MARCUS AURELIUS

# MEDITATIONS

A NEW TRANSLATION, WITH AN INTRODUCTION, BY

GREGORY HAYS

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*A New Translation, with an Introduction,*
*by Gregory Hays*

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# Introduction

*Gregory Hays*

## MARCUS AURELIUS ANTONINUS

States will never be happy until rulers become philosophers
or philosophers become rulers.
—PLATO, *The Republic*

Marcus Aurelius is said to have been fond of quoting Plato's dictum, and those who have written about him have rarely been able to resist applying it to Marcus himself. And indeed, if we seek Plato's philosopher-king in the flesh we could hardly do better than Marcus, the ruler of the Roman Empire for almost two decades and author of the immortal *Meditations.* Yet the title is one that Marcus himself would surely have rejected. He never thought of himself as a philosopher. He would have claimed to be, at best, a diligent student and a very imperfect practitioner of a philosophy developed by others. As for the imperial throne, that came almost by accident. When Marcus Annius Verus was born, in A.D. 121, bystanders might have predicted a distinguished career in the Senate or the imperial

administration. They could hardly have guessed that he was destined for the imperial purple, or seen in their mind's eye the lonely bronze horseman whose upraised hand greets us from the Capitoline hill in Rome across two thousand years.

Marcus sprang from a distinguished enough family. The year of his birth coincided with his grandfather's second tenure of the consulship, in theory Rome's highest office, though now of largely ceremonial importance. And it was to be his grandfather who brought him up, for his father died when he was very young. Marcus makes reference in the *Meditations* to his father's character as he remembered it or heard of it from others, but his knowledge must have been more from stories than from actual memories. Of the remainder of his childhood and his early adolescence we know little more than can be gleaned from the *Meditations*. The biography of him in the so-called *Historia Augusta* (a curious and unreliable work of the late fourth century probably based on a lost series of lives by the third-century biographer Marius Maximus) tells us that he was a serious child, but also that he loved boxing, wrestling, running and falconry, that he was a good ballplayer and that he loved to hunt. None of these are surprising occupations in an upper-class youth.

Book 1 of the *Meditations* offers glimpses of Marcus's schooling, and we can fill out the picture by what is known of upper-class education generally at this period. His first instructors, like the unnamed teacher mentioned in *Meditations* 1.5, were probably slaves, from whom he would have mastered the rudiments of reading and writing. At a later stage he would have been handed over to private tutors to be introduced to literature, especially, no doubt, Vergil's great epic, the *Aeneid*. But literature served only as a preparation for the real goal. This was rhetoric, the key to an active political career under the empire, as it had been under the Republic. Under the supervision of a trained rhetor, Marcus would have

begun with short exercises before progressing to full-scale practice declamations in which he would have been asked to defend one side or another in imaginary law cases, or to advise a prominent historical figure at a turning point in his career. (Should Caesar cross the Rubicon? Should Alexander turn back at the Indus? Why or why not?)

Such training was conducted in Greek as well as Latin. Since at least the beginning of the first century B.C. the Roman upper classes had been essentially bilingual, and Marcus's spoken and written Greek would have been as fluent as the French of a nineteenth-century Russian aristocrat or the Chinese of a Heian Japanese courtier. Marcus would have read Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and the tragedies of Euripides side by side with the *Aeneid*, and studied the speeches of the great Athenian orator Demosthenes as intensively as those of the Roman statesman Cicero. It was Greek writers and artists who constituted the intellectual elite at the capital; when in later life the emperor conversed with his court physician, Galen, he would have done so in the latter's native tongue. Above all, Greek remained overwhelmingly the language of philosophy. In the late Republic and early empire, writers like Lucretius, Cicero and Seneca had worked to create a philosophical literature in Latin, with notable success. But the great thinkers—Plato, Aristotle, Theophrastus, Zeno, Chrysippus, Epicurus, etc.—had all been Greeks. Serious philosophical investigation required a familiarity with the language they wrote in and the terminology they developed. That Marcus composed his own *Meditations* in Greek is natural enough.

In 137, when Marcus was sixteen, a crucial event took place. The reigning emperor, Hadrian, was childless. An illness had brought him near to death a year previously, and it was clear that he would not live forever. Hadrian owed his throne to his adoption by

his predecessor and distant relative, Trajan. Following Trajan's example, Hadrian had designated the distinguished aristocrat Lucius Ceionius Commodus to succeed him. In 137, however, Ceionius died unexpectedly, and Hadrian was forced to cast about for a new successor. His choice fell on the childless senator Antoninus, whom he selected with the proviso that Antoninus should in turn adopt Marcus (his nephew by marriage) along with Ceionius's son Lucius Verus, then aged seven. Marcus took on the family name of his adopted father, becoming Marcus Aurelius Antoninus.

Hadrian's death the following year left Marcus first in line for the throne. His education and that of the younger Verus were now matters of still greater concern, and it is clear that no expense was spared. For training in Greek rhetoric, he was entrusted to Herodes Atticus, a fabulously wealthy Athenian rhetorician whose tempestuous relations with his family, fellow citizens and the imperial court itself would have furnished ample material for a soap opera. His instructor in Latin oratory was Marcus Cornelius Fronto, a prominent rhetorician from Cirta in North Africa. By an accident of fate, many of Fronto's letters to Marcus have survived, and they illustrate the close relationship between student and teacher. They also suggest Fronto's regret at seeing Marcus move away from rhetoric to delve ever more deeply into philosophy. The first book of the *Meditations* pays tribute to a number of philosophers from whom Marcus learned, both formally and informally, and he is likely to have studied with or listened to many others.

Marcus would have learned much outside the classroom as well. For training in legal and political matters, an informal apprenticeship bound aristocratic youths to older public figures—men like Junius Rusticus, whose influence Marcus chronicles in 1.7. But the single greatest influence was surely Marcus's adopted father, Antoninus Pius. Marcus would have watched as Antoninus received

embassies, tried legal cases and dictated letters to his deputies. Meanwhile Marcus's own position as heir apparent was signaled in various ways. In 140 he served as consul (at the age of nineteen), and would serve again in 145. In the same year he married Antoninus's daughter Faustina, to whom he pays tribute in *Meditations* 1.17.

Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* describes the reign of Antoninus as "furnishing very few materials for history, which is indeed little more than the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind." It furnishes equally little material for Marcus's biography. In the decade and a half between 145 and 161 we learn little of Marcus's occupations, and our only glimpses of his inner development come from his correspondence with Fronto. But the two poles that would govern the remainder of his life—the court and philosophy—seem by this point to be fully established. There is no evidence that Marcus experienced anything like the "conversion" to philosophy that some ancient figures experienced (or affected), but it is clear that by the middle to late 140s philosophy was becoming increasingly central to his life.

On August 31, 161, Antoninus died, leaving Marcus as his sole successor. Marcus immediately acted to carry out what appears to have been Hadrian's original intention (perhaps ignored by Antoninus) by pushing through the appointment of his adopted brother, Lucius Verus, as co-regent. Verus's character has suffered by comparison with Marcus's. Ancient sources, in particular the gossipy *Historia Augusta*, tend to paint him as a self-indulgent degenerate—almost another Nero. This may be unfair; it is certainly not the picture of him we get from Marcus's own reminiscences in the *Meditations*. It does seem clear, however, that Marcus functioned as the senior emperor in fact if not name. It would be surprising if he had not. He was almost a decade older, and had been trained for the position by Antoninus himself.

What kind of ruler did this philosopher-king prove to be? Not, perhaps, as different from his predecessors as one might have expected. Though an emperor was all-powerful in theory, his ability to control policy was in reality much more limited. Much of his time was spent fielding problems that had moved up the administrative ladder: receiving embassies from the large cities of the empire, trying appeals of criminal cases, answering queries from provincial governors and dealing with petitions from individuals. Even with a functional system of imperial couriers, news could take weeks to travel from the periphery of the empire to the center; imperial edicts took time to move down the chain of command. While the emperor's decision had the force of law, enforcement was almost entirely in the hands of provincial governors, whose diligence might be affected by incompetence, corruption, or an understandable desire not to antagonize local elites.

We get occasional glimpses of Marcus's day-to-day duties from the evidence of imperial decisions preserved in letters, inscriptions and the legal codes. Surviving legislation shows a certain interest in the freeing of slaves and in regulations relating to the guardianship of orphans. Attempts have been made to tie the first to Marcus's philosophical convictions and the second to his own memories of life without a father. But it remains unclear how much of the policy is due to Marcus himself, and how far it differs from that of Marcus's predecessor, Antoninus. Perhaps more interesting are the traces of Marcus's personality to be discerned in the phrasing of imperial documents, where we find a scrupulous attention to detail and a self-consciousness about linguistic usage that seems to differentiate Marcus from his predecessors. Neither trait surprises in the author of the *Meditations* or a student of Fronto, whose extant letters place great stress on the quest for the *mot juste*.

One of Marcus's priorities was to preserve good relations with

the Senate. The goal was to disguise the absoluteness with which the emperor ruled: to preserve a facade—and sometimes, no doubt, even to achieve the reality—of consensus and cooperation. A hundred years before, aristocrats might have dreamed of a restored Republic (as some certainly did). But by the second century it was clear that there was no alternative to the principate. The Senate expected deference in public and hoped for influence behind the scenes; "good" emperors were willing to play along. In cultivating the upper classes Marcus was following in the footsteps of Antoninus and Trajan, rather than of Hadrian, whose relations with the Senate had been prickly. And it is this, as much as anything else, that is responsible for his reputation as a benevolent statesman. An emperor might do as he liked while he lived, but it was the senatorial historians—men like Cornelius Tacitus in the 120s or Cassius Dio in the generation after Marcus's death—who had the last word.

Another area where Marcus's policy continued that of his predecessors related to a small and eccentric sect known as the Christians. In the course of the next century they would become an increasing problem for the imperial administration, and they were prominent enough in Marcus's day to attract an extended denunciation from a certain Celsus, part of whose work "Against the Christians" still survives. The sect met with contempt from those intellectuals who deigned to take notice of it (Marcus's tutor Fronto was evidently one), and with suspicion and hostility from ordinary citizens and administrators. The Christians' disfavor stemmed from their failure to acknowledge the gods worshipped by the community around them. Their "atheism"—their refusal to accept any god but their own—endangered their neighbors as well as themselves, and their reluctance to acknowledge the divine status of the emperor threatened the social order and the well-being of the state.

Christianity had been illegal since the early second century when a query from Pliny the Younger (then governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor) prompted the emperor Trajan to establish a formal policy: While Christians were not to be sought out, those who confessed to the faith were to be executed. But empire-wide persecution did not become a reality until a much later date. The main threat to Christians in the second century came from individual provincial governors, acting either on their own initiative or under pressure from local communities. In the late 170s, for example, civic unrest at Lyons resulted in a virtual pogrom of Greek-speaking Christians resident there. Marcus's mentor Junius Rusticus had tried and executed Christians (the apologist Justin Martyr among them) in his capacity as city prefect. Marcus himself was no doubt aware of Christianity, but there is no reason to think that it bulked large in his mind. The one direct reference to it in the *Meditations* (11.3) is almost certainly a later interpolation, and the implicit references some scholars have discerned are surely illusory.

Marcus, in any case, had more serious concerns than this troublesome cult. Soon after his accession, relations between Rome and its only rival, the Parthian empire in the East, took a dramatic turn for the worse. Since at least the time of Trajan the two states had been locked in a cold war that would continue for the next two centuries, and that once a generation or so flared up into a military conflict. The death of Antoninus and the accession of two new and untried rulers may have tempted the Parthian ruler Vologaeses III to test the waters. In 162 his forces occupied Armenia and wiped out a Roman garrison that had gone to the rescue. Syria itself was threatened. Rome had no choice but to respond.

It was Verus, the younger emperor, who was sent east, where he remained for the next four years. Neither he nor Marcus had any military experience to speak of (Antoninus's peaceful reign had

given little scope for it), and the day-to-day conduct of the war was no doubt left to the professionals. After initial setbacks the Romans rallied and, under such commanders as the dynamic young Avidius Cassius, forced the Parthians to sue for peace. Parthia would remain a threat, but one that could be dealt with by diplomatic means for the immediate future.

Verus and his senior colleague had no time to bask in their triumph, however. Within a year the empire was in the grip of a devastating plague, apparently brought back from the East by Lucius's troops. Its effects may not have been quite as apocalyptic as later writers suggest, but the death toll was certainly high, and it also delayed the emperors' response to a second threat. This was the increasing instability on the empire's other border, the northern frontier that separated Rome from the barbarian peoples of Germany, eastern Europe and Scandinavia. During this period a number of these tribes were under pressure from peoples farther north and reacted by moving across the empire's borders—not for conquest, but in search of land to settle. Rome's reaction alternated between aggressive resistance and attempts at accommodation; its failure to develop a workable policy would eventually result in the collapse of the Western empire some three centuries later.

In some places a line could be drawn. Hadrian's great wall, stretching across Britain, was intended to secure the empire's most distant frontier; under Antoninus it had been briefly superseded by a second line farther to the north. But such fortifications were impracticable on the continent, and it was there that the threat was concentrated. Rome still remembered the catastrophe of A.D. 9, when the Roman general Varus and three legions had marched into the forests of Germany, never to return. In the second century, the greatest source of anxiety was the area farther south, roughly corresponding to modern-day Romania and Hungary.

Trajan's conquest of Dacia two generations before had cleared out a possible source of trouble, but the potential for friction remained. In Marcus's day three peoples presented a special problem: the Quadi, the Marcomanni, and the Jazyges, also called Sarmatians. The removal of three legions to Parthia had seriously weakened the Roman position on the northern frontier, and barbarians took advantage of the situation. In 168, Marcus and Verus marched north to deal with them.

Much of the remainder of the reign would be spent on intermittent warfare, first in the so-called Marcomannic Wars of the early 170s and then in a second campaign later in that decade. And most of the burden was to be borne by Marcus alone, for Verus died suddenly (apparently of a stroke) in early 169. It was a very different kind of war than the traditional campaign Verus's armies had waged. The conventional military and diplomatic tactics that worked against the Parthians were of limited use here. Instead, the Romans had to negotiate with individual chieftains whose authority was limited and whose reliability was always in doubt. When negotiation failed, the only alternative was a slow and bloody succession of small-scale engagements rather than pitched battles. The progress of the campaign is recorded on the column erected in Rome to commemorate the close of the Marcomannic Wars. In spite of its triumphal purpose, the engraved scenes that spiral around the monument paint a grim picture of brutal fighting, devastation and execution. "Spiders are proud of catching flies," Marcus notes mordantly, "men of catching hares, fish in a net, boars, bears, Sarmatians" (10.10). The gruesome vignette that opens *Meditations* 8.34 ("a severed hand or foot, or a decapitated head") may well reflect Marcus's own experience.

By 175 the Romans seemed to have gained the upper hand. But at this point disturbing news arrived. Avidius Cassius, who had dis-

tinguished himself as a general during the Parthian War and who as governor of Syria now served as virtual regent of the Eastern empire, had revolted and declared himself emperor. Some of the Eastern provinces (notably Cappadocia) remained loyal to Marcus, but Cassius was recognized as emperor throughout much of the East, and in particular in Egypt, whose grain supply was crucial to the capital. Civil war seemed inevitable, and was prevented only by Cassius's assassination at the hands of a subordinate. Marcus was nevertheless obliged to travel east to reassert his authority, taking with him Faustina (who died in the course of the journey). He visited the major cities of the East, Antioch and Alexandria, arriving finally at Athens, where he was initiated into the Eleusinian Mysteries, a set of mystic rites connected with the worship of Demeter, the goddess of agriculture.

Now in his fifties, Marcus was in declining health, and the revolt of Cassius had only underlined the need to make arrangements for the succession. Faustina had borne at least thirteen children, many of whom had died young. By the mid-170s, Marcus had only one surviving son, Commodus, just entering his teens. There was no reason for Marcus to continue the policy of adoption followed by his predecessors, and there is no reason to think he even considered it. The years that follow see Commodus's rapid promotion to a position not far short of co-emperor. He was consul in 177 at the age of fifteen. In the same year he was accorded all the major imperial privileges, except for the post of Pontifex Maximus, the head of the Roman state religion, held by the reigning emperor alone, and for life.

The gains of the Marcomannic Wars had not proved permanent, and in 178, Marcus and Commodus marched north again. Two years later Marcus died at age fifty-eight, the first emperor to pass on the throne to his son since Vespasian a century before.

Sadly, Commodus's performance did not bear out whatever promise Marcus had discerned in him. He was to be remembered as a dissolute tyrant, a second Caligula or Nero whose many defects were only emphasized by the contrast with his father. His assassination after a twelve-year reign would usher in the first in a series of power struggles that would burden the empire for the next century.

## PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND

The composition of the *Meditations* is normally dated to the 170s—Marcus's last decade. That this was a dark and stressful period for him can hardly be doubted. In the ten years between 169 and 179 he had to cope with constant fighting on the frontier, the abortive revolt of Cassius, and the deaths of his colleague Verus; his wife, Faustina; and others. Though he could hardly have anticipated the century of turmoil that would follow his death, he may have suspected that his son and successor, Commodus, was not the man he hoped. That in these circumstances Marcus should have sought consolation in philosophy is only natural. But understanding what Marcus looked for from his philosophical studies requires a certain amount of orientation. To understand the *Meditations* in context, we must familiarize ourselves not only with Stoicism, the philosophical system that underlies the work, but also with the role of philosophy in ancient life more generally.

Today philosophy is an academic discipline, one that few people other than professional philosophers would consider central to their everyday existence. While we may think of ourselves as having a "philosophy of life," it bears little relation to what goes on in the philosophy departments of our universities. The careers of

twentieth-century analytic philosophy often seem remote from what the American philosopher Thomas Nagel terms "mortal questions": the problems involved in making ethical choices, constructing a just society, responding to suffering and loss, and coming to terms with the prospect of death. Indeed, most of us would be inclined to see these issues as the province of religion rather than philosophy.

For Marcus and his contemporaries, the situation was very different. Ancient philosophy certainly had its academic side. Athens and other large cities had publicly financed chairs of philosophy, and professional philosophers taught, argued and wrote, as they do today. But philosophy also had a more practical dimension. It was not merely a subject to write or argue about, but one that was expected to provide a "design for living"—a set of rules to live one's life by. This was a need not met by ancient religion, which privileged ritual over doctrine and provided little in the way of moral and ethical guidelines. Nor did anyone expect it to. That was what philosophy was for.

Philosophy in the modern sense is largely the creation of one man, the fifth-century B.C. Athenian thinker Socrates. But it is primarily in the Hellenistic period that we see the rise of philosophical sects, promulgating coherent "belief systems" that an individual could accept as a whole and which were designed to explain the world in its totality. Of these Hellenistic systems the most important, both for Romans in general and for Marcus in particular, was the Stoic school. The movement takes its name from the stoa ("porch" or "portico") in downtown Athens where its founder, Zeno (332/3–262 B.C.), taught and lectured. Zeno's doctrines were reformulated and developed by his successors, Cleanthes (331–232 B.C.) and Chrysippus (280–c. 206 B.C.). Chrysippus in particular was a voluminous writer, and it was he who laid the foundations for sys-

tematic Stoicism. This early "academic" Stoicism is the source of certain key terms and concepts that reappear frequently in the *Meditations,* and proper understanding of Marcus's approach requires some familiarity with the system as a whole.

### *Stoicism*

Of the doctrines central to the Stoic worldview, perhaps the most important is the unwavering conviction that the world is organized in a rational and coherent way. More specifically, it is controlled and directed by an all-pervading force that the Stoics designated by the term *logos.* The term (from which English "logic" and the suffix "-logy" derive) has a semantic range so broad as to be almost untranslatable. At a basic level it designates rational, connected thought—whether envisioned as a characteristic (rationality, the ability to reason) or as the product of that characteristic (an intelligible utterance or a connected discourse). *Logos* operates both in individuals and in the universe as a whole. In individuals it is the faculty of reason. On a cosmic level it is the rational principle that governs the organization of the universe.[1] In this sense it is synonymous with "nature," "Providence," or "God." (When the author of John's Gospel tells us that "the Word"—*logos*—was with God and is to be identified with God, he is borrowing Stoic terminology.)

All events are determined by the *logos,* and follow in an unbreakable chain of cause and effect. Stoicism is thus from the outset a deterministic system that appears to leave no room for human free will or moral responsibility. In reality the Stoics were reluctant to accept such an arrangement, and attempted to get around the difficulty by defining free will as a voluntary accommodation to what is in any case inevitable. According to this theory, man is like a dog tied to a moving wagon. If the dog refuses to run along with the wagon he will be dragged by it, yet the choice remains his: to run or

be dragged. In the same way, humans are responsible for their choices and actions, even though these have been anticipated by the *logos* and form part of its plan. Even actions which appear to be—and indeed are—immoral or unjust advance the overall design, which taken as a whole is harmonious and good. They, too, are governed by the *logos*.

But the *logos* is not simply an impersonal power that governs and directs the world. It is also an actual substance that pervades that world, not in a metaphorical sense but in a form as concrete as oxygen or carbon. In its physical embodiment, the *logos* exists as *pneuma*, a substance imagined by the earliest Stoics as pure fire, and by Chrysippus as a mixture of fire and air. *Pneuma* is the power—the vital breath—that animates animals and humans. It is, in Dylan Thomas's phrase, "the force that through the green fuse drives the flower," and is present even in lifeless materials like stone or metal as the energy that holds the object together—the internal tension that makes a stone a stone. All objects are thus a compound of lifeless substance and vital force. When Marcus refers, as he does on a number of occasions, to "cause and material" he means the two elements of these compounds—inert substance and animating *pneuma*—which are united so long as the object itself exists. When the object perishes, the *pneuma* that animated it is reabsorbed into the *logos* as a whole. This process of destruction and reintegration happens to individual objects at every moment. It also happens on a larger scale to the entire universe, which at vast intervals is entirely consumed by fire (a process known as *ekpyrosis*), and then regenerated.[2]

If the world is indeed orderly, if the *logos* controls all things, then the order it produces should be discernible in all aspects of it. That supposition not only led the Stoics to speculate about the nature of the physical world but also motivated them to seek the

rationality characteristic of the *logos* in other areas, notably in formal logic and the nature and structure of language (their interest in etymology is reflected in several entries in the *Meditations*). This systematizing impulse reappears in many other fields as well. The catalogue of Chrysippus's own works preserved by the late-third-century biographer Diogenes Laertius is very long indeed; it includes not only philosophical treatises in a narrow sense, but also works such as "On How to Read Poetry" and "Against the Touching Up of Paintings." Later Stoics would try their hands at history and anthropology as well as more conventionally philosophical topics.

The expansion of Stoic thought was not only intellectual but also geographical. The movement had been born in Athens. In the century and a half that followed Chrysippus's death it spread to other centers, in particular to Rome. The Romans of the second century B.C. were in the midst of a course of conquest that by the end of the century would leave them the effective masters of the Mediterranean. With conquest came culture. Looking back on the rapid Hellenization of the Roman aristocracy between 200 B.C. and his own day, the poet Horace famously observed that "conquered Greece was the true conqueror." Nowhere is the influence of Greece more obvious than in philosophy. Greek philosophers, including the Stoics, Panaetius (c. 185–109 B.C.), and Posidonius (c. 135–50 B.C.), visited Rome to lecture. Many spent extended periods there. In the first century B.C. it became the fashion for young upper-class Romans to study in Athens, in an ancient version of the eighteenth-century Grand Tour. Roman aristocrats acted as patrons to individual philosophers and assembled large libraries of philosophical texts (like that at the famous Villa of the Papyri at Herculaneum), and Romans like Cicero and Lucretius attempted to expound Greek philosophical doctrines in Latin.

Of the major philosophical schools, it was Stoicism that had the greatest appeal. Unlike some other sects, the Stoics had always approved of participation in public life, and this stand struck a chord with the Roman aristocracy, whose code of values placed a premium on political and military activity. Stoicism has even been described, not altogether unfairly, as the real religion of upper-class Romans. In the process it became a rather different version of the philosophy from that taught by Zeno and Chrysippus. Perhaps the most important development was a shift in emphasis, a narrowing of focus. Early and middle Stoicism was a holistic system. It aimed to embrace all knowledge, and its focus was speculative and theoretical. Roman Stoicism, by contrast, was a practical discipline—not an abstract system of thought, but an attitude to life. Partly for historical reasons, it is this Romanized Stoicism that has most influenced later generations. Indeed, the application of the adjective "stoic" to a person who shows strength and courage in misfortune probably owes more to the aristocratic Roman value system than it does to Greek philosophers.

Stoicism in its later form was a system inspired as much by individuals as by texts or doctrines. One of its most distinguished adherents was Marcus Cato (known as Cato the Younger to distinguish him from his great-grandfather, prominent a century earlier). A senator of renowned rectitude when Julius Caesar marched on Rome in 49 B.C., Cato sided with Caesar's rival Pompey in defense of the legitimate government. When it was clear that Caesar would triumph, Cato chose not to survive the Republic, killing himself after the battle of Munda in 46. Within a century he had become an emblem of Stoic resistance to tyranny. Under Nero he was immortalized by the poet Lucan and praised in a laudatory biography by the senator Thrasea Paetus, whose own resistance to Nero cost him his life. Thrasea's son-in-law, Helvidius Priscus, played a similar role—and

came to a similar end—under Vespasian. Thrasea and Helvidius in their turn served as role models to second-century aristocrats like Marcus's mentors Rusticus, Maximus, and Severus. Marcus himself pays tribute to them (and to Cato) in *Meditations* 1.14.

Cato, Thrasea, and Helvidius were doers, not writers, and their legendary heroism inevitably lends them a somewhat two-dimensional quality. A more complex and much more interesting figure was the poet Lucan's uncle, Lucius Annaeus Seneca (c. 4 B.C.–A.D. 65), commonly known as Seneca the Younger to distinguish him from his equally distinguished father. Originally councillor to the young Nero, he was eventually forced to commit suicide after being implicated in an attempted coup against his erstwhile pupil. Men's lives are not always consistent with their ideals, and some critics have found it hard to reconcile Seneca's fabulous wealth and his shameless flattery of Nero with his philosophical views. Yet his works (in particular the *Letters to Lucilius*) remain the most engaging and accessible expressions of later Stoicism. Because they were written in Latin they were also among the most influential on succeeding generations.

But not all Stoics were wealthy senators. There was another kind of Stoic exemplar as well: the outsider whose ascetic lifestyle won him the admiration of his wealthier contemporaries and enabled him to criticize the pretenses of upper-class society with real authority. An early example of the type is Gaius Musonius Rufus (c. 30–100), a member of the Roman administrative class, the so-called knights (*equites*), who was banished by both Nero and Vespasian. A still more dramatic example was Musonius's student Epictetus (c. 55–c. 135), who had taken up the practice of philosophy as a slave and devoted the remainder of his life to it after being freed. He had been exiled to Nicopolis (in northern Greece) under Domitian, and after the tyrant's death, elected to remain there

where he taught and lectured to visitors who often traveled great distances to study with him.

One of these was the upper-class historian and statesman Arrian (c. 86–160), who published an extensive record of the master's discussions, a text conventionally referred to as the *Discourses of Epictetus.* He later produced an abridged version, the *Encheiridion* ("Manual" or "Handbook"). Epictetus seems to have been an especially important figure for Marcus. He thanks his philosophical mentor Rusticus for introducing him to "Epictetus's lectures" (either the *Discourses* themselves or a private set of lecture notes), and a series of quotations and paraphrases from the philosopher appear in Book 11 of the *Meditations.* And Arrian's abridged *Encheiridion* provides the closest literary parallel to the *Meditations* itself, not only in its content, but also in its form: a series of relatively short and unrelated entries.

## *Stoicism and the Meditations*

The late Stoicism of Epictetus is a radically stripped-down version of its Hellenistic predecessor, a philosophy which "had learnt much from its competitors and had almost forgotten parts of itself."[3] Both these tendencies, the narrowing of the field and the eclectic borrowing from non-Stoic sources, can be discerned also in the *Meditations.*

Chrysippus and his followers had divided knowledge into three areas: logic, physics and ethics, concerned, respectively, with the nature of knowledge, the structure of the physical world and the proper role of human beings in that world. Marcus pays lip service to this triadic division in at least one entry (8.13), but it is clear from other chapters and from the *Meditations* as a whole that logic and physics were not his focus. Among the things for which he thanks the gods is that he was never "absorbed by logic-chopping, or pre-

occupied by physics" (1.17). Occasional entries show an awareness of Stoic thought about language (the etymological pun in 8.57 is perhaps the clearest example), but they are the exception, not the rule. In many cases Marcus's logic is weak—the logic of the rhetorician, not of the philosopher; it is rare to find a developed chain of reasoning like that in *Meditations* 4.4. His interest in the nature of the physical world is limited to its relevance to human problems. About one of the basic Stoic physical doctrines—the notion of the periodic conflagration (*ekpyrosis*) that ends a cosmic cycle—Marcus adopts an agnostic position (though he was not alone in this). To him it was ethics that was the basis of the system: "just because you've abandoned your hopes of becoming a great thinker or scientist, don't give up on attaining freedom, achieving humility, serving others..." (7.67).

The questions that the *Meditations* tries to answer are primarily metaphysical and ethical ones: Why are we here? How should we live our lives? How can we ensure that we do what is right? How can we protect ourselves against the stresses and pressures of daily life? How should we deal with pain and misfortune? How can we live with the knowledge that someday we will no longer exist? It would be both pointless and impertinent to try to summarize Marcus's responses; the influence of the *Meditations* on later readers springs in part from the clarity and insistence with which he addresses these questions. It may be worthwhile, however, to draw attention to one pattern of thought that is central to the philosophy of the *Meditations* (as well as to Epictetus), and that has been identified and documented in detail by Pierre Hadot. This is the doctrine of the three "disciplines": the disciplines of perception, of action and of the will.

The discipline of perception requires that we maintain absolute objectivity of thought: that we see things dispassionately

for what they are. Proper understanding of this point requires a brief introduction to the Stoic theory of cognition. We have seen that for the Stoics universal order is represented by the *logos*. The *logos* infuses and is wielded by our *hegemonikon* (literally, "that which guides"), which is the intellective part of our consciousness. In different contexts it can approximate either "will" or "character" and it performs many of the functions that English speakers attribute to the brain or the heart.[4] One of its primary functions is to process and assess the data we receive from our senses. At every instant the objects and events in the world around us bombard us with impressions. As they do so they produce a *phantasia*, a mental impression. From this the mind generates a perception (*hypolepsis*), which might best be compared to a print made from a photographic negative. Ideally this print will be an accurate and faithful representation of the original. But it may not be. It may be blurred, or it may include shadow images that distort or obscure the original.

Chief among these are inappropriate value judgments: the designation as "good" or "evil" of things that in fact are neither good nor evil. For example, my impression that my house has just burned down is simply that—an impression or report conveyed to me by my senses about an event in the outside world. By contrast, my perception that my house has burned down and I have thereby suffered a terrible tragedy includes not only an impression, but also an interpretation imposed upon that initial impression by my powers of *hypolepsis*. It is by no means the only possible interpretation, and I am not obliged to accept it. I may be a good deal better off if I decline to do so. It is, in other words, not objects and events but the interpretations we place on them that are the problem. Our duty is therefore to exercise stringent control over the faculty of perception, with the aim of protecting our mind from error.

The second discipline, that of action, relates to our relationship

with other people. Human beings, for Marcus as for the Stoics generally, are social animals, a point he makes often (e.g., 5.16, 8.59, 9.1). All human beings possess not only a share of the *logos* but also the ability to use it (that is what makes us human and distinguishes us from other animals). But it would perhaps be more accurate to say that we are *participants* in the *logos,* which is as much a process as a substance. Marcus himself more than once compares the world ruled by *logos* to a city in which all human beings are citizens, with all the duties inherent in citizenship. As human beings we are part of nature, and our duty is to accommodate ourselves to its demands and requirements—"to live as nature requires," as Marcus often puts it. To do this we must make proper use of the *logos* we have been allotted, and perform as best we can the functions assigned us in the master plan of the larger, cosmic *logos,* of which it is a part. This requires not merely passive acquiescence in what happens, but active cooperation with the world, with fate and, above all, with other human beings. We were made, Marcus tells us over and over, not for ourselves but for others, and our nature is fundamentally unselfish. In our relationships with others we must work for their collective good, while treating them justly and fairly as individuals.

Marcus never defines what he means by justice, and it is important to recognize what the term implies and what it does not. All human beings have a share of the *logos,* and all have roles to play in the vast design that is the world. But this is not to say that all humans are equal or that the roles they are assigned are interchangeable. Marcus, like most of his contemporaries, took it for granted that human society was hierarchical, and this is borne out by the images he uses to describe it. Human society is a single organism, like an individual human body or a tree. But the trunk of the tree is not to be confused with the leaves, or the hands and feet with the head. Our duty to act justly does not mean that we must

treat others as our equals; it means that we must treat them as they deserve. And their deserts are determined in part by their position in the hierarchy. Stoicism's emphasis on the orderliness of the universe implies a similar orderliness and harmony in its parts, and part of its appeal to upper-class Romans may have been that it did not force its adherents to ask difficult questions about the organization of the society they lived in.[5]

The third discipline, the discipline of will, is in a sense the counterpart to the second, the discipline of action. The latter governs our approach to the things in our control, those that we do; the discipline of will governs our attitude to things that are *not* within our control, those that we have done *to* us (by others or by nature). We control our own actions and are responsible for them. If we act wrongly, then we have done serious harm to ourselves (though not, it should be emphasized, to others, or to the *logos*). By contrast, things outside our control have no ability to harm us. Acts of wrongdoing by a human agent (torture, theft, or other crimes) harm the agent, not the victim. Acts of nature such as fire, illness, or death can harm us only if we choose to see them as harmful. When we do so, we question the benevolence and providence of the *logos*, and thereby degrade our own *logos*.

This, of course, we must not do. Instead we must see things for what they are (here the discipline of perception is relevant) and accept them, by exercising the discipline of will, or what Epictetus calls (in a phrase quoted by Marcus) "the art of acquiescence." For if we recognize that all events have been foreseen by the *logos* and form part of its plan, and that the plan in question is unfailingly good (as it must be), then it follows that we must accept whatever fate has in store for us, however unpleasant it may appear, trusting that, in Alexander Pope's phrase, "whatever is, is right." This applies to all obstacles and (apparent) misfortunes, and in particu-

lar to death—a process that we cannot prevent, which therefore does not harm us, and which accordingly we must accept willingly as natural and proper.

Together, the three disciplines constitute a comprehensive approach to life, and in various combinations and reformulations they underlie a large number of the entries in the *Meditations.* We see them laid out starkly and explicitly in *Meditations* 7.54:

> Everywhere, at each moment, you have the option:
> • to accept this event with humility [will];
> • to treat this person as he should be treated [action];
> • to approach this thought with care, so that nothing irrational creeps in [perception].

We find the same triad rephrased and reordered in *Meditations* 9.6: "Objective judgment... Unselfish action... Willing acceptance... of all external events."

And we find it in a more subtle form underlying *Meditations* 8.7:

> ...progress for a rational mind means not accepting falsehood or uncertainty in its perceptions, making unselfish actions its only aim, seeking and shunning only the things it has control over, embracing what nature demands of it—the nature in which it participates, as the leaf's nature does in the tree's.

A score of other entries could be cited. The almost obsessive repetition of these three points suggests that they lie at the very heart of Marcus's thought, and of his project in the *Meditations.*

### *Other Influences*

Marcus Aurelius is often thought of and referred to as the quintessential Stoic. Yet the only explicit reference to Stoicism in the *Meditations* (5.10) is phrased in curiously distant terms, as if it were

merely one school among others. The great figures of early Stoicism are conspicuous by their absence. Neither Zeno nor Cleanthes is mentioned in the *Meditations,* and Chrysippus appears only twice—quoted once in passing for a pithy comparison (6.42) and included with Socrates and Epictetus in a list of dead thinkers (7.19). This is not to deny the essentially Stoic basis of Marcus's thought, or the deep influence on him exercised by later Stoic thinkers (most obviously Epictetus). If he had to be identified with a particular school, that is surely the one he would have chosen. Yet I suspect that if asked what it was that he studied, his answer would have been not "Stoicism" but simply "philosophy."

There is nothing surprising about this. The imperial period saw the development of a widespread ecumenical tendency in philosophy. Adherents of most of the major schools—the Platonists, Peripatetics, Cynics, and Stoics—preferred to focus on the points they shared, rather than those that separated them. Not all the figures Marcus credits as influential on his own philosophical development were Stoics; Severus, for example, was a Peripatetic. Although authors like Seneca and Epictetus accepted the basic premises of the system developed by Zeno and Chrysippus, they showed no reluctance to borrow aphorisms, anecdotes, and argumentative strategies from non-Stoic sources. The *Meditations* follows a similar procedure. While built on a Stoic foundation, it also refers to and quotes a wide range of figures, both precursors of the Stoics and representatives of rival schools.

Of the predecessors Marcus invokes, the most important is surely Socrates, the great Athenian thinker who had helped redirect philosophy from a preoccupation with the physical world to a focus on the role of man in society and the nature of human morality. Socrates himself wrote nothing. His teachings were transmitted (and greatly elaborated) in the philosophical dialogues of his stu-

dent Plato. Marcus quotes Plato repeatedly (especially in Book 7), and Socratic or Platonic elements can be discerned elsewhere too. One example is the so-called Socratic paradox, the claim that no one does wrong willingly, and that if men were able to recognize what is right, they would inevitably do it. "They are like this," Marcus says of other people, "because they can't tell good from evil" (2.1), and he repeats this assertion elsewhere.

Socrates' character was as important as his doctrines. His legendary endurance and self-denial made him an ideal model for the Stoic philosopher—or any philosopher. His refusal to compromise his philosophical beliefs led him to make the ultimate sacrifice when he was put on trial at the age of seventy on trumped-up charges of impiety. His display of integrity at the trial and his comportment in the days leading up to his execution made it easy to view him as a forerunner of first-century Stoic martyrs like Thrasea Paetus or Helvidius Priscus, and it is in this light that Marcus evokes him in *Meditations* 7.66.

Of Socrates' predecessors (the so-called pre-Socratic thinkers), the most important, both for Marcus and the Stoics generally, was Heraclitus, the mysterious figure from Ephesus (in modern-day Turkey) whose Zenlike aphorisms were proverbial for their profundity and obscurity alike. Heraclitus's philosophical system ascribed a central role to *logos* and to fire as the primordial element. Both elements were naturally congenial to the Stoics, and may well have influenced them. Heraclitus is mentioned in a handful of entries in the *Meditations* (4.46, 6.47), but his doctrines can be traced in many others. Moreover, his concision and epigrammatic phrasing anticipate the kind of enigmatic apothegm we find in a number of entries:

> The best revenge is not to be like that. (6.6)
> Straight, not straightened. (7.12)

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