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Marcus Aurelius (121-180)

"According to nature" you want to live? O you noble Stoics, what deceptive words these are! Imagine a being like nature, wasteful beyond measure, indifferent beyond measure, without purposes and consideration, without mercy and justice, fertile and desolate and uncertain at the same time; imagine indifference itself as a power—how could you live according to this indifference? Living—is that not precisely wanting to be other than this nature? Is not living—estimating, preferring, being unjust, being limited, wanting to be different? And supposing your imperative "live according to nature" meant at bottom as much as "live according to life"—how could you not do that? Why make a principle of what you yourselves are and must be? . . .

. . . Our honesty, we free spirits—let us see to it that it does not become our vanity, our finery and pomp, our limit, our stupidity. Every virtue inclines toward stupidity; every stupidity, toward virtue. "Stupid to the point of holiness," they say in Russia; let us see to it that out of honesty we do not finally become saints and bores. Is not life a hundred times too short—for boredom? One really would have to believe in eternal life to——

—Friedrich Nietzsche

Marcus Aurelius and the Limits of Stoicism

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I

Edward Gibbon, in his account of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, offered this bold assessment of the Golden Age of the Empire:

> 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 [that is, between 96 and 180 A.D.]. 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 involuntary respect. The forms of the civil administration were carefully preserved by Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, and the Antonines, who delighted in the image of liberty, and were pleased with considering themselves as the accountable ministers of the laws. Such princes deserved the honour of restoring the republic had the Romans of their days been capable of enjoying a rational freedom.

Of particular interest for us here are the two Antonines: Titus Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius Antoninus.

Their elevation to the highest rank (Gibbon had said) was due to the Emperor Hadrian, who "resolved to deserve the thanks of posterity, by placing the most exalted merit on the Roman throne":

> His discerning eye easily discovered a senator about fifty years of age, blameless in all the offices of life, and a youth of about seventeen, whose riper years opened the fair prospect of every virtue: the elder of these was declared the son and successor of Hadrian [who died in 138], on condition, however, that he himself should immediately adopt the younger. The two Antonines (for it is of them that we are now speaking) governed the Roman world forty-two years, with the same invariable spirit of wisdom and virtue. Although Pius had two sons, he preferred the welfare of Rome to the interest of his family, gave his daughter Faustina in marriage to young Marcus, obtained from the senate the tribunitian and proconsular powers, and with a noble disdain, or rather ignorance of jealousy, associated him to all the labours of government. Marcus, on the other hand, revered the character of his benefactor, loved him as a parent, obeyed

> him as his sovereign, and, after [Pius] was no more, regulated his own administration by the example and maxims of his predecessor. Their united reigns are possibly the only period of history in which the happiness of a great people was the sole object of government.

Marcus' own administration began in 161 and extended to 180, two decades during which the Empire was troubled by frontier problems and invasions. He died on campaign near Vienna.

The collection known as his Meditations was evidently written while Marcus was on military expeditions. These jottings were in Greek, which the educated Roman was likely to know (and to use for philosophical discourse). It is not certain that Marcus ever intended most of these writings for anyone else but himself to read.

The first of the twelve books in this collection is recognized as the best organized of the lot. Book I is believed by some scholars to have been prepared last, able thereby to serve as an introduction to the jottings in the eleven books that follow. (His jottings can be likened to those of Blaise Pascal and, to a lesser extent, to those of Friedrich Nietzsche.)

Marcus has sometimes been acclaimed as a philosopher-king. (It was said of Marcus in late antiquity, "This sentence of Plato was forever on his lips: 'Well was it for states, if either philosophers were rulers or rulers philosophers.'") Certainly, he is a rarity among prominent rulers in the Western World, exhibiting as he does a considerable openness to philosophy, resembling in some ways the modern intellectual. (He is identified with the later Stoics such as Seneca and Epictetus, who preceded him.) And yet, sad to say, this learned emperor so bungled the choice of his successor that a century of excellent governance ended for the Roman Empire with his death. There is a mystery here, the unraveling of which can challenge us as we delve into his Meditations.

Gibbon himself observed that Marcus' "excellent understanding was often deceived by the unsuspecting goodness of his heart." Here is our historian's judgment of Marcus' fatal choice of his son Commodus to succeed him.

> The monstrous vices of the son have cast a shade on the purity of the father's virtues. It has been objected to Marcus, that he sacrificed the happiness of millions to a fond partiality for a worthless boy; and that he chose a successor in his own family, rather than in the republic.

This is to be contrasted to what Antoninus Pius had done in not looking to his own sons to succeed him but rather to a son adopted for that purpose, Marcus himself (a nephew of his by blood, it seems). The Gibbon account continues:

Nothing, however, was neglected by the anxious father, and by the men of virtue and learning whom he summoned to his assistance, to expand the narrow mind of young Commodus, to correct his growing vices, and to render him worthy of the throne, for which he was designed. But the power of instruction is seldom of much efficacy, except in those happy dispositions where it is almost superfluous. The distasteful lesson of a grave philosopher was in a moment obliterated by the whisper of a profligate favourite; and Marcus himself blasted the fruits of this laboured education, by admitting his son, at the age of fourteen or fifteen, to a full participation of the Imperial power. He lived but four years afterwards; but he lived long enough to repent a rash measure, which raised the impetuous youth above the restraint of reason and authority.

It did not help, by the way, that Marcus' wife (Commodus' mother, Faustina) managed to conceal her own vices from her good-natured husband, vices which seem to have been noticed by virtually everyone else in Rome. Marcus recorded instead the judgment, "I have been blessed with a wife so docile, so affectionate, so unaffected."

II.

We must wonder, naturally enough, whether Marcus as statesman was crippled, in critical respects, by his "philosophical" opinions—and, if so, how. The organization of Book I of the Meditations, the principal work we have from Marcus' hand, may be a good place to start in studying the mode of thinking that left him markedly imprudent in making perhaps the most important decision of his career as emperor.

Book I, which reflects key elements of Books II through XII, is an inventory of the debts owed by Marcus to those who had helped shape him. R. B. Rutherford has reported, "There is quite simply nothing like Book I of the Meditations in the whole of classical literature." Book I is, in effect, an oblique autobiography; extended autobiography was rare in antiquity.

Sixteen benefactors are listed by Marcus in Book I, beginning with his immediate family, going on to his teachers, and then returning

for the most part to his family (broadly conceived). The seventeenth acknowledgment is of the gods. We can also see here how a proper prince was trained. Book I is dominated by the last two items in its inventory: Chapter 16, on Marcus' immediate predecessor (and "father"), Antoninus Pius; Chapter 17, on the gods. More space is devoted to these two chapters than to all the other fifteen combined in Book I.

The considerable emphasis thus placed on Antoninus Pius and on the gods suggests that political skill and divine worship need to be somehow blended together in order to make the best regime most likely. This is aside from what the more thoughtful Stoics really believed about the gods that were generally worshiped in Greece and Rome. It is worth noticing here that Gibbon could say of Antoninus Pius, Marcus' predecessor, that he was "justly denominated a second Numa." The original Numa, as described by authorities such as the Platonic Plutarch, was remarkably adept in making use of "divine revelations" in laying down firm foundations for Roman institutions. We may well wonder, upon reading Marcus' account of Antoninus Pius, whether his Numa-like characteristics are sufficiently appreciated by Marcus—and whether this is related to why Pius was, at least up to a point, more adept than Marcus in providing for a proper succession.

III.

The central item (or "chapter") in Marcus' Book I inventory is devoted to Sextus of Chaeronea (who is believed to have been a relative, perhaps a grandson, of Plutarch). The importance of Sextus for Marcus is further suggested by a report in Philostratus' Lives of the Sophists:

> The Emperor Marcus was an eager disciple of Sextus the Boeotian philosopher, being often in his company and frequenting his house. Lucius [also identified as a philosopher from Boeotia], had just come to Rome, asked the Emperor, whom he met on his way, where he was going and on what errand, and Marcus answered, "It is good even for an old man to learn; I am now on my way to Sextus the philosopher to learn what I do not yet know." And Lucius, raising his hand to heaven, said, "O Zeus, the king of the Romans in his old age takes up his tablets and goes to school. But my King Alexander dies before he was thirty-two."

(It is curious that a perhaps ironic Boeotian can refer to Alexander the Great as "my King," considering that warrior's destruction

[several centuries before] of Thebes, the principal city of Boeotia. The young Alexander did win his first major battle at Chaeronea.)

Sextus is particularly acknowledged by Marcus for having introduced him to the idea of living "according to nature." (This phrase is returned to in Chapter 17 of Book I of the Meditations, when the gods are acknowledged, and then a half-dozen times thereafter in the collection.) To live in accordance with nature is, it seems, to be guided primarily by reason in how one conducts oneself. The emphasis of the later Stoics, such as Marcus, seems to be upon enduring rather than upon learning (or understanding). However much the earlier Stoics had made of theoretical inquiries, the primary concern for Marcus and others like him seems to have been with how one should conduct oneself. Some knowledge is, of course, to be brought to bear upon one's conduct—but it became for the Stoics primarily knowledge that takes the form of a constant awareness of the triviality, as well as of the brevity, of human existence. It is this awareness that not only steels one to bear with most pains, but also inclines one to shun (or at least not to enjoy very much) most pleasures.

Even the gods, it sometimes seems, should not be so regarded that they are permitted to become oppressive, especially since Marcus can wonder whether, and if so for how long, an individual soul survives death. Not much is made by him of the will of Zeus—or of any specific revelation that might come from oracles and dreams—however much an emperor should observe the forms of public worship. Perhaps it can also be said that the divine is seen by the Stoics primarily in terms of the natural.

IV.

Marcus is an illustrious heir of a great philosophical tradition, a tradition which depends for its vitality upon a constant awareness of the idea of nature. That tradition has one aspect of it exaggerated by Marcus, that which we do know as Stoicism. It is an exaggeration, of an aspect of philosophy, which goes back to Zeno in 310 B. C. Stoicism has been described (by R. B. Rutherford) as "a way of imposing meaning on the chaos of [one's] daily concerns, as a solid structure of truths which provide some stability and consolation in a troubled life."

To emphasize the stoical elements always implicit in philosophy may make philosophy seem even less "practical" than it might naturally be. Too much emphasis may be placed thereby upon enduring life, upon the hardships of life, rather than upon enjoying

and fulfilling life—upon avoiding troubles rather than upon seeking the good life. This tendency, which can incline at times toward hypochondria and the pathological, may be reinforced by a Stoicism that says little about science, making more of morality than of understanding. The status of the Platonic doctrine of the ideas may be tacitly called into question, even as "political idealism" makes statesmanship impractical. The popularity of the genre of meditatio in late antiquity has been explained in this way by Judith Perkins:

> When personal instead of civic virtue became the chief aim of Stoic philosophy, the meditatio became the chief ethical tool. The meditatio form allowed Stoics to prepare themselves for the proper assessment of life's vicissitudes by reflecting on them beforehand. An assessment of external events as well as their own emotions, attachments, and desires was central to the Stoics' system. Stoicism was premised on a belief that a natural order, a logos, permeates the universe and is the universe. The Stoic ideal was to live in conformity with this order, "with Nature," as it was often put. Stoic morality was, in essence, a "morality of consent." The Stoic sapiens was one who recognized the natural order, identified with it, and approved it. Such recognition was possible because of the human intellect (recognized variously by Marcus Aurelius as the nous, a piece of the divine, a daemon). This intellect allowed Stoics to objectify and distance from themselves all human and earthly distractions and thus to focus on the beauty of the divine world order, on Nature, and to recognize that only virtue—that is, identification with this order—actually matters.

The questionable effect of Stoicism upon political judgment may usefully be seen by us in Shakespeare's Marcus Brutus, one of the assassins of Julius Caesar. We can observe in this Brutus the confidence and rigidity that may follow from an overpowering sense of rectitude. Shakespeare shows such a man as both attractive and vulnerable—as non-political, perhaps even as foolishly anti-political.

A better balanced philosophical tradition may be seen in Socratics such as Plato and Aristotle. Aristotle can speak of the sweetness of existence and of the importance of happiness in the ordering of human life. In Socrates and Plato, the founders of that philosophical tradition, there is a critical place for the political order and its inculcation of virtue, even as the importance (if not even the primacy) of theoretical inquiry is recognized. The spirit of the philosophical life is, in these ways, quite different in these three

Greeks from what it is in Marcus Aurelius. Certainly, there seem to be for them (as well as for the Socratic Xenophon) more of an opening to enjoying life, far less of an emphasis upon enduring it. Even so, it is only fair to notice that Montesquieu, had this to say (in The Spirit of the Laws) about what he calls "the Stoic sect":

The various sects of philosophy among the ancients could be considered as kinds of religion. There has never been one whose principles were more worthy of men and more appropriate for forming good men than that of the Stoics, and, if I could for a moment cease to think that I am a Christian, I would not be able to keep myself from numbering the destruction of Zeno's sect among the misfortunes of human kind.

> [The Stoic sect] exaggerated only those things in which there is greatness: scorn for pleasures and pains.
>
> It alone knew how to make citizens; it alone made great men; it alone made great emperors. . . .
>
> While the Stoics considered wealth, human greatness, suffering, sorrows, and pleasures to be vain things, they were occupied only in working for men's happiness and in exercising the duties of society; it seemed that they regarded the sacred spirit which they believed to be within themselves as a kind of favorable providence watching over mankind.
>
> Born for society, they all believed that their destiny was to work for it; it was the less burdensome as their rewards were all within themselves, as, happy in their philosophy alone, it seemed that only the happiness of others could increase their own.

David Lowenthal has said of Montesquieu, by the way, that the phrase which he applied to the Stoic emperors suits him even better: he watched over mankind. Perhaps it should also be said of Montesquieu that his own limitations may be reflected in his failure to notice the political limitations of Stoics such as Marcus Aurelius.

V.

Anyone for whom politics is central has to concern himself with the proper shaping of the citizen-body upon which a decent regime depends. The legislation of morality by the community cannot be left to chance or fate—or even to the family, unless the family is

itself soundly regulated. There is, or least can be in some circumstances, a fatalistic element in Stoicism, something that is evident in Marcus' jottings, the jottings of the man who may have been the last prominent Stoic of antiquity.

An effective legislation of morality depends upon our being able to assess others for what they are capable of. Is one less likely to be able to feel, and hence see, things properly if too much is made of one's endurance? If one is too "stoical," one may not feel "in one's bones" what is wrong with others. Although one should tend to be disinclined to take anyone (including oneself) too seriously or at face value, it is sometimes useful to be able to distinguish among those whom one is considering for sensitive assignments. It can very much affect one's judgment of others if one is persuaded that it should not really bother one what others do or are like.

Did Marcus sense that things were getting out of control politically, with Commodus' character and prospects only symptomatic of a general deterioration in Rome? Did he retreat, therefore, from taking everyday affairs seriously, something that is certainly easy to do when one contemplates the vastness of the universe and the apparent consequent insignificance of human beings? A corollary development here can be that of regarding oneself as "a citizen of the world," playing down thereby local attachment. Thus, Adam Smith, in The Theory of Moral Sentiments, said,

> Man, according to the Stoics, ought to regard himself, not as something separate and detached, but as a citizen of the world, a member of the vast commonwealth of nature. To the interest of this great community, he ought at all times to be willing that his own little interest should be sacrificed.

We have been wondering whether Marcus' Stoicism contributed to his inability to judge his son, as well as his wife, adequately. It is almost as if Marcus wanted to insure everyone, or at least himself, even more troubles that might have to be endured. It should be remembered that the Socrates of Plato's Republic goes so far as to provide, in his ordering of the best city, that its rulers not be permitted to know who their own children are, lest natural family feeling corrupt the political judgments necessary for a proper succession among rulers.

Socrates' sons, we have been told, were not remarkable—and Socrates recognized this and treated them accordingly. Nor would Socrates have permitted his philosophical pursuits to be disrupted as much as Marcus' were by military enterprises. He might have

asked, for example, what the necessity was for keeping the Empire as large as it had become. A sensible redefinition of imperial duties may have been called for well before the Antonines ascended the throne in Rome.

(Socrates is spoken well of throughout the Meditations, whatever problems Marcus may have had in reading the Platonic dialogues properly. Socrates' reservations about the career of the somewhat philosophically-minded Pericles are relevant in considering the career of Marcus.)

VI.

Marcus placed considerable emphasis upon knowing oneself—especially with a view both to not expecting much for oneself and to being able to endure the hardships that human beings, whatever their station in life, are very likely to have. Pleasures are not sought; pains are not avoided—or at least one proceeds moderately in both seeking and avoiding. Marcus' portrait of Antoninus Pius suggests what he believed a ruler should be like. How he distinguishes himself from this beloved predecessor can suggest how well he did know himself.

Did Marcus, we have wondered, know himself well enough to be able to judge others sensibly—and to keep family feelings in their proper place? The misjudgments by him which proved to be particularly harmful were, we have seen, of his wife and his son. He can be critical of "those among [the Romans] who rank as patricians [and who] are somewhat wanting in [paternal] affection." Even so, he can praise in Antoninus Pius an "undeviating firmness in giving to every man according to his deserts."

It should be noticed that the exemplary Antoninus Pius may have inadvertently contributed to Marcus' decisive failure in judgment: after all, it had been Pius who had arranged for Marcus to marry his daughter, rather than the woman Hadrian had preferred for Marcus. Could Pius see his sons better than he could his daughter? Was his Faustina already on the way to becoming the quite dissolute woman she evidently became? Or was there something about life with the somewhat saintly Marcus, to whom she bore several children, that brought out the worst in her?

We recall, in Plato's Republic, that the "best city" established there in words begins to decline when women corrupt their sons by disparaging their unambitious fathers. There may be something natural, or at least likely, about this kind of decline. But the element of

chance also plays a part in such matters—as may be seen both in the character of the daughter that Antoninus Pius had available for Marcus to marry and in the temperament of the one son that survived (decades later) among Marcus' children.

It remains a challenge for us to consider the biographical sketch which Marcus provides of his immediate predecessor. Is there exhibited, we again wonder, any awareness on Marcus' part of his own political shortcomings, especially with respect to the problem of succession, when he measures himself up against Antoninus Pius?

In short, should Marcus have known better—and how soon? What, if anything, does he indicate about these shortcomings on his own part?

VII.

Matthew Arnold has said of Marcus that "the effusion of Christianity, its relieving tears, its happy self-sacrifice, were the very elements, one feels, for which [Marcus'] soul longed; they were near him, they brushed him, he touched them, he passed them by." Even so, Christianity, toward which Marcus was not friendly, can be said to have had its way prepared for both by Stoicism among influential Romans and by political deterioration in the Empire.

Stoicism, with its emphasis upon resignation, can undercut everyday vitality. Depreciation of prosaic concerns encourages otherworldliness and non-political (if not even anti-political) interests. Also, Commodus and his often degenerate successors made politics and government service seem less honorable than they had been during the Golden Age of the Empire.

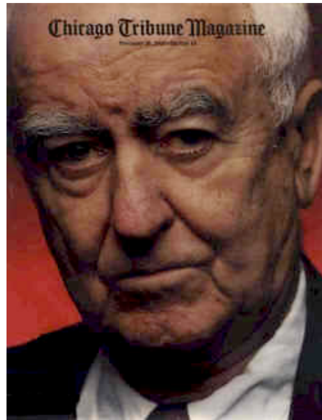
Certainly, "philosophy" was not enough of an influence in someone such as Marcus to insure first-rate decent politics. For this Marcus himself may have been partly to blame along with what had been happening in Rome since the fall of the Republic two centuries before. The Stoic insistence upon not taking oneself seriously may have also contributed to a lack of confidence in the immortality of the soul, reducing thereby the effects of religious sanctions. On the other hand, social conditions may have become so bad in the Empire that the Stoics were moved to look more to the austere virtues.

Christianity offered an alternative to the Stoic form of self-abnegation, replacing it with a considerable elevation of the sense

of individual worth. This may have contributed eventually to a revival of decent politics (however incompatible Christian counsels of perfection, like political idealism, may sometimes be with a sound civic life) as well as a return to serious philosophical discourse in the Western World. (The Greek language upon which the New Testament relied always had implicit in it critical philosophical themes, as may be seen in the opening chapter of the Gospel of John and in various of St. Paul's letters.)

Book I of the Meditations is important, then, as a coherent history which helps account for what is to be observed in the career and sensibilities of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus. Most of the rest of his collection exhibits his thoughts, all too often an "indulgence" by him in self-denial. We may have here, in fact, an anticipation of something seen so dramatically in St. Augustine two centuries later, that peculiarly powerful self-assertion which takes the eminently modest form of self-debasement. 🕮

This talk was given at the Lenoir-Rhyne College Hickory Humanities Forum, Wildacres Retreat, Little Switzerland, North Carolina, May 15, 1997. The epigraph is taken from Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, #9, #227.



Between 1950 and 1961 Professor Anastaplo conducted his own bar admission litigation, 366 U.S. 82 (1961). He was nominated annually between 1980 and 1992 for the Nobel Peace Prize. There has been issued in his honor a two-volume Festschrift, *Law and Philosophy: The Practice of Theory.* Six articles were devoted to his scholarship in the 1997 volume of the *Political Science Reviewer.* Professor Anastaplo is also a lecturer in the liberal arts at the University of Chicago and professor emeritus of political science and of philosophy at Dominican University. George is also a long time friend and colleague of Dr. Adler's and myself.

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