



On Providence Seneca

You have asked me, Lucilius, why, if a Providence rules the world, it still happens that many evils befall good men. This would be more fittingly answered in a coherent work designed to prove that a Providence does preside over the universe, and that God concerns himself with us. But since it is your wish that a part be severed from the whole, and that I refute a single objection while the main question is left untouched, I shall do so. The task is not difficult—I shall be pleading the cause of the gods.

For the present purpose it is unnecessary to show that this mighty structure of the world does not endure without someone to guard it, and that the assembling and the separate flight of the stars above are not due to the workings of chance; that while bodies which owe their motion to accident often fall into disorder and quickly collide, this swift revolution of the heavens, being ruled by eternal law, goes on unhindered, producing so many things on land and sea, so many brilliant lights in the sky all shining in fixed array....Even the phenomena which seem irregular and undetermined—I mean showers and clouds, the stroke of crashing thunderbolts and the fires that belch from the riven peaks of mountains, tremors of the quaking ground, and the other disturbances which the turbulent element in nature sets in motion about the earth, these, no matter how suddenly they occur, do not happen without a reason. No, they also are the result of special causes, and so, in like manner, are those things which seem miraculous by reason of the incongruous situations in which they are beheld, such as warm waters in the midst of the sea-waves, and the expanses of new islands that spring up in the wide ocean.

Similarly, if any one observes how the shore is laid bare as the sea withdraws into itself, and how within a short time the same stretch is covered over again, he will suppose that it is some blind fluctuation which causes the waves now to shrink and flow inwards, now to burst forth and in mighty sweep seek their former resting-place, whereas in fact they increase by degrees, and true to the hour and the day they approach in proportionately larger or smaller volume according as they are attracted by the star we call the moon, at whose bidding the ocean surges.

But let such matters be kept for their fitting time—all the more so, indeed, because you do not lack faith in Providence, but complain of it. I shall reconcile you with the gods, who are ever best to those who are best. For Nature never permits good to be injured by good

The Relationship Between God and Humans

Between good men and the gods there exists a friendship brought about by virtue. Friendship, do I say? No, rather there is a tie of relationship and a likeness, since, in truth, a good man differs from God in the element of time only; he is God's pupil, his imitator, and true offspring, whom his all-glorious parent, being no mild taskmaster of virtues, rears,

as strict fathers do, with much severity. And so, when you see that men who are good and acceptable to the gods labor and sweat and have a difficult road to climb, that the wicked, on the other hand, make merry and abound in pleasures, reflect that our children please us by their modesty, but slave-boys by their forwardness; that we hold in check the former by sterner discipline, while we encourage the latter to be bold. Be assured that the same is true of God. He does not make a spoiled pet of a good man; he tests him, hardens him, and fits him for his own service.

Analogy: God as an Athletic Trainer

You ask, “Why do many adversities come to good men?” No evil can befall a good man; opposites do not mingle. Just as the countless rivers, the vast fall of rain from the sky, and the huge volume of mineral springs do not change the taste of the sea, do not even modify it, so the assaults of adversity do not weaken the spirit of a brave man. It always maintains its poise, and it gives its own color to everything that happens; for it is mightier than all external things. And yet I do not mean to say that the brave man is insensible to these, but that he overcomes them, and being in all else unmoved and calm rises to meet whatever assails him. All his adversities he counts mere training. Who, moreover, if he is a man and intent upon the right, is not eager for reasonable toil and ready for duties accompanied by danger? To what energetic man is idleness not a punishment?

Wrestlers, who make strength of body their chief concern, we see pitting themselves against none but the strongest, and they require of those who are preparing them for the arena that they use against them all their strength; they submit to blows and hurts, and if they do not find their match in single opponents, they engage with several at a time. Without an adversary, prowess shrivels. We see how great and how efficient it really is, only when it shows by endurance what it is capable of. Be assured that good men ought to act likewise; they should not shrink from hardships and difficulties, nor complain against fate; they should take in good part whatever happens, and should turn it to good. Not what you endure, but how you endure, is important.

Analogy: God as a Good Father

Do you not see how fathers show their love in one way, and mothers in another? The father orders his children to be aroused from sleep in order that they may start early upon their pursuits—even on holidays he does not permit them to be idle, and he draws from them sweat and sometimes tears. But the mother fondles them in her lap, wishes to keep them out of the sun, wishes them never to be unhappy, never to cry, never men God has the mind of a father, he cherishes for them a manly love, and he says, “Let them be harassed by toil, by suffering, by losses, in order that they may gather true strength.” Bodies grown fat through sloth are weak, and not only labor, but even movement and their very weight cause them to break down. Unimpaired prosperity cannot withstand a single blow; but he who has struggled constantly with his ills becomes hardened through suffering; and yields to no misfortune; nay, even if he falls, he still fights upon his knees.

Do you wonder if that God, who most dearly loves the good, who wishes them to become supremely good and virtuous, allots to them a fortune that will make them struggle? For my part, I do not wonder if sometimes the gods are moved by the desire to behold great men wrestle with some calamity. We men at times are stirred with pleasure if a youth of steady

courage meets with his spear an onrushing wild beast, if unterrified he sustains the charge of a lion. And the more honorable the youth who does this, the more pleasing this spectacle becomes. But these are not the things to draw down the gaze of the gods upon us - they are childish, the pastimes of man's frivolity. But lo! here is a spectacle worthy of the regard of God as he contemplates his work. Look! Here a contest worthy of God—a brave man matched against ill-fortune, and doubly so if his also was the challenge....

God Tests Worthy Individuals

Success comes to the common man, and even to commonplace ability; but to triumph over the calamities and terrors of mortal life is the part of a great man only. Truly, to be always happy and to pass through life without a mental pang is to be ignorant of one half of nature. You are a great man; but how do I know it if Fortune gives you no opportunity of showing your worth? You have entered as a contestant at the Olympic games, but none other besides you; you gain the crown, the victory you do not gain. You have my congratulations—not as a brave man, but as if you had obtained the consulship or praetorship; you have enhanced your prestige.

In like manner, also, I may say to a good man, if no harder circumstance has given him the opportunity whereby alone he might show the strength of his mind, "I judge you unfortunate because you have never been unfortunate; you have passed through life without an antagonist; no one will know what you can do—not even yourself." For if a man is to know himself, he must be tested; no one finds out what he can do except by trying. And so some men have presented themselves voluntarily to laggard misfortune, and have sought an opportunity to blazon forth their worth when it was but to pass into obscurity. Great men, I say, often rejoice in adversity, as do brave soldiers in warfare....

True worth is eager for danger and thinks rather of its goal than of what it may have to suffer, since even what it will have to suffer is a part of its glory. Warriors glory in their wounds and rejoice to display the blood spilled with luckier fortune. Those who return from the battle unhurt may have fought as well, but the man who returns with a wound wins the greater regard. God, I say, is showing favor to those whom he wills shall achieve the highest possible virtue whenever he gives them the means of doing a courageous and brave deed, and to this end they must encounter some difficulty in life. You learn to know a pilot in a storm, a soldier in the battle-line. How can I know with what spirit you will face poverty, if you wallow in wealth? How can I know with what firmness you will face disgrace, ill fame, and public hatred, if you attain to old age amidst rounds of applause—if a popularity attends you that is irresistible, and flows to you from a certain leaning of men's minds? How do I know with what equanimity you would bear the loss of children, if you see around you all that you have fathered? I have heard you offering consolation to others. If you had been offering it to yourself, if you had been telling yourself not to grieve, then I might have seen your true character.

Do not, I beg of you, shrink in fear from those things which the immortal gods apply like spurs, as it were, to, our souls. Disaster is Virtue's opportunity. Justly may those be termed unhappy who are dulled by an excess of good fortune, who rest, as it were, in dead calm upon a quiet sea; whatever happens will come to them as a change. Cruel fortune bears hardest upon the inexperienced; to the tender neck the yoke is heavy. The raw recruit turns pale at the thought of a wound, but the veteran looks undaunted upon his own gore, knowing that blood has often been the price of his victory.

In like manner God hardens, reviews, and disciplines those whom he approves, whom he loves. Those, however, whom he seems to favor, whom he seems to spare, he is really keeping soft against ills to come. For you are wrong if you suppose that any one is exempt from ill. Even the man who has prospered long will have his share some day; whoever seems to have been released has only been reprieved. Why is it that God afflicts the best men with ill health, or sorrow, or some other misfortune? For the same reason that in the army the bravest men are assigned to the hazardous tasks; it is the picked soldier that a general sends to surprise the enemy by a night attack, or to reconnoiter the road, or to dislodge a garrison. Not a man of these will say as he goes, "My commander has treated me badly," but instead, "He has paid me a compliment." In like manner, all those who are called to suffer the things that make cowards and weak men weep may say, "God has deemed us worthy instruments of his purpose to discover how much human nature can endure."

Submitting to the Will of Providence

What then, is the part of a good man? To offer himself to Fate. It is a great consolation that it is together with the universe we are swept along; whatever it is that has ordained us so to live, so to die, by the same necessity it binds also the gods. One unchangeable course bears along the affairs of men and gods alike. Although the great creator and ruler of the universe himself wrote the decrees of Fate, yet he follows them. He obeys forever, he decreed but once. "Why, however," do you ask, "was God so unjust in his allotment of destiny as to assign to good men poverty, wounds, and painful death?" It is impossible for the moulder to alter matter; to this law it has submitted. Certain qualities cannot be separated from certain others; they cling together, are indivisible. Natures that are listless, that are prone to sleep, or to a kind of wakefulness that closely resembles sleep, are composed of sluggish elements. It takes sterner stuff to make a man who deserves to be mentioned with consideration. His course will not be the level way; uphill and downhill must he go, be tossed about, and guide his bark through stormy waters; he must keep his course in spite of fortune. Much that is hard, much that is rough will befall him, but he himself will soften the one, and make the other smooth. Fire tests gold, misfortune brave men. See to what a height virtue must climb!

Seneca. "On Providence." *Moral Essays*. Vol. 1. Translated by John W. Basore. London: W. Heinemann, 1928. Translation updated.

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