



Marcus Aurelius (121 – 180 AD) Imperator Caesar Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus

Ascended to the throne of Imperial Rome in 161 AD, aged forty. Considered by most historians to be the last great pagan emperor of Rome. His reign was blighted by problems, most notably the first waves of barbarian incursions, which threatened the boundaries of the Empire. However, Marcus was revered as a wise and benign ruler; he was the closest the world ever saw to the incarnation of Plato's ancient ideal of a "philosopher-king." The historian Edward Gibbon, in his monumental *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, famously defined Marcus

as the last emperor to reign over the golden age of Imperial peace and justice, known as the *Pax Romana*,

'If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would, without hesitation, name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus [adopted son of Marcus Aurelius]. The vast extent of the Roman Empire was governed by absolute power, under the guidance of virtue and wisdom. The armies were restrained by the firm but gentle hand of four successive emperors, whose characters and authority commanded respect. The forms of the civil administration were carefully preserved by Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, and the Antonines [Antoninus Pius and his nephew *Marcus Aurelius Antoninus*], who delighted in the image of liberty, and were pleased with considering themselves as the accountable ministers of the laws.'

Upon his death, Marcus' son, Commodus, was enthroned as Emperor of Rome. Commodus was a notoriously vile and sociopathic creature. He was obsessed with the bizarre idea of making himself a legendary gladiator and, fully armed and armoured, fought thousands of rigged bouts in the Colosseum against unfortunate opponents who were armed only with wooden swords. Rome's citizens thought he was mad. The Empire began to fall into decline.

The death of Marcus and subsequent debauchery of Commodus' rule are portrayed with considerable poetic licence in the Hollywood film *Gladiator* (2000), in which the aged Marcus is played by Richard Harris.

The Meditations

Marcus was the last great philosopher of the Stoic school, although during his life he was not renowned as a thinker. In fact, scholars believe Marcus had not actually completed his full training in the Stoic curriculum; he was a novice Stoic. He never published his writings, and did not seem involved in public debate of philosophy. His fame as a philosopher arrived after his death when his personal meditations were uncovered and published.

Written c. 170 AD, amidst the din and gore of battle, while Marcus was commanding his legions against the barbarian tribes. For many centuries the *Meditations* was considered to be a curiously disorganised collection of philosophical musings, a random *potpourri* of ideas. Modern scholarship has now established that the book is actually a private therapeutic workbook or journal, and its contents the record of a programme of highly structured Stoic psychological exercises. Greek was the standard technical language of philosophy, so although Marcus was Roman, and a native Latin speaker, he wrote the *Meditations* in Greek.

It is important to realise that for Marcus, Stoicism was a popular philosophy which had already endured for c. 500 years, and was firmly rooted in much a larger tradition of practical philosophy going back to Pythagoras, almost 750 years earlier. It had been the philosophy of many of his forebears and heroes, and of countless millions of ordinary people. Stoicism was already an ancient and tested lifestyle, well suited to the psychological demands of military leadership and political sovereignty.

The Way of the Stoic Philosophy as "The Natural Life."

Marcus: "The task of philosophy is modest and straightforward."

Stoic Mysticism: The Primal Dionysian Myth

Marcus: "an individual's mind *is* God, and is *of* God", "God gave each of us to lead and guide us, a fragment of himself. Which is our mind, our *logos*."

Bear with me on this one... Zeus, the King of Gods, had many illegitimate children. He proclaimed one of his sons, Dionysus the god of wine, successor to the throne of Heaven. Hera, Zeus' notoriously jealous wife, was furious and sent the Titans, gigantic earthbound monsters, to hunt down and destroy the infant Dionysus. The Titans distracted Dionysus with toys, a rattle, and by showing him his reflection in a mirror, leading him away from safety to a place of ambush. They tore him to shreds, devouring the pieces of his body in a grotesque act of primal cannibalism (original sin?). Zeus "the Thunderer" was incensed and blasted the Titans with bolts of lightning (his sacred weapon). Their bodies were burned to ashes, upon which Zeus caused the rains to pour. Now the ashes of the Titans mixed with the rain and congealed around the divine fragments of Dionysus, the sacred "sparks" of Aether. Thus human beings were formed, dual natured (Plotinus: "amphibious"), from the ashes of the Titans and the fragments of Dionysus. Ovid: "There is a god within us." Orphics: "I am the child of Earth [Titanic] and Starry Heaven [Olympian]."

If man is composed of an inner fragment of divinity which has become earthbound and torn away from its whole self, an obvious agenda for mysticism will be to release the divine "spark" from the body and reunite it with other alienated shards of the total divinity, the All-Soul. The last words of the last great pagan philosopher, Plotinus, on his deathbed: "Strive to give back the Divine in yourselves to the Divine in the All!"

This primitive salvation myth forms the generic mystical background presupposed in much classical philosophy prior to Stoicism. Man is embroiled in an existential struggle between his dual Titanic and Olympian natures. There are many indirect allusions to it in the *Meditations*. Marcus would have seen this legend as something like a poetic illustration of Stoic mysticism, a metaphor, he certainly would not have taken it very literally. Plato famously evoked the same mythological language when he defined philosophy as a "battle of gods and Titans (*gigantomachia*) over the very nature of existence."

The Popular Tripartition of the Soul

Marcus: "Your three components: *body, breath, mind*. Two are yours in trust; to the third alone you have clear title.", "Body. Soul. Mind. Sensations: the body. Desires: the soul. Reasoning: the mind."

1) *Nous* ([inner] mind), "intuitive" or "creative" intelligence, the "true self", the "inner man", the immortal soul; *pneuma* (spirit); the Star Daemon, or "god within." The essential soul, "that which moves itself." The Olympian nature.

2) *Psyche* (breath), the mortal soul; "flitting" between body and spirit. The soul "encrusted" with matter. The "mixed" nature between the polar opposites of Olympian and Titan.

3) *Soma* (body), the external matter which adheres to the soul. *Soma-Sema*, the body is a cave/prison (for the soul). The Titanic nature.

The "Serenity Prayer" of Alcoholics Anonymous

Is this Stoic? Origins uncertain. What is certain: The simplest formulation I know of the basic Stoic doctrine. It encapsulates the simple threefold structure of the Stoic Rule of Life:

God,
Grant me the *serenity*
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and *wisdom* to know the difference.

The Threefold Rule of Life & Stoic "Curriculum"

Marcus: "Apply them constantly, to everything that happens: Physics, Ethics, Logic."

1) Logic: The Discipline of Judgement (or Assent)

Marcus: "Objective judgement, now, at this very moment."

Wisdom to know the difference. "Distinguish between what depends upon me and what does not." Separation (*chorismos*) of (my) thought from (external) matter. Withhold assent, i.e., suspend judgement from every idea except those which are *phantasia kataleptike* (that which is compelling, objective, and true). Analyse things in terms of their essence, and objective nature, strip away value judgements and projection. Greek "Skepticism" as suspension of moral value judgements (*epoche*). Shakespeare's Hamlet: "Nothing is good or bad but thinking makes it so." The Pythagorean "Ox on the tongue." Stick to the facts!

2) Ethics: The Discipline of Action (or Impulse)

Marcus: "Unselfish action, now, at this very moment."

Courage to change what I can. Stick to the fundamental goal, act with authenticity and without egotism. This is the key to *eudaimonia*, the kind of happiness which comes from fulfilment. Happiness is found when we transcend the limited confines of our ego and become one with the All, including all of mankind. By acting with social justice we reunite ourselves with the souls of all mankind and become more than an isolated, individual ego. The mystical "fragments" are re-integrated.

When Marcus reminds himself that his single, fundamental goal in life should be the universal City of all mankind, we could be mistaken for thinking he is talking somehow as Emperor, about Roman politics. He means the metaphysical goal of becoming at one with all mankind, of feeling a sense of mystical union with all other men and women: in Biblical language "to love your neighbour as yourself."

3) Physics: The Discipline of Desire (and Aversion)

Marcus: "Willing acceptance of all external events, now, at this very moment."

Epictetus: "Do not seek for things to happen the way you want them to; rather, wish that what happens happens the way it happens: then you will be happy."

Serenity to accept the things I cannot change. Accept things for what they really are. See the bigger picture ("creature consciousness", view from above) and accept the fact that all material things are transient (*panta rei*., "All is in flux."), especially your own impermanence (*memento mori*, "Remember you must die", *melete thanatou*, "Meditation on death.").

To accept what is allotted by fate or destiny. Piety, reverence: Pythagoras "*follow the gods*" = Marcus: "*follow the Logos*." A Stoic metaphor: The dog tied to the horse and cart; either the dog follows the cart willingly, or pulls on its lead but is dragged along anyway, choking and straining. Man following the *Logos*.

Amor fati, "love your destiny." "Follow the gods", "Follow Nature." = accept and be at one with nature. "Indifference to indifferent things."

The Four Cardinal Virtues of Western Philosophy

1) *Sophia. Wisdom (Truth)*

Philosophy means "love of wisdom." Socrates: "All virtues are one." = Wisdom.

2) *Dikaiosyne. Authenticity/Justice (Justice)*

Dual meaning: (i) personal authenticity, "The unanimity of the soul with itself", (ii) social justice, "treating others with equality."

3) *Sophrosyne. Self-Control (Temperance)*

Philosophy virtually identified with self-mastery; leads to Serenity (*ataraxia*).

4) *Androsyne. Courage (Fortitude)*

The philosopher is unafraid of death. He has already achieved partial separation (*khorismos*) from his body. Socrates as the archetypal "existential hero."

ADDENDA:

Some Ancient Concepts in Modern Language

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED)

philosophical *adj.* 3. calm in adversity.

stoical *adj.* Having or showing great self-control in adversity.

Our modern use of the word "philosophical" is sometimes simply a synonym for "stoical", meaning self-control and serene acceptance in the face of adversity. When we say "He had some bad luck, but was quite *philosophical* about it", we really mean "He was *Stoical*..."

Spartan *adj.* 2. (usu. spartan) showing the indifference to comfort or luxury traditionally associated with ancient Sparta; austere, rigorous, frugal.

The Stoics, like most ancient philosophers, were renowned for the fact that they imitated the lifestyle associated with ancient Sparta. Stoics were therefore, in a sense, "Spartan" in their way of life, meaning that they rejected luxury for its own sake and sought to toughen their bodies and their minds by plain living.

This tough "militaristic" dimension to Western philosophy is virtually unrecognised by scholars, but enormously significant. From Socrates onward, virtually all philosophers, and especially the Stoics, lived like Spartan foot soldiers. Stoic philosophers would have generally been recognisable by their appearance. They wore the antiquated-looking, short, grey cotton cloak of the Spartans (called a *tribon*), walked barefoot, and shaved their heads. They also exhibited specific lifestyle habits, e.g., they had very minimalist tastes in furnishing, ate simple foods, and slept on a hard mat on the floor. They were, in a sense, in a slightly different social class from normal Roman citizens, socially accepted "outsiders", and were even classified as different from normal citizens in Roman law.

Marcus would have probably been exempt from the Spartan dress code because of the practicalities of his regal station, although he did adopt other aspects of the Stoic lifestyle.

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