

What is in every chapter

Seneca wrote no headings; the chapter numbers were added by later editors and say nothing. This is a line for each of the seventy-nine, so you can find a passage again. Valice Press's writing.

On the Shortness of Life

I The complaint that life is short, and the counter-claim: it is long enough, we are simply wasteful. Aristotle quarrelling with Nature about the lifespan of crows.

II The catalogue of waste begins — avarice, drink, ambition, idleness. The line the essay is remembered for: life is long enough if you know how to use it. Note the reversal: the complaint is not answered but reassigned. Nature is acquitted and the reader is charged.

III We defend our money and our land ferociously and give our time to anyone who asks, because time is the one possession it is respectable to be careless with.

IV The powerful long for leisure in public and never take it. Augustus, who ruled the world, writing to the Senate about how much he wanted to stop.

V Cicero, tossed between Catiline and Clodius and Pompey, calling his own consulship not so much glorious as unending.

VI Livius Drusus, who from adolescence never had an hour to himself, asking whether any man had ever had a boyhood as busy as his — and dying by his own hand.

VII Those who waste life on drink and lust; and the worse case, those who waste it on other people's business and call it duty. The list is deliberately graded, and the sting is at the end: the drunkard wastes his own life, the man consumed by other people's business wastes it and is congratulated for doing so.

VIII Men ask for our time and we give it, because neither party can see what is being handed over. Nobody would give away an acre so lightly.

IX The postponers. Everything is arranged for a future nobody has been promised, and the arranging consumes the present that was certain.

X Life divides into what was, what is, and what will be. Only the past is secure — and only the unbusy can bear to look at it.

XI How to tell how short their lives are: watch how desperately they want them longer. Broken old men praying to be thought younger.

XII Who counts as busy. Not only the men in the courts but the man perfecting his hair, the collector, the connoisseur of dinner parties.

XIII The scholars of useless facts — who first did what, who invented which game. Learned uselessness is still waste, and Seneca is scathing about it.

XIV ****The turn.**** The only people genuinely at leisure are those who spend their time with philosophy, because every previous age becomes available to them. This is the hinge of the essay and the reason it is not simply a complaint. Everything before it is diagnosis; everything after is the alternative. If you read

only two chapters, read this and the next.

XV None of the great dead will keep you waiting, refuse your visit, or send you away worse than you came. The most attractive argument for reading ever made in Latin.

XVI The shortest and unhappiest lives belong to those who forget the past, neglect the present and dread the future.

XVII Even their pleasures are anxious, because at the height of them comes the thought: how long will this last?

XVIII ****Paulinus, by name.**** Tear yourself away. You have kept the grain accounts of the world honestly; now keep your own. The essay has been general for seventeen chapters and becomes personal here. It is also the only place in the five dialogues where Seneca tells a named official to give up a specific job.

XIX The comparison that must have stung: is checking that corn has not been damaged in the granary really the same order of work as asking what god is, and what matter?

XX The men who wear the purple and are envied. They buy office with their lives, and their funerals are the loudest thing about them.

On Peace of Mind

I ****Serenus speaks.**** Fifteen hundred words of self-diagnosis: content with plain living until he sees somebody else's silver, resolute alone and dissolved in company, neither ill nor well. The most accurate description of being stuck that survives from antiquity. Read it slowly. Serenus is describing a condition with no name in his language or ours — not illness, not unhappiness, but a settled inability to stay settled — and he describes it better than the answer that follows.

II ****Seneca answers.**** The condition has a name — a disgust with oneself that no change of place will cure. Men travel to escape it and take it with them.

III What to do about it. Athenodorus' advice: occupy yourself with public business, since a mind at work has less room to turn on itself.

IV Seneca disagrees with Athenodorus. He withdrew too soon and too completely; retreat should be the last position, not the first.

V Athens under the Thirty Tyrants, and Socrates walking through it unafraid. The proof that circumstances do not decide the state of a mind.

VI The three examinations before undertaking anything: yourself, the work, and the people you will do it with or for.

VII Choose companions who leave you better. One cheerful, honest friend does more for a mind than any solitude.

VIII Property, which Seneca calls the most fertile source of human sorrows — and he would know.

IX The right measure of wealth is the one you could lose without being destroyed, and the test is whether losing it would change who you are. He mocks the man who owns libraries he will never open. It is the chapter hardest to read alongside Seneca's own three hundred million sesterces, and he must have known that when he wrote it.

X When you cannot get out of a difficulty, change what you think about it rather than thrashing at it.

XI The doctrinal core, and the most expensive claim in the book: everything you have is on loan and can be recalled without notice, and a mind that has genuinely accepted this cannot be ambushed by anything. It is also the severest chapter here, and whether anyone has ever fully held the position is a fair question to bring to it.

XII Do not labour for what is vain or in vain. The Romans who rush about all day at nothing, and come home not knowing why they went out.

XIII Democritus: he who would live at peace must not do much business, either private or public. Seneca half agrees.

XIV Cultivate an easy temper. Diogenes, who owned one slave, and when the slave ran away decided it would be absurd to chase him.

XV Against hating the human race. Heraclitus wept at mankind and Democritus laughed; Seneca prefers the laughter, and says so.

XVI ****When good men come to bad ends.**** Socrates in prison, Rutilius in exile, Cato falling on his sword. Written by a man who would be told to open his veins. The chapter where the system is loaded to breaking. Seneca lists good men destroyed — Socrates, Rutilius, Pompey, Cicero, Cato — and has to explain why a providential universe permits it. He wrote it about twenty years before receiving his own order to die.

XVII The ending surprises most first readers. After sixteen chapters of self-command the advice is to loosen — walk, travel, take a holiday, and occasionally drink, not to drown the mind but to give it slack, on the argument that a bow kept permanently strung breaks. It is the least ascetic page in Stoic literature and it closes the most practical of these five essays.

On the Happy Life

I Everyone wants to live happily and almost nobody can say what that is. Do not follow the crowd; on this question the crowd is the evidence against. The opening is the argument in miniature: everyone wants the same thing, nobody can define it, and following the majority is the reliable way to miss it.

II Truth is not settled by a show of hands. The worst arguments have the largest followings.

III The definition begins: a good that is sound all through, not one that merely looks well from outside.

IV The same idea in other words — a mind that is free, upright, undaunted, beyond the reach of fear and desire.

V Happiness is right judgement made permanent. The rest, health and money and reputation, are additions.

VI The Epicurean objection arrives: the mind has pleasures of its own. Let it, says Seneca — but let it judge them.

VII Those who locate the highest good in the belly have put the best thing in the worst place.

VIII Pleasure belongs to good and bad men alike, and bad men get more of it. That alone disqualifies it.

IX ***You practise virtue only for the pleasure it brings.*** No — pleasure follows virtue, as a crop follows a field that was not sown for the flowers.

X The Epicurean narrows his claim. Seneca grants that no one lives pleasantly without living honourably, and denies the

converse.

XI The wise man's pleasure is real but incidental. He does not go towards it; it arrives.

XII Why the pleasure-seekers are uneasy: the mind knows what it is doing even when the man does not.

XIII ****The generous chapter.**** Epicurus' own teaching was upright and holy, whatever his followers made of it — and Seneca notes that his fellow Stoics would rather he did not say so. Unusual enough to be worth marking. A Stoic tells his own school that they have caricatured Epicurus, that the man's own teaching was upright, and that his colleagues will not thank him for saying so.

XIV Let virtue lead and pleasure follow as a servant. The order is the whole argument.

XV Why virtue and pleasure cannot be combined into a single highest good: you cannot make one thing out of a master and a slave.

XVI Happiness consists in virtue, and virtue tells you to hold nothing good or bad that is not in your own power.

XVII ****The interruption.**** ***Why do you talk so much better than you live?*** The second half of the dialogue begins here, and it is Seneca's self-defence. Everything changes here. The technical argument stops and the personal defence begins, and it runs unbroken to the end of the dialogue. If you want the passage that made this book notorious, it starts on this page.

XVIII ***You talk one way and live another.*** He answers that he speaks of virtue and not of himself, and that he is a bad man trying to become less bad.

XIX Diodorus the Epicurean, who had just killed himself, and what his enemies made of it. On judging a philosophy by its worst adherent.

XX ***Philosophers do not do everything they teach.*** No; but the teaching still does good, as a physician's advice does when he is himself ill.

XXI ****The charge, exactly.**** Why does this man study philosophy and live like a rich man? Why does he say wealth should be despised and keep his? The charge in its sharpest form, and Seneca states it himself rather than letting an opponent state it: why does this man study philosophy and live like a rich man?

XXII The wise man with money has a wider field for his powers than the wise man without. Poverty offers only endurance.

XXIII ***The philosopher may own ample wealth, but not wealth torn from another.*** The sentence the whole defence turns on. The sentence the defence turns on — *the philosopher may own ample wealth, but not wealth torn from another*. It is a real moral distinction. Whether it covers a fortune built on imperial favour and provincial lending is the question the dialogue does not ask.

XXIV Giving is difficult and most people do it badly. On choosing recipients as carefully as one chooses friends.

XXV Why wealth counts among things to be preferred without counting among things that are good. The technical distinction that carries the argument — or does not.

XXVI ***What is the difference between me, a fool, and you, a wise man?*** The wise man's riches serve him; the fool's own him. The distinction restated as a formula: the wise man's riches serve him, the fool's own him. Elegant, and exactly as

testable as any claim about who owns whom.

XXVII Socrates from his prison, speaking to his accusers. The counter-example the argument has been reaching for.

XXVIII ****Breaks off mid-sentence.**** A hundred and twenty-five words into the last chapter the manuscripts stop. The ending is lost; nothing here supplies it.

On Providence

I Lucilius' question: if providence rules, why do good men suffer? Seneca accepts the question as asked and promises a narrow answer.

II No evil can befall a good man, because contraries do not combine. What looks like disaster is material.

III The images begin — the gladiator asking for a better opponent, the soldier chosen for the night patrol. Hardship is assignment, not punishment. The image that does the most work in the dialogue. A gladiator who asks to be matched against a better opponent is not being punished, and Seneca is asking the reader to reclassify hardship the same way.

IV Prosperity comes to anybody. It is the privilege of great men alone to be given something difficult.

V The claim the dialogue rests on: nothing bad can happen to a good man, because good and evil are internal and no external reaches them. The load-bearing claim, and the one a modern reader has to decide about: nothing bad can happen to a good man, because good and evil are internal and no external event reaches them.

VI ****God speaks.**** The last chapter puts a speech in the mouth of providence, and it ends with the door: *the way of escape lies open before you... I have made nothing easier for you than to die*. George Long cites this chapter in his notes to the *Meditations*, and says he doubts Marcus Aurelius would have agreed. The dialogue ends with God speaking and the last offer being the exit. Read it knowing how Seneca died, and knowing that George Long — who translated the *Meditations* Valice publishes — cites this chapter and says he does not think Marcus Aurelius would have agreed.

On Leisure

I ****Opens mid-sentence.**** The beginning is lost. What survives starts inside an argument about why the crowd recommends vice, and turns to the benefit of withdrawal.

II ***I will prove that I am not deserting the tenets of the Stoics*** — which is what a man says when he is about to depart from them.

III Zeno and Chrysippus both allowed the wise man to withdraw in certain conditions. Seneca collects the precedents.

IV ****The idea the fragment exists for.**** There are two commonwealths: the small one you were born into by chance, and the vast one containing gods and men. Withdrawal from the first may be service to the second. The best idea in the fragment, and the one that outlived it: two commonwealths, one you were born into and one that contains everything, and service to the larger one is still service. It is the Stoic root of every later argument that obligation does not stop at a border.

V Nature made us for contemplation as well as action, and gave us eyes to look at things that are no use to us.

VI ***It makes a difference whether you retire for pleasure or for study.*** The objection, and a partial answer.

VII The three lives — pleasure, contemplation, action — and the observation that no one pursues any of them purely.

VIII ****Breaks off mid-sentence.**** Chrysippus allows leisure; Seneca is mid-argument about the conditions when the manuscript stops. The manuscript stops mid-argument. What Seneca concluded — whether he conceded more to the orthodox position or less — is not recoverable, and no edition should pretend otherwise.