

Chapter 47

Marcus Aurelius

121 CE – 180 CE

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How putrid is the matter which underlies everything. Water, dust, bones, stench. Again, fine marbles are calluses of the earth; gold and silver, its sediments; our clothes, animal-hair; their purple, blood from a shellfish. Our very breath is something similar and changes from this to that. *(Meditations, 9 36).*

Marcus Aurelius, Roman emperor from 161 to 180 CE, was the last of the great Stoic philosophers. He was born in Rome as Marcus Annii Verus, of Spanish ancestry. His father died when he was a young boy, but Marcus soon enjoyed the favor of the emperor Hadrian. Nicknaming him Verissimus, meaning ‘the most truthful’, Hadrian made Marcus a priest at the tender age of eight, and betrothed him to the daughter of Lucius Ceionius Commodus when he was fifteen. When Ceionius died two years later, Hadrian arranged for the trustworthy Antoninus Pius, Hadrian’s successor to the throne, to adopt both Marcus and Ceionius’ son Lucius Verus.

Marcus learned rhetoric, grammar, philosophy, and law from the best teachers of his day. Frank, sincere, and sensitive in character, Marcus was frail, but also lean and athletic. He married Pius’ daughter Faustina in 145 CE, and they had a daughter the next year. An ever loyal and obedient son-in-law, around 147 CE Marcus abandoned rhetoric for Stoicism, which inspired him the rest of his life. His own Stoic philosophy was deeply influenced by the great Stoic teacher and ex-slave Epictetus.

After twenty-two years of administrative experience, Marcus ascended the throne. Much of his reign was spent defending and expanding the frontiers of the empire. He battled tribes in northern Italy, Britain, Parthia, and especially Germany. During these many wars Marcus would return to his tent, under the cold gloom of a foreign sky, weary from another day of shouldering his staggering imperial duties, and take up a pen to jot down his private thoughts on the place of human beings in the universe. These personal reflections, written only for himself, in Greek, the language of philosophy, rather than Latin, range in length from a short sentence to

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several paragraphs. Later compiled into twelve books, Marcus' unique philosophical notebook became known as the *Meditations*.

The cosmic perspective, insistence on the plain truth, and acting for the common good characterize Marcus' thought. One of his favourite techniques is to take what many prize the most—wealth, power, luxuries, sex—strip them of their glitz and glamour, and reveal how paltry they truly are. In *Meditations* he writes:

When you sit before delicacies and fancy foods, you will recognize their nature if you bear in mind that this is the corpse of a fish, that is the corpse of a bird or a pig; or again, that imported wine is merely grape juice, and this purple robe some sheep's wool dipped in the blood of a shellfish; and as for sexual intercourse, it is the rubbing of a piece of intestine, then a convulsion, and the spurring of some mucus. Thoughts like these go to the heart of actual facts and penetrate them, allowing us to see them as they really are (*Meditations*, 6.13).

Such sobering reminders helped Marcus remain upright and clear-eyed amidst regal bewitchments. Surrounded daily by such enticements, Marcus was intent on not falling prey to them. He warns himself that 'pride is an arch-seducer of reason' in order to keep himself honest and humble despite his lofty position of authority.

As a Stoic, Marcus believed that the only real goods are wisdom, temperance, justice, courage, and the other virtues of a good moral character. All else he considered transient, cheap, and superfluous, as he writes:

All that is prized in life is empty, rotten, and petty, puppies snapping at one another, little children bickering, laughing, and then soon crying ... What is one to do? ... What else than to worship and praise the gods, to do good to people, to bear with them and to show forbearance (*Meditations*, 5.33).

Concern for communal unity and tolerance of others is a common refrain:

Human beings are here for the sake of one another; either instruct them or put up with them (*Meditations*, 8.59).

By concentrating on what is up to him, Marcus offers himself sound Stoic advice:

Another does me wrong? Let him look to that; he has his own disposition, and his actions are his own. For my part, I now have what universal nature wills that I should have, and I am doing what my own nature wills that I should do (*Meditations*, 5.25).

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Dying is no big deal, Marcus thinks, since thousands upon thousands, entire cities, have perished for century after century. He often looks at things from the viewpoint of the universe:

How small a fraction of infinite and unimaginable time has been assigned to each of us. For all too swiftly it vanishes in eternity. And what a fraction of the whole of matter, and what a fraction of the whole of universal soul. And on what a small clod of the whole earth you creep. Bearing all this in mind, imagine nothing to be great but this: to act as your own nature directs, and to love what universal nature brings (*Meditations*, 12.32).

With these somber reflections, the Stoic emperor situated himself in the world. ‘All things are ever the same,’ he writes (9.14), ‘familiar in experience, fleeting in time, foul in their matter; all is just the same now as it was in the days of those whom we have buried.’ What comforting wisdom does Marcus derive from these observations? He explains:

Our security in life is to see each thing in itself, in its entirety, its material, its cause; and to do what is right and to speak the truth with all our heart. What remains but to enjoy life, linking one good act to another, so that not even the smallest space is ever left in between? (*Meditations* 12.29).

In a letter to his rhetoric teacher, Marcus Cornelius Fronto, he reports that he is a lucky man because from Fronto he learns ‘how to speak the truth; and that ability, to tell the truth, is a hard task indeed, for men and gods alike.’ Is it any easier for us today?

References and Suggestions for Further Reading

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