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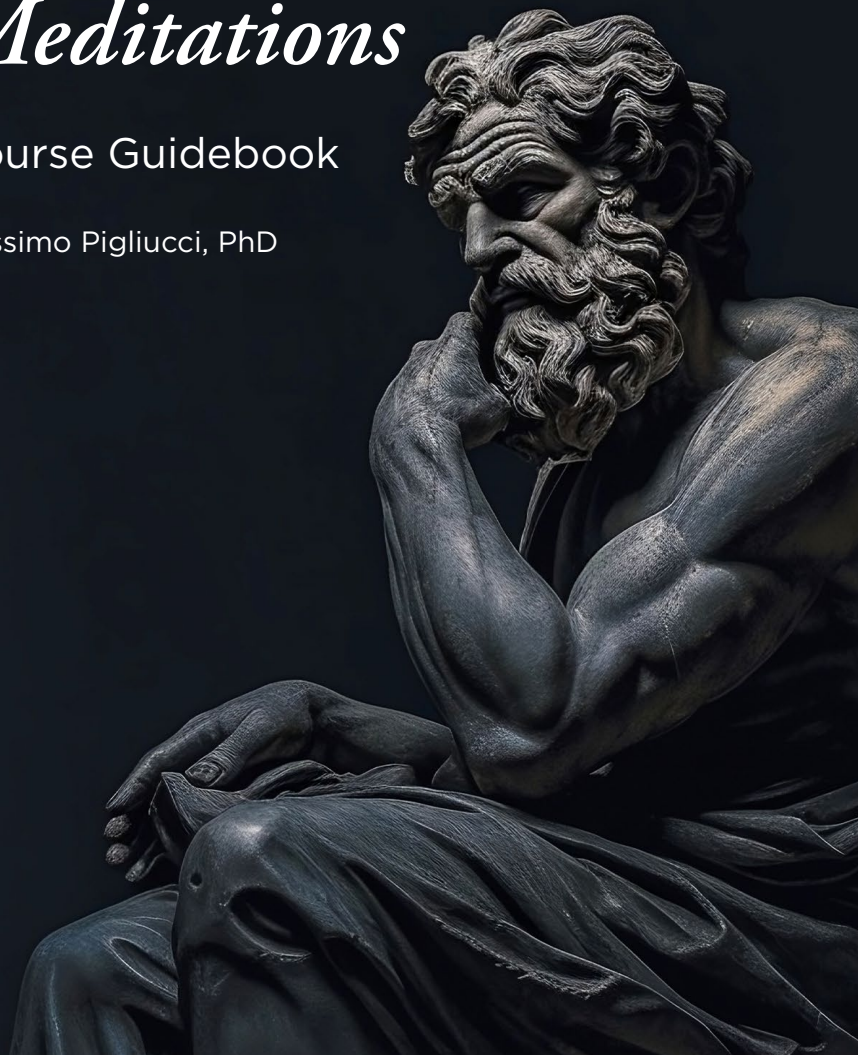
Meditations

Course Guidebook

Massimo Pigliucci, PhD



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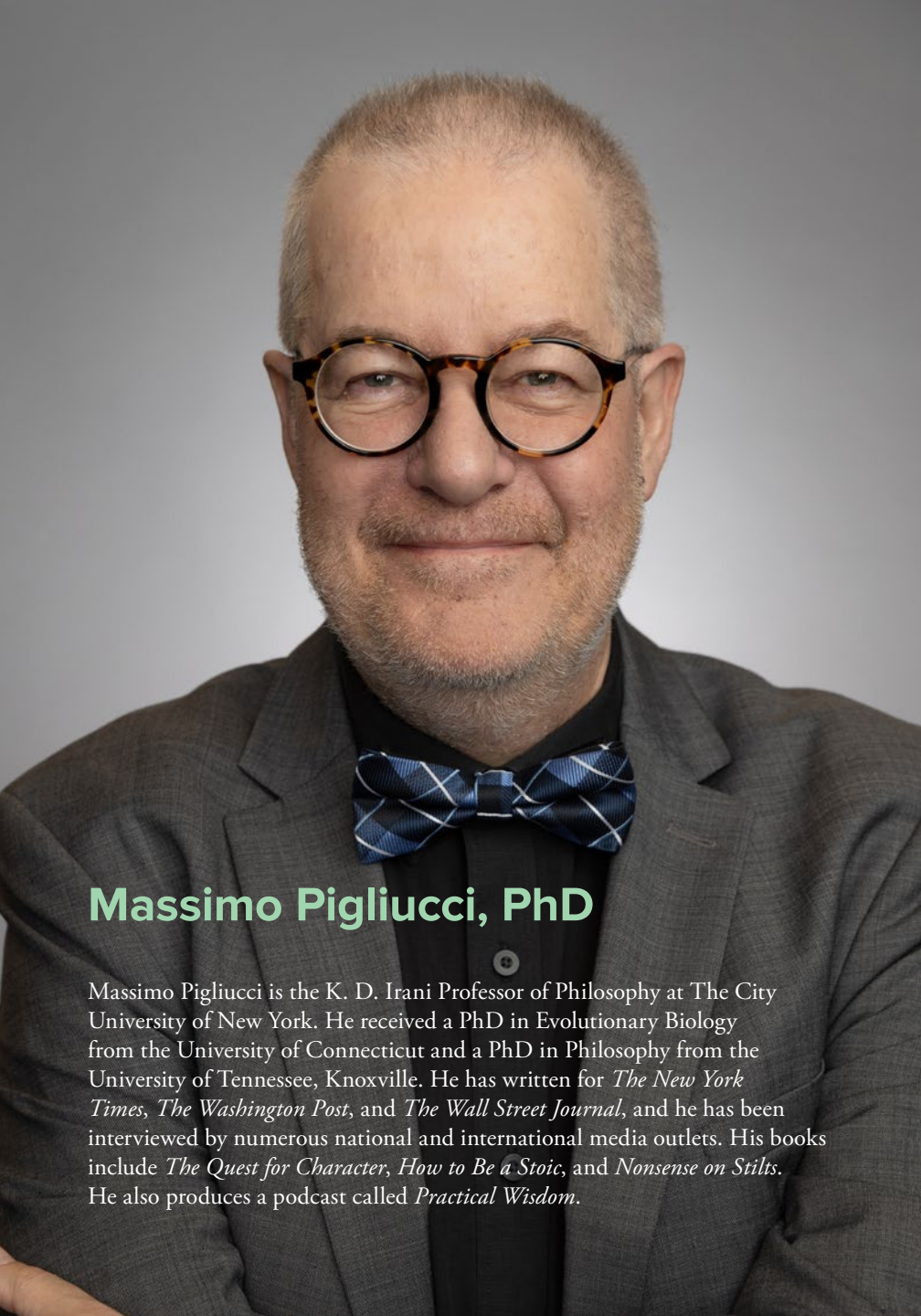

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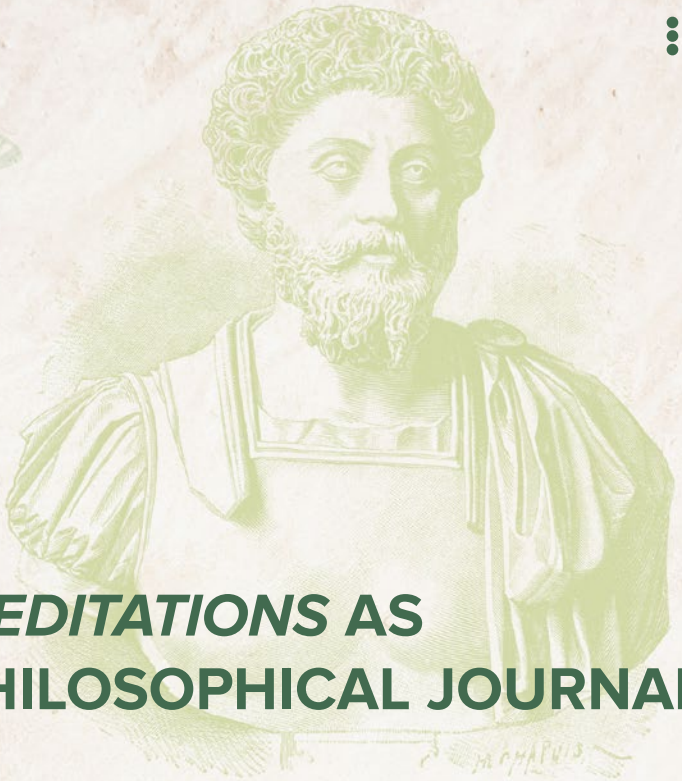


MEDITATIONS AS PHILOSOPHICAL JOURNAL

IN THIS COURSE, YOU'LL TAKE A JOURNEY THROUGH *Meditations*—the personal philosophical journal of the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius—to learn how this book has influenced generations of thinkers, politicians, and peacemakers and helped readers achieve self-awareness and a greater understanding of the world at large for thousands of years. In doing so, you'll see how the Roman society Marcus was born into impacted his worldview and explore the basic tenets of the ancient Greek philosophy of Stoicism. You'll also examine the thoughts of the individual philosophers who influenced Marcus and indirectly shaped a book that would become expected reading for both politicians and philosophers the world over.

The Principal Features of *Meditations*

Philosophical journaling is essentially a tool for ethical self-improvement, which is why Marcus wrote *Meditations*. In the book, he often writes in the second, rather than the first, person—as if he were writing to a friend rather than to himself. At times, he also goes to extremes to avoid emotionally loaded language, trying to convey an objective description of what happened and how he felt. Both of these techniques are recommended by contemporary cognitive behavioral therapists.

Meditations has three more features one may expect from a personal journal: It has no internal structure, it is redundant, and it's a bit preachy. These elements—which may sound like flaws—also have a benefit, providing greater insight into what mattered to Marcus and what challenged him.

The lack of internal structure is the obvious result of the fact that Marcus is writing about whatever bothers him at a particular moment in time, which also explains the second feature: redundancy. Like most human beings, Marcus runs into the same problems over and over again. Finally, as Marcus is aware of his shortcomings, he chides himself repeatedly for having not addressed them yet, hence the somewhat preachy tone of parts of the book—but he is preaching to himself rather than to an audience.

Major Influences on Marcus Aurelius

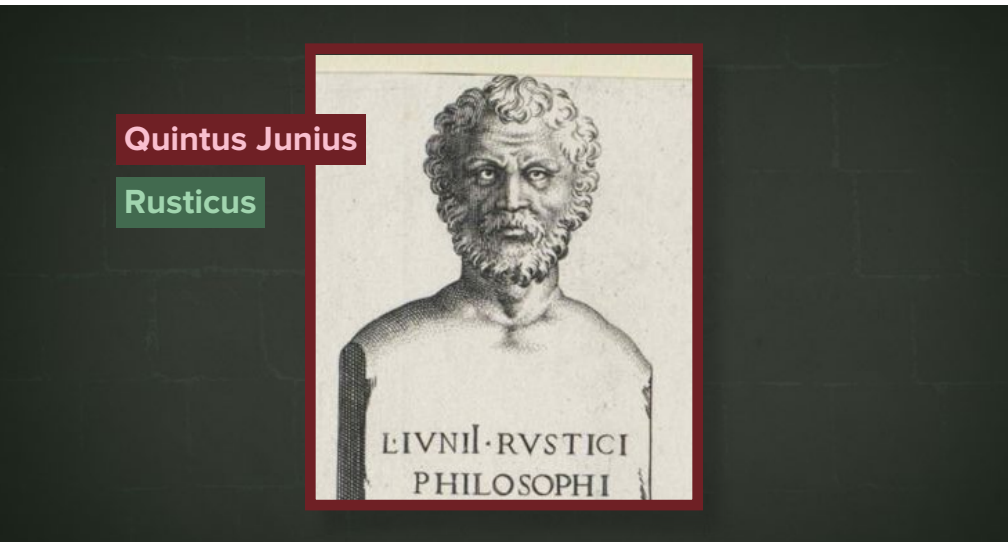
A number of important figures of 2nd-century Rome were influential in shaping Marcus as an emperor and a human being. For example, Marcus's mother—Domitia Lucilla—taught him "the fear of god, and generosity; and abstention not only from doing ill but even from the very thought of doing it; and furthermore, to live the simple life, far removed from the habits of the rich."

Stoics like Marcus had an interesting and very unusual take on wealth. It was classed as a preferred indifferent. This apparently oxymoronic phrase means that while wealth can improve one's life, it makes no difference to the most precious thing a human being can have—a good character.

From an unnamed tutor, Marcus learned the Stoic notions that sports are just not important and that an emperor should maintain a neutral stance toward competitors as a matter of decorum and fairness. The unknown tutor also taught Marcus what one would refer to today as a good work ethic: minding his business, working hard, and not unloading his duties on others. In addition, Marcus learned to not mind being slandered by others, which is another important aspect of Stoic practice. For a Stoic, a verbal offense is not something to be concerned with—because words cannot actually cause any damage.

Quintus Junius Rusticus, a Stoic philosopher, was one of the major influences on Marcus, by far:

> From Rusticus [I learned] ... to show oneself ready to be reconciled to those who have lost their temper and trespassed against one, and ready to meet them halfway as soon as ever they seem to be willing to retrace their steps. ... And to make the acquaintance of the Memoirs of Epictetus, which he supplied me with out of his own library.



Rusticus's grandfather, Arulenus Rusticus, was a member of the so-called Stoic opposition, a group of senators and philosophers who resisted what they perceived as the tyranny of the emperors Nero, Vespasian, and Domitian. The elder Rusticus was condemned to death by Domitian because he had written a defense of another Stoic, his friend Thrasea Paetus.

It speaks volumes about Marcus's views and character that he considered a lifelong friend a man whose philosophy had at least occasionally been hostile to the rulers of Rome and whose ancestor had been directly involved in political resistance against an emperor.

Lessons Learned

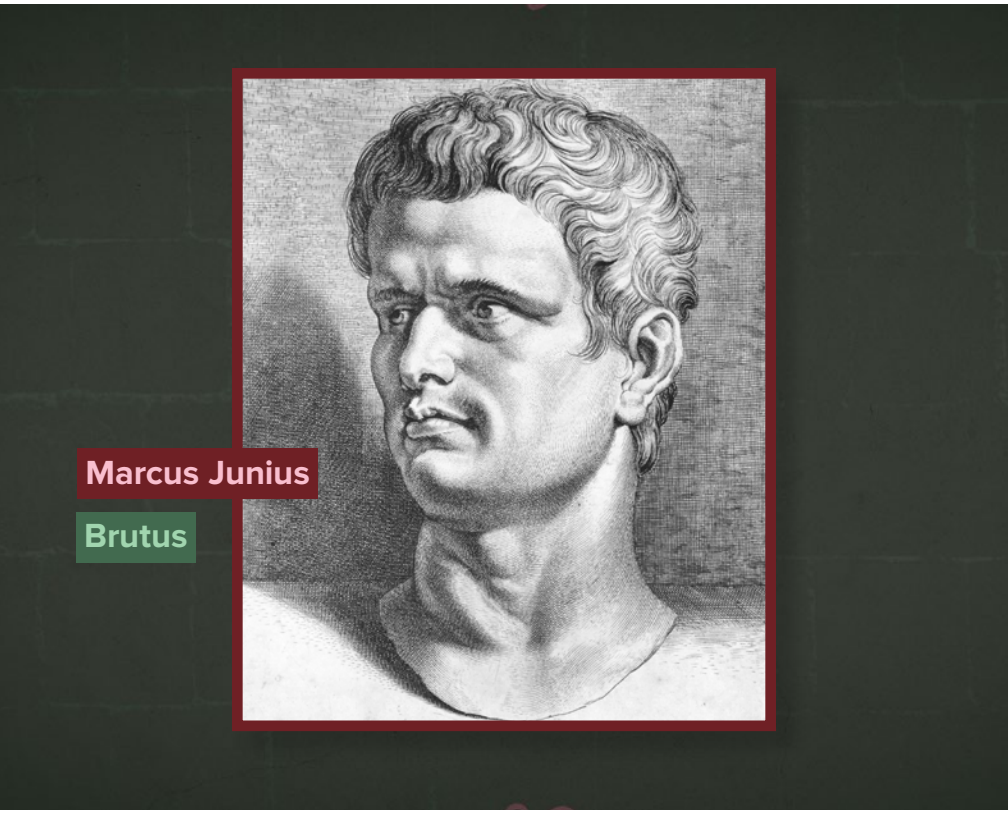
The Stoic teacher Epictetus was pivotal for the instruction of Marcus. *Epictetus* was not his real name, which is unknown. The word simply means "acquired" because he was a slave. He was bought by Epaphroditus, the personal secretary of the emperor Nero, and brought to Rome as a young man. He was brilliant and was therefore allowed to study philosophy with the renowned Stoic teacher Musonius Rufus.

Eventually, Epictetus was given his freedom and began to teach in the streets of Rome. At some point, he and other Stoics got on the nerves of the emperor because of their annoying habit of speaking truth to power, and they were sent into exile. Epictetus moved to Nicopolis, in northwestern Greece, where he restarted his school and became one of the most sought-after teachers of the entire Mediterranean area—eventually becoming an enormous influence on Marcus.

Marcus's education was wide-ranging and not limited to a single school of thought. While considering himself a Stoic, the emperor-philosopher did not hesitate to draw from the wisdom of a number of thinkers belonging to different traditions. As the Stoic writer Seneca put it, truth belongs to everyone.

In the first book of *Meditations,* Marcus, as emperor, is thankful for having been exposed to the deeds of a number of people who were famous for fighting against tyrants in the name of freedom—for example, Marcus

Junius Brutus, the famous leader of the conspiracy against Julius Caesar on the Ides of March, and Dion of Syracuse, a student of Plato and the leader of a successful plot to overthrow the tyranny of Dionysius the Second.



In *Meditations*, Marcus also says that he is glad to have been taught that the law should be equal for all, that people should have equal standing and enjoy freedom of speech, and that individual liberty should be prized above all. However, note that Marcus isn't invoking anything like the modern concept of universal human rights. After all, the economy of the Roman Empire—like that of any empire of antiquity—was based on slavery, and women had little or no say in public affairs. So, words like *freedom* and *liberty* ought to be interpreted with more than a grain of salt.

Marcus's Meditations on Gratitude

In the final section of the first book of *Meditations*, Marcus thanks not individual human beings in particular but the divine in general. However, when Stoics refer to God (in the singular) or even gods (in the plural), they might as well—at a first approximation—be talking about nature or fate or the laws of cause and effect.

Marcus is thankful for the luck of having good family members, teachers, and friends. The Stoics put much stock into the environment of one's upbringing, considering it the first school of life, which helps shape one's character, hopefully in a virtuous fashion. He is also thankful for the understanding that just because he grew up in a royal court, he didn't need to be enamored of its trappings—from bodyguards to expensive garments.

He is moreover grateful to fate for having granted him sufficient health to withstand the rather harsh life he had conducted, spending many years in the field as a commander in chief, despite the fact that he was never of a particularly strong constitution.

Finally, he is happy to have been able to nurture his interest in philosophy without falling prey to a sophist. Sophists were teachers of rhetoric—an approach that was antithetical to the philosophical one being taught by Plato and preferred by Marcus.

The entirety of book one of *Meditations* is an obvious exercise in gratitude, which was one of the Stoics' standard practices. They had a strong intuition of a truth that has been confirmed time and again by modern science: Mindfully practicing gratitude is good for one's own well-being, as it results in improved mood and increased degrees of self-reported happiness; more satisfaction with one's life and a less materialistic attitude; better sleep and physical health; less fatigue and more resilience; and increased levels of humility and patience.

Moreover, expressing gratitude—even just to oneself, as Marcus does—decreases the experience of negative and toxic emotions, reduces episodes of unproductive or self-undermining rumination, and shifts one's attention and general mental resources toward positive, healthy emotions.

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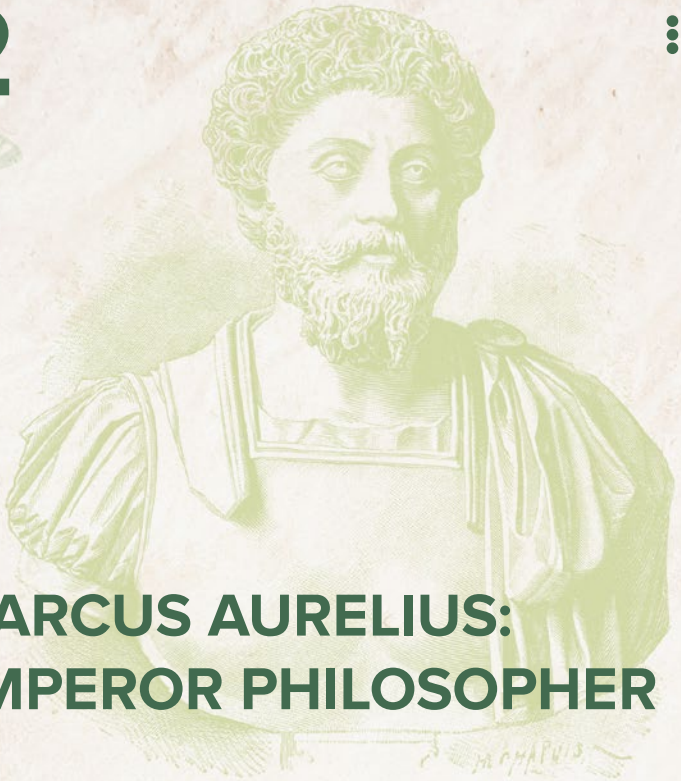


MARCUS AURELIUS: EMPEROR PHILOSOPHER

IN THIS LECTURE, YOU'LL EXPLORE HOW EVENTS IN THE Roman Empire and Marcus Aurelius's immediate historical context can be linked—both directly and indirectly—to some of the major themes in *Meditations*. These include the notion of virtue in its many forms, the concept of divine providence, the duties people have toward the great family of humanity, and the metaphysical relationship between wholes and parts. You'll look at some of these themes in more depth, in addition to touching on a few criticisms of Marcus's actions that seemed to run contrary to his character and philosophy.

The Nerva-Antonine Dynasty

Marcus was part of a line of emperors. In fact, he was the fifth (and last) of the so-called good emperors, formally known as the Nerva-Antonine dynasty. The founder of this dynasty was Marcus Cocceius Nerva, who became emperor at age 66 and reigned wisely and with moderation, though he died of natural causes after only 15 months in office. One of the crucial decisions made by Nerva was to select his own successor among the ranks of the army. He chose the popular and very capable general Trajan, thus setting the new dynasty on sure footing.

Trajan's market in Rome

Trajan was so good at governing that the senate called him Optimus, meaning "the best." He was the one who expanded the empire to its largest historical limits, but he also introduced social welfare reforms and built magnificent markets bearing his name. When Trajan died, he was succeeded by the man he had designated, Hadrian, who was the first emperor to assess that further territorial expansion was not sustainable. As a result, he preferred to focus

his energies and resources on stabilizing what he conceived as a Panhellenic empire led by Rome. Hadrian gave quite a bit of thought to his succession, adopting Antoninus Pius—who became emperor after him—on condition that the latter, in turn, would adopt Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus to further the line of succession.

Antoninus was benevolent toward the senate and worked with that ancient institution to guarantee a time of peace and prosperity throughout the empire. When he died in 161, at age 74, he was succeeded by Marcus and his adoptive brother, Lucius. They ruled as co-emperors—a first in the history of the empire. When Lucius died in 169, Marcus remained in charge alone until 177.

A popular explanation for the goodness of the five emperors is the fact that they picked their successors instead of transmitting power to their biological heirs. While there may be some truth to this, the strategy was likely dictated by necessity rather than choice: Four of the five emperors simply did not have male offspring who survived to adulthood. There had also been other examples of emperors designating their own successors outside of the bloodline.

More importantly, according to Renaissance political thinker Niccolò Machiavelli, the emperors "had no need of praetorian cohorts, or of countless legions to guard them, but were defended by their own good lives, the good-will of their subjects, and the attachment of the senate." In this sense, virtuous emperors could rely on their virtue rather than on bodyguards, as tyrants are forced to do. In fact, by the standards of ancient Rome—and of the ancient world in general—the 2nd century was a period of uncommon peace, prosperity, and even social progress of sorts, and the five people in charge were at least in part responsible for this.

But then, Marcus picked his son Commodus as his successor, and the latter was so bad that some historians have even suggested that the choice marked the beginning of the decline of the Roman Empire.

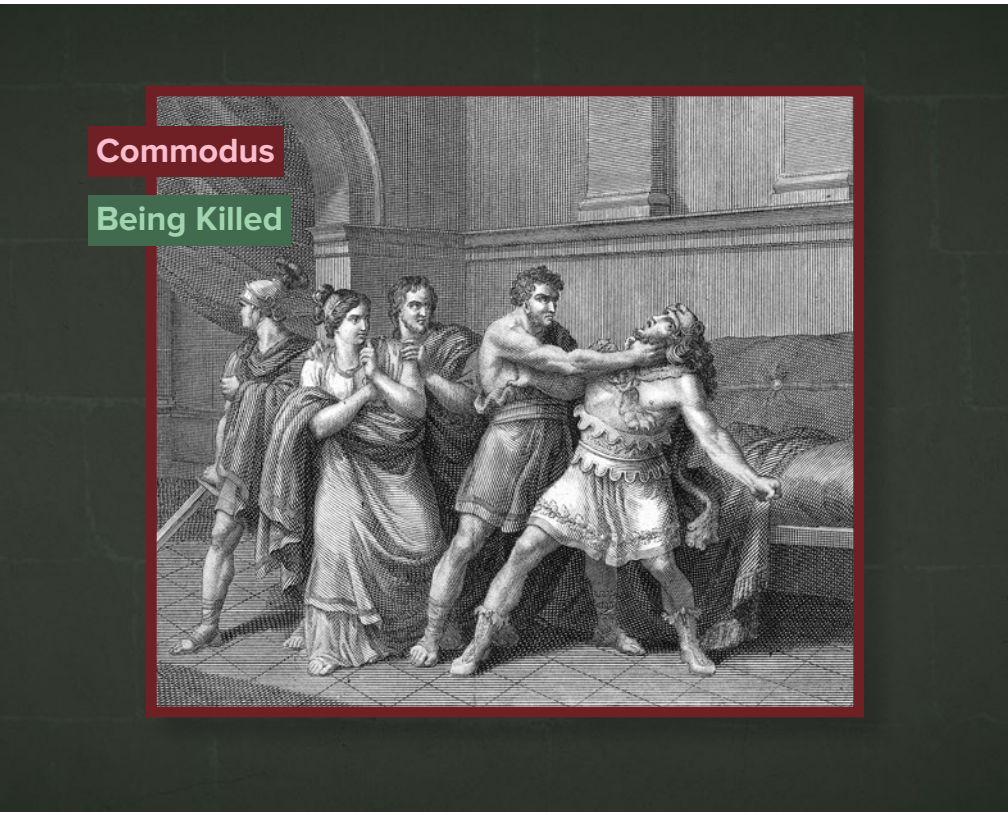
The Succession of Commodus

A major criticism often raised against Marcus is as follows: Why did a thoughtful and wise emperor, one who studied and practiced philosophy, decide to break with well-established tradition and make the misguided choice of anointing Commodus?

The situation was complex. To begin with, Marcus had actually made elaborate succession plans—just like Hadrian and Antoninus Pius before him—demonstrating that he was a thoughtful ruler and aware of the potential issues involved. Specifically, while he was still co-emperor with Lucius Verus, Marcus appointed Commodus and the latter's younger brother, Marcus Annius Verus, as emperors-in-waiting. However, fate intervened, killing both Lucius and the young Marcus Annius in the same year, leaving Commodus as the only one remaining in line. At the time, he was 8 years old.

From that point on, Marcus kept a closer eye on Commodus, as much as it was possible, given his own involvement with the Marcomannic Wars. Commodus was elevated to co-emperor in 177, which was 3 years before his father died. He was then 16 years old. By this point, Marcus must have suspected that Commodus was not the ideal choice because he approached one of his lieutenants—the general Tiberius Claudius Pompeianus—and invited him to become junior emperor. However, the general refused.

After Commodus was assassinated in 192, a period of turmoil followed. The eventual successor, Septimius Severus, commented on the Commodus issue, saying that Marcus should have simply killed his son to spare Rome so much violence.



Fighting Fires

A second issue potentially affecting the moral stature of Marcus is his dealings with the increasingly popular new religion on the block—Christianity. Marcus has been accused of generally engaging in persecutions of the Christians and, in particular, of ordering a massacre of members of the sect in the city of Lyon, France, during the year 177.

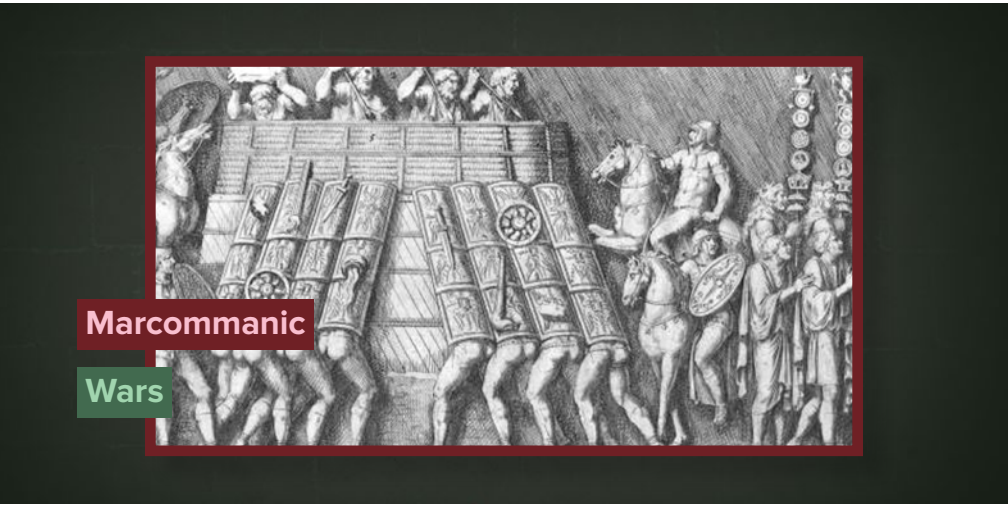
However, there seems to be no historical evidence that Marcus persecuted Christians; indeed, this would have been highly inconsistent with his Stoic teachings and his practice of philanthropia—or love of mankind. In addition, the new religion was still too small and not likely to be on Marcus's radar in any prominent fashion.

However, during Marcus's 19-year reign, he had to put out one fire after another—which came in rapid succession from all over the empire. One such crisis was the war against the Germanic tribes of the Marcomanni, Quadi, and others on the northern frontier of the Roman Empire in continental Europe. Marcus took command of the operations himself. On and off, he spent the rest of his life in that endeavor, achieving a certain degree of success via a judicious combination of military action, negotiations, and even voluntary resettlement of some of the former enemies within the confines of the Roman Empire.

Meditations was likely entirely written in this period, probably while Marcus was stationed in various places along the German frontier. Despite this, Marcus never actually talks in *Meditations* about the specific problems he faced, preferring to focus on his own ethical self-improvement—for instance, on managing his anger issues. This is yet another reminder that the book is not just a straightforward diary. The emperor was writing to summon the internal resources necessary to effectively deal with the issues that faced him.

One of the many practical problems that go unremarked by Marcus in his philosophical diary is the Antonine Plague, which raged from 165 to 180 and proBably Killed both Marcus and his co-emperor, Lucius Verus. It was caused either by smallpox or—as recent genetic evidence seems to indicate—measles. By all accounts, it was the major epidemic of the ancient world. According to Cassius Dio, the plague came back in 189, killing 2,000 people per day just

in Rome. The estimated total was 5 to 10 million deaths, or roughly 10% of the entire population of the empire. The effects were so long-lasting that some historians point to this episode as one of the triggers of the beginning of the decline of the Roman Empire.



Stoicism in Action

Marcus was also the target of a revolt in the year 175, orchestrated by the general Avidius Cassius. This episode is particularly interesting for understanding Marcus and how his philosophy of life played a role in his political decisions.

Avidius was a Syrian who claimed descent from Augustus, the first Roman emperor. He began his military career under Marcus's predecessor, Antoninus Pius, rising to the rank of general in charge of a legion. After his distinguished service, he was elevated to the senate and later—by Marcus—made governor of the Syrian province. Moreover, Marcus also made Avidius *Rector Orientis*, in charge of all the eastern provinces, giving him power of *imperium* (supreme military command) during a revolt in Egypt. Add to all of this the fact that Avidius could make a reasonable claim to the throne because of his familial relationship with Augustus, and the stage was set for big trouble.

The trigger for the actual revolt came in 175 CE from an entirely unexpected source: Marcus's wife, Faustina the Younger, told Avidius that Marcus was on his deathbed, even though that was most certainly not the case. As a result, Avidius declared himself emperor, supported by seven legions stationed throughout the eastern provinces of Arabia, Egypt, and Syria.

Nevertheless, Avidius was outnumbered by the large force that Marcus was able to rapidly field to deal with the insurrection. Here, one can see an interesting aspect of Marcus's character and philosophy at play. Before moving against Avidius, Marcus addressed the senate and asked—entirely uncharacteristically for a Roman emperor—to extend clemency to Avidius's family, who would otherwise have been ruthlessly exterminated. He argued that they were not responsible for Avidius's mistake, in agreement with the charitable attitude typical of Stoic philosophy, of which repeated references occur throughout *Meditations*. In the end, though, Marcus was spared a direct confrontation. A centurion of one of Avidius's own legions killed Avidius and sent his head to Marcus as proof. The rebellion was over.

Three years later, in 178 CE, yet another catastrophe struck the empire: The beautiful city of Smyrna (modern-day Izmir, in western Turkey) was destroyed by a powerful earthquake. Marcus immediately ordered funds to be set aside for the reconstruction of the distant city. In this regard, he was very much aware that, as emperor, he had certain duties toward Rome. But he was also a Stoic cosmopolitan—literally a citizen of the world—and he did his best to act accordingly, feeling deeply for the devastated city of Smyrna and its residents.

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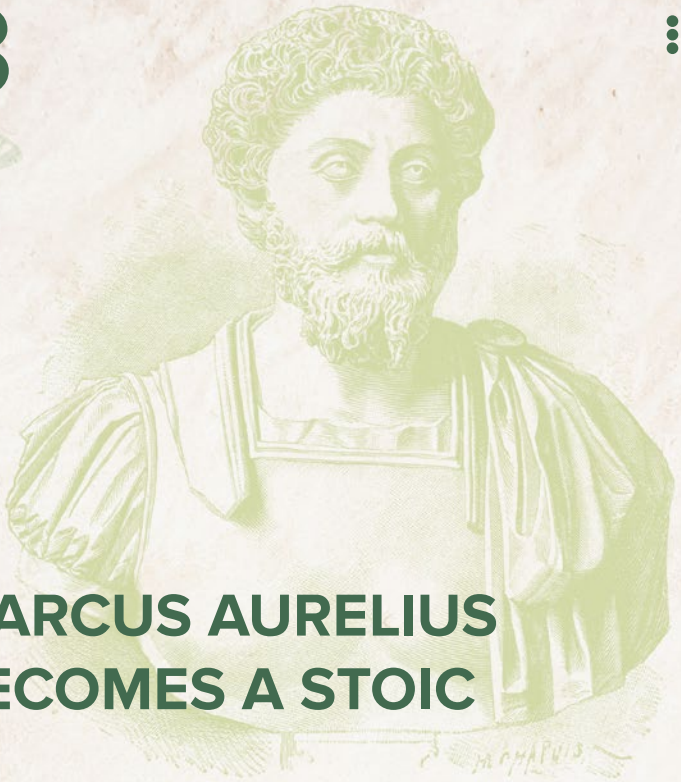
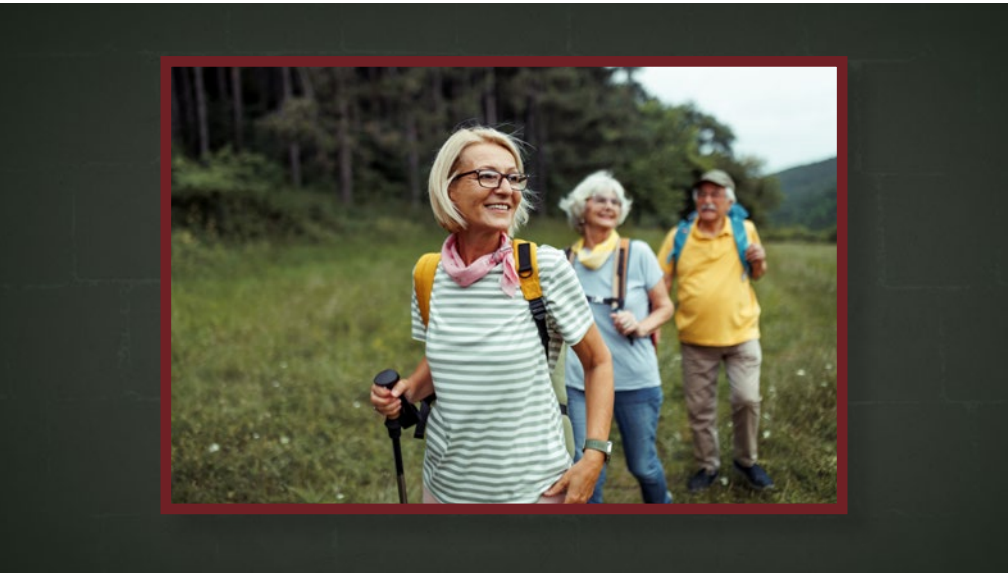


MARCUS AURELIUS BECOMES A STOIC

IN *MEDITATIONS*, MARCUS AURELIUS ADMITS THAT MOST people, beginning with himself, don't know much, especially when it comes to metaphysics—the study of the nature of things. Despite this, he had studied philosophy since he was a child, and many of his teachers were Stoics. This fact leaves little doubt that although he was interested in a wide range of philosophies, his main focus was Stoicism. In this lecture, you'll explore what Stoicism actually is and its influence on Marcus and his writing.

The Stoic Moral Compass

The most fundamental idea in Stoic philosophy is that one should live "in agreement with Nature." In this regard, if the goal is to live a good life as a human being, then one first needs to understand what sort of creature a human is and, consequently, what sort of things foster or undermine one's flourishing.



According to the Stoics, humans are a highly social species capable of reason. Nature hasn't given them the sort of evolutionary weapons that other animals enjoy. They don't have large muscles or big fangs; they don't fly, nor can they swim fast. But they instinctively cooperate with each other and have large brains that allow them to solve complex problems.

So, to live according to nature, people must live rationally and prosocially. But how do they do that? One way is to use the Stoic moral compass, which is based on four cardinal virtues that are meant to provide guidance on how to act in life: wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance. The Stoics understood these virtues in a particular fashion.

Wisdom is the knowledge of what is and is not good for us. The Stoics had different ideas than most people about this topic. Normally, people grow up thinking that things like health, wealth, fame, and so forth are good, while their counterparts—sickness, poverty, obscurity, and the like—are bad.

However, in Stoicism, these things are actually neutral because their goodness or badness depends on how they are used—they depend on our wisdom. For instance, wealth is good if we use it to help others and make the world a better place; it is bad if we use it to corrupt politicians and exploit people.

So, the only true good in Stoicism is our own character because all our decisions in life stem from it, including how to use externals, such as health, wealth, and fame. Consequently, the only true bad is whatever may undermine our character, which is the most precious thing we have.

The second cardinal virtue is courage, which is understood not just as bravery in the face of danger but more specifically as moral courage—the courage to do the right thing. The third virtue is justice, by which the Stoics meant the attitude of treating others fairly and with respect and dignity, just like anyone would like to be treated. Finally, the last virtue is temperance, or the idea that we should do things in the right measure—neither too much nor too little.

Using the Four Cardinal Virtues

How does one use the four cardinal virtues as a moral compass? Consider a hypothetical example. Imagine that one day, a woman walks into her place of work and finds her boss harassing a colleague. What would a Stoic do?

Wisdom would tell her that it is good to intervene and bad not to intervene—because her character would be undermined if she ignored the situation and walked away. And to intervene would take courage, as she may have to suffer retaliation or other consequences for it.

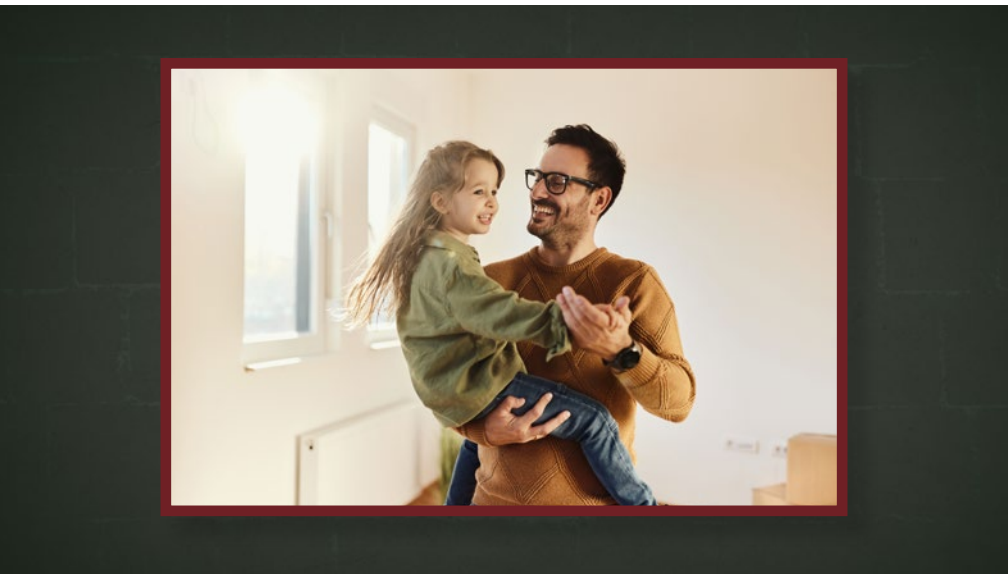
In addition, while it is the just thing to do (because if she were in her coworker's place, she would certainly want someone to intercede), temperance would modulate her intervention, allowing her to step in firmly and say something that is both clearly audible and aimed at calming the situation down.

The four cardinal virtues are an important aspect of Stoic ethics but most certainly not the only ones to consider to appreciate what Marcus writes in his *Meditations*. He also repeatedly mentions or implicitly refers to two notions that he gets from Epictetus: role ethics and cosmopolitanism.

Role Ethics and the Cosmopolis

In section 44 of the sixth notebook, Marcus tells himself that as a member of the Antonine family, he has a duty toward Rome in his role as emperor. But as a human being, he is a member of the cosmopolis—the universal city of humans and gods. Therefore, he needs to find good ways to balance those two roles, especially when they come into conflict with each other.

Epictetus's theory of role ethics, as it is often referred to, says that people perform three kinds of roles in life: Some roles are given to them by fate, such as being someone's son or daughter; other roles are chosen by them given the circumstances of their lives. The third role is that of a human being, common to everyone.



According to Epictetus, the idea is that the cosmopolitan—or third—role overrides all others. People should never forget that they are members of the human family at large. However, within that family, they also happen to play more specific, local roles, which they need to learn to balance with each other.

From a Stoic point of view, almost everything people do affects the cosmopolis, for good or for bad. If they get angry with a friend, they undermine the cosmopolis. By contrast, if they help a stranger, they also help the cosmopolis. Even small decisions will affect other human beings or the environment in which everyone lives, and everyone has a duty—according to the Stoics—to always act appropriately.

Cause and Effect

To know when to act one way or another requires consideration of three intertwined concepts: impressions, assent, and impulse.

An impression is a precognitive, intuitive judgment originating from one's previous experiences or subconscious thinking. Assent is the confirmation—at a cognitive, conscious level—of the initial impression. An impulse is a movement of the will toward action that one feels due to having assented to a given impression. In Stoic psychology, the causal chain connecting these three phenomena goes like this: impression > assent > impulse.

The impression is involuntary. However, the assent is the result of reflection, and so the impulse is also voluntary—the outcome of a specific combination of impression and assent.

Here is an example from Epictetus, the philosopher who most influenced Marcus:

> Provoked by the sight of a handsome man or a beautiful woman, you will discover within you the contrary power of self-restraint. Faced with pain, you will discover the power of endurance. If you are insulted, you will discover patience. In time, you

> will grow to be confident that there is not a single impression that you will not have the moral means to tolerate.

The Stoics thought that people ought to concern themselves with the study of three branches of philosophy: science, logic, and ethics. The idea is that to live a good life (ethics), they need to understand how the world works (science) and to reason correctly about it (logic).

The Stoics also saw the universe as a living organism permeated by something called the Logos—a substance that endows the universe itself with the ability to reason. Moreover, everything in the world is made of matter, which means that things have causal powers. Consequently, everything that happens is the result of cause and effect. No exceptions nor miracles exist, and even what people call chance is simply a label for their ignorance of the actual causes.

If the universe is deterministic, then everything that happens is bound to happen, and an individual's role in life is to play their assigned part willingly and to the best of their abilities. If the cosmos is a rational being, then human beings are literally his cells or other active parts. Whatever happens to them is for the good of the whole—the Stoic version of providence.

Stoicism, Free Will, and Logic

One of the major implications of Stoic science concerns their view of free will, which can be summarized as follows: People do have will, but it isn't free. From a Stoic perspective, the idea that judgments and decisions to act or not to act are uncaused is impossible in a deterministic universe where everything is caused. A will independent of causality would be a miracle, and the Stoics don't believe in miracles.

That said, people clearly do make decisions and, thus, have a will. The word used by the Stoics is *prohairesis* (often translated as "volition"), which works by processing external and internal inputs. The external ones come from the world around people, and the internal ones originate within them. For the Stoics, human beings are, in a sense, extremely sophisticated and complex decision-making machines.

Other than ethics and science, the Stoics were very much concerned with logic. And so was Marcus, who engages in a number of logical arguments at various points in *Meditations*. For example, in section 13 of the eighth notebook, he reminds himself: "Persistently and, if possible, in every case test your impressions by the rules of physics, ethics, logic."

The type of logic articulated by the Stoics is known as propositional logic because it applies to statements. For instance: Premise 1: All philosophy courses are incredibly exciting. Premise 2: All logic courses are philosophy courses. Conclusion: Therefore, all logic courses are incredibly exciting. Indeed, propositional logic is the foundation of all higher-order logics and the building blocks of everything in modern logic and its multifarious applications.

Stoic logic was not limited to formal reasoning. It also included dialectics, rhetoric, and epistemology and therefore amounted to a comprehensive study of human reasoning and its uses. Marcus studied Stoic logic—together with Stoic ethics and science—because he was convinced that sound reasoning is crucial both to better understand the world one lives in and to live well in that world.

Reading

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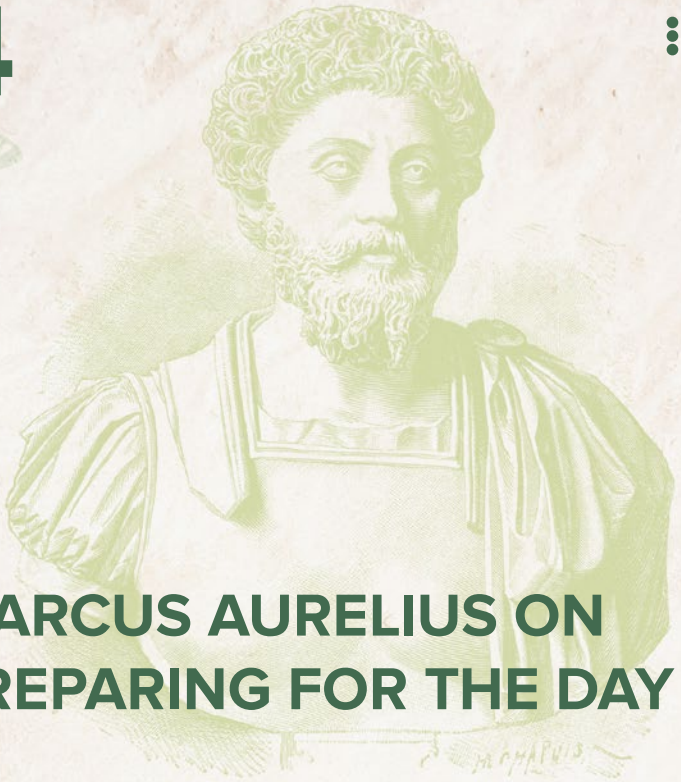

MARCUS AURELIUS ON PREPARING FOR THE DAY

BEGINNING WITH THIS LECTURE, YOU WILL TAKE A DEEP DIVE into the notebooks of *Meditations* in some depth. Armed as you are with some background about the historical context, Marcus Aurelius's life, and Stoic philosophy, you are now in a position to appreciate the actual content of the book—and especially the many life lessons that the emperor-philosopher wrote down for himself and that are still very relevant to people today, almost 2 millennia later.

Premeditatio Malorum and Living in Agreement with Nature

In the first section of the second notebook, Marcus reminds himself that on any given day, he is bound to encounter people who will not behave at their best. As an inevitable aspect of reality and the human condition, he simply needs to accept this. What he is doing here is engaging in an exercise that the Stoics called *premeditatio malorum*, which roughly translates to "premeditation about bad things." The idea is that people handle problems and setbacks much better if they expect and are prepared for them.

Marcus then goes on to say that he cannot be injured by such behaviors because, for a Stoic, the only truly bad things are one's own bad character and judgment, which are entirely up to us—not to other people. Others may annoy or anger us, but annoyance and anger are our own responses to external situations; they are not inherent in the situations themselves.

In the same passage, Marcus says that we are made for cooperation and that to resent other people is equivalent to rejecting the notion that we are all in it together—that we thrive when we work with each other, not against each other. From a Stoic perspective, this notion is what it means to "live in agreement with Nature": *Homo sapiens* is a species of social primates capable of reason, so the best human life is one in which we use reason and cooperate with others to solve our problems.

Stoicism and God in *Meditations*

Later on in the second notebook, Marcus turns to the topic of death and considers two possibilities: Either God exists, or there are only atoms and the void. The first take is the Stoic one, while the second is the opinion of the Epicureans, one of the chief rivals of Stoicism throughout the Hellenistic period.

For the Stoics, there is one God, and it is the same thing as the cosmos itself. This God is thought of as a living organism endowed with something called the Logos, which translates to the ability to reason. According to Stoic theology, which is best understood as a type of pantheism, people are literally bits and pieces of the cosmic God.

Marcus also explicitly mentions the concept of providence but resists the temptation to interpret it in terms of Christian theology. For the Stoics, God is not external to the world, which is created by Him. God is the world, which is periodically self-created and self-destroyed by way of fire—in a universal conflagration. Providence, then, is simply the notion that whatever happens to us is good for the cosmic organism as a whole, and we should therefore accept it gladly.

Marcus concludes that such a God does exist and that he is glad of it because he finds solace in the sort of providence that results from it. However, in other parts of *Meditations,* Marcus is more agnostic on this topic, concluding that it really doesn't matter whether God exists or not—people still need to act reasonably and cooperatively toward other human beings because that's the way that nature established.

Metaphysics and Ethics

A fascinating feature of Stoic philosophy is how interrelated metaphysics is to ethics—that is, how the Stoics connected their view of how the world works with their take on how to act rightly within the world.

In the second notebook, Marcus turns his musing on the nature of the cosmos into some practical considerations on how to improve his own character. He frames it in terms of five ways our soul can harm itself.

The first way is by behaving like a tumor. We don't want to be a "malignant growth in the Universe," and we are precisely that if we insist on rebelling against the dictates of nature. Second, we hurt ourselves when we intend to do harm to others, for instance, as a result of anger. In the Stoic view, anger is a particularly destructive emotion because we act by ignoring reason when we are angry.

Third, we undermine our soul when we allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by either pleasure or pain. Pleasure needs to be managed and pain endured. Fourth, we harm our own character when we "assume a mask," meaning that we utter insincere or untruthful words and act accordingly, which goes against the dictates of nature. Finally, we do ourselves a disfavor when we engage in actions that have no particular point—when we waste our limited time instead of using it to do some good.

The second notebook ends by posing the following question, to which Marcus gives a clear answer:

> What then is it that can help us on our way? One thing and one alone: Philosophy; and this consists in keeping the divine genius within pure and unwronged.

This is not philosophy understood as a specialized academic discipline but as "love of wisdom"—as a way of life and a path to ethical self-improvement.

Stoicism, Suicide, and Death

In the third notebook of *Meditations*, Marcus approaches the theme of aging: As people enter their final years, they can still perform basic biological functions and experience desires and wants. However, their faculty of judgment may begin to be impaired, which is a problem because it is—according to the Stoics—the most important of the human faculties by far. If someone can't think straight, then they are bound to make errors of judgment, and it won't matter how good their physical health will be—their soul will do wrong.

What to do, then? Marcus hints at the solution in a subtle way but returns to the same theme later on in the book. We should contemplate what the Stoic teacher Epictetus called "the open door," that is, suicide. Epictetus says that if the room we are in is too dense with smoke and we can't take it anymore, then the door is open—it is up to us when to leave. Conversely, if we don't wish to leave, then we should stop complaining and get on with the business of living the best life possible.

For the Stoics, life itself is not sacred, as it would be for a Christian. It falls into that strange category of preferred indifferent: Life is indifferent not in the sense that it doesn't have value—otherwise, it wouldn't be preferred—but in the sense that its value comes from what we actually do with it.

If our mental or even physical abilities are severely impaired, as they may be near the end, then we can't contribute much to the big human family—the cosmopolis. If so, we may decide that it is time to leave. Neither Epictetus nor Marcus are treating life with casual disregard here. Rather, it is a question of human dignity and autonomy.

Marcus goes on to approach the theme of death in a way that exemplifies an important Stoic spiritual exercise: the so-called view from above, in which he reminds himself of famous people who achieved a lot and yet, in the end, all died anyway. From this perspective, a person was born, they lived, and it's now their turn to get ready to depart. No big deal—it's a law of nature. He then immediately revives the "God or atoms" thought: If there is an afterlife and a God, very good. But if not, then there will be no sensation, no pleasure, and no pain. So, why worry?

The Ruling Reason

While on the front lines defending the empire, Marcus contemplates what the best use of his time and energy is—an issue that he has already explored in the second notebook. In doing so, he engages in yet another standard Stoic exercise, which one might call mind cleaning. What is it that you are thinking? Is it the sort of thing that you could honestly and promptly discuss in the open, should someone suddenly ask? If not, perhaps you should nudge your thoughts in more productive directions.

Above all, Marcus is saying not to be concerned so much with the opinions and doings of others, unless such concern is actually providing some benefit to humanity—which it probably isn't. One's only concern should be toward the good functioning of what Marcus calls the ruling reason.

In modern terms, the ruling reason may be identified with what cognitive scientists refer to as the executive function of the brain, which oversees several cognitive processes and functions, including planning, monitoring, attention, inhibition, problem-solving, and working memory. It is therefore clear why it's so important and why the Stoics—with their emphasis on the human capacity to reason—also regarded it as such.

The ruling reason is so important because it allows people to do everything that is good about humanity and also avoid doing everything that is bad. According to the Stoics, the trick is to carefully analyze every one of your impressions—the first, usually automatic, judgment of a situation or perception.

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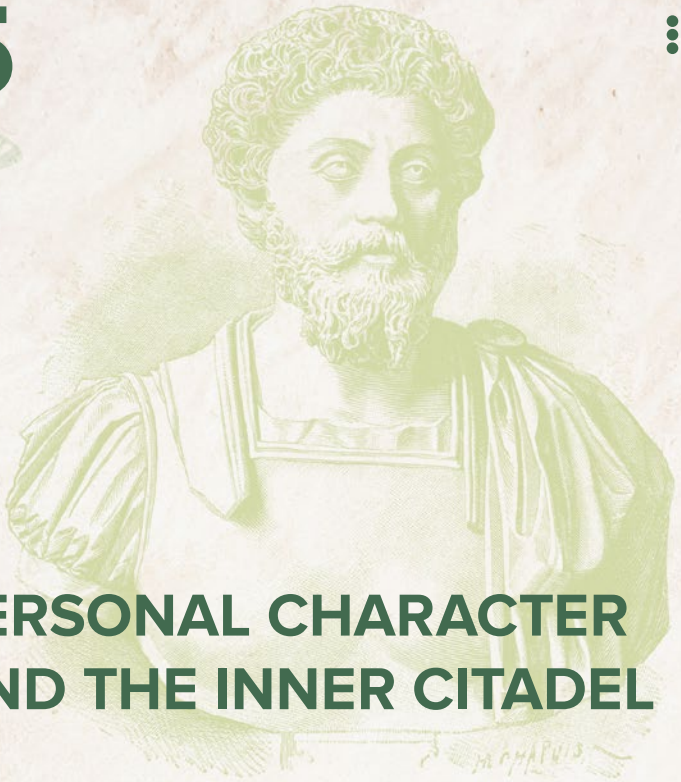


PERSONAL CHARACTER AND THE INNER CITADEL

IF YOUR GOAL OF TAKING A VACATION IS TO GET OVER YOUR problems by changing scenery rather than just relaxing and recharging your batteries, then be prepared for disappointment. Inevitably, you will bring yourself along, which means your problems will travel with you. What you need, as Seneca puts it, is a change of soul. But how do you change your soul? Arguably, the whole point of Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* was precisely to answer this question, and the suggestion he makes to himself to retreat into his own mind from time to time is one of the most famous self-help approaches devised by the Stoics. In this lecture, you will learn about this tactic, which the French scholar Pierre Hadot called the Inner Citadel.

The Inner Citadel and the View from Above

The idea of retreating into the Inner Citadel is to focus inwardly rather than outwardly to sharpen our attention on whatever troubles us, analytically dissect it, and realize that it shouldn't be troubling in the first place. This notion stems from one of the fundamental aspects of Epictetus's philosophy—the sharp separation he makes between external facts and events and the value judgments people apply to those same facts and events. The point here is to remind ourselves that while facts about externals are what they are, our opinions and judgment are up to us.

The Inner Citadel is a reminder that our worries and desires are not objective features of the world. They are the result of our judgments, and we have the power to change or modulate them as we think appropriate. To do that, according to Marcus, we need some simple precepts to use as guides and reminders in daily life. The first of these is Epictetus's separation between facts and value judgments, while the second has to do with the notion that everything inevitably changes and that we should accept change as a natural—and beneficial—feature of the world.

One value that has apparently always been prominent in people's minds is how well regarded, or not, they are by other people. Fame is alleged to be one way to assess this, but the Stoics do not put much stock into the whole notion of fame. Utilizing the Stoic spiritual exercise of the view from above, Marcus focuses on time, reflecting on the fact that fame is short-lived given the typical human lifespan and ephemeral memory of human beings.

However, if fame is used for a virtuous purpose, then it has a point. Marcus's own life provides a great example of fame used for good purpose: His renown throughout history has helped countless people to approach Stoic philosophy and live a better, more mindful life.

Taking the view from above may seem to imply that it doesn't really matter whether you've done bad or good things—eventually, the memory of you will recede and then vanish forever. However, this idea is not suggesting that what

people do here and now is not important. On the contrary, as Marcus writes in *Meditations*, it is the only thing that matters—the only thing we should focus on.

If Marcus appeared a little pessimistic about the human lot in general, perhaps he was. He had good reasons; by this time in his life, he'd endured multiple wars, pestilence, earthquakes, floods, and the betrayal of one of his lieutenants and possibly his own wife. Despite this, he kept finding good reasons to work with others on behalf of the human cosmopolis—to do what he could to make life better not just for his subjects within the Roman Empire but even for the enemy at the gates.

Resilience is a fundamental Stoic value. Resilient people tend to be optimistic about their own ability to cope with life's inevitable setbacks, and they are able to reframe situations in ways that allow them to do so more effectively and proceed to focus on what can be done given the situation. This principle applies to all challenges, big and small. People will always be better off by keeping their cool, focusing on what can actually be done, and accepting the rest with as much equanimity as they can muster.

Stoicism and Benefits

According to the Stoics, the job of a human being is to live in agreement with nature. And since human nature is that of a social animal capable of reason, the job of a human being is to reason well and cooperate with others. In the fifth notebook, Marcus writes:

> Someone, when they have done another a kindness, [is] ready also to reckon on a return. Someone else is not ready to do this, yet in their heart of hearts rank the other as a debtor, and they are conscious of what they have done. But another one is … like the vine that has borne a cluster of grapes, and when it has once borne its due fruit looks for no reward beyond. … And so

> a human being: when they have done one thing well,
> do not broadcast it loudly, but go on to the next thing,
> as a vine to bear afresh her clusters in due season.

The topic here is what the ancients called benefits. The problem, then and now, is that we don't know how to properly give and receive. All sorts of nefarious consequences follow from this ignorance, affecting both us and others.

Consider the first two hypothetical individuals mentioned by Marcus. One has done a kindness to a fellow human being. But is it really a kindness if the person in question is already counting on the favor to be returned? The second individual is not going quite as far as the first one and yet, in their heart of hearts, still thinks of the receiver of the favor as being in their debt. But according to Marcus, the third person has the right attitude: They do something for another person without expecting a return or waiting to be praised. They are simply conscious that they have done their duty and move on, ready to do it again.

The broader point is that in virtue ethics, of which Stoicism is a particular example, what matters are our intentions and nothing else. Not only should we not seek to be praised for doing the right thing, but we should also do the right thing only because it is the right thing—not for any ulterior motive.

For example, if someone volunteers at a soup kitchen to help others, then all is good. But if the motive is to add a line to their resume so that they will perform better in the job market, their action is not virtuous—even if it does end up actually helping others—and their character is undermined. They are now the kind of person who pretends to care for others even though what they do is actually self-serving.

Stoicism and Forgiveness

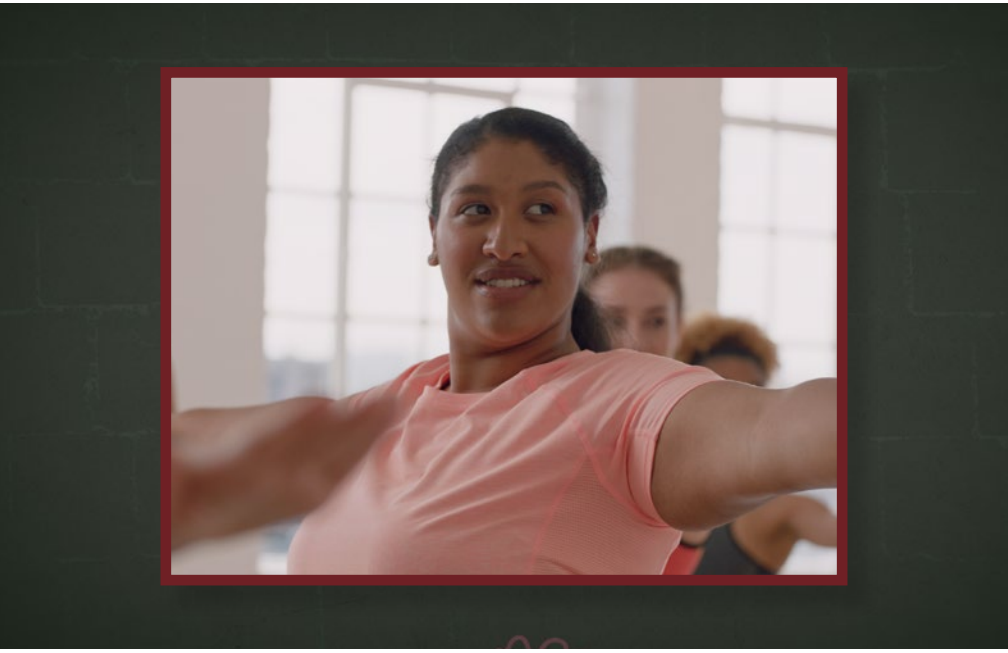
By now, it may seem that Stoicism is a rather unforgiving philosophy. Marcus was quite pessimistic about people's intentions and behaviors—not to mention his own ability to do the right thing—and the Stoics demand high standards when it comes not only to actions but also to inner motivations.

And yet, Stoicism is actually incredibly forgiving—toward both others and ourselves. For example, at the beginning of the second notebook, Marcus says that people don't do bad things on purpose but simply because they don't know better. It's not that they are evil; they are ignorant of the true good—or lacking the wisdom to see it. Therefore, they need to be helped, if possible, or endured, if nothing better can be done.

The point is that for a Stoic, a happy life is one in which we do our best to be good human beings. Naturally, we won't always succeed. Setbacks will occur. When that happens, we pick ourselves up and try again, confident that we are striving to do the right thing.

But how, exactly, do we improve our character so that we are more likely to stay on the right track than to veer off of it? A powerful concept that Marcus mentions near the middle of the fifth notebook is that we become what we think about. If we "dye our soul" with the proper thoughts, then we are doing good work on our character. Conversely, if we allow ourselves to be polluted by improper thoughts, we are undermining that same character.

Proper and improper here does not mean according to or against the dictates of arbitrary social etiquette. It means virtuous or unvirtuous. Direct your thoughts toward wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance and away from their opposites: folly, cowardice, injustice, and intemperance. Nobody can color our thoughts for us. We are the ones doing the coloring, as we choose what to dwell on and what to avoid.



Going with the Flow

Here is a thought from section 20 of Marcus's fifth notebook:

> Your mind can adapt any impediment to action in order to serve its purpose. Something that might have gotten in the way of your task instead contributes to it. What appeared to be an obstacle becomes a new way forward.

This Stoic concept is very much analogous to a major aspect of Daoist philosophy. Sociologists have no reason to think that Daoism—which began in China during the 6th or 5th century BCE—had any influence on Greek philosophy in general or Stoicism in particular. Instead, this idea is probably an example of convergence between different philosophies tackling the same aspect of reality in similar ways.

A classic Daoist story tells of a mythical character named Dayu. His land faced the threat of a flood. He was advised to use force to oppose nature by building a dike to resist the torrential water. Instead, he dredged new channels to redirect the water, using it to irrigate distant farmland. Dayu's response to the dire situation is still used today to exemplify a fundamental Daoist concept—that of flow. It is said that the Dao flows like water.

Zeno of Citium, the founder of Stoicism, also referenced the idea of flow. He is reported to have said that when we live in agreement with nature—that is, virtuously—we ensure a smooth flow to our life, and consequently, we are happy.

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6

MAKE THE BEST OF THE PRESENT MOMENT

ONE OF THE FUNDAMENTAL LESSONS FROM STOICISM IS that we should live in the here and now and try to make the best of the moments we have. Marcus Aurelius reminds himself of this very clearly right at the beginning of the sixth notebook, when he says that “even dying is an action taken in life, so there too it’s a matter of making the best use of the present moment.” You will explore this notebook and idea in more depth in this lecture.

Appropriate Action and Decomposition

According to the concept of appropriate action—or *kathēkon* in Greek—people need to make sure that they always, under all circumstances, try their best to engage only in actions that are appropriate to a human being. And what is appropriate is what is in agreement with nature. For our species, this means only actions that are rational and prosocial. According to Marcus, taking appropriate action is something one ought to do not just when one is perfectly healthy and comfortable but regardless of circumstances.

Marcus also places great emphasis on the present moment, which is typical of Stoicism. Remember that the Stoics, most especially Epictetus, divide things into those that are up to us and those that are not, meaning things for which we are responsible and things for which we are not. According to Epictetus, a good life is the result of putting all our efforts into the things that are up to us because that's where our agency lies. At the same time, we should develop an attitude of equanimity toward the things that are not up to us.

The past is not up to us, in the sense that we cannot change it. The future is also not up to us because it depends on a large number of factors that are not under our control. The only thing that is truly up to us is this moment, right here, right now—which is where Marcus is focused.

However, this idea doesn't mean that we should ignore either past or future. We can certainly learn from our past experiences, and we can just as obviously plan for possible futures. But according to Marcus and the Stoics, the way to do that is by determining what the most appropriate action is for us, here and now. Such action will ideally take into consideration what we have learned from experience as well as what we may reasonably project about the future course of events.

A bit later on in the sixth notebook, Marcus engages in yet another spiritual practice—sometimes referred to as a decomposition exercise—to remind himself how to behave appropriately in any given moment. The exercise is called a decomposition because it attempts to break things down and describe them in neutral, objective terms to counter an excessive emotional attachment one may have to them.

For instance, if you like gourmet food too much, remind yourself from time to time that you are salivating after the carcass of a dead fish. If you enjoy drinking too much, recall that what you pine for is just fermented grape juice. And if you are obsessed with sex, focus on its biological mechanics instead—at least once in a while. Very good evidence exists that such a technique works well and accomplishes what it is meant to: a bit more detachment from things and activities so that we don't overvalue them and lose track of what is really important in life.

In fact, to make the best of the present moment, Marcus also draws on gratitude exercises. In so doing, he reminds himself that it feels good and reinvigorating to think of the virtues of others. If we keep in mind that our friend, brother, or mother has been acting wisely, courageously, justly, or in a temperate manner, it will be easier for us to practice those very same virtues—which are the foundation of Stoic ethics.

The *Daimon* and the *Hegemonikon*

At the beginning of the seventh notebook, Marcus writes:

> Whatever happens in life you should keep readily available the thought that what you're seeing is nothing you haven't often seen before. As a general rule, look where you will, sameness is all you'll find: history books on ancient times, recent times, and the period in between are filled with the same things, and they are the same things with which states and households are fully occupied now. Nothing is new; everything is both familiar and temporary.

Despite how different the 21st century is from the 2nd century, humanity still goes to war, suffers from diseases, and is struck by countless other crises both manufactured by humans themselves and imposed on them by nature. Most human beings still want the same things and are afraid of the same things. Deep down, things have not really changed that much.

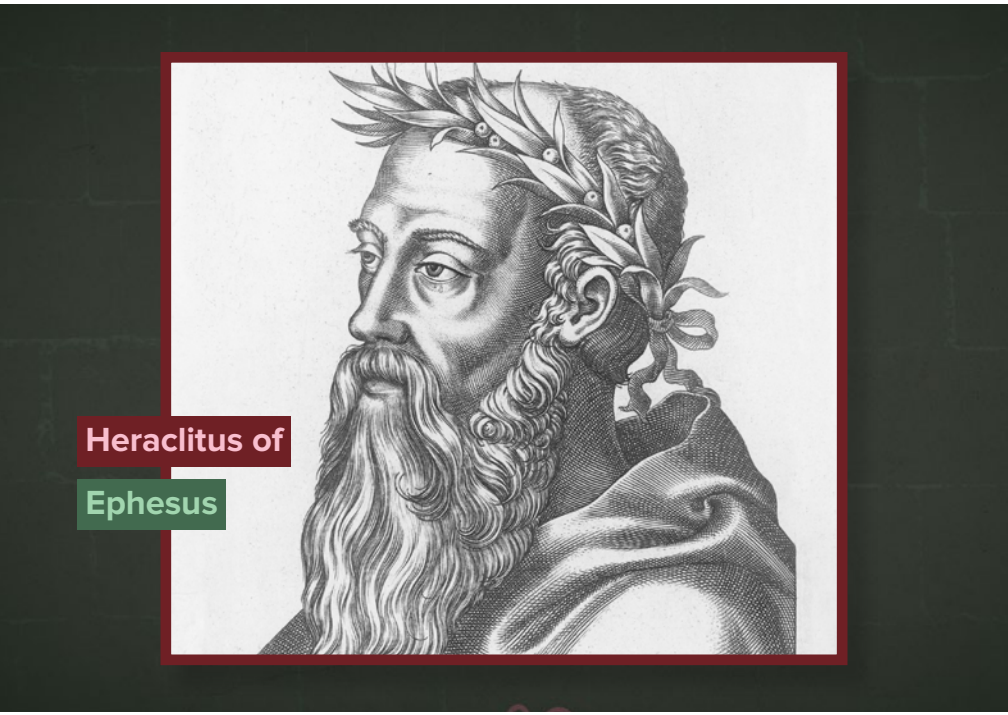
And what is it that all people want? They want to be happy. The problem is that they tend to disagree and to be confused about what happiness is in the first place. Marcus comes to the rescue with a very straightforward sentence: "Happiness is a good guardian spirit or a good command center." Here, Marcus is referring to two fundamental concepts: our *daimon*, or guardian spirit, and the *hegemonikon*, or the ruling reason (which he calls the command center).

The fact that Marcus treats the *daimon* and the *hegemonikon* as similar—if not necessarily identical—concepts reinforces a common interpretation of the *daimon*: It is a conceptualization of our own conscience. Since the *hegemonikon* is the seat of the executive function of our brain, from which spring all decisions we make to act or not to act, one can see how the *hegemonikon* would also be where our conscience resides. After all, to have a conscience just means to critically analyze the moral dimension of what we think and do. For a Stoic, it is impossible to be happy unless our conscience is clear and our decisions are sound. Everything else stems from these two conditions, hence Marcus's emphasis on them.

Stoicism and Change

If one thing is seen by many people as a threat to their happiness, it's change—or at least some kind of change they don't want. But the Stoics took perennial change for granted as a result of their adoption of the metaphysics of Heraclitus of Ephesus. He famously said that we never step into the same river twice—because the river constantly changes and because we constantly change as well. This notion he introduced became a distinctive way of looking at the world, nowadays known as process metaphysics: No stable, static objects or things exist—only changeable patterns and the processes that produce them.

Interestingly, the Heraclitean view of the cosmos is very much in agreement with the latest from fundamental physics. In a book titled *Every Thing Must Go: Metaphysics Naturalized*, James Ladyman and Don Ross have argued that, according to physicists, there are no fundamental things of which the world is



made. Atoms are made of subatomic particles, and some of those particles are themselves made of other things called quarks—and pushing as far down as possible reveals only rarefied "fields" and no particles at all.

Marcus knew nothing about fundamental physics, but he accepted Heraclitus's insight nevertheless, writing:

> Can you take a warm bath unless the firewood undergoes change? Can you be nourished unless your food undergoes change? Can anything else worthwhile take place without change?

A bit later in the seventh notebook, he says: "It's no more terrible for a box to be broken up than it was for it to be put together."

The first passage is both an acknowledgment of the inevitability of change by way of examples and a value judgment that change is good—that worthwhile things could not take place without change. The second passage is an indirect reference to death, the ultimate fear that most human beings harbor. The box is a stand-in for a person: Just like it is not terrible for the box to be either assembled or broken up, so it is not terrible for people to either be born or die.

These processes are a kind of assembling and disassembling from bits and pieces floating in the cosmos. As astronomer Carl Sagan put it, we are literally stardust. The elements that make up our bodies were once forged in the explosion of a supernova, and when we are dead, they will reenter the cosmic recycling program.

Unhappiness and Pain

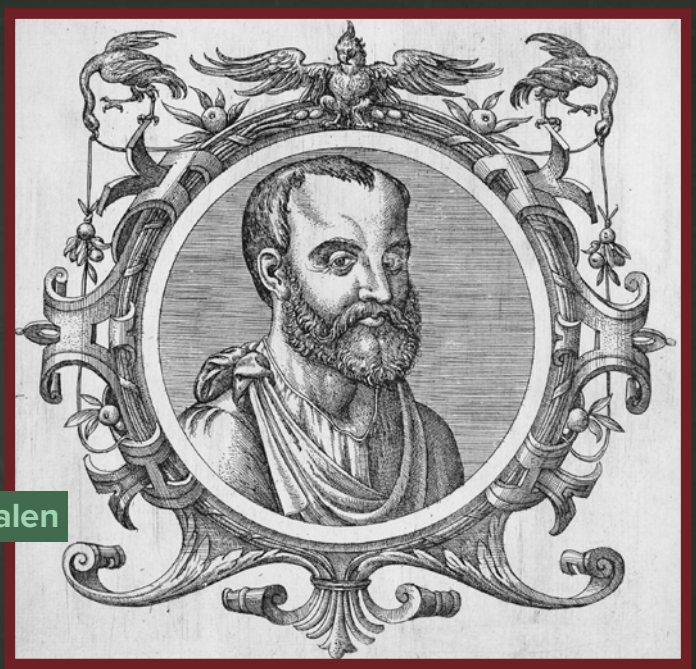
Another common source of unhappiness, especially in contemporary consumerist societies, is the feeling that we just don't have enough stuff. As emperor, Marcus surely had more stuff than most of his contemporaries, and yet his attitude toward material possessions was to focus on appreciating what you have rather than going after what you don't have.

In *Meditations*, Marcus also reminds himself not to get too attached to what he already has—which can be interpreted as ratcheting up minimalism so that it applies not only to the things one doesn't have or need but also to those one currently has. Ideally, we need to work toward a Zen-like state of mind characterized by a light attachment to things. That way, we will not get upset should we lose them.

Marcus's take on pain is very similar to that of Epicurus—who was most definitely not a Stoic philosopher and said that happiness in life derives from not experiencing pain, the lack of which he considered to be the highest possible pleasure. In fact, both Marcus and Epicurus appear to have an optimistic view of pain, which was shared by other Stoics. For them, pain falls into two categories: acute or chronic. If it is acute, it usually doesn't last long, either because it abides or because we die. If it is chronic, then it is bearable, and Marcus even says that it affects people's limbs and other parts of their

bodies but not the *hegemonikon*, or the command center. Indeed, Marcus gets downright dismissive toward the other parts of the body, writing that "it is up to them to protest, if they can."

While this notion is relying a bit too much on the concept of the Inner Citadel, it is clear from a combination of modern medicine and meditation techniques that chronic pain can indeed be managed—that it is in our mind, in a sense, and our mind can therefore handle it. Still, one of the advances of contemporary science is the availability of broadly efficacious painkillers, which Marcus would probably have taken advantage of, just as he did of a concoction of opioids that his personal physician, Galen, put together so that the emperor could manage his own chronic pain.



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7

ANGER MANAGEMENT IN *MEDITATIONS*

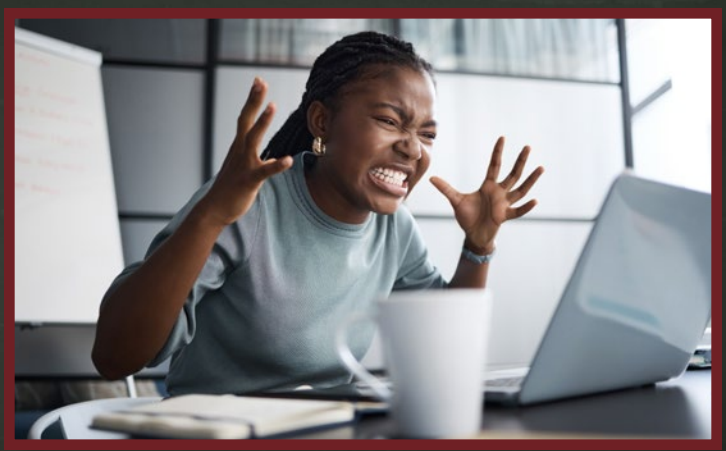
HAVE YOU EVER GOTTEN UPSET WITH A COMPUTER BECAUSE it failed to do what you wanted? Did you find yourself getting angry and yelling at the machine? If you've ever vented your feelings at an inanimate object, you are not alone. This problem isn't new, as Marcus reminds you halfway through the seventh notebook of *Meditations*: "It's useless to get angry with things, For they don't care." In fact, anger was a major concern for the Stoics, so much so that the 1st-century Stoic philosopher Seneca the Younger wrote a whole book about it. In this lecture, you'll take a deep dive into the issue of anger—and discover why thinking of bitter cucumbers is a way to become a better human being.

Anger and Understanding

The Stoics divided emotions into two broad categories: healthy and unhealthy. This subdivision was not arbitrary but was based on a single, crucial criterion: the relationship of the emotion to reason. If a given emotion tends to override or even simply go against reason, then it is unhealthy. If the emotion is aligned with reason, then it is healthy.

Cognitive behavioral therapy, which is one of the most efficacious evidence-based types of psychotherapy, was inspired by Stoicism, and it very much makes the same assumption as the ancient Stoic writers: Emotions are aspects of our cognition and are therefore subject to being challenged—and even overturned—by a reasoned analysis. Accordingly, we should regard the intercourse between reason and emotions as the partial integration of aspects of our thinking.

Anger is a violent emotional response to something one dislikes and cannot control. Even when directed at other human beings rather than at objects, anger springs from our inability to bend outside forces to our will.



The problem is, the Stoics say, that this is a waste of mental energy and likely to lead us to act in unreasonable ways, which we will regret once reason reasserts itself. In this sense, anger is never healthy.

Even when things are going nicely and smoothly, life has a way of suddenly hitting us with obstacles and setbacks, such as the death of a loved one. According to Marcus and the Stoics, our guard should always be up so that we don't get punched all of a sudden, the shock making us unable to react appropriately.

Stoicism is a highly forgiving philosophy, both toward oneself and others. According to Socrates, when we do something bad, this action is the result of the lack of appropriate knowledge of what is truly good. In this regard, no Disney-style villains exist who get up in the morning, go to the mirror, and ask themselves, "What sort of bad things can I do today?" Even the worst villains in history told themselves stories about why what they were doing was actually good.

For Marcus, this Socratic attitude fosters understanding and compassion toward both others and oneself. The idea does not mean that we should condone bad actions, but it can be understood as the Stoic equivalent of the Christian thought, "Hate the sin, but not the sinner."

Action and Equanimity

Near the end of the seventh notebook, Marcus states:

> Judgment can say to Situation: "This is your real essence, whatever else opinion would have you be." And Good Use can say to Circumstance: "I've been looking for you."

The first part is about the relationship between our judgment and any given situation we encounter in our life. The reminder here is never to go with the first opinion that comes to mind but always to take the time to assess what the situation is really about so that we can act in the most appropriate way possible. The second part is about action: We don't know what circumstances

we will find ourselves in—that depends on a lot of factors that are outside of our jurisdiction. But whatever we are facing, it's up to us to make good use of the materials the universe throws our way. Marcus adds that the chief thing that is up to us is to avoid doing bad things, as that is eminently possible. Symmetrically, it's absurd to try to avoid the bad things that others do—because that's up to them.

Combining these two thoughts results in an attitude of equanimity toward other people's actions and an appreciation of our own duty to do the right thing. Accept that the world is what it is, but don't find excuses to avoid doing your part in making it a better place.

Sleepwalking Through Life

In the eighth notebook, Marcus compares a group of generals who devoted their lives to ephemeral things like fame, wealth, and power to a group of philosophers who kept their eyes open and made sure to be in charge of their own ruling faculty—that is, reason. Marcus had no doubt about which group made the right choice. In a similar manner, Heraclitus, whose metaphysics strongly influenced the Stoics, was famous for berating his fellow Ephesians and accusing them of sleepwalking through life.

The general idea here is the same as what Plato famously expressed in his allegory of the cave: Only the philosopher, in control of her mind, is capable of seeing the world as it truly is and acting accordingly. The rest of us are like prisoners in the cave, looking at shadows projected on the wall and being duped into thinking that we understand reality.

But how do we open our eyes and make sure we don't spend our existence sleepwalking? Marcus states that for everything we think of as important, we should ask ourselves the following questions:

> What is this thing made of? What is the substance and material of it? What is its cause? What does it do in the Universe? How long does it subsist?

The answers to the first three questions can provide us with a good understanding of the nature of a thing. The final two questions are more characteristically Stoic in that we are inquiring about how the thing we are interested in fits within the rest of the cosmos—what its broader role is. Everything is interconnected with everything else, so to appreciate the function of a thing is to better understand the universe itself. We also want to know how long the thing is likely to exist because we want to remind ourselves of the impermanence of everything, which in turn reminds us of how precious life is—precisely because it is ephemeral. In this regard, asking oneself questions about the nature of things is the Stoic path to avoid sleepwalking through life.

Blame and Busyness

In the eighth notebook, Marcus lays out a crucial sequence of attitudes that are considered proper by the Stoics whenever one deals with potential problems and challenges:

1. Do not blame anyone, including yourself. Blaming never solves anything and likely makes things worse.
2. If you can, explain things to the other person. Persuasion, rooted in the correct use of reason, ought always to be the first step when tackling any issue.
3. If persuasion fails, then see if you can set things straight yourself. That is, instead of complaining about other people's stubbornness, try to fix the issue. Again, complaining doesn't do anything—acting does.
4. If nothing can be done to fix the problem, you still have no reason to complain. You've done your best—first in the persuasion department, then in the action department. Now, it is simply time to accept the situation and endure the outcome without anger.

The following passage is near the end of the eighth notebook of *Meditations*:

> The cucumber is bitter. Toss it away. There are briars in the path. Turn aside. That is enough, you don't need to add: Why are such things found in the world? For you would be a laughing stock to any student of nature; just as you would be laughed at by a carpenter and a cobbler if you took them to task because in their shops are seen sawdust and parings from what they are making.

Marcus is not saying that we should act like carpets and let other people or events walk all over us. He is talking about accepting the inevitability of certain features of life—hence his conjuring the image of how ridiculous you would be if you walked into the shop of a carpenter or cobbler and started

complaining about sawdust and parings. You cannot work wood without producing sawdust, and you cannot make shoes without leaving leather parings around.

The same is true in life. We want to do certain things and engage with certain people, but all that comes with inevitable side effects. We are not obliged to do those things or engage with those people if we want to avoid the side effects. But to feel angry or upset and complain about the inevitabilities involved is silly and useless.

Immediately after this passage, Marcus reminds himself not to "fill your life with busyness," which refers to acting busy for the sake of being busy, even though much of what we do is pointless or at the very least not important. "Busyness" in this sense is a major problem in contemporary society, as research in social psychology amply demonstrates. We are all busy, all the time, and yet we don't seem to do much that is actually worth doing.

The Stoics were keenly aware of the fact that the human lifespan is limited, and it is precisely the fact that we'll soon be gone that gives meaning to what we do. As Seneca puts it, we die a little every day, which means that every moment is precious. We should be focused on making the best of it. To be busy for the sake of being busy is a supreme way of wasting one's life.

Contemplating death is a Stoic practice that helps put all things into perspective. In the face of mortality, your anger about any situation feels small and pointless. When considering whether the hereafter is oblivion or new life, you're unlikely to feel quite so angry with your computer or television, no matter what appears on the screen.

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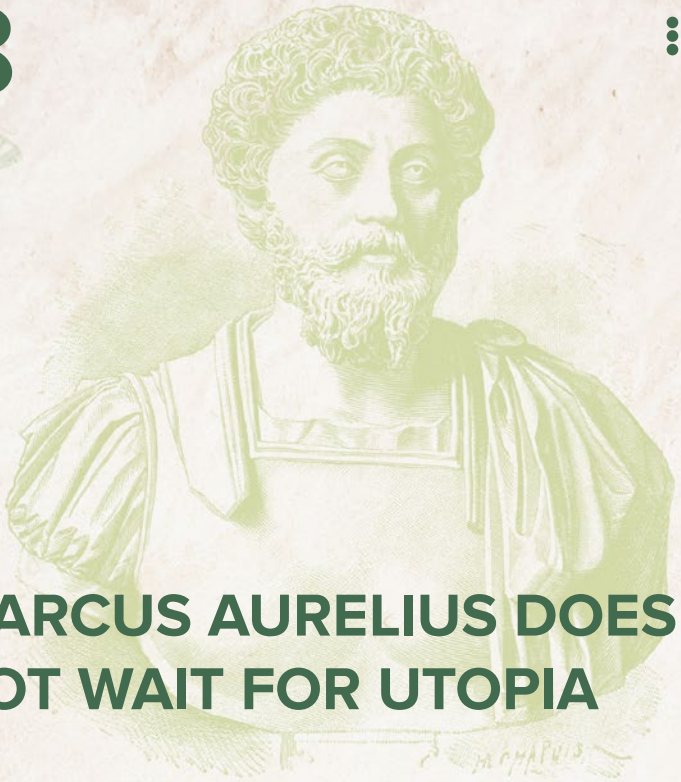


MARCUS AURELIUS DOES NOT WAIT FOR UTOPIA

IS STOICISM A RELIGION? THE STRAIGHTFORWARD ANSWER IS no—it is a philosophy of life. The more nuanced answer is that it depends on what you mean by religion or philosophy of life. Also, you have to remember that the ancient Stoics did believe in God. They thought that the universe itself is a living organism endowed with reason, and that's what they called God. Such thinking made them pantheists; the term indicates belief in a god that is immanent in and pervading the cosmos. A corollary of such belief is that human beings—and indeed every other living creature—share in the divinity, as they are literally bits and pieces of God. In this lecture, you will explore the relationship between Stoicism, God, religion, and philosophy in more detail.

Religion and Philosophy of Life

It's reasonable to suggest that religions are a subcategory of philosophies of life, which typically have at least three components:

- First, a metaphysics, meaning an account of how the world works. In the case of Stoicism, the world is made of matter and behaves deterministically by cause and effect.
- Second, an ethics, that is, an account of how to behave in the world. Stoics try to live in agreement with nature, which means rationally and prosocially. They consider themselves citizens of the world, and they try to act appropriately, following the four cardinal virtues of wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance.
- Third, a set of practices to help people live ethically. The so-called spiritual exercises comprise just such a set as far as the Stoics are concerned.

Now, consider a religion like Christianity. Christians also have a metaphysics, which involves a creator god responsible for the very existence of the universe but who is external to it. They have an ethics, made concrete by the Ten Commandments and the teachings of Jesus. And they have practices, including going to church, praying, and reflecting on scripture.

The differences between philosophies of life like Stoicism and religions like Christianity lie in the fact that Christians worship God and put more emphasis on faith than reason, while the Stoics have no use for faith at all and try to reason their way to understanding how the world works.

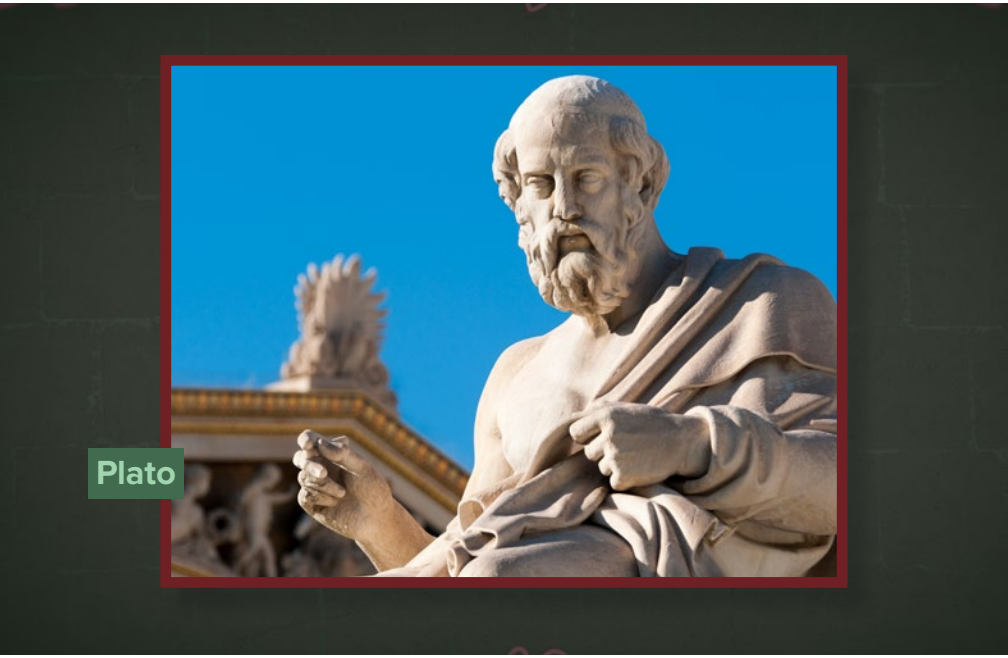
Determinism, Pragmatism, and the Ruling Reason

Stoics were determinists—believers in the notion that the principle of cause and effect governs the entire universe at all times. One implication of this way of looking at things is that there is nothing inherently good or bad in what happens. Things just are. Humans are neither better nor worse off when

change happens to them, including the biggest changes of all: being born and dying. Only the self-centered ego pushes them to think that they are special—that they represent exceptions to the workings of the universe. This attitude is a major cause of human foolishness, according to the Stoics.

A bit later on in the ninth notebook, Marcus says: "Dream not of Plato's Utopia, but be content if the least thing goes forward, and count the outcome of the matter in hand as no small achievement." Here, Marcus is being pragmatic, telling himself not to wait for Plato's utopia to be created on Earth because it is an ideal—not a practical project for government. Meanwhile, he says, work on whatever small, incremental improvement you can achieve, and be happy if you do achieve it.

Much of Marcus's daily work had to do with interacting with people, at court or during a military campaign, who would either criticize or flatter him. In *Meditations*, Marcus reminds himself that people's ruling reason often just doesn't work too well, so they are misguided about their priorities and values.



As a consequence of such mistakes in reasoning, those same people then fool themselves into thinking that their criticism of Marcus actually causes him distress or that their praise will gain them some profit.

Marcus also uses the mental trick of reminding himself of just how different other people's values and priorities are from his own—so that he won't be fooled into allowing them to flatter him. He uses the same approach to avoid getting angry with some of the same people, trying to understand rather than condemn their worldview and the behaviors that stem from it. Both techniques are obviously advantageous for an emperor who wields much power and bears much responsibility, and Marcus is keenly aware of just how much damage he could do if he allowed his ruling reason to be manipulated or overpowered by anger.

Stoicism, Dualism, and Materialism

Dualism is a metaphysical stance that posits the existence of a profound qualitative distinction between physical matter and spiritual essence. Plato was the quintessential dualist of antiquity, and Christian theology also very much falls into this category.

However, dualism is most definitely a minoritarian stance in modern philosophy, as the overwhelming majority of professional philosophers are monists—meaning they think only one kind of fundamental substance exists in the universe. And most contemporary monists are materialists in the sense that they think fundamental physics got it right: The world is made of matter and energy, and the two of them are one and the same thing.

Therefore, it's important to understand that, for all their talk of body versus mind, the Stoics nevertheless were materialists and monists. They thought that everything that exists has causal powers and that those causal powers derive from the fact that things are made of matter. This included the soul, which means that Stoic philosophy taught that the soul is perishable and dies with the body. Indeed, there is no permanent essence that is us—even the soul is a set of ever-changing processes, as the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus maintained.

This kind of metaphysics had important implications on the Stoic view of life as a whole. Life is meaningful and precious precisely because we, as thinking entities, don't exist forever. The materials that constitute our body get recycled into the vastness of the cosmos, but "we" simply cease to exist. For this reason, we need to make the best of what is happening to us here and now. The past is gone and will not return, and the future is uncertain and of very limited duration.

A fundamental rule of Epictetus is that some things are up to us and others are not—and that a good life is the result of focusing on the things that are up to us and developing an attitude of acceptance and equanimity toward the rest. And according to Epictetus, the only things that are truly up to us are our considered judgments, our decisions to act or not to act, and the values we consciously decide to endorse and make our own.

Where do these three things come from? They are the result of our *prohairesis*—our faculty of judgment—which resides in what can be called the Inner Citadel. Modern scientists refer to it as the executive function of our brain, a set of cognitive processes that help us plan, monitor, and successfully execute our goals. These processes include attentional control, inhibition, problem-solving, and working memory, and they are thought to originate in the prefrontal cortex of the brain.

For the Stoics that, and only that, is who we truly are. We are not our limbs, our fingers, our eyes, or any other anatomical part of our body. We are not even some of our mental activity, which is automatic and subconscious. At the end of the day, we are the decisions we make and nothing else. This notion is why the Stoics put such an emphasis on the contrast between our ruling faculty and everything else, which makes them sound like dualists even though they very clearly were not.

Theory and Practice

Perhaps precisely because of their view of the universe as one large web of interconnected causes and effects, the Stoics put a lot of value on the connection between the individual human being, society at large, and the universe itself. At times, Marcus uses metaphors to remind himself of this concept—for instance, by saying that what is good for the beehive is also good for the bee. While this idea is an important bit of Stoic metaphysics and is often expressed in a rather poetic form, it does not really follow logically.

The Stoics thought that the universe is a living organism endowed with reason and that human beings are like the cells of that gigantic organism. What happens to them, including their own death, serves the purpose and the well-being of the cosmos as a whole—just like the fate of the worker bee with respect to the whole hive.

Marcus was obviously an attentive thinker who appreciated the value of philosophy. From time to time, however, he also very sharply reminds himself that philosophy is pointless if it's not put into practice: "Put an end once for all to this discussion of what a good man should be, and be one." This practical attitude is also a result of the influence of Epictetus, who in his *Discourses* is seen berating his students multiple times for coming to his classroom, learning the theory of Stoic philosophy, and then going outside and not actually putting it into practice.

What Marcus is referring to here has deep roots in Stoicism. The idea is that if knowledge of logic and of what makes a good person doesn't translate into action—that is, actually being a good person—it is utterly useless.

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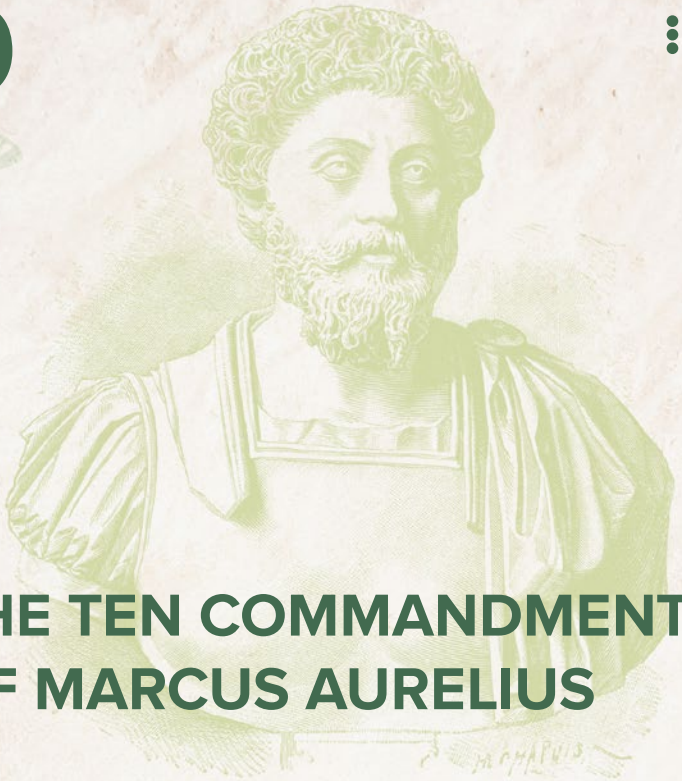


THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF MARCUS AURELIUS

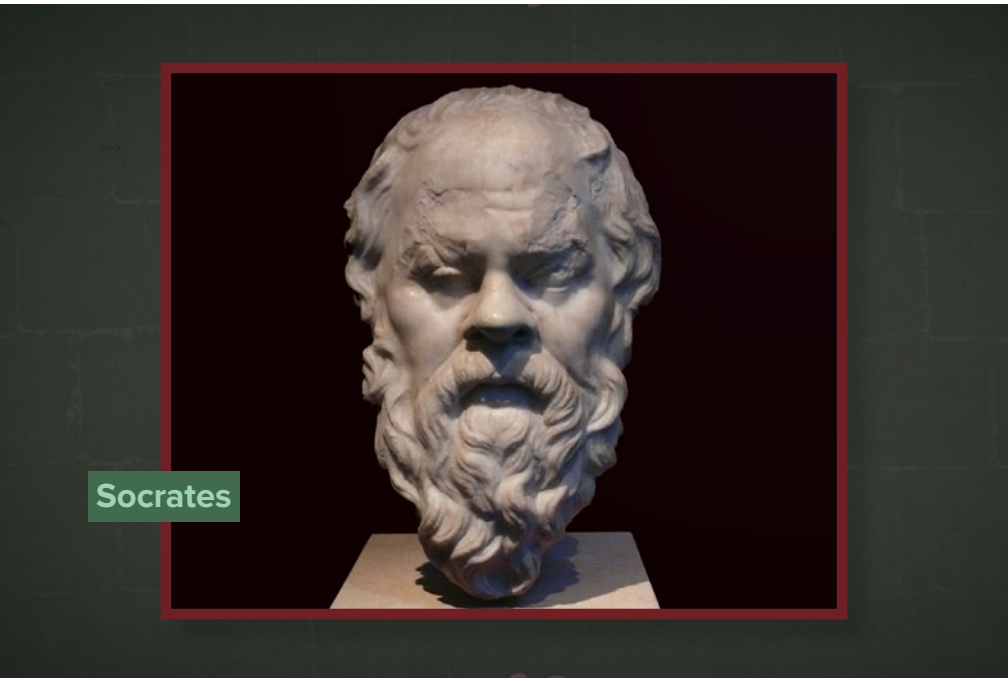
IN THIS LECTURE, YOU WILL EXPLORE 10 PRINCIPLES FROM THE 11th notebook of *Meditations*. Think of them as Marcus's version of the Ten Commandments, except that they are aimed at himself and his own self-imposed ethical training—not at issuing injunctions to other people. In addition, you'll explore some fundamental conclusions that Marcus draws about human nature and the reasons why people still find his writings so relevant in the 21st century. In doing so, you'll see a number of themes that you've encountered before but that have now been pulled together to form a powerful, coherent whole.

Marcus's Commandments

First, a Stoic is a cosmopolitan who thinks that every other human being is his brother or sister and who understands that humans were made, by nature, to help each other. Cooperation is the key to human survival and thriving.

Second, it is a fact of life that we get irritated by other people. Marcus seeks to see people for what they are, warts and all, and not for what he would like them to be. In particular, he reminds himself that lots of people simply have the wrong priorities in life—and that is why they act the way they do.

Third, two possibilities exist concerning how people act: Either they do the right thing or they don't. In the first case, one has no reason to get upset. In the second case, Marcus willfully adopts Socrates's opinion that people do evil as a result of ignorance of what is truly good. Therefore, the right attitudes are tolerance, education, and pity.



Fourth, Marcus reminds us to remember that we are capable of the same sort of wrongdoing that we impute to others. Perhaps we end up not doing it ourselves, but is that because we are truly virtuous and righteous? Or is it simply because we are cowards and do not dare to do it or because we are too concerned with superficial things like maintaining a good reputation?

Fifth, we should remember that we often rush to judgment on the basis of little information. Do we know enough to judge people's characters—who they truly are—just on the basis of something that annoys us? Would we like to be so summarily and superficially judged by others?

Sixth, Marcus suggests practicing the spiritual exercise known as the view from above and reminding ourselves that we'll soon be gone into oblivion. Compared to that, is it really worth getting angry because of someone's behavior?

Seventh, it isn't things that upset us but rather the opinions we have of those things. We may not be able to change the things themselves, but we can certainly alter our opinions. The trick is to keep straight facts separate from value judgments. They are not the same thing, and a given fact does not necessarily logically entail a particular value judgment.

Eighth, Marcus argues that we should compare the consequences of the original act with those of the anger one feels entitled to as a result of that original act. Isn't it better to just forget all about it and go on with one's day?

Ninth, Marcus tries to instill in himself an attitude not fundamentally different from the Christian injunction to turn the other cheek—though with a positive twist added to it, as he says that we can quietly try to teach others to do better. It certainly wouldn't hurt if more of us were to switch our default approach to perceived offenses from one of revenge and retribution to one of tolerance and constructive feedback.

Finally, according to Marcus, it's crazy to expect things not to be what they are and for the universe to instead align with our wishes. However, giving the lie to the common misconception that Stoicism counsels passivity in the face of injustice or adversity, Marcus also says that it is "unfeeling and despotic" not to intervene when some wrongdoing is being done—all the while expecting ourselves not to be the targets of such wrongdoing.

Cleaning the *Hegemonikon* and Figs in Winter

Recall that the ruling reason—the seat of which lies in the *hegemonikon*—is our own Inner Citadel, where we can retreat whenever there's trouble outside. For it to be an effective retreat, however, the place needs to be kept clean and tidy. Marcus enumerates four common sources of mess within the *hegemonikon*:

1. Thinking thoughts that are not actually necessary—that is, wasting our time with things like regrets and recriminations or indulging in anxiety-inducing ruminations about the future.

2. Having thoughts that undermine the welfare of the human cosmopolis, to which we all belong in accordance with the Stoic doctrine of cosmopolitanism.

3. Saying something that we know not to be true, which, from the point of view of Stoic philosophy, does double damage: It undercuts our bonds with other members of the human family, and it damages the most precious thing we have—our own character.

4. Feeling self-reproach, which is also a habit that Stoics aim to banish because it doesn't do any good. It is certainly important to learn from our mistakes so that we keep making progress as human beings, but reproaching ourselves and generally indulging in self-flagellation is a waste of emotional resources that accomplishes nothing.

From the 11th notebook, Marcus writes: "Only a madman will look for figs in winter. No better is he who looks for a child when he may no longer have one." Figs do not normally grow in winter, so it would indeed be foolish to search for them during that time. The Stoics use this as a metaphor for all sorts of things that we should learn to enjoy when we have them—but not to regret when they're gone.

People die or simply move to a different location. Missing them when they are no longer around is common and understandable. But part of that feeling results from our awareness, somewhere in the recesses of our mind, that we

did not really enjoy them enough when they *were* around. We are always busy. We always say that we'll call, and we don't. We always plan on getting together, but then, we postpone. Meanwhile, the seasons inevitably move on, and we are left pining for figs in winter—or for relatives and friends who are no longer with us. So, make the best of what you have while you have it. If you do, you are less likely to regret things later, when you'll have sweet memories to keep you company.

Accepting the Inevitable and Spiritual Exercises

Marcus has this to say near the end of the 11th notebook:

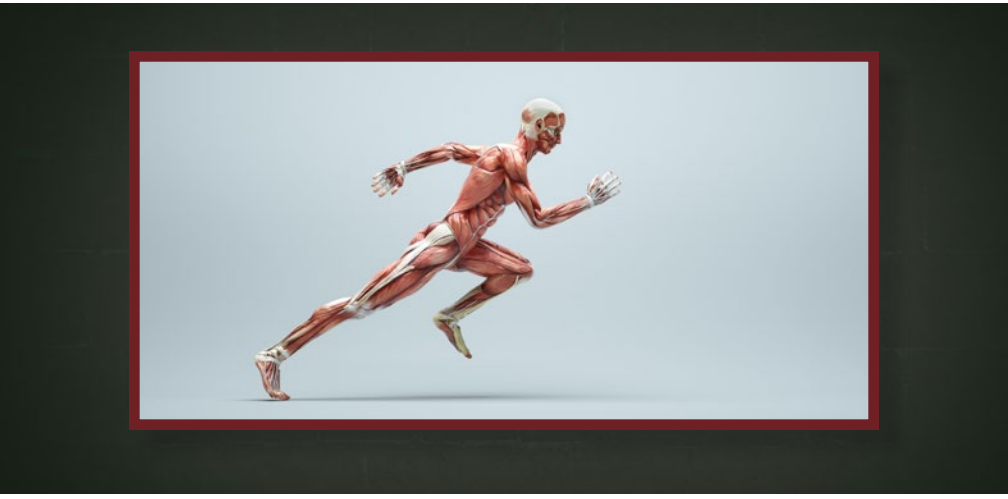
> A man while fondly kissing his child, says Epictetus, should whisper in his heart: Tomorrow perhaps you will die. Ill-omened words these! Nay, said he, nothing is ill-omened that signifies a natural process. Or it is ill-omened also to talk of ears of corn being reaped.

This perspective is one of the things about Stoicism that most people have the hardest time accepting, so it's worth unpacking. The idea comes across as harsh and unfeeling by modern standards, but one needs to keep a number of things in mind.

First and foremost, at the time, it was fairly common for children to die before reaching adulthood. Second, the idea is the basic Stoic one of readying ourselves to accept things that are natural and inevitable. Death is a fact of life, and as difficult as it may be, we better steel ourselves for it because it's coming. Lastly, the ancient Stoics believed in a type of cosmic providence, according to which everything that happens to us—including things we may not like at first—is for the well-being of the universe itself.

At the beginning of the 12th notebook is a direct reminder of the importance of practicing so-called spiritual exercises, through which Marcus in particular and the Stoics in general attempted to become better human beings. Training in Stoicism is like exercising different muscles of the body: Some are better

for certain tasks, others for different ones. But so long as we keep them all in good working order, we'll be able to face any situation, including those that only happen occasionally.



Although the Stoics, following Socrates, thought that the four virtues of wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance are all aspects of an underlying, more generalized conception of wisdom, they nevertheless distinguished them because each virtue may have special applications under specific circumstances. Some situations will chiefly require courage, others will depend on our ability to be temperate, and so on. We should keep all of these behavioral inclinations ready to be deployed.

At the end of the day, though, Marcus's advice to himself boils down to something that is as simple and straightforward as it is truly difficult to actually apply: "If not right, do it not: if not true, say it not. Let your impulses be in your own power."

Don't do or say things that are not right. To act according to this maxim, one needs to control one's own impulses: Think first, act later—not the other way around. Doing this requires an enormous amount of self-discipline, which can be achieved by patient and mindful repetition over an entire lifetime.

A Farewell to *Meditations*

In section 36 of the 12th notebook, Marcus almost sounds like he is bidding farewell to himself:

> But I have not played my five acts, but only three. Very possibly, but in life three acts may count as a full play. For what is responsible for your composition originally and your dissolution now, decides when it is complete. You are responsible for neither. Depart then with a good grace, for what dismisses you is gracious.

Marcus wrote *Meditations* near the end of his life, and at some point, he clearly sensed that this was the case. He died in the year 180 CE, aged 58. This was not too old, even by the standards of the time, but average life expectancy was certainly lower than that. In addition, Marcus had always suffered from health problems, likely made worse by the ongoing plague—which probably killed him—and by years in the field battling one enemy or another.

The passage makes reference to the then standard length of a play—five acts—and Marcus tells himself that his own play may be ending after only three acts, which is enough. For the Stoics, it isn't the duration but the quality of one's life that is important. The reference to "what is responsible for your original composition and current dissolution" is to the cosmos itself, which the Stoics identified with God. It is a gracious universe, in Marcus's conception, and it is up to us to exit the play with grace. We are not responsible for its staging, only for the quality of our acting. This idea is a beautiful way to look at life and one that is surely of comfort when one faces the final curtain.

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HISTORICAL IMPACT OF *MEDITATIONS*

OVER THE COURSE OF ALMOST 2,000 YEARS, *MEDITATIONS* has become a text of great historical and even practical significance. But why was it written in Greek? Who was the first documented reader of *Meditations*? And how have scholars and thinkers responded to the book? This lecture will answer all of these questions, in addition to exploring three major themes you may have noticed emerging from the book as a whole. Doing so will help you see how *Meditations* fits within a broader category of similar works—one that it may have helped create.

Historical Context

The first definitive mention of *Meditations* comes in the 10th century from Arethas of Caesarea, a Christian bishop who was also a great collector of ancient manuscripts:

> I have had for some time an old copy of the Emperor Marcus's most profitable book, so old indeed that it is altogether falling to pieces. ... This I have had copied and am able to hand down to posterity in its new dress.

Unfortunately, Arethas's copy of *Meditations* has now been lost, but scholars think it is the source of the surviving manuscripts, which means that the earliest version of the book that scholars have a definite record of dates from 8 centuries after the time of Marcus.

The original text written by Marcus, and first copied by others, was in koine Greek, which evolved during the Hellenistic period and spread throughout the Mediterranean world because of the conquests of Alexander the Great. Koine Greek became the unofficial language of the Roman cultural elite during the empire, which explains why Marcus used it.

The Suda—a 10th-century Byzantine encyclopedia of the Mediterranean world—mentions *Meditations* in one of its whopping 30,000 entries. It says that *Meditations* is a work about "his own life by Marcus the Emperor in twelve books," the first time that the 12 notebooks are ever mentioned.

Several centuries later, Nicephorus Callistus Xanthopoulos writes in his *Ecclesiastical History* that "Marcus Antoninus composed a book for the education of his son Marcus [i.e., Commodus], full of all worldly experience and instruction." If true, this would be a significantly different interpretation of *Meditations* from the one commonly accepted. From this point on, *Meditations* is quoted fairly regularly and becomes an increasingly popular book, first translated into Latin in 1558.

All modern versions can be traced back to just two manuscripts, one of which is now lost to the sands of time. The lost manuscript is known as the Codex Palatinus, so called because it was obtained from the library of Otto Heinrich, who was referred to as Prince Palatine. This manuscript was the basis for the 1558 printed edition. The other, which is known as the Codex Vaticanus 1950, is still at the Vatican Library in Rome.

Meditations as *Hypomnemata*

In many ways, *Meditations* is a unique book. Then again, it is also rather representative of a whole genre invented by the ancient Greco-Romans that continues to this day. The Greek word for the genre is *hypomnema*, which literally means "under memory." Common English translations include words like *reminder*, *note*, *commentary*, and *draft*.

Twentieth-century French philosopher Michel Foucault helps put *Mediations* into the larger context of a category of writing called the *hypomnemata* (plural of *hypomnema*):

> The *hypomnemata* constituted a material memory of things read, heard, or thought, thus offering these as an accumulated treasure for rereading and later meditation. They also formed a raw material for the writing of more systematic treatises in which were

> given arguments and means by which to struggle against some defect (such as anger, envy, gossip, flattery) or to overcome some difficult circumstance (a mourning, an exile, downfall, disgrace).

This sounds very much like what Marcus was doing, regardless of whether he truly meant *Meditations* to be solely for self-improvement or as drafts of his thoughts for later reorganization and publication.

Foucault continues:

> In this period there was a culture of what could be called personal writing: taking notes on the reading, conversations, and reflections that one hears or engages in oneself; keeping kinds of notebooks on important subjects, which must be reread from time to time so as to re-actualize their contents.

Marcus was engaging in this exact practice—putting together notes based on his readings and reflections and doing so to assist himself in his personal struggles.

While a few other examples of *hypomnemata* from ancient Roman times exist, the suggestion has been made that *Meditations* is a prototype of sorts for a number of important works in the Western canon that span millennia—from Augustine's *Confessions* to the book by the same title penned many centuries later by Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Critical Reception

The reception of the book has been almost uniformly positive. In his introduction to *Meditations* published in 1964, for example, the Anglican priest Maxwell Staniforth commented favorably on the impact of Stoicism on Christianity. The classicist Michael Grant wrote that Marcus was "the noblest of all the men who, by sheer intelligence and force of character, have prized and achieved goodness for its own sake and not for any reward."

Another classical scholar and public intellectual, George Gilbert Aimé Murray, said that *Meditations* is characterized by "as much intensity of feeling as in most of the nobler modern books of religion, only with a sterner power controlling it." In addition, the English economist and feminist social reformer Beatrice Webb called *Meditations* her "manual of devotion," and modern admirers include the former US president Bill Clinton and the former prime minister of China Wen Jiabao.

However, not everyone has sung Marcus's praises. One of the harshest reviews came from Bertrand Russell, a preeminent British philosopher of the early part of the 20th century, who said that *Meditations* was, in his assessment, the product of a tired age—a time when real goods lose their appeal. He wrote: "[According to the Stoics,] we can't be happy, but we can be good; let us therefore pretend that, so long as we are good, it doesn't matter being unhappy."

For the Stoics, there is no such thing as being happy without being good. But there can be such a thing as happiness without—or with very little—material goods because a life well lived consists precisely of using externals wisely.

Stoicism has had enduring appeal because it is a philosophy practiced across the wide spectrum of human conditions, literally ranging from slaves like Epictetus to absolute monarchs like Marcus. And in spite of what Russell wrote, Stoicism was practiced for more than half a millennium in antiquity, most of which certainly cannot be fairly characterized as a "tired age."

Main Themes in *Meditations*

Three broad themes characterize Marcus's reflections throughout the book and allow readers to get a better idea of the big picture of *Meditations*: the ontology of parts and wholes, time, and the relationship between virtue and vice.

Ontology is the branch of metaphysics that deals with what exists, and a subbranch of that is mereology, which studies the relationship between things and the parts of which they are constituted. For Marcus, ever the practical philosopher, understanding mereology helps one better understand the world—and for the Stoics, a good life depends on being able to do just that.

The second overarching theme has to do with the nature of time. Marcus repeatedly reflects on the relationship among present, past, and future in an attempt to gain a broad view of things and thereby achieve equanimity and serenity.

The third major theme in *Meditations* has to do with the polar opposites of virtue and vice. Progressing through the book, one begins to sense that Marcus is laying out a sophisticated philosophical account of how the world works (metaphysics) and how to live in it (ethics) by way of his training in logic. His conclusion, in line with Stoic teachings, is that vice is the only real problem to overcome and that virtue is the only true guide in life—leading Marcus, in turn, to an interesting conception of the very task of philosophy itself.

In section 29 of the ninth notebook, he uses his broad understanding of the world and his place in it to remind himself that the sort of things that most human beings busy themselves with—like wealth and fame—are irrelevant

in the big picture. At the same time, though, making the human cosmopolis better is never a waste of effort. Therefore, in the same section, he famously reminds himself not to wait for Plato's utopia on Earth but to be content with whatever small improvements he can affect through his efforts.

One of the basic lessons of philosophy, says Marcus, is the distinction between what is and is not up to us, which comes straight from Epictetus—one of the major influences on Marcus. From this perspective, we need to focus on our efforts, which are up to us, while simultaneously accepting that outcomes are not under our control.

The Value of Philosophy

With all this in mind, philosophy can provide us with a simple three-step approach to life: First, don't be anxious about what will happen because it isn't up to us—but to nature itself. Second, keep our eyes on what needs to be done, which is up to us. Third, act, but always do so with humility, kindness, and lack of hypocrisy. Follow these steps, and our lives will be *eudaimon*—that is, worth living.

Philosophy also teaches what may appear to be a paradox: While the lives of virtuous people don't ultimately matter, virtue itself is all that is important. Another way to say this is that while individual human beings are ephemeral, the good they manage to do is precious nevertheless because it helps others.

For Marcus and the Stoics, philosophy is a kind of therapy of the soul, in the words of French scholar Pierre Hadot. Just like the doctor takes care of our body, the philosopher takes care of our soul. But while not everyone can be a doctor, everyone has the ability to be a philosopher in the practical sense of the word.

In the ninth section of the fifth notebook, Marcus makes the parallel between medicine and philosophy explicit, choosing the analogy of someone whose eyes are inflamed. The doctor will provide the man with ointments that will help him to regain his eyesight. Similarly, the philosopher helps us to see

things as they really are—to bring us outside of the cave, as Plato would put it, or to awake us from our sleepwalking, as Heraclitus said. That is the true value of philosophy.

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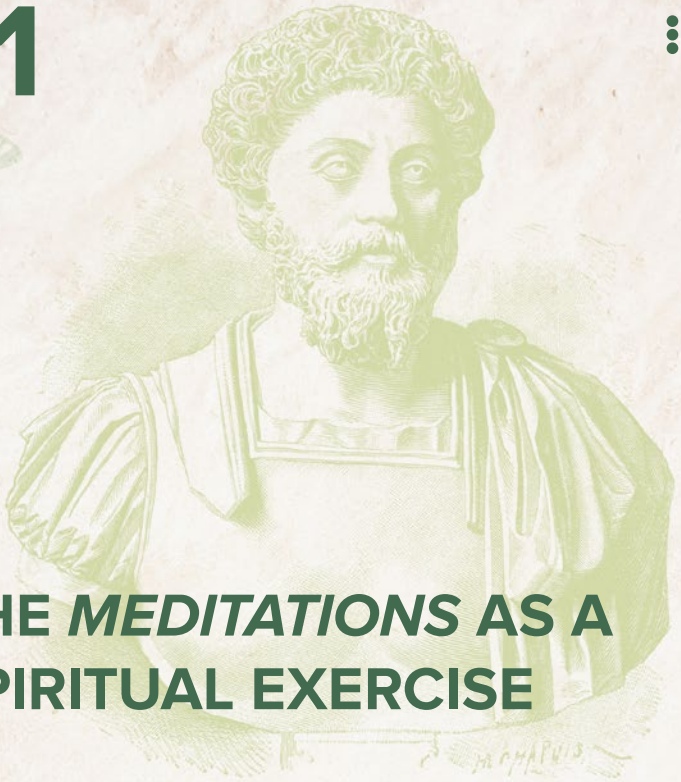

THE *MEDITATIONS* AS A SPIRITUAL EXERCISE

STOICISM IS A PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY, AND IT SERVES NO purpose if you limit yourself to the theory. Indeed, the Stoics would say that you are wasting your time unless you earnestly attempt to apply their lessons in your daily life. With this in mind, you will take a look at Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* from a different perspective—not just as the critical self-reflections of a remarkable human being but also as a book of spiritual exercises that have withstood the test of time. In this lecture, you'll explore six exercises from *Meditations* that help bridge the gap from just being curious about Marcus and Stoicism to actually living as Marcus intended.

Take Another's Perspective

The phrase *spiritual exercises* comes from a famous volume by that title, originally published in Latin in 1548 by Saint Ignatius of Loyola, who meant the exercises to be helpful to people who wished to renew and deepen their Christian faith. *Meditations* also contains a number of exercises for the betterment of the soul, which Marcus derives from a variety of sources, mostly Stoic. However, some sources even predate the Stoics—such as the Pythagoreans, who flourished during the 6th century BCE.

The first spiritual exercise to look at from *Meditations* is one called "Take another's perspective." The idea behind this is that we often make what psychologists call the fundamental attribution error—we tend to think that other people's actions are reflections of their character, while our own actions always have some kind of justification. As a result, we forgive ourselves a lot but are much less charitable toward others, which leads us to cultivate our own righteousness rather than humility and forgiveness.

The Stoic take, by contrast, is that we should try our best to understand why the other person is acting the way they are, even if we disagree with them. We should be wary of righteous anger and work to develop the most charitable interpretation of what others are doing. If it does turn out that they are clearly wrong, then we should pity them in the same way as someone who makes an elementary mistake in logic or math. And we ought to do our best to gently correct them rather than chastise or humiliate them.

We also ought to keep in mind that we have made similar mistakes ourselves or that we may do so in the future. Moreover, says Marcus, we may have changed our mind about certain things and know better now, but we didn't back then. Perhaps the person who is irritating us will go through the same process.

The basic Stoic notion underlying the exercise is that nobody acts wrongly on purpose. People always have what seems to them very good reasons for doing or saying things. The idea is not necessarily to agree with them but to do our best to understand them and to be charitable toward their mistake—if indeed

it is a mistake. Modern psychology backs up this practice, with empirical evidence strongly suggesting that taking another person's perspective on purpose makes us more compassionate toward them.

Take a Broad Perspective

The second exercise is called "Take a broad perspective." The idea is that we are often bothered by emotional reactions—what Marcus calls agitations—that are not really useful for solving problems and moving forward. On the contrary, they get in the way of a smooth flow of life.

As usual for the Stoics, emotions have a cognitive component, and when they are dysfunctional, they are likely based on some kind of incorrect judgment, which can be challenged. Both common sense and modern psychology agree with the Stoics here: One way to deal with our anxieties is to put them in perspective—to remind ourselves that whatever bothers us is not all that important.

The Stoics recommend three ways of gaining perspective: reminding ourselves of the vastness of time, considering the immensity of space, and relativizing our problem by comparing it to others. Doing so can help us put into perspective whatever has been bothering us and see our problem as both a little petty in the great scheme of things and quite puny when compared to what other people may be experiencing.

The idea here is not to trivialize our issues. They are ours, and they need to be dealt with. Rather, the goal is to bring them back to a reasonable size so that we can deal with them rationally rather than be overwhelmed by them emotionally.

Question Every Action

> The third exercise, called "Question every action," is meant to improve one's practice of Stoic mindfulness. The basic idea is to train ourselves to not act without thinking and instead to slow down and question exactly why we are doing something and whether it's a good idea—or the best way to go about it.

The Stoic word for mindfulness is *prosoche*, which literally means "attention." Although it is not always possible to pause and reflect before acting, the notion is that whenever it is possible, we ought to do it because nothing has ever been improved by acting while not paying attention.

Once again, modern research in cognitive science backs up the ancient Stoics' intuitions. Psychologist and Nobel prize winner Daniel Kahneman has proposed that the human brain works at two levels: fast and slow. The fast system deals with situations where a decision has to be made instantaneously because we don't have time to analyze things carefully and our life may depend on responding quickly. The problem with the fast system, though, is that it is imprecise. Its very speed means that it doesn't have time to ponder and evaluate, which is what we want to do whenever we are considering a complex problem characterized by multiple variables and possible outcomes.

That's when the slow system should take over—its slowness allowing it to analyze things and arrive at the best recommendation for a course of action that we are capable of articulating. For example, if you are pondering the pros and cons of taking a new job or getting married, you really ought to engage the slow system and not make a rushed decision.

As a result, in *Meditations*, Marcus forces himself to carefully consider the meaning of his actions, asking himself whether he will regret them. According to Stoic philosophy, things that are worth doing are rational and social-minded, which Marcus says put us on a par with God. So, we should always ask ourselves: Is this rational? Is it prosocial? If yes, let's do it; if not, let's skip it.

Catch and Examine Your Judgments

The next exercise—"Catch and examine your judgments"—is based on a passage from section 37 of the 11th notebook, in which Marcus reminds himself of Epictetus's insistence on a "sound grammar of assent," meaning that we need to exercise logic in giving or denying assent to any proposition.

Marcus spells out the details of a grammar of assent shortly thereafter, where he mentions that when we act—what he calls "dealing with the impulses"—we need to make sure that three criteria are satisfied:

> (i) Whatever we do is "subject to reservation," meaning that what is in our power is to try our best to accomplish something. However, actually achieving the desired result depends in part on circumstances that are not up to us.
> (ii) The action we intend to carry out has to be unselfish because we are social animals and everything we do has to be for the benefit of the human cosmopolis, not just our own.
> (iii) Our actions have to be in proportion to the objective we wish to achieve—neither too much nor too little. In other words, we ought to act with temperance.

In this sense, whatever course of action we end up taking, we need to do it in just measure. In addition, Marcus reminds himself to "limit avoidance to things within our control," which means to concern ourselves only with the subset of things that are up to us.

But how do we do this kind of exercise in practice? The idea is to get used to identifying and, if necessary, challenging our assumptions or judgments about what is truly good or bad. For example, in the case of a car not starting no matter how hard we try, our immediate reaction—being annoyed or even angry at the ensuing delay—is based on the unexamined underlying assumption that delays are bad. But are they?

According to the Stoics, external things, like a car refusing to start and the setback this may cause in one's schedule, are neither good nor bad because they don't affect our character. Only things that improve or undermine our character are, respectively, good or bad. The rest may be preferable or not, but they're not really good or bad.

Vigilance against Bad Habits

The last exercise comes from section 19 of the 11th notebook. Here, Marcus tells himself that he has to be vigilant to counter four attitudes that sometimes creep into his Inner Citadel: He may give too much importance to something fancy that is not actually necessary; he may act antisocially; he may entertain a thought that doesn't come from his heart; and he may yield to pleasures that are not in agreement with his rational self. In other words, like the rest of us, Marcus has some bad habits. Unlike most of us, he wants to do something about it.

Here is how to carry out the exercise. Of the four habits Marcus warns himself about, pick one that is perhaps particularly problematic, and focus on it for a whole week. The goal is to be vigilant and catch the mood in question while it tries to sneak into your Inner Citadel, thus disturbing your tranquility and the smooth flow of your life.

This time, though, you will be prepared with short phrases that you will draw upon to immediately counter the unwelcome mood. For example, say you tend to be a people pleaser, which means you indulge in thoughts and actions that are insincere. You can then write down what psychologists call

an implementation intention—a suggestion to yourself to act in a certain way—that may read something like, "Whenever I feel the urge to please someone, I'll pause and say to myself: This is a people-pleasing impulse. I won't act on it." You should actually write this down somewhere that is easily accessible, as it is both the action of writing it down and its visibility that will help you implement the intention.

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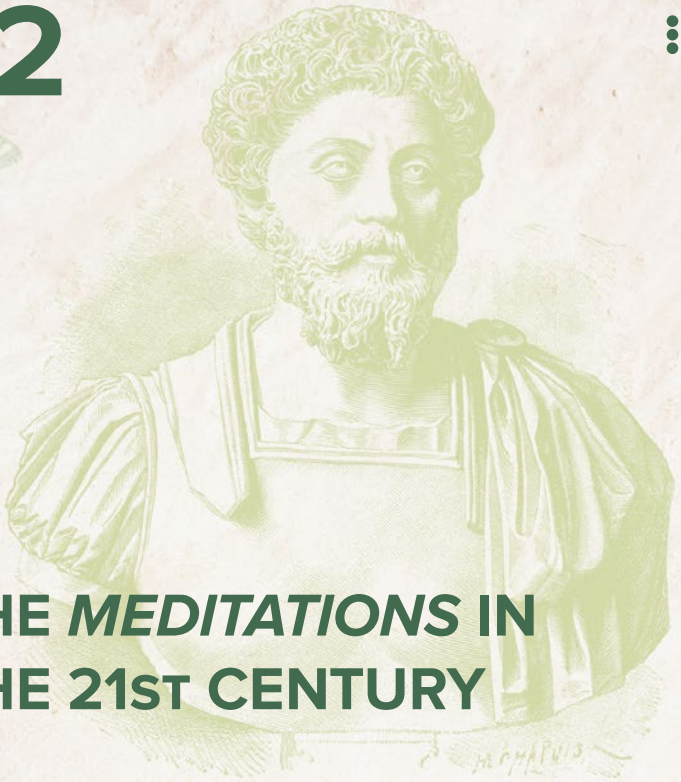
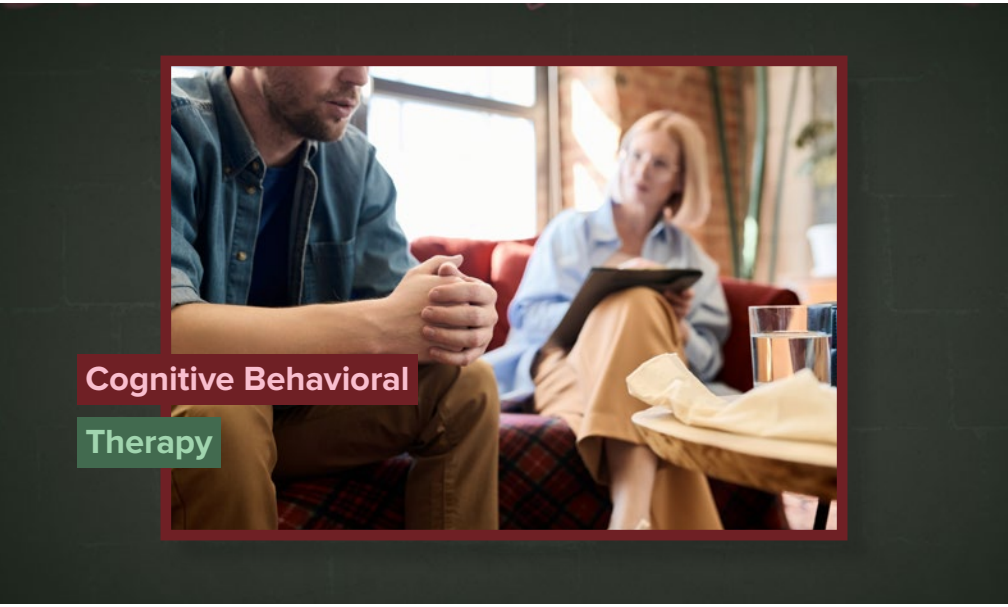


THE *MEDITATIONS* IN THE 21ST CENTURY

MEDITATIONS OF THE EMPEROR MARCUS AURELIUS WAS written in the 2nd century CE. However, in this lecture, you'll bring your mind to your own moment in time to see whether what you have learned so far is primarily of historical and cultural interest or whether it can still provide the basis for a better life in the era of the internet, social media, and artificial intelligence. Much of the discussion will apply interchangeably to *Meditations* in particular and to Stoicism more generally because Marcus was a mainstream Stoic practitioner. His approach did not differ much from the one recommended by the school, especially in the version of the philosophy developed by Epictetus.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

At one level, the sort of Stoicism practiced by Marcus is useful in modern times because it was the inspiration for the beginnings of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). Since CBT is well grounded empirically—meaning that scientific research confirms that it works and actually helps people—one can infer that the Stoic techniques on which it is based also work in practice.



The basic idea behind CBT is that all human core beliefs fall into one of three categories: about oneself, about others, and about the future. According to CBT, negative or irrational thoughts about one or more of these three core areas generate a variety of mental issues—from depression to anxiety—as well as a number of deleterious behavioral patterns, including eating disorders and substance abuse.

The way CBT practitioners go about treating a client's problems is very much what Marcus does repeatedly in the course of *Meditations*. The first step is cognitive: We need to recognize that we have a problem. The second step is

behavioral: Once we reframe whatever issues we are dealing with, we then nudge ourselves to behave differently. And the third step is emotional (and, in a sense, the chief target of CBT techniques)—for example, an individual bringing himself to the point where he does not feel much of a craving for alcohol. This sequence is repeated over and over again until sustained behavioral change, which is made possible by cognitive restructuring, results in underlying emotional change.

All of that said, a big difference exists between a psychotherapy and a philosophy of life. Psychotherapy is meant to address a specific problem, such as anxiety, or a phobia. And CBT in particular is supposed to work within a short time framework: weeks or months. By contrast, a philosophy of life is a lifelong commitment, like exercising or eating healthily.

With this in mind, modern readers may want to be aware that a lot of what is presented as Stoicism these days is not really a philosophy of life but rather more akin to a series of life hacks—which is why Stoicism is very popular with business leaders, Silicon Valley types, athletes and coaches, and even soldiers and military leaders. In this regard, the popularity of Stoicism has brought about a multiplication of approaches that don't always match up with the ideas of Marcus and other early Stoics. If it's not about making you into a better person and the world into a better place, then it's not Stoicism.

Updating Stoicism

Many aspects of the original Stoicism very much translate to the 21st century. However, a few don't, and some require a significant amount of updating in light of both modern science and philosophy. For example, one aspect of ancient Stoicism that needs revision in light of modern thought recurs often in *Meditations*, where Marcus reminds himself to despise the body and focus on the mind. Such a perspective is a little odd—even by the standards of ancient Stoicism—since the Stoics were not dualists: They did not make a sharp distinction in kind between body and mind. The mind is also made of matter, and it is also subject to the laws of cause and effect, just like the body.

Epictetus's fundamental rule is that some things are up to us and others are not, and a good life is the result of focusing on the first group and developing an attitude of acceptance and equanimity toward the second. As a result of the way the universe is organized, the only thing that is truly up to us, according to the Stoics, is a small subset of our mental activity, specifically our *prohairesis*—our faculty of judgment. Everything else, including the rest of our body, is not up to us, meaning that it is not entirely under our control.

This idea is the root of the mind-body distinction that Marcus makes so often. He's reminding himself that he should not be concerned at all about the kinds of things that are not up to him, precisely because they do not fall under the domain of his agency. However, while modern science would agree that the sphere of our agency is very limited—and it essentially boils down to a small subset of our conscious thoughts—it does not necessarily follow that we should go as far as despising the body and all that is not up to us.

On the contrary, modern science supports the notion of a strong mind-body connection, whereby our mental states affect our physical ones and vice versa. Contemporary health science says that if we want to keep our *prohairesis* functioning well into old age, we do need to take care of our body, insofar as that is possible. Care—not contempt—is in order.

A second example where modern Stoics could improve on the ancient version of the philosophy is social justice. The general approach—typical of the ancient Stoics—is to take the sociopolitical system one lives in as a given background against which one does their best to live virtuously. After all,

said sociopolitical system is, strictly speaking, an "indifferent" for the Stoics, meaning that it isn't something that makes a difference to one's character and virtue. From this perspective, Stoicism does not lead to political action of a revolutionary kind.

From a modern perspective, however, dealing with whatever system we happen to live under is one of the many ways in which we exercise our virtue and improve our character. Therefore, the 21st century certainly needs a more sociopolitically conscious version of Stoic philosophy.

The Modern Relevance of Stoicism

The notion that ancient Stoicism as practiced by Marcus needs to be revised and updated should not be surprising. Other philosophies of life, including religions, have gone through and continue to undergo a similar process. Nobody practices Buddhism or Christianity the way people did 2,000 or 2,500 years ago. And yet, there are roughly 500 million Buddhists around today, not to mention about 2.4 billion Christians. These approaches for living a meaningful and ethical life are clearly still working for a lot of people.

Similarly, Stoicism is still very popular in the 21st century, and one of the contributing factors for this is that Marcus's *Meditations* resonates across centuries and cultures. It has been translated into at least 20 languages, including Arabic, Chinese, English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, and Russian. Since it is in the public domain, estimating how many copies it has sold is next to impossible, but the number is certainly in the millions—likely in the tens of millions.

So, what makes Marcus's version of Stoicism so apt for adoption in our own time? An obvious reason is that *Meditations* is explicitly a tool for self-improvement. The whole point of its author was to strive to become a better person—a goal that, for so many people, has not changed in the course of millennia.

How to Become a Better Person

How exactly does Marcus pursue the goal of becoming a better person? The very title under which the work is known gives a strong hint. However, the word *meditation* in this case does not refer to the sort of practice associated with Zen Buddhism and its Westernized versions. In the Stoic sense, meditation refers to deliberate, analytical, critical reflection on one's own thoughts and actions. In the Greco-Roman tradition, this traces back to the famous injunction at the entrance of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi: *gnothi seauton*, or "know thyself." To know ourselves means, at least in part, to be aware of why we feel, think, and act in certain ways rather than others. As Socrates would say, this knowledge is the beginning of wisdom because it is the starting point from which we can embark on our process of self-improvement.

To know oneself, though, is not a static thing; it is a dynamic process. For a Stoic, the self is like everything else: a pattern that changes over time, as was taught by the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus, who reproached his fellow citizens of the city of Ephesus for sleepwalking through life, warning them that they would be well advised to open their eyes and live more mindfully—precisely the goal of *Meditations* and Epictetus's brand of Stoicism.

But what exactly should we be paying attention to or mindful of? Marcus tells himself several times. First and foremost, we need to do only things that are helpful—and certainly never harmful—to the human cosmopolis. This means to be charitable, tolerant, and kind toward others, even when they do not behave at their best—indeed, especially when they don't. Why should we do this in the first place? Because human beings are social animals capable of reason, and those two aspects of our nature are what makes it possible for us all to survive and thrive. To act reasonably and prosocially, to live in agreement with nature, is the Stoic approach to a life worth living. And, surely, we all wish to do that—something that was true in the 2nd century just as it is in the 21st. Follow Marcus, start your own *Meditations*, and live the best life you can.

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