and admire only himself, courageous in spirit and ready for any fate; let him be the moulder of his own life; let not his confidence be without knowledge, nor his knowledge without firmness; let his decisions once made abide; and let not his decrees be altered by any erasure. It will be understood, even without my adding it, that such a man will be poised and well-ordered, and will show majesty mingled with courtesy in all his actions. Let reason search into external things at the instigation of the senses, and, while it derives from them its first knowledge (for it has no other base from which it may oper-

ate, or begin its assault upon truth), yet let it fall back upon itself. For God also, the all-embracing world and the ruler of the universe, reaches forth into outward things, yet, withdrawing from all sides, returns into himself. And our mind should do the same: when, having followed the senses that serve it, it has through them reached to things without, let it be the master both of them and of itself. In this way will be born an energy that is united, a power that is at harmony with itself, and that dependable reason which is not divided against itself nor uncertain either in its opinions, or its perceptions, or in its convictions. And this reason, when it has regulated itself and established harmony between all its parts and, so to speak, is in tune, has attained the highest good. For no crookedness, no slipperiness is left to it—nothing that will cause it to stumble or fall. It will do everything under its own authority and nothing unexpected will befall it, but whatever it does will turn out a good—and that, too, easily and readily and without subterfuge on the part of the doer, for reluctance and hesitation are an indication of conflict and instability. Therefore you may boldly declare that the highest good is harmony of the soul; for where concord and unity are, there must the virtues be. Discord accompanies the vices.

"But even you," it is retorted, "cultivate virtue for no other reason than because you hope for some pleasure from it." But, in the first place, even though virtue is sure to bestow pleasure, it is not for this reason that virtue is sought. For it is not this, but something more than this that she bestows; nor does she labour for this, but her labour, while directed toward something else, achieves this also. As in a ploughed field, which has been broken up for grain, some flowers will spring up here and there, yet it was not for these poor little plants, although they may please the eye, that so much toil was expended (the sower had a different purpose, these were superadded)—just so, pleasure is neither the cause nor the reward of virtue, but its by-product, and we do not accept virtue because she delights us, but if we accept her, she also delights us. The highest good lies in the very choice of it, and in the very attitude of a mind made perfect. And when the mind has completed its course and fortified itself within its own bounds, the highest good has now been perfected, and nothing further is desired; for there can no more be anything outside of the whole than there can be some point beyond the end. Therefore you blunder when you ask what it is that makes me seek virtue; you are looking for something beyond the supreme. Do you ask what it is that I seek in virtue? Only herself. For she offers nothing better—she herself is her own reward. Or does this seem to you too small a thing? When I say to you, "The highest good is the inflexibility of an unyielding mind, its foresight, its sublimity, its soundness, its freedom, its harmony, its beauty," do you require of me something still greater to which these blessings may be ascribed? Why do you mention to me pleasure? It is the good of man that I am searching for, not that of his belly. The belly of cattle and wild beasts is more roomy!

"You are misrepresenting what I say," you retort; "for I admit that no man can live pleasantly without at the same time living virtuously as well, and this is patently impossible for dumb beasts and for those who measure their good by mere food. Distinctly, I say, and openly I testify that the life that I denominate pleasant is impossible without the addition of virtue." Yet who does not know that those who are most apt to be filled with your sort of pleasure are all the greatest fools, and that wickedness abounds in enjoyments, and that the mind itself supplies many kinds of pleasure that are vicious? Foremost are haughtiness, a too high opinion of one's self and a puffed-up superiority to others, a blind and unthinking devotion to one's own interests, dissolute luxury, extravagant joy springing from very small and childish causes, a biting tongue, the arrogance that takes pleasure in insults, sloth, and the degeneracy of a sluggish mind that falls asleep over itself. All these things virtue tosses aside, and she plucks the ear² and appraises pleasures before she permits them. And those that she approves she sets no great store by, or even just permits them; and it is not her use of them, but her temperance that gives her joy. Since, however, temperance reduces our pleasures, injury results to your highest good. You embrace pleasure; I enchain her; you enjoy pleasure, I use it; you think it the highest good, I do not think it even a good; you do everything for the sake of pleasure, I, nothing.

When I say that "I" do nothing for the sake of pleasure, I am speaking of the ideal wise man, to whom alone you are willing to concede pleasure. But I do not call him a wise man who is dominated by anything, still less by pleasure. And yet if he is engrossed by this, how will he withstand toil and danger and want and all the threatening ills that clamour about the life of man? How will he endure the sight of death, how grief, how the crashes of the universe and all the fierce foes that face him, if he has been subdued by so soft an adversary? You say: "He will do whatever pleasure advises." But come, do you not see how many things it will be able to advise? "It will not be able to advise anything base," you say, "because it is linked with virtue." But once more, do you not see what sort of thing that highest good must be if it needs a guardian in order to become a good? And how shall virtue guide pleasure if she follows her, since it is the part of one who obeys to follow, of one who commands to guide? Do you station in the rear the one that commands? Truly a fine office that you assign to virtue—to be the foretaster³ of your pleasures! . . .

Whosoever has gone over to the side of virtue, has given proof of a noble nature; he who follows pleasure is seen to be weakly, broken, losing his manhood, and on the sure path to baseness unless someone shall establish for him some distinction between pleasures, so that he may know which of them lie within the bounds of natural desire, which sweep headlong onward and are unbounded and are the more insatiable the more they are satisfied. Come, then—let virtue lead the way, and every step will be safe. Then, too, it is the excess of pleasure that harms; but in the case of

virtue there need be no fear of any excess, for in virtue itself resides moderation. That cannot be a good that suffers from its own magnitude. Besides, to creatures endowed with a rational nature what better guide can be offered than reason? Even if that combination⁴ pleases you, if you are pleased to proceed toward the happy life in such company, let virtue lead the way, let pleasure attend her—let it hover about the body like its shadow. To hand over virtue, the loftiest of mistresses, to be the handmaid of pleasure is the part of a man who has nothing great in his soul.

Let virtue go first; let her bear the standard. We shall nonetheless have pleasure, but we shall be the master and control her. At times we shall yield to her entreaty, never to her constraint. But those who surrender the leadership to pleasure, lack both. For they lose virtue and yet do not possess pleasure, but are possessed by it; and they are either tortured by the lack of it or strangled by its excess—wretched if it deserts them, more wretched if it overwhelms them. They are like sailors who have been caught in the waters around the Syrtes⁵ and now are left on the dry shore and again are tossed by the seething waves. But this results from a complete lack of self-control and blind love for an object, for if one seeks evils instead of goods, success becomes dangerous. As the hunt for wild beasts is fraught with hardship and danger, and even those that are captured are an anxious possession (for many a time they rend their masters), so it is as regards great pleasures—for they turn out to be a great misfortune, and captured pleasures become now the captors. And the more and the greater the pleasures are, the more inferior will that man be whom the crowd calls happy, and the more masters will he have to serve. . . .

"Nevertheless," someone asks, "what is there to prevent the blending of virtue and pleasure into one, and constituting the highest good in such a way that the honourable and the agreeable may be the same thing?" The answer is that the honourable can have no part that is not honourable, nor will the highest good preserve its integrity if it sees in itself something that is different from its better part. Even the joy that springs from virtue, although it is a good, is not nevertheless a part of the absolute good, any more than are cheerfulness and tranquillity, although they spring from the noblest origins; for goods they are, yet they only attend on the highest good but do not consummate it. . . . Therefore let the highest good mount to a place from which no force can drag it down, where neither pain nor hope nor fear finds access, nor does any other thing that can lower the authority of the highest good. But virtue alone is able to mount to that height. We must follow her footsteps to find that ascent easy. Bravely will she stand, and she will endure whatever happens, not only patiently, but even gladly. She will know that every hardship that time brings comes by a law of nature, and like a good soldier she will submit to wounds, she will count her scars, and, pierced by darts, as she dies she will love him for whose sake she falls—her commander. She will keep in mind that old injunction, "Follow God!" But whoever complains and weeps and moans, is compelled by force to obey commands and, even though he is unwilling, is

rushed nonetheless to the bidden tasks. But what madness to prefer to be dragged rather than to follow! As much so, in all faith, as it is great folly and ignorance of one's lot to grieve because of some lack or some rather bitter happening, and in like manner to be surprised or indignant at those ills that befall the good no less than the bad—I mean sickness and death and infirmities and all the other unexpected ills that invade human life. All that the very constitution of the universe obliges us to suffer, must be borne with high courage. This is the sacred obligation by which we are bound—to submit to the human lot and not to be disquieted by those things which we have no power to avoid. We have been born under a monarchy; to obey God is freedom.

Therefore true happiness is founded upon virtue. And what is the counsel this virtue will give to you? That you should not consider anything either a good or an evil that will not be the result of either virtue or vice; then, that you should stand unmoved both in the face of evil and by the enjoyment of good, to the end that—as far as is allowed—you may body forth God. And what does virtue promise you for this enterprise? Mighty privileges and equal to the divine. You shall be bound by no constraint, nothing shall you lack, you shall be free, safe, unhurt. Nothing shall you [attempt] in vain, from nothing be debarred. All things shall happen according to your desire; nothing adverse shall befall you, nothing contrary to your expectations and wish. "What? Does virtue alone suffice for living happily?" Perfect and divine as it is, why should it not suffice—nay, suffice to overflowing? For if a man has been placed beyond the reach of any desire, what can he possibly lack? If a man has gathered into himself all that is his, what need does he have of any outside thing? . . .

"Philosophers do not practise what they preach," you say. Yet they do practise much that they preach, much that their virtuous minds conceive. For indeed if their actions always matched their words, who would be more happy than they? Meanwhile you have no reason to despise noble words and hearts that are filled with noble thoughts. The pursuit of salutary studies is praiseworthy, even if they have no practical result. What wonder that those who [attempt] the steep path do not mount to the summit? But if you are a man, look up to those who are attempting great things, even though they fall. The man that measures his effort, not by his own strength but by the strength of his nature, that aims at high things and conceives in his heart greater undertakings than could possibly be accomplished even by those endowed with gigantic courage, shows the mark of nobility. . . . The wise man does not deem himself undeserving of any of the gifts of fortune. He does not love riches, but he would rather have them; he does not admit them to his heart, but to his house; and he does not reject the riches he has, but he keeps them and wishes them to supply ampler material for exercising his virtue.

Who, however, can doubt that the wise man finds in riches, rather than in poverty, this ampler material for displaying his powers, since in poverty

there is room for only one kind of virtue ([namely,] not to be bowed down and crushed by it), while in riches moderation and liberality and diligence and orderliness and grandeur all have a wide field? The wise man will not despise himself even if he has the stature of a dwarf, but nevertheless he will wish to be tall. And if he is feeble in body or deprived of one eye, he will still be strong,⁶ but nevertheless he will prefer to have strength of body—and this though he knows that there is something else in him that is stronger than body. If his health is bad he will endure it, but he will wish for good health. For certain things, even if they are trifles in comparison with the whole and can be withdrawn without destroying the essential good, nevertheless contribute something to the perpetual joy that springs from virtue. As a favourable wind, sweeping him on, gladdens the sailor, as a bright day and a sunny spot in the midst of winter and cold give cheer—just so riches have their influence upon the wise man and bring him joy. And besides, who among wise men (I mean those of our school, who count virtue the sole good) denies that even those things which we call “indifferent”⁷ do have some inherent value, and that some are more desirable than others? To some of them we accord little honour, to others much. Do not, therefore, make a mistake—riches are among the more desirable things. “Why then,” you say, “do you make game of me, since they occupy the same place in your eyes that they do in mine?” Do you want to know what a different place they occupy? In my case, if riches slip away, they will take from me nothing but themselves; while if they leave you, you will be dumbfounded, and you will feel that you have been robbed of your real self. In my eyes, riches have a certain place; in yours, they have the highest. In fine, I own my riches; yours own you.

► NOTES

1. *praetors*: elected Roman magistrates with judicial duties [D.C.A., ed.]
2. *plucks the ear*: a Latin expression meaning “reminds someone of something” [D.C.A.]
3. *foretaster*: a slave who tasted food to test it for poison before serving it to the master [D.C.A.]
4. that is, a life combining virtue and pleasure [J.W.B., trans.]
5. *Styrtes*: sandbanks off the northern coast of Africa, proverbially perilous to the sailor [J.W.B.]
6. The author contrasts physical and mental well-being; the latter may exist without the former, but it is desirable to have both. [J.W.B.]
7. In Stoic moral philosophy, something that makes no difference to a person’s moral worth is called “indifferent”—a category that encompasses everything other than virtue and vice. But the Stoics also held that some “indifferent” things (e.g., riches) are preferable to others (e.g., poverty). [D.C.A.]