

One Must Tend One's Garden: Care, Plants, and Humans in Seneca's Moral Letters

Seneca, *Epistulae Morales*

1) Quattuor hae naturae sunt, arboris, animalis, hominis, dei; haec duo, quae rationalia sunt, eandem naturam habent, illo diversa sunt, quod alterum immortale, alterum mortale est. Ex his ergo unius bonum natura perficit, dei scilicet, alterius cura, hominis. (*Ep.* 124.14)

2) Tu summum bonum, voluptatem, infantiae donas, ut inde incipiat nascens quo consummatus homo pervenit. Cacumen radicis loco ponis. (*Ep.* 124.7)

3) Ergo nec in tenero, modo coalescente corpusculo est. Quidni non sit? Non magis quam in semine. Hoc si dicas, aliquod arboris ac sati bonum novimus; hoc non est in prima fronde, quae emissa cum maxime solum rumpit. Est aliquod bonum tritici; hoc nondum est in herba lactente nec cum folliculo se exerit spica mollis, sed cum frumentum aestas et debita maturitas coxit. (*Ep.* 124.10–11)

4) Nam et illa herba, quae in segetem frugemque ventura est, aliam constitutionem habet tenera et vix eminens sulco, aliam, cum convaluit et molli quidem culmo, sed quo ferat onus suum, constitit, aliam cum flavescit et ad aream spectat et spica eius induruit...(*Ep.* 121. 15)

5) Voluptatem peto, cui? Mihi. Ergo mei curam ago. Dolorem refugio, pro quo? Pro me. Ergo mei curam ago. Si omnia propter curam mei facio, ante omnia est mei cura. Haec animalibus inest cunctis nec **inseritur**, sed innascitur. (*Ep.* 121.17)

6) Mors malum non est: quid <sit> quaeris? Sola ius **aequum** generis humani. (*Ep.* 123.16)

7) Illum tu lauda et imitare quem non **piget** mori, cum iuvet vivere: quae est enim virtus, cum eiciaris, exire? (*Ep.* 54.7)

There are these four natures: one for trees, one for animals, one for humans, and one for god; these two, which are rational, have the same nature, but they are separated by the fact that the one is immortal, the other mortal. So, of these Nature accomplishes the Good for one—i.e., god—and care does for the other—i.e., humans.

You're gifting the highest good—pleasure—to infancy, so that a baby begins there, where the accomplished person ends up. You're putting the treetop in place of the root.

So, it is not in the tender little body, just now coming together. Why should it be? No more than in the seed. If you should say this, we know that there is a certain good of the tree and plant; this is not in the first leaf, which breaks the soil just as soon as it's sent out. There is a certain good of wheat; this is not yet in the suckling grass nor when the soft bristle has gone out of its husk, but once the summer heat and the ripeness owed has cooked it.

For also that grass, which is about to come into harvest and fruition, tender and scarcely jutting out from the furrow, has one constitution; it constitutes another, when it has grown strong and with a soft stalk too, but one which it bears its own burden; another, when it turns gold and looks at the thresher and its bristles have hardened...

I seek pleasure—for whom? For me. So, I am doing care of myself. I flee pain—on whose account? On mine. So, I am doing care of myself. If I do all things on account of care for myself, care for myself is before all things. This is in the rest of the animals and not planted in them but born in them.

Death is no evil: do you seek what it is? It alone is the fair law for human kind.

But you yourself, praise and imitate that one who is not disgusted at dying, although he is pleased to live: for what virtue is there in going out when you are being tossed out?

Hyginus

8) Cura cum quendam fluvium transieret, vidit cretosum lutum, sustulit cogitabunda et coepit fingere hominem. Dum deliberat secum quidnam fecisset, intervenit Iovis; rogat eum Cura ut ei daret spiritum quod facile ab Iove impetravit. Cui cum vellet Cura nomen suum imponere, Iovis prohibuit suumque nomen ei dandum esse dixit. Dum de nomine Cura et Iovis disceptarent, surrexit et Tellus suumque nomen ei imponi debere dicebat, quandoquidem corpus suum praebuisset. Sumpserunt Saturnum iudicem; quibus Saturnus aequus videtur iudicasse: “Tu Iovis quoniam spiritum dedisti <animam post mortem accipe; Tellus, quoniam corpus praebuit> corpus recipito. Cura quoniam prima eum finxit, quamdiu vixerit Cura eum possideat; sed quoniam de nomine eius controversia est, homo vocetur quoniam ex humo videtur esse factus. (CCXX)

Vergil, *Georgics*

9) Est etiam ille labor **curandis** vitibus alter, cui numquam exhausti **satis** est: namque omne quotannis terque quaterque solum scindendum glabraeque uersis aeternum frangenda bidentibus, omne leuandum fronde nemus. redit agricolis labor actus in orbem, atque in se sua per uestigia uoluitur annus. ac iam olim, seras posuit cum uinea frondes frigidus et siluis Aquilo decussit honorem, iam tum acer **curas** uenientem extendit in annum rusticus, et curuo **Saturni** dente relictam persequitur uitem attondens **fingit**que putando. primus **humum** fodito, primus deuecta cremato sarmenta, et uallos primus sub tecta referto; postremus metito. bis uitibus ingruit umbra, bis segetem densis obducunt sentibus herbae; durus uterque labor: laudato ingentia rura, exiguum colito. nec non etiam aspera rusci uimina per siluam et ripis **fluui**alis harundo caeditur, incultique exercet **cura** salicti. iam uinctae uites, iam **falcem** arbusta reponunt, iam canit effectos extremus uinitor antes; sollicitanda tamen **tellus** puluisque mouendus et iam maturis metuendus **Iuppiter** uuis. (II. 397–419)

When Cura was crossing a certain river, she saw some clay-filled mud; wrapped in thought, she lifted it up and began to fashion a person. While she is deliberating with herself just what she had made, Jove interrupts; Cura asks him to give it spirit, which she easily obtained from Jove. When Cura wanted to put her own name on it, Jove held her back and said it should be given his name. While Cura and Jove were debating about the name, Tellus also got up and said that her name ought to be put on it, seeing as she had offered up her own body. They got hold of Saturn as a judge: Saturn seems to them to have judged them fair: “You, Jove, since you gave the spirit, take the soul after death; Tellus, since you offered the body, take back the body. Cura, since she first fashioned it, for as long as it lives let Cura possess it; but since there is a dispute over its name, let it be called “homo” since it seems to have been made from dirt.

There is also that other work of taking care of the vines, which is never quite exhausted: for every year all the soil must be broken three and four times and the clod must be crushed eternally once the hoes have been turned over, the whole grove must be lightened of their leaves. The work returns to the farmers led in a circle, and the year rolls into itself through its own traces. And now at last, when the vineyard has put away the late leaves and the cold North Wind has shook the reward from the forest, then the sharp farmer stretches their care into the coming year, and shearing with the curved tooth of Saturn they pursue the left-over vine and forms it by pruning. Let them dig up the dirt first, let them burn the brush that’s been carried away first, and let them bring their stakes under their roofs first; let them harvest afterward. Twice the shadow falls upon the vines, twice the grass spreads over the field with thick thorns; each labor is hard: let them praise the huge countryside but let them cultivate a tiny bit. Nor are the harsh twigs of the butcher not also cut throughout the forest and the flowing read on the banks, and care for the untouched willows gets to work. Now the bound vines, now the orchards set back the sickle, now the last vine dresser sings of the rows the made; nevertheless, the earth must be stirred and the dust moved and Jupiter feared for the ripe grapes.

10) Possum multa tibi ueterum praecepta referre,
ni refugis tenuisque piget cognoscere **curas**.
area cum primis ingenti **aequanda** cylindro
et uertenda manu et **creta** solidanda tenaci,
ne subeant herbae neu puluere uicta fatiscat,
tum uariae inludant pestes...
(I.176–81)

I can relate many precepts of the old to you,
unless you flee back and it disgust you to get to
know slender cares. First of all, the threshing
floor has to be leveled by a huge roller and turned
by hand and made solid with clingy clay, so that
the grass doesn't go underneath it and it doesn't
crack, conquered by the dust—then various
varmints play...

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