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Of Leisure

Lucius Annaeus Seneca

Translated by Aubrey Stewart

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Introduction

Of Leisure, known in Latin as *De Otio*, is Seneca's defence of philosophical retirement and contemplative activity. Addressed to his friend Annaeus Serenus, it examines whether a Stoic may withdraw from direct political service without betraying the school's commitment to the common good. The work is generally dated to around 62 CE, a period when Seneca's own relationship with public power had become increasingly difficult.

The surviving text is incomplete. Its opening begins in the middle of an argument, and its ending breaks off before the discussion reaches a formal conclusion. These gaps are part of the ancient work's transmission. They leave some context unknown, but the central dispute remains clear enough to follow across the eight surviving sections.

Seneca opens by describing retirement as protection from the unstable judgement of the crowd. People pursue whatever receives public approval, change desires rapidly and mistake popularity for evidence of value. Leisure creates space in which a person can choose a coherent model of life without having every unsettled conviction overturned by social pressure.

An objection immediately appears. Stoicism traditionally requires service to humanity and refuses to discharge a person from useful labour merely because of age. Retirement can therefore look like an Epicurean retreat from public obligation. Seneca responds that he is following the real direction of Stoic teaching rather than repeating a slogan without regard to circumstances.

The dialogue distinguishes different stages and reasons for retirement. Someone may devote life to contemplation from the beginning, while another may withdraw after public service, failing health or political obstruction. What matters is whether leisure is used honourably rather than whether every person follows one identical timetable.

Seneca compares the Stoic and Epicurean approaches. Epicurus makes retirement the ordinary rule unless special circumstances call the wise person into politics. Zeno makes public involvement the ordinary rule unless circumstances prevent it. Their starting points differ, but both acknowledge that political action is conditional rather than absolute.

The word prevent covers more than personal convenience. A state may be too corrupt to receive useful guidance; a person may lack influence, health or suitable capacity; political action may require moral compromise without a reasonable

prospect of benefit. Stoic duty does not demand the waste of strength on an undertaking structurally closed to virtue.

Retirement is not defended as idleness. The duty to be useful remains: first to many people if possible, then to a few, then to those nearby and finally to oneself. Self-improvement serves others by preparing judgement, character and teaching that may later become available to them.

The fourth section expands citizenship beyond the state of birth. Seneca describes two commonwealths: the local political community and the larger community that includes gods and human beings under nature. Direct office serves the smaller state; philosophical inquiry may serve the universal one by investigating virtue, nature and humanity's place in the whole.

Contemplation is itself presented as a natural human function. Curiosity, travel and wonder show a desire to discover what is hidden. Human posture and perception appear fitted for observing the heavens. Nature has made people not only participants in the world but witnesses capable of reflecting upon it.

Yet Seneca refuses to detach contemplation entirely from action. Virtue that never tests itself in conduct remains incomplete. The contemplative person's work may consist in teaching, writing and forming principles for later generations. Zeno and Chrysippus held no political commands, yet their thought influenced a community far larger and more enduring than one administration.

The discussion of three lives - pleasure, contemplation and action - shows that these categories overlap. Thought contains activity; action requires reflection; even rational pleasure involves deliberate organisation. The question is which purpose leads, not whether the other human capacities disappear.

Seneca finally argues that a truly suitable state for the wise person may not exist. Athens condemned Socrates and drove Aristotle away; Carthage is portrayed as consumed by faction and injustice. These historical examples make retirement less a refusal to serve than a response to institutions incapable of tolerating or using wisdom.

The fragmentary ending leaves Seneca's last comparison unfinished. He likens political service to sailing: praising navigation while forbidding dangerous seas would effectively prevent departure. The missing conclusion would presumably have clarified when conditions make the political voyage unreasonable.

Of Leisure therefore rejects the opposition between usefulness and retirement. A secluded life may be selfish, but so may a public career pursued for status. The moral question concerns the direction of activity. Leisure is justified when it

develops truth, virtue and work capable of serving people beyond the limits of immediate office.

For modern readers, the dialogue speaks to transitions away from formal employment, blocked institutions and the value of reflective work. It does not offer leisure as permanent escape from responsibility. It asks how service can change form when direct participation is unavailable, harmful or no longer the place where one's capacities can do the most good.

I.

. . . . why do they with great unanimity recommend vices to us? even though we attempt nothing else that would do us good, yet retirement in itself will be beneficial to us: we shall be better men when taken singly—and if so, what an advantage it will be to retire into the society of the best of men, and to choose some example by which we may guide our lives! This cannot be done without leisure: with leisure we can carry out that which we have once for all decided to be best, when there is no one to interfere with us and with the help of the mob pervert our as yet feeble judgment: with leisure only can life, which we distract by aiming at the most incompatible objects, flow on in a single gentle stream.

Indeed, the worst of our various ills is that we change our very vices, and so we have not even the advantage of dealing with a well-known form of evil: we take pleasure first in one and then in another, and are, besides, troubled by the fact that our opinions are not only wrong, but lightly formed; we toss as it were on waves, and clutch at one thing after another: we let go what we just now sought for, and strive to recover what we have let go. We oscillate between desire and remorse, for we depend entirely upon the opinions of others, and it is that which many people praise and seek after, not that which deserves to be praised and sought after, which we consider to be best.

Nor do we take any heed of whether our road be good or bad in itself, but we value it by the number of footprints upon it, among which there are none of any who have returned. You will say to me, “Seneca, what are you doing? do you desert your party? I am sure that our Stoic philosophers say we must be in motion up to the very end of our life, we will never cease to labour for the general good; to help individual people, and when stricken in years to afford assistance even to our enemies. We are the sect that gives no discharge for any number of years’ service, and in the words of the most eloquent of poets:— ‘We wear the helmet when our locks are grey.’ We are they who are so far from indulging in any leisure until we die, that if circumstances permit it, we do not allow ourselves to be at leisure even when we are dying.

Why do you preach the maxims of Epicurus in the very headquarters of Zeno? nay, if you are ashamed of your party, why do you not go openly altogether over to the enemy rather than betray your own side?” I will answer this question straightway: What more can you wish than that I should imitate my leaders? What then follows? I shall go whither they lead me, not whither they send me.

II.

Now I will prove to you that I am not deserting the tenets of the Stoics: for they themselves have not deserted them: and yet I should be able to plead a very good excuse even if I did follow, not their precepts, but their examples. I shall divide what I am about to say into two parts: first, that a man may from the very beginning of his life give himself up entirely to the contemplation of truth; secondly, that a man when he has already completed his term of service, has the best of rights, that of his shattered health, to do this, and that he may then apply his mind to other studies after the manner of the Vestal virgins, who allot different duties to different years, first learn how to perform the sacred rites, and when they have learned them teach others.

III.

I will show that this is approved of by the Stoics also, not that I have laid any commandment upon myself to do nothing contrary to the teaching of Zeno and Chrysippus, but because the matter itself allows me to follow the precepts of those men; for if one always follows the precepts of one man, one ceases to be a debater and becomes a partizan. Would that all things were already known, that truth were unveiled and recognized, and that none of our doctrines required modification! but as it is we have to seek for truth in the company of the very men who teach it. The two sects of Epicureans and Stoics differ widely in most respects, and on this point among the rest, nevertheless, each of them consigns us to leisure, although by a different road.

Epicurus says, "The wise man will not take part in politics, except upon some special occasion;" Zeno says, "The wise man will take part in politics, unless prevented by some special circumstance." The one makes it his aim in life to seek for leisure, the other seeks it only when he has reasons for so doing: but this word "reasons" has a wide signification. If the state is so rotten as to be past helping, if evil has entire dominion over it, the wise man will not labour in vain or waste his strength in unprofitable efforts. Should he be deficient in influence or bodily strength, if the state refuse to submit to his guidance, if his health stand in the way, then he will not attempt a journey for which he is unfit, just as he would not put to sea in a worn-out ship, or enlist in the army if he were an invalid.

Consequently, one who has not yet suffered either in health or fortune has the right, before encountering any storms, to establish himself in safety, and thenceforth to devote himself to honourable industry and inviolate leisure, and the service of those virtues which can be practised even by those who pass the quietest of lives. The duty of a man is to be useful to his fellow-men; if possible, to be useful to many of them; failing this, to be useful to a few; failing this, to be useful to his neighbours, and, failing them, to himself: for when he helps others, he advances the general interests of mankind.

Just as he who makes himself a worse man does harm not only to himself but to all those to whom he might have done good if he had made himself a better one, so he who deserves well of himself does good to others by the very fact that he is preparing what will be of service to them.

IV.

Let us grasp the fact that there are two republics, one vast and truly “public,” which contains alike gods and men, in which we do not take account of this or that nook of land, but make the boundaries of our state reach as far as the rays of the sun: and another to which we have been assigned by the accident of birth. This may be that of the Athenians or Carthaginians, or of any other city which does not belong to all men but to some especial ones. Some men serve both of these states, the greater and the lesser, at the same time; some serve only the lesser, some only the greater.

We can serve the greater commonwealth even when we are at leisure; indeed I am not sure that we cannot serve it better when we are at leisure to inquire into what virtue is, and whether it be one or many: whether it be nature or art that makes men good: whether that which contains the earth and sea and all that in them is be one, or whether God has placed therein many bodies of the same species: whether that out of which all things are made be continuous and solid, or containing interstices and alternate empty and full spaces: whether God idly looks on at His handiwork, or directs its course: whether He is without and around the world, or whether He pervades its entire surface: whether the world be immortal, or doomed to decay and belonging to the class of things which are born only for a time?

What service does he who meditates upon these questions render to God? He prevents these His great works having no one to witness them.

V.

We have a habit of saying that the highest good is to live according to nature: now nature has produced us for both purposes, for contemplation and for action. Let us now prove what we said before: nay, who will not think this proved if he bethinks himself how great a passion he has for discovering the unknown? how vehemently his curiosity is roused by every kind of romantic tale. Some men make long voyages and undergo the toils of journeying to distant lands for no reward except that of discovering something hidden and remote. This is what draws people to public shows, and causes them to pry into everything that is closed, to puzzle out everything that is secret, to clear up points of antiquity, and to listen to tales of the customs of savage nations.

Nature has bestowed upon us an inquiring disposition, and being well aware of her own skill and beauty, has produced us to be spectators of her vast works, because she would lose all the fruits of her labour if she were to exhibit such vast and noble works of such complex construction, so bright and beautiful in so many ways, to solitude alone. That you may be sure that she wishes to be gazed upon, not merely looked at, see what a place she has assigned to us: she has placed us in the middle of herself and given us a prospect all around. She has not only set man erect upon his feet, but also with a view to making it easy for him to watch the heavens, she has raised his head on high and connected it with a pliant neck, in order that he might follow the course of the stars from their rising to their setting, and move his face round with the whole heaven.

Moreover, by carrying six constellations across the sky by day, and six by night, she displays every part of herself in such a manner that by what she brings before man's eyes she renders him eager to see the rest also. For we have not beheld all things, nor yet the true extent of them, but our eyesight does but open to itself the right path for research, and lay the foundation, from which our speculations may pass from what is obvious to what is less known, and find out something more ancient than the world itself, from whence those stars came forth: inquire what was the condition of the universe before each of its elements were separated from the general mass: on what principle its confused and blended parts were divided: who assigned their places to things, whether it was by their own nature that what was heavy sunk downwards, and what was light flew upwards, or whether besides the stress and weight of bodies some higher power gave laws to each of them: whether that greatest proof that the spirit of man is divine be true, the theory, namely, that some parts and as it were sparks of the stars have fallen down upon earth and stuck there in a foreign substance.

Our thought bursts through the battlements of heaven, and is not satisfied with knowing only what is shown to us: "I investigate," it says, "that which lies without the world, whether it be a bottomless abyss, or whether it also is confined within boundaries of its own: what the appearance of the things outside may be, whether they be shapeless and vague, extending equally in every direction, or whether they also are arranged in a certain kind of order: whether they are connected with this world of ours, or are widely separated from it and welter about in empty space: whether they consist of distinct atoms, of which everything that is and that is to be, is made, or whether their substance is uninterrupted and all of it capable of change: whether the elements are naturally opposed to one another, or whether they are not at variance, but work towards the same end by different means." Since man was born for such speculations as these, consider how short a time he has been given for them, even supposing that he makes good his claims to the whole of it, allows no part of it to be wrested from him through good nature, or to slip away from him through carelessness; though he watches over all his hours with most miserly care, though he live to the extreme confines of human existence, and though misfortune take nothing away from what Nature bestowed upon him, even then man is too mortal for the comprehension of immortality.

I live according to Nature, therefore, if I give myself entirely up to her, and if I admire and reverence her. Nature, however, intended me to do both, to practise both contemplation and action: and I do both, because even contemplation is not devoid of action.

VI.

“But,” say you, “it makes a difference whether you adopt the contemplative life for the sake of your own pleasure, demanding nothing from it save unbroken contemplation without any result: for such a life is a sweet one and has attractions of its own.” To this I answer you: It makes just as much difference in what spirit you lead the life of a public man, whether you are never at rest, and never set apart any time during which you may turn your eyes away from the things of earth to those of Heaven. It is by no means desirable that one should merely strive to accumulate property without any love of virtue, or do nothing but hard work without any cultivation of the intellect, for these things ought to be combined and blended together; and, similarly, virtue placed in leisure without action is but an incomplete and feeble good thing, because she never displays what she has learned.

Who can deny that she ought to test her progress in actual work, and not merely think what ought to be done, but also sometimes use her hands as well as her head, and bring her conceptions into actual being? But if the wise man be quite willing to act thus, if it be the things to be done, not the man to do them that are wanting, will you not then allow him to live to himself? What is the wise man’s purpose in devoting himself to leisure? He knows that in leisure as well as in action he will accomplish something by which he will be of service to posterity. Our school at any rate declares that Zeno and Chrysippus have done greater things than they would have done had they been in command of armies, or filled high offices, or passed laws: which latter indeed they did pass, though not for one single state, but for the whole human race.

How then can it be unbecoming to a good man to enjoy a leisure such as this, by whose means he gives laws to ages to come, and addresses himself not to a few persons but to all men of all nations, both now and hereafter? To sum up the matter, I ask you whether Cleanthes, Chrysippus, and Zeno lived in accordance with their doctrine? I am sure that you will answer that they lived in the manner in which they taught that men ought to live: yet no one of them governed a state. “They had not,” you reply, “the amount of property or social position which as a rule enables people to take part in public affairs.” Yet for all that they did not live an idle life: they found the means of making their retirement more useful to mankind than the perspirings and runnings to and fro of other men: wherefore these persons are thought to have done great things, in spite of their having done nothing of a public character.

VII.

Moreover, there are three kinds of life, and it is a stock question which of the three is the best: the first is devoted to pleasure, the second to contemplation, the third to action. First, let us lay aside all disputatiousness and bitterness of feeling, which, as we have stated, causes those whose paths in life are different to hate one another beyond all hope of reconciliation, and let us see whether all these three do not come to the same thing, although under different names: for neither he who decides for pleasure is without contemplation, nor is he who gives himself up to contemplation without pleasure: nor yet is he, whose life is devoted to action, without contemplation.

“It makes,” you say, “all the difference in the world, whether a thing is one’s main object in life, or whether it be merely an appendage to some other object.” I admit that the difference is considerable, nevertheless the one does not exist apart from the other: the one man cannot live in contemplation without action, nor can the other act without contemplation: and even the third, of whom we all agree in having a bad opinion, does not approve of passive pleasure, but of that which he establishes for himself by means of reason: even this pleasure-seeking sect itself, therefore, practises action also. Of course it does, since Epicurus himself says that at times he would abandon pleasure and actually seek for pain, if he became likely to be surfeited with pleasure, or if he thought that by enduring a slight pain he might avoid a greater one.

With what purpose do I state this? To prove that all men are fond of contemplation. Some make it the object of their lives: to us it is an anchorage, but not a harbour.

VIII.

Add to this that, according to the doctrine of Chrysippus, a man may live at leisure: I do not say that he ought to endure leisure, but that he ought to choose it. Our Stoics say that the wise man would not take part in the government of any state. What difference does it make by what path the wise man arrives at leisure, whether it be because the state is wanting to him, or he is wanting to the state? If the state is to be wanting to all wise men (and it always will be found wanting by refined thinkers), I ask you, to what state should the wise man betake himself; to that of the Athenians, in which Socrates is condemned to death, and from which Aristotle goes into exile lest he should be condemned to death? where virtues are borne down by jealousy?

You will tell me that no wise man would join such a state. Shall then the wise man go to the commonwealth of the Carthaginians, where faction never ceases to rage, and liberty is the foe of all the best men, where justice and goodness are held of no account, where enemies are treated with inhuman cruelty and natives are treated like enemies: he will flee from this state also. If I were to discuss each one separately, I should not be able to find one which the wise man could endure, or which could endure the wise man. Now if such a state as we have dreamed of cannot be found on earth, it follows that leisure is necessary for every one, because the one thing which might be preferred to leisure is nowhere to be found.

If any one says that to sail is the best of things, and then says that we ought not to sail in a sea in which shipwrecks were common occurrences, and where sudden storms often arise which drive the pilot back from his course, I should imagine that this man, while speaking in praise of sailing, was really forbidding me to unmoor my ship

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AUTHOR

Lucius Annaeus Seneca

TRANSLATOR

Aubrey Stewart

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