

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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Life is neither good or evil, but only a place for good and evil.  
—**Marcus Aurelius**



**Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus**  
Fragment of a bronze portrait.  
Roman artwork, after 170 CE.  
Louvre Museum, Paris, France

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## STOICISM IS JUST SO YESTERDAY

Book Review by **Emily Colette Wilkinson**

**O**urs is not a philosophical age, much less an age of Stoicism. As Frank McLynn explains in his new biography\* of Marcus Aurelius, the last of Rome's "five good emperors," commander of Rome's prolonged campaigns against the invasions of barbarian German tribes,

and the last important Stoic philosopher of ancient days, our philosophers (academics) no longer profess to help the average person answer life's great metaphysical questions. Contemporary philosophers might contemplate such abstruse problems as whether mental properties can be said to emerge from the physical processes of the universe; what the necessary and sufficient conditions are for self-interest; where the mind stops and the rest of the world begins—not, perhaps, the pressing existential questions presented by the normal course of a human life.

Beyond the realm of professional philosophy, an ever-expanding tribe of self-appointed lay philosophers profess practical strategies for worldly success: how to win friends and influence, how not to sweat the small stuff, how to free ourselves from shyness, anxiety, phobias, poverty, extra pounds, how to ensnare the perfect mate, how to care for and feed a husband or be a domestic goddess. But, again, these regimes, while they might indeed make you thinner, more confident, or more productive, do not answer life's great metaphysical questions.

Between the hyper-intellectual abstractions of university philosophers and the calculating, materialistic schemes of self-help gurus, lies another philosophy. This is the philosophy of the ancients, of Marcus Aurelius. It is a practice that intends to help individuals answer life's great metaphysical questions in both material and spiritual terms: What is my place in the world, the cosmos? What is the purpose of existence? How do I live a good life? What is happiness and how do I achieve it?

Marcus Aurelius' contribution to this philosophy has come to be known simply as the *Meditations*, though the title Marcus gave the work—more a private collection of self-examinations and moral exercises than a systematic philosophy or spiritual autobiography intended for publication—was “The matters addressed to himself.” And it is as much a model of moral self-examination as a demonstration of Stoic principles. The work's subtitles sug-

gest that Marcus wrote some portion of the text during Rome's Marcommanic wars, a long, brutal series of military campaigns prompted by the invasions of barbarian German tribes on the northern borders of the Roman Empire during the 160's.

These wars occupied most of the last two decades of Marcus' reign as emperor (160's and 170's), but to read the *Meditations*, you would not imagine them to be the writings of a man encamped in barbarian lands in the midst of war, nor of a man commanding the largest army ever assembled on the frontier of the Roman empire, nor of a man whose empire and army were in the grip of the Antonine plague (believed now to have been smallpox or measles, possibly both), that lasted from 165-180 and killed, by some estimates as many as 18 million people, including, in 180, Marcus himself (notwithstanding Ridley Scott's fanciful version of Marcus Aurelius' death in *Gladiator*—smothered by his son, the psychotic future emperor Commodus). The *Meditations*' lack of political or worldly anguish and anxiety is a mark of the philosophy they profess: Stoicism.

As McLynn explains, our modern conception of Stoicism consists mainly in colloquial expressions such as “be a man,” “take what's coming to you,” “roll with the punches,” and “make the best of it.” Such expressions communicate the Stoic insistence on acceptance and steadfastness in the face of whatever life presents, no matter how calamitous. One of the most famous lines from the *Meditations* is, “Remain ever the same, in the throes of pain, on the loss of a child, during a lingering illness” and many modern readers, including McLynn, find the Stoic creed—that virtue is the only good and the source of happiness and that we should train ourselves to rise above emotional, physical, and material concerns—inhuman, even monstrous.

It is one of the curious features of McLynn's biography that he is openly hostile his subject's philosophy: “A

more priggish, inhuman, killjoy and generally repulsive doctrine would be hard to imagine,” he writes at the beginning of a caricatured exposition of the precepts of Marcus Aurelius’ Stoic predecessor Epictetus. And in an appendix on Stoicism, McLynn contends that “one could just as well derive this cracker-barrel philosophy from the maxims of old-fashioned tea chests.”

This authorial frankness certainly makes for entertaining reading. Many a scholarly pose of objectivity belies an unprofessed agenda and it’s to McLynn’s credit that he lets his readers know exactly what he thinks about Stoicism (little of it good) and everything else that makes its way into his sweeping, highly readable account of Marcus and his age (though the lay reader might find herself nodding a bit at the book’s extensive accounts of military campaigns and other extra-biographical digressions, while readers familiar with classical scholarship may be annoyed with McLynn for not offering his conclusions with a bit more circumspection. Classical scholarship deals in fragmentary, uncertain evidence but McLynn never lets on that much of what he presents as foregone can only be tentative).

Putting aside the charm of this curmudgeonly bombast, though, McLynn’s hostility to the animating intellectual ethos of his subject’s life seems something of a failure. Certainly, Stoicism, like most of the world’s other great philosophies and religions, has its logical inconsistencies, and it insists on a grim, difficult worldview. Marcus’ creed held that virtue was its own reward and the only life goal worth pursuing. On the Stoic view, we have no power to determine whether we’ll be rich or poor, famous or infamous, sick or healthy, but we can control whether or not we are good. Thus, life’s pleasures and pains—poverty, disease, fame, death—become “indifferents” to the Stoics—i.e. matters that have no direct bearing on our moral wellbeing and so are irrelevant. As a Stoic, I might be poor and sick and my family might die, but none of this hurts me because it does not impair my

ability to be good, which consists in working for the good of my fellow human beings.

“Remember that everything is but what we think it,” Marcus writes, and what he urges himself to think is that we are all ears of corn for the reaping, “leaves that the wind scatters earthward”:

*But a little while and thou shalt be burnt ashes or a few dried bones, and possibly a name, possibly not a name even....And all that we prize so highly in our lives is empty and corrupt and paltry, and we but as puppies snapping at each other, as quarrelsome children now laughing and anon in tears.*

According to the Stoic cosmology, we are each but a tiny part of a greater whole (humankind, and then the universe) and our individual disappointments and triumphs, even our deaths, are not to be mourned in this greater scheme. In fact, we should be contented with whatever happens to us whenever it happens because it serves the purpose of a benevolent, divinely ordered cosmos.


The sternness of this creed is plain, likewise its startling insistence on indifference to the strivings and grief of humankind. It's not hard to see why McLynn gravitates toward the word “inhuman” to describe Stoicism. But he seems to forget that most of the world's great religions ask their adherents to master their baser inclinations and to become, in a positive sense of the word, just that—*inhuman*—different from the man guided by physical desires and emotions, better than that man and less human, partaking more of something metaphysical, something divine. The Stoic also becomes inhuman (more than human) through the philosophy's holism—the idea that we are all parts of the whole, existing to serve the whole, all instilled with the same spirit of the divine. Even McLynn is willing to concede that this is a compelling doctrine but because he spends more time delineating the logical inconsistencies of Stoicism rather than trying to see the

world from its vantage, he doesn't appreciate the psychological benefits of the belief.

Stoic holism offers a refuge from individualism, the intrinsic faith of our age, and its petty, exhausting calculations. Through Marcus' writings, individual self-interest and concern for others become mutually supporting ends: The well-being of others and my own well-being are one and the same. And so my happiness consists in orienting my actions toward others and the good of the whole, rather than in pursuing the endless vagaries of earthly desire—sex, fame, fine things, the love and approval of peers—the Goblin Market cravings (to borrow a term from the poet Christina Rossetti) that contemporary society usually encourages us to indulge as the means to self-fulfillment. Have more orgasms, we're told, wear spiffier outfits, watch another movie, speak more assertively, and the longings, the sense of something missing, will abate.

Stoicism says just the opposite: Stop indulging illusory physical and emotional longings and see your real happiness outside of yourself, your body, your emotions. As McLynn points out in his explanation of Marcus Aurelius' intense popularity in the Victorian era and increasing neglect in our own, ours is a culture more interested in rights and entitlements than in duty, while Stoicism is only interested in duty, and duty understood to be synonymous with virtue and happiness. But it is a duty that liberates—a duty that teaches us to transcend the tyranny of the emotions and the body and that insists that contentment is ours for the having whenever we summon the strength to push away the things of the world that obscure it.

Frank McLynn's *Marcus Aurelius* offers a masterfully woven tapestry of the world and worldly concerns of a man determined to live somewhat apart from the world he ruled. But to hear the man himself, the Stoic philosopher, to fall into the rhythms of his thought and learn the art of self-discourse from him is a deeper pleasure. Mar-

cus Aurelius may be dust and ashes, but he is, in spite of his modest Stoic guess, still a living name and a living mind. 

\* *Marcus Aurelius: A Life*, by Frank McLynn, Da Capo \$30.00, 720 pages.

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**John Rocha**

*We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.*

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