

## Seneca on pleasure

Seneca has much to say *contra voluptatem*, as might be expected of a Stoic philosopher. Pleasure, we must recall, was the *summum bonum* of the Epicureans, the rival school of the Stoics. The latter stressed *apatheia*, selfregulation, and restraint; they lauded the suppression of pleasure, arguing that *voluptas* was invidious to a life of reason, constancy, and virtue. Needless to say, Seneca was especially outspoken about pleasures because of the excessive pursuit of them by his contemporaries in Imperial Rome. It is notorious that the Romans of the first century A. D. exceeded all bounds in their craving for and idealization of extravagance and luxury <sup>1</sup>.

This Philosopher of the Neronian Age is well aware of the fatal attraction of sensual pleasures.

*Si de bono sensus iudicarent, nullam  
voluptatem reiceremus, nulla enim  
non invitat, nulla non delectat...*

(*Ep.*, 124.2)

*(If the-senses were to judge what is  
good, we would reject no pleasure,  
for there is none that does not en-*

<sup>1</sup> Luxury was the common target of the Roman moralists. Livy, for example, observes that it threatened the entire social fabric of Rome: ... nuper divitiae avaritiam et abundantes voluptates desiderium per luxum atque libidinem perdendique omnia invexere (Bk, I, Praef.).

*tice, none that does not  
delight...)*

Yet the indulgence in such pleasures is the source of all evil <sup>2</sup>. *Radix malorum est cupiditas* <sup>3</sup>. Cicero, quoting Archytas of Tarentum, writes:

*Nullam capitaliorem pestem quam voluptatem corporis hominibus dicebat a natura datam, cuius voluptatis avidae libidines temere et ecfrenate ad potiendum incitarentur. Hinc patriae proditioes, hinc rerum publicarum eversioes, hinc cum hostibus clandestina colloquia nasci; nullum denique scelus, nullum malum facinus esse, ad quod suscipiendum non libido voluptatis impelleret; stupra vero et adulteria et omne tale flagitium nullis excitari aliis illecebris nisi voluptatis... <sup>4</sup>*

*(He said that no more deadly plague has been given by nature to men than carnal pleasure, for the attainment of which greedy lust is rashly and uncontrollably aroused. From it stems the betrayal of one's country, from it the overthrow of government, from it secret colloquies with the enemy; in sum, there is no crime, no evil deed that the lust for pleasure will not drive men to commit; indeed, rape, adultery, and every disgraceful act are incited by nothing but the enticements of pleasure.)*

<sup>2</sup> Ep., 110.10.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Timothy 6.10, *Biblia Sacra* (Vulgate): *Radix enim omnium malorum est cupiditas...*

<sup>4</sup> *De Senectute*, 12.39-40. Throughout, all translations are our own.

For evil arises when men follow their sensual appetites, become crass materialists, slaves to the emotions; they ignore the role of reason, man's distinguishing characteristic, the quality possessed by him alone <sup>5</sup>.

*Impedit... consilium voluptas, rationi inimica est, mentis... praestringit oculos, nec habet ullum cum virtute commercium* <sup>6</sup>.

*(Voluptas impedes judgment, it is hostile to reason, it shuts the eyes of the mind, and it has no communion with virtue).*

At birth, God bestows upon human beings the seeds of reason—seeds which require constant nurturing, vigorous training, and education to come to fruition. Without cultivating reason, man in his irrational quest for uncontrolled pleasure is like an animal <sup>7</sup>; his behavior, moreover, is nearly identical with that of an infant: both lack judgment, both are spontaneous, brash, and hyper-emotional, both are devoid of knowledge of good and evil. Such a man's *voluptas* is

*... humile, servile, imbecillum, caducum, cuius statio ac domicilium fornices et popinae sunt.*

*(De Vita Beata, 7. 3)* <sup>8</sup>

*(... a base, servile, weak, and transitory possession; its haunt and hang out are brothels and cafés)* <sup>9</sup>.

And, paradoxically, pleasure of this sort is, at one and the same time, empty and infinite. Because sensual desires, however

5 *Ep.*, 41.8; 76.9-11; 92-27; 113-17; 121.14; 124.14, 21, 23.

6 Cicero, *De Senectute* 12.42.

7 *Ep.*, 92.6: *voluptas bonum pecoris est.*

8 See also *Ep.*, 123.16.

9 *Ep.*, 78.27.

nugatory, are limitless, incapable of being kept within bounds, Seneca labels them unnatural —a species of habitual madness and slavery<sup>10</sup>. And, ironically, the more pleasures one possesses, the more he is possessed; furthermore, the greater the pleasures, the more inferior he becomes<sup>11</sup>.

Moreover, the avid pleasure-seeker is on a kind of merry-go-round; the constant cycle of pleasures he indulges in is addictive, repetitive, even predictable. Consequently, Seneca terms *voluptas* «*inertissimum vitium*», the most slothful vice<sup>12</sup>. These idle pursuits of the voluptuary lie outside the realm of natural laws and natural desires; the more they are fulfilled, the more insatiable they become: «*quo magis implentur, eo magis inexplebiles*»<sup>13</sup>. As a result, the very pleasure of such men is restless, anxious, filled with tremor<sup>14</sup>. Fearful lest their desires be aborted or curtailed, their life, like that of any addict, is one of frustration and outrage.

*... ad rabiem nos cogunt pervenire  
deliciae, ut quicquid non ex  
voluntate respondit, iram evocet.*

(*Ep.*, 47.19)

*(Our extravagances drive us to  
rage, so that whatever fails to  
satisfy our wants, stirs our wrath).*

Their boundless quest for pleasure is, in fact, an indication of madness.

*... illi ipsi stulti et inaequales et  
sub ictu paenitentiae positi magnas  
percipient voluptates, ut fatendum*

10 *Ep.*, 39.5-6; see also *Ep.*, 110.10; *De Vita Beata*, 4.4.

11 *De Vita Beata*, 14-2.

12 *De Benef.*, 4.11-5.

13 *De Vita Beata*, 13-4.

14 *De Brev. Vit.*, 17.1.

*sit tam longe tum illos ab omni molestia  
abesse quam a bona mente et... hilarem  
insaniam insanire ac per risum furere.*

(*De Vita Beata*, 12.1)

(... these very men, foolish, unbalanced,  
and subject to nagging regret, will ex-  
perience great pleasures, so it must be  
admitted that, at the time, they  
are as far removed from every an-  
noyance as they are from a sound  
mind and... that their insanity rages  
on cheerfully and their laughter is  
madness).

Thus, Seneca repeatedly argues that the pursuit of hedonism and sensual gratifications are, paradoxically, attended by fear, pain, anxiety, and mental unbalance. Since pleasure is so attractive to many—in Vergil’s words: *trahit sua quemque voluptas*<sup>15</sup>—Seneca is well aware that he is being contentious and annoying when he inveighs against it. Yet he contends that he must assault precisely because we worship and adore vice.

*... non desistam persequi nequitiam et  
adfectus efferatissimos inhibere et  
voluptates ituras in dolorem com-  
pescere et votis obstrepere. Quidni?  
Cum maxima malorum optaverimus....*

(*Ep.*, 121.4)

(... I shall not desist to prosecute  
wickedness, to inhibit the wildest  
emotions, to check pleasures that  
will turn to pain, and to clamor a-  
gainst men’s prayers. Why not? Because  
we have prayed for the greatest evils...).

<sup>15</sup> *Ecl.*, 2.65.

In sum, the epicure and the debauchee suffer from an unstable mind; desiring to transcend the bounds of what is natural, they are doomed to failure while in the midst of a life of pleasure. And Seneca goes still further, arguing that a life of boundless pleasure reaps deleterious results.

Seneca repeatedly remarks that self-indulgence and satiety lead to *taedium vitae*, to exhaustion <sup>16</sup>, and also to sorrow, disillusionment, and hatred.

*Voluptas fragilis est, brevis, fastidio  
objecta, quo avidius hausta est citius  
in contrarium recidens...*

(*De Benef.*, 7.2.2) <sup>17</sup>

*(Pleasure is fragile, brief, subject to  
revulsion; the more eagerly it is in-  
dulged, the more quickly it turns into  
its opposite...).*

In addition, a life of over-indulgence in such pleasures renders one effeminate and weak <sup>18</sup>, and, by a species of poetic justice, turns his pleasure into pain.

*Ipsae voluptates in tormenta vertuntur,  
epulae cruditatem adferunt, ebrietates  
nervorum torporem tremoremque, libidines  
pedum, manuum, articularum omnium de-  
pravationes.*

(*Ep.*, 24.16)

*(Our very pleasures are turned into tor-  
ments: banquets cause indigestion,  
drunkenness induces numbness and ner-  
vous tremors, lust deforms the feet,  
the hands, all the joints).*

<sup>16</sup> *De Tranq. An.*, 2.15.'

<sup>17</sup> See also *Ep.*, 23.6; 77.16.

<sup>18</sup> *Ep.*, 104.34; *De Vita Beata*, 13.4.

Furthermore, indulgence in such pleasures causes mental as well as physical anguish.

*Dimitte istas voluptates turbidas,  
magno luendas; non venturae tantum,  
sed praeteritae nocent. Quemadmodum  
scelera etiam si non sint deprehensa  
cum fierent, sollicitudo non cum ipsis  
abit; ita improbarum voluptatum etiam  
post ipsas paenitentia est.*

(*Ep.*, 27.2)

*(Dismiss those disorderly pleasures,  
paid for at a great price; not only  
are those injurious which are about  
to come but also those which have come  
and gone. Just as crimes even when  
undetected, do not free the criminal  
from anxiety, so wicked pleasures, even  
after they have been indulged, cause  
feelings of guilt).*

Seneca as physician of body and soul expounds at length upon the many diseases caused by luxury and pleasure tremors, dizziness, indigestion, fever and chills, heart palpitations, gout, ulcers, ague, dropsy, jaundice, arthritis, and a general internal malaise<sup>19</sup>. A man, so vice-ridden and diseased, loses his sense of judgment<sup>20</sup>, ruins himself in body and soul<sup>21</sup>, and turns himself into a monstrosity. Like Scylla, he possesses godlike beauties and talents above, but these all turn to foulness and corruption below.

*Prima hominis facies et pulchro pectore virgo  
Pube tenuis, postrema inmani corpore pistrix  
Delphinum caudas utero commissa luporum*<sup>22</sup>.

19 *Ep.*, 95.15-29; *NQ*, 4.13.5-7, 10-11.

20 *De Benef.*, 4.11.5.

21 *Ep.*, 51.5-6; *NQ*, 7.31.1.

22 Vergil, *Aeneid*, 3.426-28.

*(Above, her face is human, with beautiful breast —a maiden down to her waist; below, she is a monster, huge in body—, with tails of dolphins joined to a belly of wolves).*

This is precisely the argument Seneca repeatedly conveys.

*Voluptas... in qua nihil est magnificum aut quod naturam hominis dis proximi decent, res humilis, membrorum turpium aut vilium ministerio veniens, exitu foeda.*

*(De Benef., 7.2.2)*

*(Pleasure... in which there is nothing magnificent, nothing becoming to the nature of man, who is nearest the gods, —pleasure, a lowly thing resulting from ministering to the vile members of the body, and ending in abomination).*

*Prima ars hominis est ipsa virtus; huic committitur inutilis caro et fluida, receptandis tantum cibus habilis, ut ait Posidonius. Virtus illa divina in lubricum desinit et superioribus eius partibus venerandis atque caelestibus animal iners ac marcidum adtextitur.*

*(Ep., 92.10)*

*(Man's primary occupation is virtue itself; to this is affixed the useless and languid flesh suited only for the consumption of food, as Posidonius says. That divine virtue ends in baseness and, to its higher parts that ought to be venerated and are celestial, is attached a sluggish and enfeebled animal).*

Such, alas, is the dual nature of man —at once angelic and demonic. In the memorable words of Alexander Pope:

*Plac'd on this isthmus of a middle state,  
A being darkly wise, and rudely great;*



*With too much knowledge for the Sceptic side,  
 With too much weakness for the Stoic's pride,  
 He hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest,  
 In doubt to deem himself a God, or Beast;  
 In doubt his Mind or Body to prefer,  
 Born but to die, and reas'ning but to err;  
 Alike in ignorance, his reason such,  
 Whether he thinks too little, or too much:  
 Chaos of Thought and Passion, all confus'd;  
 Still by himself abus'd, or disabus'd;  
 Created half to rise, and half to fall;  
 Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all;  
 Sole judge of Truth, in endless error hurl'd:  
 The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!<sup>23</sup>*

Overall, what Seneca strives to make clear about pleasure is that paradoxically it yields *no pleasure* whatsoever. For, anticipating it breeds anxiety, experiencing it is too fleeting, and its aftermath confers a guilty conscience and disease. William Shakespeare in one of his most brilliant sonnets explores this whole paradox of man's compulsive quest for pleasure. «Th'expense of spirit in a waste of shame» is how he designates «lust in action». Prior to the attainment of his desired object, such a man in his anxious search for fulfillment is «Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust»; yet, immediately after his momentous gratification, the self-same man becomes bored, disinterested, listless, and exhausted. He now looks down upon or reviles the object of his pursuit and often castigates himself for his vile behavior: «Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme». Shakespeare concludes by noting ironically that man understands well enough this whole course of his perverse and contradictory passions, but yet knows not how to stop.

«All this the world well knows; yet none knows well. To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell»<sup>24</sup>.

23 «Essay on Man», Epistle II, lines 3-18, in *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. Maynard Mack, London 1950, vol. 3.i, 53-56.

24 Sonnet N. 129, in Shakespeare, *The Sonnets*, ed. Douglas Bush and Alfred Harbage, rev. ed., New York 1970, 149. In the body of this paper we have quoted, lines 1, 4, 13 and 14.

Hence, the quest for pleasure renders a man barbarous and tumultuous —paradoxicaly, as Seneca repeatedly suggests, providins little pleasure at all. No poet has so poignantly explored this paradox as has John Keats. For him, the aftermath of pleasure fulfilled is devastating, transforming the hedonist into a victim of melancholia, or worse. In «La Belle Dame sans Merci», a knight who consummates his love with «a fairy's child» is suddenly cast under a spell; becoming «haggard» and «woe-begone», he must loiter interminably upon a «cold hill's side», in thrall in a stark landscape where vegetation has withered and «no birds sing». In Keats' view, pleasure tasted somehow magically and horribly turns into its opposite. This is the realm of Melancholy:

*She dwells with Beauty —Beauty that must die;  
And joy, whose hand is ever at his lips  
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,  
Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips...<sup>25</sup>*

Seneca's chief point in all these discussions and analyses of *voluptas* is that man owes it to himself to strive for goals more meaningful and less demeaning than mere sensual pleasure and its ceaseless cycle of passion, folly, and remorse. For pleasures, he writes,

*Non sunt solidae, non sunt fideles;  
etiam si non nocent, fugiunt. Ali-  
quod potius bonum mansurum circumspice.  
Nullum autem est, nisi quod animus ex  
se sibi invenit. Sola virtus praestat  
gaudium perpetuum, securum...*

(*Ep.*, 27.2-3)

*(are not solid, are not reliable;  
even when harmless, they are fleet-  
ing. Rather, look for something good,*

25 «Ode on Melancholy», lines 21-24, in *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger, Cambridge, Mass. 1978, 375. Consult Lionel Trilling, «The Fate of Pleasure: Wordsworth to Dostoevsky», *Partisan Review* 30 (1963) 167-91.

*something that will last. But there is nothing except what the soul discovers within itself. Virtue alone offers joy which is perpetual, which is secure...).*

This is the very crux of Seneca's long and often-addressed quarrel with the life of pleasure. Such a life provides tilt-a-whirls and ferris wheels but it does not offer tranquillity, peace of mind, knowledge, stability.

We might well ask why Seneca so frequently returns to this topic—the disadvantages and the perils of pleasure. First of all, as we noted at the outset of this essay, Imperial Rome in the first century A. D. had become an affluent, pleasure-loving city—synonymous with luxury and conspicuous consumption. It was a world renowned for greed, gluttony, drunkenness, and sexual excess—depicted so vividly in Petronius' *cena Trimalchionis* and in Juvenal's *Satires*. In the words of J. B. Priestley, the world of Imperial Rome witnessed the decline both of religion and of the ideal of heroism.

*The profound corruption of slavery;  
the organised sadism of the games and  
circuses; the sensuality that soon  
reached satiety; the murderous intrigues  
that passed for politics; the cynical  
cosmopolitanism of the huge city;  
the worship that had lost both heart  
and head and was dwindling into super-  
stition: this was... Rome...<sup>26</sup>*

What was especially disturbing to Seneca and others who espoused the cause of living *secundum naturam*, i. e., in accord with Reason, man's highest good, was the fact that not only the οἱ πολλοί but also some intellectuals extolled, justified, and elevated the habits of sensuality.

26 *Man and Time*, New York 1968, 139.

*Quicumque voluptatem in summo ponunt,  
sensibile iudicant bonum, nos contra  
intelligibile, qui illud animo damus.*

(*Ep.*, 124.2)

*(Whoever place pleasure on the highest  
plane judge the Good to be situated in  
the senses; we, on the contrary, who  
assign it to the mind, judge it to be  
situated in the understanding).*

Seneca is here obviously referring to the antithetic position of the two leading schools of philosophy in Neronian Rome—the Epicurean and the Stoic—the former designating pleasure, the latter, virtue, as the highest good. Moreover, the Epicurean notion that virtue is the servant of pleasure, he flatly denies<sup>27</sup>, arguing that those who endorse such an idea have bestowed upon pleasure an erroneous and ill-deserved status, thereby making *voluptas* all the more insidiously attractive and justifiable. He reprimands and, at times, even excoriates, so-called Epicureans, describing them as effete, lecherous, debauched, overly-addicted to a life of leisure.

*... nobis pugna est cum Epicureis,  
delicata et umbratica turba in con-  
vivio suo philosophantium...*

(*De Benef.*, 4.2.1)

*(... our quarrel is with the Epicureans,  
an effeminate, idle crowd, lounging in  
their garden with their wine cups...).*

They gave Seneca additional ammunition to speak out against pleasure. Again and again he carefully distinguishes pleasure from virtue, pointing out the need of separating the one from the other. For virtue, the *summum bonum*,

<sup>27</sup> *Ep.*, 90.35; *De Benef.*, 4.2.1.

*... immortale est, nescit exire nec  
satietaem habet nec paenitentiam  
... At voluptas tunc, cum maxime  
delectat, extinguitur; non multum  
loci habet, itaque cito implet et  
taedio est et post primum impetum  
marcet.*

(*De Vita Beata*, 7.4)<sup>28</sup>

*(... is immortal, it does not know how  
to recede, it has neither satiety nor  
remorse... but pleasure is extinguished  
the moment it reaches its peak; it has  
no depth, therefore it fills up quickly,  
becomes weary, and withers after its  
first onslaught).*

The virtue that Seneca praises derives from a life that is righteous and honorable, a life that follows Nature and Reason as guide<sup>29</sup>. He believed that the champions of pleasure threatened this ideal. Yet he wanted his readers to know that he was not so much lampooning Epicurus himself, as he was attacking the popular distortion of the Epicurean philosophy. Even today an *Epicurean* is defined in our dictionaries as one «fond of good food, comfort, and ease», and the word *epicure* evokes the image of a person concerned with «food and wine», and «devoted to sensuous pleasure and luxurious living»<sup>30</sup>. The man in the street in Seneca's day was tempted to understand «epicurean» in just such hedonistic terms. As a teacher

28 See also *De Vita Beata*, 8.1; 9.1-4; 10.1-3; 11.1-4; 12.1-5; 13.1-5; 14.1-3; 15.1-5; *De Benef.*, 4.2.4; *Ep.*, 95.35.

29 *De Vita Beata*, 8.1.

30 Consult *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Boston, New York & London 1992, s.v. «epicure» and «epicurean». As H. W. Fowler observes in *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. rev., Oxford 1965, s.v. «hedonist», 243: «It will be seen that the hedonist umbrella is a broad one, covering very different persons. ... the epicurean... [has] suffered some wrong in popular usage; it has generally been ignored that for Epicurus pleasure consisted in the practice of virtue. We now apply *epicure* to one who is given to refined enjoyment of food and drink...».

and philosopher, Seneca felt it one of his first duties to debunk this popular misconception and to dispel the shabby idea that wild living and dissipation merited elevation to a pedastal as a system of organized thought.

*Ille effusus in voluptates, ructa-  
bundus semper atque ebrius... credit  
[se vivere]... cum virtute; audit  
enim voluptatem separari a virtute  
non posse... Itaque non ab Epi-  
curo impulsus luxuriantur, sed vitiis  
dediti luxuriam suam in philosophiae  
sinu abscondunt et eo concurrunt,  
ubi audiant laudari voluptatem. Nec  
aestimant, voluptas illa Epicuri...  
quam sobria ac sicca sit...*

(*De Vita Beata*, 12.3-5)

*(The man drenched in pleasures, for-  
ever belching and tipsy, believes he  
is living virtuously; for he has heard  
that pleasure cannot be separated from  
virtue... Yet such men are not driven  
to dissipation by Epicurus but, having  
surrendered themselves to vices, hide  
their dissipation in the bosom of phil-  
osophy and rush wherever they hear the  
praise of pleasure).*

As a matter of fact, Seneca thought so highly of Epicurus himself, the founder of the school that bears his name, that he quotes him more frequently than any other philosopher<sup>31</sup>, believing his ethical teachings to be closely akin to those of the Stoics.

*In ea quidem ipse sententia sum  
—invitis hoc nostris popularibus  
dicam— sancta Epicurum et recta*

31 Consult Anna Lydia Motto and John R. Clark, «*Paradoxum Senecae*: The Epicurean Stoic», CW 62 (1968), 37-42.

*praecipere et, si propius accesseris, tristia; voluptas enim illa ad parvum et exile revocatur et, quam nos virtuti legem dicimus, eam ille dicit voluptati: iubet illam parere naturae.*

(*De Vita Beata*, 13.1)

*(I am indeed of this opinion — I shall state it, though the members of my sect will object— that Epicurus teaches what is holy and right and, if you look more carefully, what is unpleasant; for that pleasure of his is reduced to the small and the meagre, and the law which we assign to virtue, he assigns to pleasure: he orders it to obey Nature).*

«The Stoics believed that virtue was the highest good; the Epicureans, pleasure. But the ‘pleasure’ which constituted their *summum bonum* in life was something much richer than wine, women, and song, something much deeper than the gluttony and libertinage that later generations ascribed to them. Epicurean ‘pleasure’ was, rather, moral conduct itself and the art or practice of living fully, ideally, happily. Since Epicurus taught that it is impossible to lead a life of pleasure which is not also a life of prudence, honor, and justice; nor lead a life of prudence, honor, and justice which is not also a life of pleasure<sup>32</sup>, it seems that the Stoic is almost at one with the Epicurean at last»<sup>33</sup>.

True pleasure or joy can fall to the lot only of the wise (*gaudium nisi sapienti non contingere*)<sup>34</sup>, regardless of the school or sect with which one is affiliated. Thus, for Seneca, Epicurus is a striking example that truth is valid whatever the source:

32 R. D. Hicks, *Stoic and Epicurean*, London 1910, 172.

33 Motto and Clark, «*Paradoxum Senecae*» (above, n. 31) 39.

34 *Ep.*, 59.2.

*«Epicurus», inquis, «dixit. Quid tibi cum alieno?». Quod verum est, meum est. Perseverabo Epicurum tibi ingerere, ut isti, qui in verba iurant, nec quid dicatur aestimant sed a quo, sciant, quae optima sunt, esse communia.*

(*Ep.*, 12.11)

*(«Epicurus», you say, «said this. What have you to do with the philosophy of another school?». What's truth is mine. I shall continue to heap Epicurus upon you, so that those who swear by words and do not value what is said but by whom it is said, may know that the thoughts which are best are common property).*

All who are wise know that *verum gaudium* does not come from self-indulgence but from contentment, self-control, and equanimity.

*Illa est voluptas et homine et viro digna non implere corpus nec saginare nec cupiditates irritare...sed perturbatione carere...*

(*De Benef.*, 7.2.3)

*(The pleasure worthy of man and hero is this: not to fill or stuff the body and not to arouse the passions ... but to be free from perturbation ...).*

Hence, Seneca expresses the highest regard for anyone, regardless of his philosophic sect, who leads a life of simplicity and honor—the only life that can offer man real and lasting pleasure.

Nor does such a life prevent one from enjoying moderate pleasures so essential to the well-being of the individual.



Using plain, common sense, Seneca recognizes that pleasure is inherent in human nature.

*Quis negat omnis adfectus a quodam  
quasi naturali fluere principio?  
Curam nobis nostri natura mandavit,  
sed huic ubi nimium indulseris, vitium  
est. Voluptatem natura necessariis  
rebus admiscuit, non ut illam pet-  
eremus, sed ut ea, sine quibus non  
possumus vivere, grata nobis illius  
faceret accessio...*

(Ep., 116.3)

*(Who would deny that all the emotions  
stem, as it were, from a certain natural  
source? Nature has imbued us with self-  
interest, but when you over-indulge this  
interest, it is a vice. Nature has  
mingled pleasure with necessities, not  
that we should pursue pleasure but that  
the addition of pleasure would make  
those things pleasing to us without  
which we cannot live).*

All men require a well-balanced schedule: they need moderation in their work, in their exercise, in their food, in their drink.

*Lusus quoque proderunt; modica  
enim voluptas laxat animos et  
temperat.*

(De Ira, 2.20.3)

*(Amusements too are helpful; for  
moderate pleasure relaxes and  
tempers the soul).*

Those who have subdued and carefully regulated their pleasures appreciate and enjoy them all the more:

*... quidni ad te magis perventurae  
sint, si illis imperabis, quam si  
servies?*

(*Ep.*, 116.1)

*(Why should pleasures not come  
to yo more readily, if you are  
in command of them rather  
than at their service?)*

Such are the pleasures experienced by the Stoic sapiens —pleasures that are calm, moderate, subdued<sup>35</sup>, pleasures that come from an inner tranquillity and peace of mind<sup>36</sup>, from contentment<sup>37</sup>, from leading a simple life<sup>38</sup>, from vanquishing desires<sup>39</sup>, from conversation with friends<sup>40</sup>, from helping others<sup>41</sup>. Paradoxically, only the wise man experiences genuine pleasure<sup>42</sup>, for he alone has gained control of his life; he alone is free to taste *bona fide* pleasures that are entirely removed from riot, nervous impulse, and addiction.

Bertrand Russell once paused to reflect upon the meaning of «free thought». «Free» thought cannot be unfettered; it cannot be dissolute, boundless, or unstructured:

*The freedom that the freethinker  
seeks is not the absolute freedom  
of anarchy; it is freedom within  
the intellectual law...*

*To be worthy of the name [freethinker],  
he must be free from two things; the  
force of tradition, and the tyranny  
of his own passions<sup>43</sup>.*

35 *De Vita Beata*, 12.2; *De Benef.*, 7.2.4.

36 *Ep.*, 4.1.

37 *Ep.*, 15.9.

38 *De Tranq. An.*, 17.2.

39 *Ep.*, 12.5.

40 *Ep.*, 35.3.

41 *Ep.*, 81.10; *De Benef.*, 1.6.1; 2.2.2; 4.14.4; 4.15.2-4.

42 *De Vita Beata*, 11.1.

43 «The Value of Free Thought», *Understanding History and Other Essays*, New York 1957, 58, 57.

With this assertion, Seneca would fully agree. To be wholly free, a man cannot be a slave to some past tradition—even Stoic tradition.

*Non ibo per priorum vestigia? Ego  
vero utar via vetere, sed si propiorem  
planioremque invenero, hanc muniam.  
Qui ante nos ista moverunt, non  
domini nostri, sed duces sunt.  
Patet omnibus veritas, nondum est  
occupata. Multum ex illa etiam  
futuris relictum est.*

(*Ep.*, 33.11)<sup>44</sup>

*(Shall I not tread in the footsteps  
of my predecessors? I shall, in  
truth, use the old road, but if I  
come upon one that is shorter and  
easier, I shall secure it. Men who  
discovered those paths before us  
are not our masters, but our guides.  
Truth lies open to all; it has not  
yet been wholly appropriated. There  
is also a great deal of it left for  
posterity to explore).*

Thus did Lucius Annaeus Seneca at times diverge from traditional teachings, and did not hesitate to do so. And what's more, the freed-man must escape «the tyranny of his own passions». No one knew this better than the Philosopher Seneca, who expended so much energy assaulting lust and pleasure.

ANA LYDIA MOTTO

44 Cf. *De Otio*, 3.1.