



The Mereology of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus

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Mereology (from the Greek μέρος) is the branch of ontology which studies the relations of part to whole and the relations of part to part within a whole. The roots of mereology can be traced back to the earliest ancient Greek philosophers (the Presocratics), Plato, and Aristotle. The mereological approach of the Stoic philosophers in the Roman Empire, however, has been neglected.¹ In this paper, The author Offer a sketch of how the Roman emperor and Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius Antoninus used mereology in the collection of brief, occasionally cryptic memoranda and self-exhortations which the tradition has dubbed the *Meditations*. The author's thesis is that his account of parts and wholes is such a prevalent theme throughout this work because mereological analyses provide Marcus an understanding of what he is, what the cosmos is and how it works, and the purposes of all rational beings, both as agents in the social community and as citizens of the state. That is, the conceptual power and explanatory flexibility of mereology enable Marcus to reason to conclusions about ontology, the nature of a human person, ethical ideals, and a political worldview. As a consequence, a good grasp of Marcus' mereology provides a clear and detailed overview of a wide swath of the philosophical terrain in his *Meditations*.

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Mereology as Method

Marcus often uses mereology as a method for piercing through and discrediting popular but misleading opinions that disguise the real nature of a subject, object, or thing. Stoics believed that true goods are necessary and sufficient for a happy life, while the true evils are similarly necessary and sufficient for a miserable life. Stoics famously hold that the only true goods are the virtues, while the only true evils are the vices. Everything else, including life, death, good repute, ill repute, wealth, poverty, health, illness, noble birth, humble birth, praise, calumny, status, power, and all material possessions are neither good nor evil but “indifferents” since each can be used either well or badly, either virtuously or viciously, either happily or miserably. Consequently, the Stoic has an attitude of indifference toward these items that are “indifferent” with respect to his/her happiness. What matters is how the Stoic uses these items, not the “indifferents” themselves.

Attention to parts and wholes, Marcus thinks, allows correct thinking about, and so success at managing, these “indifferents” in order to achieve a good, happy life. He wrote:

“To live a good life: We have the potential for it. If we can learn to be indifferent to what makes no difference. This is how we learn: by looking at each thing, both the parts and the whole”. (xi. 16)²

Mereological analysis—examining “the parts and the whole”—is the primary method of philosophical investigation in the *Meditations*. With it Marcus debunks the kinds of displays that tend to impress non-Stoics and distract them from focusing on their moral characters.

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¹ Major works in English on Marcus' philosophy include: Hadot (1998); Rutherford (1989); Asmis (1989, *ANRW* II 36.3, pp. 2228-2252); Brunt (1974); Long (1982); Rist (1982); Stephens (2012).

² All translations of the *Meditations* are by Hays (2002).

“To acquire indifference to pretty singing, to dancing, to the martial arts: Analyze the melody into the notes that form it, and as you hear each one, ask yourself whether you’re powerless against *that*. That should be enough to deter you. The same with dancing: individual movements and tableaux. And the same with the martial arts. And with everything—except virtue and what springs from it. Look at the individual parts and move from analysis to indifference. Apply this to the whole of life”. (xi. 2)

Marcus coaches himself to resist being emotionally overpowered by a melody by breaking this whole into the unimpressive notes that constitute its parts. The same method dispels the illusory grandeur of every other activity and the putative “treasure” coveted by the unwise. Indeed, this sober, clear-sighted method of mereology should be applied to the whole of life and each of its parts. Only “virtue and what springs from it” are not to be dissected into trivial fragments, perhaps because the integrity of virtue alone is indivisible and unassailable.³

Very early in the *Meditations*, Marcus applies this mereological analysis to himself to discover a tripartition: “Whatever this is that I am, it is flesh and a little spirit and an intelligence” (ii. 2). The first part, the flesh, is to be despised because of what it is—“a mess of blood, pieces of bone, a woven tangle of nerves, veins, arteries” (ii. 2). The second part, the spirit, is “air, and never the same air, but vomited out and gulped in again every instant” (ii. 2). These first two parts are on loan. Only the third part, the intelligence, properly belongs to Marcus: “Your three components: body, breath, and mind. Two are yours in trust; to the third alone you have clear title” (xii. 3). His intelligence, Marcus reasons, is the only precious part of himself because it alone has the power to discern how the cosmos operates (ix. 15, 22, 26) and then to think, act, and live appropriately with that knowledge.⁴

Cosmic Holism

Understanding what the cosmos is, what governs its operation, how its constituent parts fit together, and the impermanence of those parts is fundamental to Marcus’ enterprise in the *Meditations*. As a consequence, he often reminds himself of the perspectives that arise from reflection on the cosmic whole and the organic parts belonging to it.

Marcus emphasizes the unity of the world, its coherence, and the strong, synergistic interconnections of all its parts: “The world as one living being—one nature, one soul. Keep that in mind. And how everything feeds into that single experience, moves with a single motion. And how everything helps produce everything else. Spun and woven together” (iv. 40). No part, no body, no event in the cosmos is isolated or detached from the rest of it. No element in it is detached, out of place, or alien to it.

“Keep reminding yourself of the way things are connected, of their relatedness. All things are implicated in one another and in sympathy with each other. This event is the consequence of some other one. Things push and pull on each other, and breathe together and are one”. (vi. 38; ix. 9; x. 26)

So just as no event or object is out of place or incongruous relative to the cosmic whole, no event or object is superfluous or eliminable. All parts fit together, each fulfilling its role, each performing a job. All events

³ Though Marcus does not state that he accepts the Stoic doctrine of the unity of the virtues, he nowhere hints that he rejects it or doubts its truth. Thus it seems safe to assume that, as a Stoic, he holds this orthodox view.

⁴ “Singular, not plural: Sunlight. Though broken up by walls and mountains and a thousand other things. Substance. Though split into a thousand forms, variously shaped Life. Though distributed among a thousand different natures with their individual limitations. Intelligence. Even if it seems to be divided. The other components—breath, matter—lack any awareness or connection to one another (yet unity and its gravitational pull embrace them too). But intelligence is uniquely drawn toward what is akin to it, and joins with it inseparably, in shared awareness” (xii. 30).

similarly unfold in a coherent, continuous sequence, one bringing about another, each the result of a prior one.

This worldview is not a pat, obvious observation. Rather, it functions as a profound recognition of the ubiquitous goodness and wisdom of the structure Marcus finds himself embedded in. The perpetual unity of the diverse elements of the cosmos reflects a simultaneous monism of divinity, substance, law, and intelligibility:

“Everything is interwoven, and the web is holy; none of its parts are unconnected. They are composed harmoniously, and together they compose the world. One world, made up of all things. One divinity, present in them all. One substance and one law—the *logos* that all rational beings share. And one truth. If this is indeed the culmination of one process, beings who share the same birth, the same *logos*”. (vii. 9; ix. 8, ix. 39)

So the *logos*, the coherence, order, divinity, and interconnectedness of all things in the cosmos also establish a norm, an action guiding principle, which all beings with the capacity to recognize it share in common. All rational beings share a common origin and a common birth in this unified cosmos. All rational beings share a common law by which to govern their lives together. Consequently, all rational beings, all beings with sufficient intelligence, can comprehend this one truth that they are bound together both with the cosmic whole, with each other, with all other animate inhabitants and with all inanimate components of the world.

The proper place and function of each part derives directly from its relation to the whole. The needs of the whole (the cosmos) dictate the proper course for the part (the individual person). This arrangement, Marcus, like all Stoics, takes to be providential: “What is divine is full of Providence. Even chance is not divorced from nature, from the inweaving and enfolding of things governed by Providence. Everything proceeds from it” (ii. 3). It’s unclear how much room there is for chance in Marcus’ cosmology, but here he claims that even chance fits within nature, tied into the unfolding of events in nature. He continues:

“And then there is necessity and the needs of the whole world, of which you are a part. Whatever the nature of the whole does, and whatever serves to maintain it, is good for every part of nature. The world is maintained by change—in the elements and in the things they compose. That should enough for you; treat it as an axiom”. (ii. 3)

This is a crucial inference in the logic of Marcus’ cosmic mereology. Since the part is what it is by necessity, that is, since a part is necessarily a part of a particular whole, the good of a part must necessarily derive from the good of that whole of which it is a part.

Time and Its Parts

Marcus’ mereological analysis of time merits its own separate, extended treatment. Here the author limit himself to one remark on it as it relates to the point about the cosmic whole dictating what occurs, and so what is good to occur, for each of its parts. Intuitively enough, Marcus divides time into three parts: an infinitely long past, a razor-thin blip of the present, and an infinitely long, ultimately unfathomable future. How do we fit into this tripartite temporal scheme, given what we are and where find ourselves? Marcus wrote:

“The fraction of infinity, of that vast abyss of time, allotted to each of us. Absorbed in an instant into eternity. The fraction of all substance, and all spirit. The fraction of the whole earth you crawl about on. Keep all that in mind, and don’t treat anything as important except doing what your nature demands, and accepting what Nature sends you”. (xii. 32)

Our lives are the briefest of instants in the vast stretch of eternity. Our bodies and spirits are the tiniest bits in the vast volumes of substances in nature. Even though for some of us today the earth may feel smaller than it did in Marcus’ day, the portions of it most of us traverse still remain a small fraction of the whole. These three

observations remind Marcus to soberly disregard trivial worries and annoyances, trifling fears and concerns, and to focus squarely on doing what his Nature (as a logical being equipped with mereological wisdom, embedded in a providential cosmos) demands. More on that soon—but acceptance of what Nature sends to him is basic to the mereological insight that if the cosmos sends him an event, situation, circumstance, or encounter, then facing it and embracing it in an intelligent way is his responsibility.

What exactly is the intelligent response to what Nature sends us? How should conscious, reasoning parts—normal, adult human beings—react to what nature, the cosmic whole, send to them? Marcus believed that fiance would be an entirely discordant refrain:

“... For there is a single harmony. Just as the world forms a single body comprising all bodies, so fate forms a single purpose, comprising all purposes... what happens to an individual is a cause of well-being in what directs the world—of its well-being, its fulfillment, of its very existence, even. Because the whole is damaged if you cut away anything—anything at all—from its continuity and coherence. Not only its parts but also its purposes. And that’s what you’re doing when you complain: hacking and destroying”. (v. 8)

To ignore what nature sends us, to deny it, to resent it, or try to reject it is to fundamentally fail to see that the part does not govern the whole. The part is not free to separate itself, to separate its nature, to detach its function, to define its good, in isolation from the whole to which it is connected as a part. The whole needs the part to do its part. The whole operates as a whole only if each of its parts works in harmony with the overarching purpose of the whole. The purpose of each part is defined by its task within, and in relation to, the whole. The part fulfills itself and achieves its well-being, Marcus asserted, when it accepts what happens to it. What happens to an individual person is never accidental or unnecessary, but contributes to the well-being directing the entire cosmos. Consequently, to complain about what happens to you is to sever yourself from the continuity and coherence of the purposes of the whole cosmos. To complain is for the part to damage its parthood—its connection to its whole, its purpose *within* the whole.

Death as Harmless Transformation

What is one of our favorite things to fear and complain about? Death, to be sure. However, Marcus believed that to complain about death is to turn our intelligence away from how the cosmos functions, how nature works.

“Nature takes substance and makes a horse. Like a sculptor with wax. And then melts it down and uses the material for a tree. Then for a person. Then for something else. Each existing only briefly. It does the container no harm to be put together and none to be taken apart”. (vii. 23)

Horses, trees, and human beings are made of the same material substance, are manufactured by the same kind of physical processes and natural causes, exist for only a brief period relative to the immense span of eternity, and are dissolved—“melted down”—back into the same cosmos from which they originated. Living beings suffer no harm in being generated by the cosmos and serving as temporary “containers” of nature’s material substance, and they suffer no harm in being taken apart, disassembled, and recycled into new containers manufactured by nature. The cosmic whole always has, always does, and always will so recycle its animate parts. Marcus wrote:

“The whole is compounded by nature of individual parts, whose destruction is inevitable (‘destruction’ here meaning transformation). If the process is harmful to the parts and unavoidable, then it’s hard to see how the whole can run

smoothly⁵, with parts of it passing from one state to another, all of them built only to be destroyed in different ways. Does nature set out to cause its own components harm, and make them vulnerable to it—indeed, predestined to it? Or is it oblivious to what goes on? Neither one seems very plausible...” (x. 7)

Just as the birth of an organism is a harmless transformation, Marcus sees the death of an organism similarly as a transformation. Death is thus neither an annihilation nor harmful. The whole transforms its parts, but it makes no sense to Marcus that the cosmic whole would build them only to harm them by recycling them. Marcus sees the symmetry of this cosmic process as “unavoidable”.

Marcus reminds himself: “You have functioned as a part of something; you will vanish into what produced you. Or be restored, rather. To the *logos* from which all things spring. By being changed” (iv. 14; Cf. iv. 21, 36, 40, 42; v. 13; vii.10, 23, 25). And: “What dies does not vanish. It stays here in the world, transformed, dissolved, as parts of the world, and of you. Which are transformed in turn—without grumbling” (viii. 18; cf. ix. 3).⁶ The transformed part restored to the cosmic whole has no reason to grumble about its restoration. Marcus applies his mereological analysis to himself. Marcus, who is a kind of whole, is composed of body, a kind of substance, and the animating spirit, which, as the air, is another kind of substance. He wrote:

“I am made up of substance and what animates it and neither one can ever stop existing, any more than it began to. Every portion of me will be reassigned as another portion of the world, and that in turn transformed into another. Ad infinitum. I was produced through one such transformation, and my parents too, and so on back. Ad infinitum”. (v. 13; cf. ii. 17; ix. 21; xii. 21)

This same endless process by which the cosmos rearranges, reuses, and recycles its organismic parts links Marcus to his parents, grandparents, all his ancestors, to all human beings, and, indeed, to all life forms stretching back in time infinitely. He likens this aspect of the relationship between a human person and nature to the relationship between an olive and the tree that bears it. He urges himself “... to pass through this brief life as nature demands. To give it up without complaint. Like an olive that ripens and falls. Praising its mother, thanking the tree it grew on” (iv. 48). As the tree gives fruit to its olives, the cosmos gives fruit to its living beings. Ripening fruit does not complain about falling from its tree, neither should we. But we can do one better than the olives by praising our mother-tree—the Earth—for bearing us.

The Limbs of the Social Body

In one fascinating text Marcus uses a mereological model to conceive of his life as an agent as a series (a whole) composed of individual actions (the parts). “You have to assemble your life yourself—action by action. And be satisfied if each one achieves its goal, as far as it can. No one can keep that from happening” (viii. 32). Though there can be external obstacles to our accomplishments, Marcus noted that there are no obstacles outside of ourselves “to behaving with justice, self-control, and good sense” (viii.32). Indeed, “if you accept the obstacle and work with what you’re given, an alternative will present itself—another piece of what you’re trying to assemble. Action by action” (viii. 32).⁷ Just, self-controlled and sensible actions concatenate to

⁵ The “smooth running” of the cosmos is a good state for it to be in. The good of the whole defines what the good of the part must be. “Whatever happens to you is for the good of the world. That would be enough right there. But if you look closely you’ll generally notice something else as well: whatever happens to a single person is for the good of others (Good in the ordinary sense—as the world defines it)” (vi. 45; xii. 23).

⁶ “... nature as a whole, whose parts, shifting and changing, constantly renew the world, and keep it on schedule” (xii. 23).

⁷ Consequently, if one’s aim is to do one’s best to achieve a particular outcome, and one succeeds in making the best attempt one can under the circumstances, then one has succeeded already regardless of what results in the external world. That outcome will be determined in part by causes beyond one’s control.

constitute the life of a good agent, a virtuous person. Such an agent is a good actor, as it were, on the social stage.

Society is a whole composed of civic parts. Marcus reminded himself:

“You participate in a society by your existence. Then participate in its life through your actions—all your actions. Any action not directed toward a social end (directly or indirectly) is a disturbance to your life, an obstacle to wholeness, a source of dissension. Like the man in the Assembly—a faction to himself, always out of step with the majority”. (ix. 23)

With this mereological understanding of society Marcus thought the normative conclusions about how one ought to deal with other people is plain:

“What is rational in different beings is related, like the individual limbs of a single being, and meant to function as a unit. This will be clearer to you if you remind yourself: I am a single limb (μέλος) of a larger body—a rational one. Or you could say ‘a part’ (μέρος)—only one letter’s difference. But then you’re not really embracing other people. Helping them isn’t yet its own reward. You’re still seeing it only as The Right Thing To Do. You don’t yet realize who you’re really helping”. (vii. 13)

He prods himself to take to heart the truth that for a part to help other parts within a whole is really for the part to promote its *own* good by promoting the good of its whole.⁸ The whole that is human society is benefited whenever a human member of that societal body helps another of its members.⁹

Because our common rationality binds all human beings together, all members of human society, both the righteous and the wrongdoers, are relatives:

“...the wrongdoer has a nature related to my own—not of the same blood or birth, but the same mind, and possessing a share of the divine. And so none of them can hurt me. No one can implicate me in ugliness. Nor can I feel angry at my relative, or hate him. We were born to work together like feet, hands, and eyes, like the two rows of teeth, upper and lower. To obstruct each other is unnatural. To feel anger at someone, to turn your back on him: these are obstructions”. (ii. 1; cf. xii. 26)

The synergy and mutual assistance are the work of the organs and limbs of the organic body. For parts of an organic whole to interfere with each other and obstruct each other is contrary to their purposes. Marcus reasons that human beings share the same mind, the same intelligence—*logos*—and so are co-workers, like team mates, co-workers, singers in a chorus, or musicians in a symphony. As fellow rational beings, we are citizens of the cosmos, related by our intellects, meant to work together and strive for the good of the whole we participate in. Disregard, neglect, anger, hatred, or obstruction of one part by another is contrary to nature.

However, since rational beings can choose to think of themselves as unconnected social atoms, we are free

⁸ “Nature of any kind thrives on forward progress. And progress for a rational mind means not accepting falsehood or uncertainty in its perceptions, making unselfish actions its only aim, seeking and shunning only the things it has control over, embracing what nature demands of it—the nature in which it participates, as the leaf’s nature does in the tree’s. Except that the nature shared by the leaf is without consciousness or reason, and subject to impediments. Whereas that shared by human beings is without impediments, and rational, and just, since it allots to each and every thing an equal and proportionate share of time, being, purpose, action, chance. Examine it closely. Not whether they’re identical point by point, but in the aggregate: this weighed against that” (viii. 7).

⁹ It is interesting that Marcus uses a different kind of mereological thinking to address a particular instance of the problem of evil: Why are there shameless people in the world? Why can’t the world be free of shamelessness? He writes: “When you run up against someone else’s shamelessness, ask yourself this: Is a world without shamelessness possible? No. Then don’t ask the impossible. There have to be shameless people in the world. This is one of them. The same for someone vicious or untrustworthy, or with any other defect. Remembering that the whole class has to exist will make you more tolerant of its members” (ix. 42). Why is a world without shamelessness impossible? Presumably because in order for beings to be capable of rational and virtuous conduct, they must also be capable of irrational and vicious conduct. To have a sense of shame and honor necessitates being capable of shamelessness.

to disregard, hate, or obstruct each other, causing internal conflicts and divisions within the societal whole. Marcus again uses anatomical mereology to illustrate the nature of societal discord and dissension:

Have you ever seen a severed hand or foot, or a decapitated head, just lying somewhere far away from the body it belonged to...? That's what we do to ourselves—or try to—when we rebel against what happens to us, when we segregate ourselves. Or when we do something selfish. You have torn yourself away from unity—your natural state, one you were born to share in. Now you've cut yourself off from it. But you have one advantage here: you can reattach yourself. A privilege God has granted to no other part of no other whole—to be separated, cut away, and reunited. But look how he's singled us out. He's allowed us not to be broken off in the first place, and when we are he's allowed us to return, to graft ourselves back on, and take up our old position once again: part of a whole". (viii. 34)

Marcus observes that the more often the citizenly limb severs itself from the civic body, the more difficult re-attachment becomes.¹⁰ Choosing to hate or reject others fractures one's connection to the other parts—one's fellow citizens. The wiser course is never to disregard, reject, be angry with, or hate one's fellows at all in the first place.

The Politics of the Hive and the Citizen Bee

Marcus held that,

"nothing can harm one of nature's citizens except what harms the city he belongs to. And nothing harms that city except what harms its law. And there is no so-called misfortune that can do that. So long as the law is safe, so is the city—and the citizen" (x. 33).

Consequently, he reasons that if something does not harm the community, then it does not harm its members. "When you think you've been injured, apply this rule. If the community isn't injured by it, neither am I. And if it is, anger is not the answer. Show the offender where he went wrong" (v. 22). Anger never reattaches a severed limb to its body. Helping the offending, self-detaching limb to re-establish solidarity is done by helping the offender use his *intelligence* to see his error, to see how cutting himself off from society harms *him*.¹¹ Those who violate the city's law injure the city itself. "What injures the hive injures the bee" (vi. 54), as Marcus says.¹²

¹⁰ Marcus also uses the tree analogy to explain this mereological insight: "A branch cut away from the branch beside it is simultaneously cut away from the whole tree. So too a human being separated from another is cut loose from the whole community. The branch is cut off by someone else. But people cut themselves off—through hatred, through rejection—and don't realize that they're cutting themselves off from the whole civic enterprise. Except that we also have a gift, given us by Zeus, who founded this community of ours. We can reattach ourselves and become once more components of the whole. But if the rupture is too often repeated, it makes the severed part hard to reconnect, and to restore. You can see the difference between the branch that's been there since the beginning, remaining on the tree and growing with it, and the one that's been cut off and grafted back. 'One trunk, two minds'. As the gardeners put it" (xi. 8).

¹¹ "If thought is something we share, then so is reason—what makes us reasoning beings. If so, then the reason that tells us what to do and what not to do is also shared. And if so, we share a common law. And thus, are fellow citizens. And fellow citizens of something. And in that case, our state must be the world. What other entity could all of humanity belong to? And from it—from this state that we share—come thought and reason and law. Where else could they come from? The earth that composes me derives from earth, the water from some other element, the air from its own source, the heat and fire from theirs—since nothing comes from nothing, or returns to it. So thought must derive from somewhere else as well" (iv. 4).

¹² "Whether it's atoms or nature, the first thing to be said is this: I am a part of the world controlled by nature. Secondly: that I have a relationship with other, similar parts. And with that in mind I have no right, as a part, to complain about what is assigned to me by the whole. Because what benefits the whole can't harm the parts, and the whole does nothing that doesn't benefit it. That's a trait shared by all natures, but the nature of the world is defined by a second characteristic as well: no outside force can compel it to cause itself harm. So by keeping in mind the whole I form a part of, I'll accept whatever happens. And because of my relationship to other parts, I will do nothing selfish, but aim instead to join them, to direct my every action toward what benefits us all and to avoid what doesn't. If I do all that, then my life should go smoothly. As you might expect a citizen's life to go—one

There are two different political bodies, two different civic wholes, of which Marcus identifies himself as a member. He considers the possibility that the gods decide nothing about our lives. Even if this is the case, he insists that he himself can still make decisions. He can still consider what it is to his benefit to do. He wrote:

“And what benefits anyone is to do what his own nature requires. And mine is rational. Rational and civic. My city and state are Rome—as Antoninus. But as a human being? The world. So for me, ‘good’ can only mean what’s good for both communities”. (vi. 43; cf. ix. 16)¹³

Marcus believes that he can properly play his part as the emperor of Rome and contribute to the good of the empire only if he simultaneously properly plays his part as a rational being in the cosmos and contributes to the good of the entire world. Since Rome is part of the world, this must necessarily be the case in Marcus’ mereology.

History Repeats the Same Old Plot

Marcus’ view of history is also shaped by his mereological perspective on time. Marcus urges himself to play his assigned part—his role—in the drama of human history, even though the great deeds and even names of the giants of the past are quickly or slowly swept away by the river of time. Marcus wrote:

“Hippocrates cured many illnesses—and then fell ill and died. The Chaldaeans predicted the deaths of many others; in due course their own hour arrived. Alexander, Pompey, Caesar—who utterly destroyed so many cities, cut down so many thousand foot and horse in battle—they too departed this life. Heraclitus often told us the world would end in fire. But it was moisture that carried him off; he died smeared with cowshit. Democritus was killed by ordinary vermin, Socrates by the human kind. And? You boarded, you set sail, you’ve made the passage. Time to disembark”. (iii. 3)

Marcus remarks that the mighty Alexander the Great and his lowly mule driver both died and their bodies were dissolved and absorbed back into the world (vi. 24). Marcus mentions Chrysippus, Epictetus (vii. 19), all the people in the age of Vespasian and the age of Trajan (iv. 32), Augustus’s court, the family of the Pompeys, Camillus, Caeso, Volesus, Dentatus, Scipio, Cato, Fabius Catullinus, Lusius Lupus, Stertinius, Tiberius, Velius Rufus (xii. 27)—all these people are dead and gone (viii. 31), decomposed into the elements that formed them.

Marcus wrote that the story of history has the same plot from beginning to end with the identical staging: “the court of Hadrian, of Antoninus. The courts of Philip, Alexander, Croesus. All just the same. Only the people different” (x. 27). It would be a mistake to interpret Marcus’ lists of the deceased to express a pessimistic fatalism. Marcus is not arguing that all human endeavors are ultimately pointless, futile, or worthless. Rather, Marcus sees these repeated reminders of human mortality, the brevity of our lives, and the fleeting impermanence of fame and acclaim to be a poignant remedy to complacency and wasting our thoughts, feelings, and energies on trivial matters.¹⁴ He wrote:

“When you look at Satyron, see Socraticus, or Eutyches, or Hymen. When you look at Euphrates, see Eutycheon or

whose actions serve his fellow citizens, and who embraces the community’s decree”. (x. 6)

¹³ “You’ve lived as a citizen in a great city. Five years or a hundred—what’s the difference? The laws make no distinction. And to be sent away from it, not by a tyrant or a dishonest judge, but by Nature, who first invited you in—why is that so terrible?...” (xii. 36).

¹⁴ “Verus, leaving Lucilla behind, then Lucilla. Maximus, leaving Secunda. And Secunda. Diotimus, leaving Epitynchanus. Then Epitynchanus. Faustina, leaving Antoninus. Then Antoninus. So with all of them. Hadrian, leaving Celer. And Celer. Where have they gone, the brilliant, the insightful ones, the proud? Brilliant as Charax and Demetrius the Platonist and Eudaemon and the rest of them. Short-lived creatures, long dead. Some of them not remembered at all, some become legends, some lost even to legend. So remember: your components will be scattered too, the life within you quenched. Or marching orders and another posting”. (viii. 25)

Silvanus. With Alciphron, see Tropaeophorus. When you look at Xenophon, see Crito or Severus. When you look at yourself, see any of the emperors. And the same with everyone else. Then let it hit you: Where are they now? Nowhere... or wherever. That way you'll see human life for what it is. Smoke. Nothing. Especially when you recall that once things alter they cease to exist through all the endless years to come. Then why such turmoil? To live your brief life rightly, is not that enough". (x. 31)¹⁵

Though the river of time quickly washes away our bodies and erases our names from history, sooner or later, we must seize the moment to live rightly and act intelligently here and now. That requires us to perform our roles, that is, to do our parts, *as* parts of the different wholes to which we are connected.

Conclusion

Mereology is Marcus' favored philosophical method in the *Meditations*. He uses it to understand what the universe is, how it is structured, its composition, and the laws by which it operates. Marcus uses mereology to pierce through the illusory veil which glamorizes wealth and material possessions as things worthy of esteem. Mereology informs his communitarian, cosmopolitan conception of citizenship. Mereological analysis also reveals to Marcus the nature of time. By means of this method Marcus understands a human life as a series of stages, from birth to mature adulthood to death, each of which is an instance of transformation, but none of which is an instance of annihilation, and so none of which is bad. Finally, Marcus' judgment that history repeats the same old plot arises from a kind of mereological perspective. Therefore, a clear understanding of Marcus' mereology is vital for understanding his philosophy as a whole.

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¹⁵ "Words once in common use now sound archaic. And the names of the famous dead as well: Camillus, Caeso, Volesus, Dentatus... Scipio and Cato... Augustus... Hadrian and Antoninus, and... Everything fades so quickly, turns into legend, and soon oblivion covers it. And those are the ones who shone. The rest—'unknown, unasked for' a minute after death. What is 'eternal' fame? Emptiness. Then what should we work for? Only this: proper understanding; unselfish action; truthful speech. A resolve to accept whatever happens as necessary and familiar, flowing like water from that same source and spring". (iv. 33) "Carried through existence as through rushing rapids. All bodies. Which are sprung from nature and cooperate with it, as our limbs do with each other. Time has swallowed a Chrysippus, a Socrates, and an Epictetus, many times over. For 'Epictetus' read any person, and anything". (vii. 19) "The first step: Don't be anxious. Nature controls it all. And before long you'll be no one, nowhere—like Hadrian, like Augustus". (viii. 5) "Constantly run down the list of those who felt intense anger at something: the most famous, the most unfortunate, the most hated, the most whatever. And ask: Where is all that now? Smoke, dust, legend... or not even a legend. Think of all the examples: Fabius Catullinus in the country, Lusius Lupus in the orchard, Stertinius at Baiae, Tiberius on Capri, Velius Rufus... obsession and arrogance". (xii. 27)