MEDITATIONS

MEDITATIONS

The Philosophy Classic

MARCUS AURELIUS

With an Introduction by
DONALD ROBERTSON

This edition first published 2020

The material for *Meditations* is based on *The Thoughts of the Emperor M. Aurelius Antoninus*, translated by George Long, published by Bell & Daldy, London 1862, and is now in the public domain. This edition is not sponsored or endorsed by, or otherwise affiliated with George Long, his family or heirs.

Registered office
John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, United Kingdom

A catalogue record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978–0–857–08846–8 (hardback) ISBN 978–0–857–08849–9 (ePDF)
ISBN 978–0–857–08841–3 (ePub)

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Cover design: Wiley

Set in 11/15pt ITC New Baskerville by Aptara, New Delhi, India
Printed in Great Britain by TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall, UK

CONTENTS

AN INTRODUCTION

BY DONALD ROBERTSON

"If thou would'st master care and pain,
Unfold this book and read and read again
Its blessed leaves, whereby thou soon shalt see
The past, the present, and the days to be
With opened eyes; and all delight, all grief,
Shall be like smoke, as empty and as brief."

This epigram is found at the end of a Vatican manuscript of *The Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius. It captures the central appeal of the book, which is that it offers a way to "master care and pain" by providing philosophical insights that promise to elevate our minds above worldly concerns – both the things we crave and those we fear.

The Stoic wisdom *The Meditations* contains offers us a whole philosophy of life, capable of providing a much-needed sense of purpose and direction in the modern world – just as it did nearly two thousand years ago for people living in the Roman Empire.

THE PHILOSOPHER KING

Marcus Aurelius was the last famous Stoic philosopher of antiquity. He also happens to have been emperor of Rome during the height of its power. As a consequence, we know considerably more about him than about any other Stoic philosopher. We have accounts of Marcus' life and reign from Cassius Dio, Herodian, and the *Historia Augusta* – a history of the Roman emperors – as well as fragments of evidence from other historical sources.

The Meditations itself opens with a series of remarks about his family members and teachers, and the nature of the text – a series of private notes on his endeavours to apply Stoic philosophy in his own life – gives us some glimpses of Marcus' personal concerns. In addition, we have a cache of letters between Marcus and his Latin rhetoric tutor, and close family friend, Marcus Cornelius Fronto, which provide a window on his character and personal life.

Marcus wasn't the sort of decadent autocrat that many people today associate with the immensely privileged position of Roman emperor. For example, Herodian writes of him:

> *He was concerned with all aspects of excellence, and in his love of ancient literature he was second to no man, Roman or Greek; this is evident from all his sayings and writings which have come down to us. To his subjects he revealed himself as a mild and moderate emperor; he gave audience to those who asked for it and forbade his bodyguard to drive off those who happened to meet him. Alone of the emperors, he gave proof of his learning not by mere words or knowledge of philosophical doctrines but by his blameless character and temperate way of life. His reign thus produced a very large number of intelligent men, for subjects like to imitate the example set by their ruler.*

We're told that he constantly had the saying of Plato on his lips, "that those states prospered where the philosophers were kings or the kings philosophers" (*Historia Augusta*). Indeed, by all accounts he was

widely perceived as embodying the principles of the Stoic philosophy that he followed, and which he describes throughout *The Meditations*.

Curiously, Marcus never mentions the word 'Stoic' anywhere in the text, although there's no question that he considered himself a follower of that school's teachings. The Roman historian, Cassius Dio, says that although Marcus had tutors in Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy, "he was most inclined to the doctrines of the Stoic school". The two philosophers he cites most often in the book are Epictetus – perhaps unsurprisingly, as he was the most important Stoic teacher of the Roman world – and Heraclitus, a famous pre-Socratic philosopher who appears to have influenced the Stoics. Marcus also mentions two other "noble philosophers" favoured by the Stoics, Socrates and Pythagoras (6.47). Curiously, Marcus nowhere mentions Zeno, the founder of the Stoic school, but he does mention Chrysippus, the third head of the Stoic school, alongside Socrates and Epictetus: "How many a Chrysippus, how many a Socrates, how many an Epictetus has time already swallowed up!", he writes (7.19).

The *Historia Augusta* describes Marcus as being "wholly given over to the Stoic philosophy, which he had not only learned from all the best masters, but also acquired for himself from every source". Indeed, Marcus was well-known for having dedicated his life to training in Stoic philosophy, a path which he started upon from the unusually young age of twelve. This commitment is summed up in the *Historia Augusta*:

> *For the emperor was so illustrious in philosophy that when he was about to set out for the Marcomannic war, and everyone was fearful that some ill-luck might befall him, he was asked, not in flattery but in all seriousness, to publish his "Precepts of Philosophy"; and he did not fear to do so, but for three days discussed the books of his "Exhortations" one after the other.*

It's not clear whether or not these "Precepts of Philosophy" or "Exhortations", if real, correspond with *The Meditations*, his only surviving philosophical text. As we'll see, the content of *The Meditations*

consists mainly of notes to himself on philosophical themes rather than formal precepts or exhortations.

It seems unlikely that *The Meditations* was ever intended for publication. Marcus frequently alludes to events that would be obscure or meaningless to most people reading it, even people of his time – such as the contents of a letter received by his mother, or a dispute his adoptive father had with a customs officer. He also criticizes his own character quite harshly and complains about the values of those surrounding him at court. These are remarks he presumably would have intended to keep to himself. If the *Historia Augusta* is correct, therefore, it may be that Marcus published some other philosophical writings that are now lost.

In any case, it seems clear that to subsequent generations of Romans, and perhaps during his own lifetime, Marcus had earned the reputation of a ruler who aspired to, and arguably succeeded in nearing, the ancient Platonic ideal of the philosopher-king.

TO HIMSELF

The title *Meditations* or *The Meditations* was introduced by later editors. It fits quite well because the text contains a series of passages largely consisting of Marcus Aurelius' personal reflections on life, written from the perspective of Stoic philosophy. There are many short aphoristic sayings, but also a few longer passages sometimes showing more rhetorical elegance. The book also contains quotations from earlier philosophers and poets. There are even a few fragments of dialogue, such as this one attributed to Socrates:

> What do you want, souls of rational men or irrational?
> Souls of rational men.
> Of what rational men, sound or unsound?
> Sound.
> Why then do you not seek for them?
> Because we have them.
> Why then do you fight and quarrel? (11.39)

understand what it meant to "live in accord with Nature" (1.9). This phrase was a well-known slogan, which defines the supreme goal (*telos*) or meaning of life according to Stoic philosophy. Although Marcus never mentions Stoicism by name, he uses this phrase many times throughout *The Meditations*.

"Living in accord with Nature" came to have a double, or even treble, meaning for early Stoics. On the one hand, it means fulfilling our potential by applying reason to the best of our ability in our daily lives – living rationally and *wisely*. For the Stoics, we're both inherently rational and social creatures. Fulfilling our potential therefore requires exercising wisdom in our relationships, whether with individuals or with groups, and to society as a whole.

Wisdom applied to relationships is what the Stoics mean by 'justice'. So living in accord with nature means, in part, living with wisdom and justice. As the virtue of justice (*dikaiosune*) is such a major theme in *The Meditations*, it's worth explaining that the Greek term as used in Stoic philosophy denotes a broader concept than our English word 'justice' tends to suggest. It covers the subordinate virtues of fairness and kindness, and so is expressed in all of our relationships, including how we treat our friends, spouses, and children.

Living in accord with nature, however, has another meaning. It means living in harmony with our fate, not being disturbed or frustrated by the external events that befall us in life. In order to live consistently in accord with wisdom and justice we have to master our fears and desires. Overcoming fear and learning to endure pain and discomfort, when that's our fate, requires the virtue of courage or endurance. Likewise, mastering our desires, so that they're healthy and moderate, requires the virtue of temperance or self-discipline.

The four cardinal virtues of Greek philosophy are wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance. Plato attributes this fourfold schema to Socrates. However, the Stoics employed it more consistently. Living in agreement with nature meant living wisely and virtuously. Diogenes Laertius says that the Stoics defined the supreme goal as a "living according to virtue".

There's therefore both a threefold and fourfold structure in *The Meditations*, derived from early Stoicism. It distinguishes between living harmoniously at three different levels by exercising the four cardinal virtues:

1. **Self**. Wisdom consists in living in harmony with our own true nature as reasoning beings and fulfilling our potential for rationality.
2. **Others**. Justice consists in living in harmony with others, fulfilling our social nature by applying wisdom in a manner designed to build friendships and well-ordered communities.
3. **Nature/Zeus.** The virtues of courage and temperance consist in mastering our fears and desires, respectively, so that we can live in harmony with our fate by accepting events as they befall us. We don't complain or demand more from life than is reasonable and healthy.

As Marcus puts it elsewhere:

> *There are three relations [between you and other things]: the one to the body which surrounds you; the second to the divine cause from which all things come to all; and the third to those who live with you. (8.27)*

The Cynic philosophers believed that virtue is the only true good, vice the only true evil, and that everything else, everything 'external' to our own character and volition, is completely indifferent. One of the key differences between Stoicism and Cynicism was that the Stoics did not view all external things as *equally* indifferent but classed some as 'preferred' and others as 'dispreferred' externals. For example, health is preferable to sickness, wealth to poverty, having friends to having enemies, and so on. Yet we shouldn't attach so much importance to these things that we become upset about them. External things have some value in Stoicism, but they're relatively unimportant. They don't determine whether our life as a whole is good or bad – only virtue or vice can do that. This was explained by the analogy of a set of scales on which

virtue is placed on one side. It doesn't matter how many gold coins, or other externals, we place on one side, it should never be enough to tip the balance against virtue. Although it is rational for us to prefer certain externals over others, the Stoic will never sacrifice virtue for the sake of any of them.

THE PHILOSOPHERS OF THE PORCH – A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE STOICS

It's worth delving into the history of Stoicism to get a sense of the intellectual legacy that Marcus was part of, and that he would build on in *The Meditations*.

The Stoic school of philosophy, which Marcus Aurelius was trained in and followed from his youth, was founded at Athens in 301 BC by a Phoenician merchant called Zeno of Citium.

It's a testimony to the appeal of Stoicism that the ancient school endured for nearly five centuries, until around the time of Marcus' death in AD 180. However, perhaps surprisingly given the popularity of the philosophy during his reign, we hear virtually nothing more about Stoics in the ancient world after this time. Stoicism appears to have been assimilated into Neoplatonism, which was itself gradually superseded by Christianity.

Stoicism's founder, Zeno, made a fortune trading the precious purple dye (*porphura*) manufactured from the fermented innards of the murex sea snail. This dye was known as 'royal' or 'imperial' purple because it was worn by kings and emperors. According to one account, after being shipwrecked near the port of Piraeus, and losing his precious cargo at sea, Zeno made his way to Athens. As a foreign immigrant, he found himself alone and penniless, living like a beggar on the streets.

At some point, Zeno journeyed to the temple of Apollo at Delphi and consulted the famous priestess there, known as the Pythia, asking how he could live the best life. Speaking through his oracle, Apollo pronounced that Zeno should "take on the colour not of dead sea snails

but of dead men". We can assume this puzzled him at first. We're told he sat down at a bookseller's stall in Athens and by chance found himself reading the second book of Xenophon's *Memorabilia of Socrates.* This contains Socrates' version of a famous speech composed by the Sophist Prodicus, known as *The Choice of Hercules.* The speech was a powerful exhortation to young men to embrace a life of virtue as opposed to hedonism. Sure enough, after reading it, Zeno leapt to his feet asking where he could find a man like Socrates, who had been executed a few generations earlier. He realized that the oracle meant that he should dye his mind with the wisdom of dead philosophers from previous generations.

The bookseller pointed Zeno toward the Cynic philosopher Crates of Thebes, who happened to be walking past at that moment. So Zeno became a follower of the Cynic school for many years and later studied in the Academic school, run by the followers of Plato. He also studied in the Megarian school, founded by another follower of Socrates, Euclid of Megara. Eventually, though, Zeno decided to found a new school of philosophy. It became known as Stoicism after the *Stoa Poikile* or painted porch, on the edge of the Athenian agora, where Zeno's followers would gather to hear him discourse on philosophy. He was succeeded as head of the school by Cleanthes, who in turn was followed by Chrysippus, one of the most highly regarded intellectuals of the ancient world. Chrysippus, a prolific author, revised the doctrines of Zeno and Cleanthes, adding detailed arguments to defend them. These three are therefore regarded collectively as the original teachers of the Stoic school.

The Stoic school continued to thrive in Athens under the leadership of successive *scholarchs*, as the heads of ancient philosophical schools were known. In 155 BC, Diogenes of Babylon, the fifth scholarch, travelled from Greece to Rome on an ambassadorial mission, along with representatives of the Platonic Academy and the Peripatetic school of Aristotle. These three philosophers caused a sensation, and their visit had a lasting influence on Roman society. A few decades after this, the last scholarch of the Athenian school, Panaetius, became the tutor of

the Roman general and statesman, Scipio Amelianus, and a group of his friends, known as the Scipionic Circle.

A few generations later, the Roman statesman Cato the Younger was an important representative of Stoic philosophy, which became associated with republican values when he took a stand against Julius Caesar's autocratic rise to power. Cato was friends with another important Roman politician, Cicero, who, although a follower of Academic philosophy, had studied Stoicism at Athens and was intimately acquainted with its teachings. Whereas Cato wrote nothing, Cicero's extensive writings provide one of our main sources for early Stoicism.

Caesar's victory in the civil war led to the end of the Roman Republic, after he appointed himself dictator. Having no children of his own, he adopted his grand-nephew, Octavian, who went on to become the first Roman emperor, Augustus. Augustus had Stoic tutors, perhaps setting a precedent for subsequent generations of Roman statesmen to align themselves with the philosophy during the imperial period.

Most of the writings of earlier Stoics are lost, so our knowledge of ancient Stoic philosophy comes mainly from three later philosophers of the Roman empire. The first is Seneca the Younger, rhetoric tutor and later speechwriter and political advisor to the emperor Nero, who lived in the first century AD. Many of Seneca's letters and essays discussing Stoicism survive today. Nero's Greek secretary owned a slave called Epictetus, who was later freed. Having studied under another famous Stoic called Musonius Rufus, Epictetus went on to become arguably the most famous teacher of philosophy in the history of Rome. Epictetus wrote nothing, but one of his students, a highly accomplished Roman general and statesman named Arrian, transcribed his discussions with students under the title *The Discourses.* From these was distilled a short handbook containing some of Epictetus' key sayings, the *Enchiridion.*

Epictetus moved from Rome to Greece, where he set up a school. Marcus Aurelius was a child when he died so they almost certainly never met. However, we can assume that Marcus must have been personally acquainted with older men who had studied under Epictetus,

member of the emperor's praetorian guard – his personal bodyguard – died at Carnuntum in AD 171. We can therefore infer that Marcus was probably stationed there at this time.

THE IMPACT AND LEGACY OF *THE MEDITATIONS*

The Meditations is one of the most loved self-help and spiritual classics of all time. It has had a profound influence on many different people throughout history, ever since the first printed edition of the Greek manuscript was published in 1558, edited by Wilhelm Xylander.

A few decades later, the Flemish humanist Justus Lipsius founded a movement called 'Neostoicism', which sought to integrate Stoicism with Christianity, inspiring renewed interest in the philosophy among European thinkers. Shortly after this, the first English translation of *The Meditations* was published by Méric Casaubon in 1634.

In the eighteenth century, Frederick the Great modelled himself on Marcus Aurelius. Anthony Ashley-Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, wrote his own version of *The Meditations*, called *The Philosophical Regimen*. And the great economist Adam Smith studied *The Meditations*, referring to Marcus as "the mild, the humane, the benevolent Antoninus", in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776).

The influence of *The Meditations* and Stoicism in general continued to spread throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, the practical implications of the philosophy were not fully appreciated until the 1950s when it reached a new audience through the founders of cognitive behavioural therapy, or CBT, which is now the leading evidence-based form of modern psychotherapy. In particular, Albert Ellis, the developer of rational emotive behaviour therapy, the main precursor of CBT, frequently mentioned the influence of Stoicism on his approach to psychotherapy:

> *This principle, which I have inducted from many psychotherapeutic sessions with scores of patients during the last several years, was originally discovered and stated by the ancient Stoic philosophers, especially Zeno of Citium (the founder of the school),*

> *Chrysippus, Panaetius of Rhodes (who introduced Stoicism into Rome), Cicero [sic.], Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius. The truths of Stoicism were perhaps best set forth by Epictetus, who in the first century A.D. wrote in the Enchiridion: "Men are disturbed not by things, but by the views which they take of them." (Ellis, 1962, p. 54)*

Aaron T. Beck, the founder of cognitive behavioural therapy, followed Ellis in attributing the philosophical origins of his approach to Stoicism. Indeed, Stoicism and CBT share the same premise, known as the cognitive model of emotion, which holds that our emotions are largely determined by underlying beliefs. Whereas Ellis tended to quote Epictetus, Beck quoted the same Stoic doctrines from George Long's translation of *The Meditations* in order to illustrate the cognitive model of emotion:

> *If thou art pained by any external thing, it is not the thing that disturbs thee, but thine own judgment about it. And it is in thy power to wipe out this judgment now. (Marcus Aurelius, quoted in Beck, 1976, p. 263)*

What the Stoics intuited about the role of beliefs in the cause and cure of emotional disorders, and verified in their own experience, modern psychologists have confirmed in countless scientific research studies: that by changing our thoughts and attitudes we can potentially change our emotions and alleviate much psychological suffering in our lives.

Partly because of the indirect support it received from research on modern psychotherapy, since the 1950s Stoicism has enjoyed a resurgence in popularity. John Steinbeck's novel *East of Eden* (1954) mentions *The Meditations* as a "tiny volume bound in leather". The Tom Wolfe novel about the Stoicism of Epictetus, *A Man in Full* (1998), also helped to reignite popular interest in Stoicism. Marcus Aurelius has also been depicted on the silver screen. In *The Fall of the Roman Empire*

(1964), he was played by Alec Guinness. However, Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000), which featured Richard Harris as Marcus Aurelius, has done the most to ratchet up interest in him and in *The Meditations.*

Since then, an increasing number of popular books influenced by Stoicism such as Ryan Holiday's *The Obstacle Is the Way* (2014) have appeared. Likewise, a growing number of blog articles and podcasts testify to public interest in Stoicism as a powerful and timeless approach to self-help and self-improvement.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATION

This edition of *The Meditations* is based on the classic translation published in 1862 by the English classical scholar George Long (1800–1879). Long's translation is the subject of the poet and literary critic Matthew Arnold's essay *Marcus Aurelius* (1863).

> *The man whose thoughts Mr. Long has thus faithfully reproduced, is perhaps the most beautiful figure in history. He is one of those consoling and hope-inspiring marks, which stand forever to remind our weak and easily discouraged race how high human goodness and perseverance have once been carried, and may be carried again. The interest of mankind is peculiarly attracted by examples of signal goodness in high places; for that testimony to the worth of goodness is the most striking which is borne by those to whom all the means of pleasure and self-indulgence lay open, by those who had at their command the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them. Marcus Aurelius was the ruler of the grandest of empires; and he was one of the best of men.*

Arnold praises the scholarly "fidelity and accuracy" of Long's translation and for treating "Marcus Aurelius's writings, as he treats all the other remains of Greek and Roman antiquity which he touches, not as a dead and dry matter of learning, but as documents with a side of

modern applicability and living interest, and valuable mainly so far as this side in them can be made clear."

However, he does raise a minor complaint against Long because his translation "is not quite idiomatic and simple enough". "Small as these matters appear," says Arnold, "they are important when one has to deal with the general public, and not with a small circle of scholars."

This Capstone Classics edition attempts to make Long's text more accessible to modern readers. I have made minor adjustments designed to simplify and modernize the English, but without affecting its meaning.

Marcus Aurelius

Born AD 121 in Rome, to Marcus Annius Verus, a praetor, and Domitia Lucilla, a noblewoman and heiress. He was raised by his mother and grandfather, after the untimely death of his father when Marcus was probably around three years old.

Rome at this time was ruled by Emperor Hadrian. When Hadrian's heir died, he made Marcus' uncle, Antoninus Pius, his new heir. Antoninus, in turn, adopted Marcus as his heir. He married Antoninus' daughter Faustina in 145.

When Antoninus died during an illness in 161, Marcus became emperor. He immediately requested permission to appoint his adoptive brother, Lucius Verus, as co-emperor in a kind of subordinate capacity. After Lucius' death in 169, Marcus was sole ruler.

Major episodes in Marcus Aurelius' reign include the war against the Parthian Empires (in Mesopotamia), which finally ended in 166, and the Marcomannic Wars against Germanic tribes. He also ruled during the Antonine Plague, which was brought back from campaigns and killed millions of Romans.

When not involved in military matters, Marcus' time was taken up with hearing legal cases and petitions. He was considered knowledgeable on the law and just in his decisions.

Marcus died in 180 in Vindobona, modern-day Vienna, leaving his son Commodus to reign. As Emperor, Commodus was considered a disaster, and so Marcus' death is often considered to mark the end of the *Pax Romana*.

REFERENCES

Arnold, Matthew, 1863. 'Marcus Aurelius' in *Essays in Criticism*. London and Cambridge: Macmillan and Co., 1865.

Beck, A.T., 1976. *Cognitive Therapy & Emotional Disorders*. New York: International University Press.

Ellis, A., 1962. *Reason & Emotion in Psychotherapy*. Secaucus, NJ: Citadel.

THE MEDITATIONS

CONTENTS