

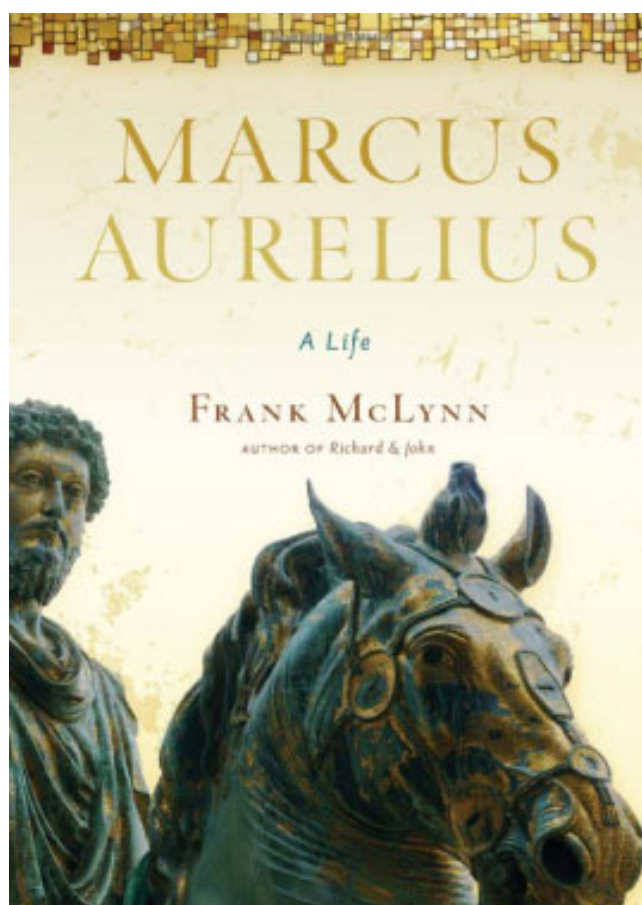
THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Jun '12

Philosophy is Everybody's Business

Nº 671

*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 a deadly plague. The Meditations' lack of political or worldly anguish and anxiety is a mark of the philosophy they profess: **Stoicism**.*



MARCUS AURELIUS: A LIFE

Frank McLynn

Reviewed by Emily Colette Wilkinson

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

THE RETURN OF VIRTUE ETHICS

What is the good life? How can we know?

Mark Vernon

The Enlightenment was a revolution in the way we think about morality. Two ethical models, in particular, have come to dominate ever since. One can be traced back to Immanuel Kant, and is based upon the notion of duty (and hence is called deontological, from the Greek *deon*, meaning duty.) The second is hedonist and can be traced back to Jeremy Bentham, and his principle of utility: an action can be called good if it increases pleasure or decreases pain.

Put them together and you have the liberal approach to asking what's the right thing to do. It's liberal not in the sense of being pro-gay or pro-abortion. Rather, it's liberal in the deeper sense of focusing on the individual and the choices an individual makes. It's ethics conceived of in terms of rights and responsibilities, or in terms of what makes you happy or sad. The philosopher John Stuart Mill summed it up when he wrote: "Neither one person, nor any number of persons is warranted in saying to another human creature of ripe years, that he shall not do with his life for his own benefit what he chooses to do with it."

You can understand why Mill wrote what he did. He lived in a period of history in which many people were not free to do as they chose. They were ruled by monarchs and chastised by prelates. The result was the subjugation of women and the owning of slaves. But we don't live in such a world now. Most enjoy a degree of freedom that would have been unimaginable for most of human history, in the West at least. As a result, the liberal approaches to ethics are increasingly being questioned. Can they tell us what this freedom is for? Is it for more than just more consumption, more accumulation? What is the good life?

The problem is that we've lost touch with the bigger picture: what is it that makes life good for us humans? The Enlightenment left us with few resources for thinking about that larger question, because it was so focused on winning individuals their freedom. The philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe described our dilemma this way. Our talk of having "moral duties," or our description of actions as "morally right," has become vacuous because we are now free of the law-giving God who fixes those duties and obligations. And Anscombe, as a Catholic, was a firm believer in God—only not a law-giving God but a loving one.

In any case, now that we are relatively free, we need to ask again what life is for. There is another ethical tradition that can help. It's known as virtue ethics. Virtue ethics begins by asking what it is to

be human, and proceeds by asking what virtues—or characteristics, habits and skills—we need in order to become all that we might be as humans. It's much associated with the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, who discussed the meaning of friendship as a way to illustrate his approach to ethics.

Science tells us we are social animals, Aristotle observed. But in order to live well as social animals, we also need a vision of what our sociality can be. He had a word for that vision: friendship. The good friend is someone who knows themselves, who is honest and courageous, who has time for others, who is engaged not only in their self-interest but has a concern for others. These are some of the virtues we should nurture in order to be fulfilled as friends.

However, there's a further dimension to the good life, which virtue ethics also highlights—and which is problematic for us, given the hyper-individualism of contemporary societies.


The virtue ethics approach is not individualistic. It tells us that to become all we might be as humans we need others. And we need others in a number of ways. One is highlighted by Aristotle's focus on friendship. Social animals, like ourselves, are fulfilled by being with others: we discover who we are by discovering who others are—those to whom we are connected by way of family, affection, community, and society. They shape us, and we shape them, and so we need to have a concern for them all. If we live in an unhappy family, or in an oppressive society, that is going to have a major impact upon our own lives, even compromising our full flourishing as human beings.

That's one reason we need others. But we also need them because the communities to which we belong are also the repositories for the skills that we need to live well. The contemporary philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has drawn attention to this in his book *After Virtue*. He points out that community life is the context within which we learn the characteristics and habits that make for the good life. Consider how one learns to play chess. It's only by belonging to a community of chess players, and learning from past masters, that you too might become good at chess. You can learn the basics on your own, but the art of chess only by practicing with others. Alternatively, think of baseball. "If, on starting to play baseball, I do not accept that others know better than I when to throw a fast ball and when not," MacIntyre writes, "I will never learn to appreciate good pitching let alone to pitch."

There's a third reason we need communities too. They are not only

the context within which we learn life's virtues, they are also the context within which we hear the stories that can inspire us about who we might become. These are the stories held, most commonly, in religious communities—the stories that convey how life is a gift, how life is for love, and how even in the midst of suffering there is hope. Stories are so important because they inform our vision of the good life—and that, in turn, informs us, and shapes our conduct.

Of course, the Enlightenment tells stories about who we are too. Only, they are individualistic, having to do with our rights and happiness. Much modern science tells us stories about who we are as well. Evolutionary psychologists, for example, frequently tell us we are basically the same as our primate cousins, struggling to survive, and driven by our selfish genes. This last story has been particularly powerful over recent decades.

When Alasdair MacIntyre asked how we might use virtue ethics to inspire us to live well today, he concluded pessimistically. He thought that our common life had become too thin, as a result of individualism, and so is unable to teach us the virtues. Hence he called his book *After Virtue*. He thought we are at a moment in history that needs some striking individual to stir up the desire in us to flourish again. It's happened before. In 5th century BCE Athens, figures like Socrates emerged. In the early Christian period, there was the person of Jesus. Or again, in the period around the collapse of the Roman empire, Benedict of Nursia emerged, and essentially became the founder of Western monasticism. Who will it be today? 

Mark Vernon is a journalist, writer, and former Anglican priest. His books include *The Meaning of Friendship*, *Plato's Podcasts: The Ancients' Guide to Modern Living*, and *After Atheism: Science, Religion, and the Meaning of Life*.

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

Post Here: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/tgioid/>

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

is published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Ken Dzigan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.
Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.