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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY DONALD ROBERTSON

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The Philosophy Classic

MARCUS AURELIUS

With an Introduction by
DONALD ROBERTSON

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CONTENTS

An Introduction Donald Robertson vii

About Donald Robertson xxv

About Tom Butler-Bowdon xxv

Meditations **1**

AN INTRODUCTION

BY DONALD ROBERTSON

> "If thou would'st master care and pain,
> Unfold this book and read and read again
> Its blessed leaves, whereby thou soon shalt see
> The past, the present, and the days to be
> With opened eyes; and all delight, all grief,
> Shall be like smoke, as empty and as brief."

This epigram is found at the end of a Vatican manuscript of *The Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius. It captures the central appeal of the book, which is that it offers a way to "master care and pain" by providing philosophical insights that promise to elevate our minds above worldly concerns – both the things we crave and those we fear.

The Stoic wisdom *The Meditations* contains offers us a whole philosophy of life, capable of providing a much-needed sense of purpose and direction in the modern world – just as it did nearly two thousand years ago for people living in the Roman Empire.

THE PHILOSOPHER KING

Marcus Aurelius was the last famous Stoic philosopher of antiquity. He also happens to have been emperor of Rome during the height of its power. As a consequence, we know considerably more about him than about any other Stoic philosopher. We have accounts of Marcus' life and reign from Cassius Dio, Herodian, and the *Historia Augusta* – a history of the Roman emperors – as well as fragments of evidence from other historical sources.

The Meditations itself opens with a series of remarks about his family members and teachers, and the nature of the text – a series of private notes on his endeavours to apply Stoic philosophy in his own life – gives us some glimpses of Marcus' personal concerns. In addition, we have a cache of letters between Marcus and his Latin rhetoric tutor, and close family friend, Marcus Cornelius Fronto, which provide a window on his character and personal life.

Marcus wasn't the sort of decadent autocrat that many people today associate with the immensely privileged position of Roman emperor. For example, Herodian writes of him:

> *He was concerned with all aspects of excellence, and in his love of ancient literature he was second to no man, Roman or Greek; this is evident from all his sayings and writings which have come down to us. To his subjects he revealed himself as a mild and moderate emperor; he gave audience to those who asked for it and forbade his bodyguard to drive off those who happened to meet him. Alone of the emperors, he gave proof of his learning not by mere words or knowledge of philosophical doctrines but by his blameless character and temperate way of life. His reign thus produced a very large number of intelligent men, for subjects like to imitate the example set by their ruler.*

We're told that he constantly had the saying of Plato on his lips, "that those states prospered where the philosophers were kings or the kings philosophers" (*Historia Augusta*). Indeed, by all accounts he was

widely perceived as embodying the principles of the Stoic philosophy that he followed, and which he describes throughout *The Meditations.*

Curiously, Marcus never mentions the word 'Stoic' anywhere in the text, although there's no question that he considered himself a follower of that school's teachings. The Roman historian, Cassius Dio, says that although Marcus had tutors in Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy, "he was most inclined to the doctrines of the Stoic school". The two philosophers he cites most often in the book are Epictetus – perhaps unsurprisingly, as he was the most important Stoic teacher of the Roman world – and Heraclitus, a famous pre-Socratic philosopher who appears to have influenced the Stoics. Marcus also mentions two other "noble philosophers" favoured by the Stoics, Socrates and Pythagoras (6.47). Curiously, Marcus nowhere mentions Zeno, the founder of the Stoic school, but he does mention Chrysippus, the third head of the Stoic school, alongside Socrates and Epictetus: "How many a Chrysippus, how many a Socrates, how many an Epictetus has time already swallowed up!", he writes (7.19).

The *Historia Augusta* describes Marcus as being "wholly given over to the Stoic philosophy, which he had not only learned from all the best masters, but also acquired for himself from every source". Indeed, Marcus was well-known for having dedicated his life to training in Stoic philosophy, a path which he started upon from the unusually young age of twelve. This commitment is summed up in the *Historia Augusta*:

> *For the emperor was so illustrious in philosophy that when he was about to set out for the Marcomannic war, and everyone was fearful that some ill-luck might befall him, he was asked, not in flattery but in all seriousness, to publish his "Precepts of Philosophy"; and he did not fear to do so, but for three days discussed the books of his "Exhortations" one after the other.*

It's not clear whether or not these "Precepts of Philosophy" or "Exhortations", if real, correspond with *The Meditations*, his only surviving philosophical text. As we'll see, the content of *The Meditations*

consists mainly of notes to himself on philosophical themes rather than formal precepts or exhortations.

It seems unlikely that *The Meditations* was ever intended for publication. Marcus frequently alludes to events that would be obscure or meaningless to most people reading it, even people of his time – such as the contents of a letter received by his mother, or a dispute his adoptive father had with a customs officer. He also criticizes his own character quite harshly and complains about the values of those surrounding him at court. These are remarks he presumably would have intended to keep to himself. If the *Historia Augusta* is correct, therefore, it may be that Marcus published some other philosophical writings that are now lost.

In any case, it seems clear that to subsequent generations of Romans, and perhaps during his own lifetime, Marcus had earned the reputation of a ruler who aspired to, and arguably succeeded in nearing, the ancient Platonic ideal of the philosopher-king.

TO HIMSELF

The title *Meditations* or *The Meditations* was introduced by later editors. It fits quite well because the text contains a series of passages largely consisting of Marcus Aurelius' personal reflections on life, written from the perspective of Stoic philosophy. There are many short aphoristic sayings, but also a few longer passages sometimes showing more rhetorical elegance. The book also contains quotations from earlier philosophers and poets. There are even a few fragments of dialogue, such as this one attributed to Socrates:

> What do you want, souls of rational men or irrational?
> Souls of rational men.
> Of what rational men, sound or unsound?
> Sound.
> Why then do you not seek for them?
> Because we have them.
> Why then do you fight and quarrel? (11.39)

The Codex Palatinus, the Greek manuscript from which Xylander's original printed edition of *The Meditations* derived, bore the title *To Himself.* This is fitting because Marcus is clearly addressing himself throughout and, indeed, he often refers to the notion that he should tell himself various sayings or remind himself of certain philosophical ideas. The first passage of Chapter Two, for instance, opens with the words: "Begin the morning by saying to yourself…" This can be viewed as the beginning of the book proper, in a sense, as it follows what's often viewed as a kind of prologue, in Chapter One. It's one of the most popular passages from the book, so worth quoting:

> *Begin the morning by saying to yourself, I shall meet with the busy-body, the ungrateful, arrogant, deceitful, envious, unsocial. All these things happen to them by reason of their ignorance of what is good and evil. But I who have seen the nature of the good that it is beautiful, and of the bad that it is ugly, and the nature of him who does wrong, that it is akin to me, not only of the same blood or seed, but that it participates in the same intelligence and the same portion of the divinity, I can neither be injured by any of them, for no one can fix on me what is ugly, nor can I be angry with my kinsman, nor hate him. For we are made for cooperation, like feet, like hands, like eyelids, like the rows of the upper and lower teeth. To act against one another then is contrary to nature; and it is acting against one another to be vexed and to turn away. (2.1)*

Structurally, *The Meditations* is divided into twelve chapters or 'books', composed of discrete passages such as this. The number ranges from sixteen to seventy-five per chapter, adding up to 487 passages in total.

There doesn't seem to be a consistent theme for each book that might serve to distinguish it from the others. Book One is the exception. It consists of a series of passages in which Marcus praises his family members and tutors for exhibiting various positive qualities. It's likely that this was intended as a sort of contemplative exercise, whereby he

might articulate and try to emulate the virtues exhibited by his loved ones and role models. Later in the text, he provides an explanation for this practice:

> *When you wish to delight yourself, think of the virtues of those who live with you; for instance, the activity of one, and the modesty of another, and the liberality of a third, and some other good quality of a fourth. For nothing delights so much as the examples of the virtues, when they are exhibited in the morals of those who live with us and present themselves in abundance, as far as is possible. Hence we must keep them before us. (6.48)*

Each passage in Book One concentrates on a different person, sixteen individuals in total, except for the closing passage which consists of a brief summary of related blessings for which Marcus thanks the gods.

For the purposes of his own moral and psychological self-improvement, in the rest of *The Meditations* Marcus explores a variety of themes related to Stoic philosophy and its applications in daily life. These mainly relate to justice, death, piety, and overcoming unhealthy desires and emotions. Anger was the emotion with which Marcus was most concerned. In the opening sentence of the book, Marcus praises his grandfather's freedom from anger. Later, he admits that he has struggled to control his own temper sometimes. At one point, Marcus lists ten distinct psychological strategies for overcoming feelings of anger (11.18). He returns to various selections from this list many times throughout *The Meditations.*

LIVING IN AGREEMENT WITH NATURE

Marcus thanks the gods that he knew Apollonius, Rusticus, and Maximus, his three main Stoic tutors, and that he "received clear and frequent impressions about living according to nature, and what kind of a life that is" (1.17). He also says that the Stoic teacher Sextus of Chaeronea, whose lectures he attended later in life, helped him to

understand what it meant to "live in accord with Nature" (1.9). This phrase was a well-known slogan, which defines the supreme goal (*telos*) or meaning of life according to Stoic philosophy. Although Marcus never mentions Stoicism by name, he uses this phrase many times throughout *The Meditations.*

"Living in accord with Nature" came to have a double, or even treble, meaning for early Stoics. On the one hand, it means fulfilling our potential by applying reason to the best of our ability in our daily lives – living rationally and *wisely.* For the Stoics, we're both inherently rational and social creatures. Fulfilling our potential therefore requires exercising wisdom in our relationships, whether with individuals or with groups, and to society as a whole.

Wisdom applied to relationships is what the Stoics mean by 'justice'. So living in accord with nature means, in part, living with wisdom and justice. As the virtue of justice (*dikaiosune*) is such a major theme in *The Meditations*, it's worth explaining that the Greek term as used in Stoic philosophy denotes a broader concept than our English word 'justice' tends to suggest. It covers the subordinate virtues of fairness and kindness, and so is expressed in all of our relationships, including how we treat our friends, spouses, and children.

Living in accord with nature, however, has another meaning. It means living in harmony with our fate, not being disturbed or frustrated by the external events that befall us in life. In order to live consistently in accord with wisdom and justice we have to master our fears and desires. Overcoming fear and learning to endure pain and discomfort, when that's our fate, requires the virtue of courage or endurance. Likewise, mastering our desires, so that they're healthy and moderate, requires the virtue of temperance or self-discipline.

The four cardinal virtues of Greek philosophy are wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance. Plato attributes this fourfold schema to Socrates. However, the Stoics employed it more consistently. Living in agreement with nature meant living wisely and virtuously. Diogenes Laertius says that the Stoics defined the supreme goal as a "living according to virtue".

There's therefore both a threefold and fourfold structure in *The Meditations*, derived from early Stoicism. It distinguishes between living harmoniously at three different levels by exercising the four cardinal virtues:

1. **Self**. Wisdom consists in living in harmony with our own true nature as reasoning beings and fulfilling our potential for rationality.
2. **Others**. Justice consists in living in harmony with others, fulfilling our social nature by applying wisdom in a manner designed to build friendships and well-ordered communities.
3. **Nature/Zeus.** The virtues of courage and temperance consist in mastering our fears and desires, respectively, so that we can live in harmony with our fate by accepting events as they befall us. We don't complain or demand more from life than is reasonable and healthy.

As Marcus puts it elsewhere:

> *There are three relations [between you and other things]: the one to the body which surrounds you; the second to the divine cause from which all things come to all; and the third to those who live with you. (8.27)*

The Cynic philosophers believed that virtue is the only true good, vice the only true evil, and that everything else, everything 'external' to our own character and volition, is completely indifferent. One of the key differences between Stoicism and Cynicism was that the Stoics did not view all external things as *equally* indifferent but classed some as 'preferred' and others as 'dispreferred' externals. For example, health is preferable to sickness, wealth to poverty, having friends to having enemies, and so on. Yet we shouldn't attach so much importance to these things that we become upset about them. External things have some value in Stoicism, but they're relatively unimportant. They don't determine whether our life as a whole is good or bad – only virtue or vice can do that. This was explained by the analogy of a set of scales on which

virtue is placed on one side. It doesn't matter how many gold coins, or other externals, we place on one side, it should never be enough to tip the balance against virtue. Although it is rational for us to prefer certain externals over others, the Stoic will never sacrifice virtue for the sake of any of them.

THE PHILOSOPHERS OF THE PORCH – A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE STOICS

It's worth delving into the history of Stoicism to get a sense of the intellectual legacy that Marcus was part of, and that he would build on in *The Meditations.*

The Stoic school of philosophy, which Marcus Aurelius was trained in and followed from his youth, was founded at Athens in 301 BC by a Phoenician merchant called Zeno of Citium.

It's a testimony to the appeal of Stoicism that the ancient school endured for nearly five centuries, until around the time of Marcus' death in AD 180. However, perhaps surprisingly given the popularity of the philosophy during his reign, we hear virtually nothing more about Stoics in the ancient world after this time. Stoicism appears to have been assimilated into Neoplatonism, which was itself gradually superseded by Christianity.

Stoicism's founder, Zeno, made a fortune trading the precious purple dye (*porphura*) manufactured from the fermented innards of the murex sea snail. This dye was known as 'royal' or 'imperial' purple because it was worn by kings and emperors. According to one account, after being shipwrecked near the port of Piraeus, and losing his precious cargo at sea, Zeno made his way to Athens. As a foreign immigrant, he found himself alone and penniless, living like a beggar on the streets.

At some point, Zeno journeyed to the temple of Apollo at Delphi and consulted the famous priestess there, known as the Pythia, asking how he could live the best life. Speaking through his oracle, Apollo pronounced that Zeno should "take on the colour not of dead sea snails

but of dead men". We can assume this puzzled him at first. We're told he sat down at a bookseller's stall in Athens and by chance found himself reading the second book of Xenophon's *Memorabilia of Socrates.* This contains Socrates' version of a famous speech composed by the Sophist Prodicus, known as *The Choice of Hercules.* The speech was a powerful exhortation to young men to embrace a life of virtue as opposed to hedonism. Sure enough, after reading it, Zeno leapt to his feet asking where he could find a man like Socrates, who had been executed a few generations earlier. He realized that the oracle meant that he should dye his mind with the wisdom of dead philosophers from previous generations.

The bookseller pointed Zeno toward the Cynic philosopher Crates of Thebes, who happened to be walking past at that moment. So Zeno became a follower of the Cynic school for many years and later studied in the Academic school, run by the followers of Plato. He also studied in the Megarian school, founded by another follower of Socrates, Euclid of Megara. Eventually, though, Zeno decided to found a new school of philosophy. It became known as Stoicism after the *Stoa Poikile* or painted porch, on the edge of the Athenian agora, where Zeno's followers would gather to hear him discourse on philosophy. He was succeeded as head of the school by Cleanthes, who in turn was followed by Chrysippus, one of the most highly regarded intellectuals of the ancient world. Chrysippus, a prolific author, revised the doctrines of Zeno and Cleanthes, adding detailed arguments to defend them. These three are therefore regarded collectively as the original teachers of the Stoic school.

The Stoic school continued to thrive in Athens under the leadership of successive *scholarchs*, as the heads of ancient philosophical schools were known. In 155 BC, Diogenes of Babylon, the fifth scholarch, travelled from Greece to Rome on an ambassadorial mission, along with representatives of the Platonic Academy and the Peripatetic school of Aristotle. These three philosophers caused a sensation, and their visit had a lasting influence on Roman society. A few decades after this, the last scholarch of the Athenian school, Panaetius, became the tutor of

the Roman general and statesman, Scipio Amelianus, and a group of his friends, known as the Scipionic Circle.

A few generations later, the Roman statesman Cato the Younger was an important representative of Stoic philosophy, which became associated with republican values when he took a stand against Julius Caesar's autocratic rise to power. Cato was friends with another important Roman politician, Cicero, who, although a follower of Academic philosophy, had studied Stoicism at Athens and was intimately acquainted with its teachings. Whereas Cato wrote nothing, Cicero's extensive writings provide one of our main sources for early Stoicism.

Caesar's victory in the civil war led to the end of the Roman Republic, after he appointed himself dictator. Having no children of his own, he adopted his grand-nephew, Octavian, who went on to become the first Roman emperor, Augustus. Augustus had Stoic tutors, perhaps setting a precedent for subsequent generations of Roman statesmen to align themselves with the philosophy during the imperial period.

Most of the writings of earlier Stoics are lost, so our knowledge of ancient Stoic philosophy comes mainly from three later philosophers of the Roman empire. The first is Seneca the Younger, rhetoric tutor and later speechwriter and political advisor to the emperor Nero, who lived in the first century AD. Many of Seneca's letters and essays discussing Stoicism survive today. Nero's Greek secretary owned a slave called Epictetus, who was later freed. Having studied under another famous Stoic called Musonius Rufus, Epictetus went on to become arguably the most famous teacher of philosophy in the history of Rome. Epictetus wrote nothing, but one of his students, a highly accomplished Roman general and statesman named Arrian, transcribed his discussions with students under the title *The Discourses.* From these was distilled a short handbook containing some of Epictetus' key sayings, the *Enchiridion.*

Epictetus moved from Rome to Greece, where he set up a school. Marcus Aurelius was a child when he died so they almost certainly never met. However, we can assume that Marcus must have been personally acquainted with older men who had studied under Epictetus,

probably including some of his own Stoic tutors in Rome. Indeed, Marcus says in *The Meditations* that his main Stoic tutor, Junius Rusticus, gave him a copy of certain notes from the lectures of Epictetus:

> *From Rusticus I received the impression that my character required improvement and discipline… and I am indebted to him for being acquainted with the discourses of Epictetus, which he communicated to me out of his own collection. (1.7)*

Marcus refers to Epictetus more often than to any other philosopher. It seems likely he viewed himself as a student, primarily, of Epictetus' brand of Stoicism. Whereas, originally, we're told there were eight volumes of *The Discourses*, only half of those survive today. However, Marcus attributes sayings to Epictetus not found in the surviving *Discourses*, so it seems likely that he'd also read the ones we're missing. Indeed, for all we know other passages in *The Meditations* may contain unattributed quotes or paraphrases from the lost *Discourses* of Epictetus.

WHEN AND WHERE

It's difficult to know for certain when *The Meditations* was actually written. No specific dates are mentioned in the text, and different parts could have been written at different times in Marcus' life. Still, there are a few clues to be found in the text itself and in the Roman histories and elsewhere. At one point, for instance, Marcus mentions that his adoptive brother, the emperor Lucius Verus, has been dead long enough that it would seem odd for his mistress Pantheia still to be grieving beside his casket (8.37). Given that Lucius died in AD 169, this part of *The Meditations* was presumably written in AD 170 or later. Elsewhere, though, Marcus writes to himself, "you now wait for the time when the child shall come out of your wife's womb" (9.3). His youngest child, Vibia Aurelia Sabina, was born in AD 170, which suggests *this* passage must have been written in that year or earlier.