

---

9

MARCUS AURELIUS

**Meditations, c. 167 C.E.**

Marcus Aurelius (121–180 C.E.) was both a Roman emperor (161–180 C.E.) and a philosopher. He is numbered the last of the “five good emperors,” a line of emperors that began in 96 C.E. and included Trajan. According to the great historian Edward Gibbon, this was an era in which “the Roman Empire was governed by absolute power, under the guidance of wisdom and virtue.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: Everyman's Library, 1993), vol. 1, chap. 3, p. 90.

---

Source: Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. George Long, bk. 2, *The Internet Classics Archive*, <http://classics.mit.edu/Antoninus/meditations.2.two.html>.

Although much of his reign was taken up with wars, Marcus Aurelius also initiated legal reform on behalf of slaves, minors, and widows. As a philosopher, he was an adherent of Stoicism, a set of beliefs aptly summarized in this selection from his *Meditations*, written about 167 c.e. Stoicism originated in Greece in the third century b.c.e. Stoics believed that negative emotions were the result of poor judgment and that wisdom made one immune to pain or misfortune.

In keeping with his Stoic convictions, Marcus Aurelius calls for the mind to regulate the body. Thus it would seem he meant to lead a very controlled and contemplative life. And yet, to be the emperor was to be the most important actor in the Roman world. The historian Dio Cassius tells us that Marcus Aurelius treated his enemies humanely, but the historian also relates stories of the emperor's desire to exterminate an entire enemy people. How might Marcus Aurelius have reconciled his ideas and his actions to produce such varying results?

The years after 165 c.e. were particularly difficult for the emperor and the empire. Roman forces had just defeated the Parthian army, only to return to their homes with a pandemic disease (possibly smallpox or measles) that lasted until about 180 c.e., claiming the lives of as many as five million people, including Marcus Aurelius himself. How might these events have influenced the emperor's philosophy as recorded in the *Meditations*?

#### THINKING HISTORICALLY

Compare Marcus Aurelius' personal injunctions on how he should act with Confucian ideas as expressed in *The Analects* and Han Fei's Legalist views on government. What sorts of commonalities, if any, do you detect between these three different philosophies? In what ways have these philosophies had a lasting influence? Ask two questions that require you to compare Marcus Aurelius and some aspect of Chinese history. Ask one question that you can answer from what you have read in this chapter and another question which would require research to answer. What sort of research would you have to do in order to answer the second question?

Begin the morning by saying to thyself, I shall meet with the busy-body, the ungrateful, arrogant, deceitful, envious, unsocial. All these things happen to them by reason of their ignorance of what is good and evil. But I who have seen the nature of the good that it is beautiful, and of the bad that it is ugly, and the nature of him who does wrong, that it is akin to me, not only of the same blood or seed, but that it participates in the

same intelligence and the same portion of the divinity, I can neither be injured by any of them, for no one can fix on me what is ugly, nor can I be angry with my kinsman, nor hate him, for we are made for cooperation, like feet, like hands, like eyelids, like the rows of the upper and lower teeth. To act against one another then is contrary to nature; and it is acting against one another to be vexed and to turn away.

Whatever this is that I am, it is a little flesh and breath, and the ruling part. Throw away thy books; no longer distract thyself: it is not allowed; but as if thou wast now dying, despise the flesh; it is blood and bones and a network, a contexture of nerves, veins, and arteries. See the breath also, what kind of a thing it is, air, and not always the same, but every moment sent out and again sucked in. The third then is the ruling part: consider thus: Thou art an old man; no longer let this be a slave, no longer be pulled by the strings like a puppet to unsocial movements, no longer either be dissatisfied with thy present lot, or shrink from the future. . . .

Every moment think steadily as a Roman and a man to do what thou hast in hand with perfect and simple dignity, and feeling of affection, and freedom, and justice; and to give thyself relief from all other thoughts. And thou wilt give thyself relief, if thou doest every act of thy life as if it were the last, laying aside all carelessness and passionate aversion from the commands of reason, and all hypocrisy, and self-love, and discontent with the portion which has been given to thee. Thou seest how few the things are, the which if a man lays hold of, he is able to live a life which flows in quiet, and is like the existence of the gods; for the gods on their part will require nothing more from him who observes these things.

Do wrong to thyself, do wrong to thyself, my soul; but thou wilt no longer have the opportunity of honoring thyself. Every man's life is sufficient. But thine is nearly finished, though thy soul reverences not itself but places thy felicity in the souls of others. . . .

How quickly all things disappear, in the universe the bodies themselves, but in time the remembrance of them; what is the nature of all sensible things, and particularly those which attract with the bait of pleasure or terrify by pain, or are noised abroad by vapoury fame; how worthless, and contemptible, and sordid, and perishable, and dead they are. . . .

Though thou shouldst be going to live three thousand years, and as many times ten thousand years, still remember that no man loses any other life than this which he now lives, nor lives any other than this which he now loses. The longest and shortest are thus brought to the same. For the present is the same to all, though that which perishes is not the same; and so that which is lost appears to be a mere moment. For a man cannot lose either the past or the future: for what a man has not,

how can anyone take this from him? These two things then thou must bear in mind; the one, that all things from eternity are of like forms and come round in a circle, and that it makes no difference whether a man shall see the same things during a hundred years or two hundred, or an infinite time; and the second, that the longest liver and he who will die soonest lose just the same. For the present is the only thing of which a man can be deprived, if it is true that this is the only thing which he has, and that a man cannot lose a thing if he has it not. . . .

The soul of man does violence to itself, first of all, when it becomes an abscess and, as it were, a tumour on the universe, so far as it can. For to be vexed at anything which happens is a separation of ourselves from nature, in some part of which the natures of all other things are contained. In the next place, the soul does violence to itself when it turns away from any man, or even moves towards him with the intention of injuring, such as are the souls of those who are angry. In the third place, the soul does violence to itself when it is overpowered by pleasure or by pain. Fourthly, when it plays a part, and does or says anything insincerely and untruly. Fifthly, when it allows any act of its own and any movement to be without an aim, and does anything thoughtlessly and without considering what it is, it being right that even the smallest things be done with reference to an end; and the end of rational animals is to follow the reason and the law of the most ancient city and polity.

Of human life the time is a point, and the substance is in a flux, and the perception dull, and the composition of the whole body subject to putrefaction, and the soul a whirl, and fortune hard to divine, and fame a thing devoid of judgment. And, to say all in a word, everything which belongs to the body is a stream, and what belongs to the soul is a dream and vapor, and life is a warfare and a stranger's sojourn, and after-fame is oblivion. What then is that which is able to conduct a man? One thing and only one, philosophy. But this consists in keeping the daemon<sup>1</sup> within a man free from violence and unharmed, superior to pains and pleasures, doing nothing without purpose, nor yet falsely and with hypocrisy, not feeling the need of another man's doing or not doing anything; and besides, accepting all that happens, and all that is allotted, as coming from thence, wherever it is, from whence he himself came; and, finally, waiting for death with a cheerful mind, as being nothing else than a dissolution of the elements of which every living being is compounded. But if there is no harm to the elements themselves in each continually changing into another, why should a man have any apprehension about the change and dissolution of all the elements? For it is according to nature, and nothing is evil which is according to nature.

<sup>1</sup>Spirit. [Ed.]

## ■ REFLECTIONS

Stoicism might at first thought seem an odd philosophy for an emperor, stranger still as an ideology to direct the governance of an empire. Yet, the belief that everything is natural or that resistance is always futile, might comfort an emperor, general, or official who feels forced to wage a bloody campaign or annihilate resistant populations. In any case, Stoicism was not the only tool in the armory of Roman rule. Not even the only ideological tool. The great Enlightenment historian Edward Gibbon famously linked Christianity, reputedly a religion of the weak and pacifists, to *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. If correct, then the martial Roman gods, emperor cults, and state religions might be credited with the growth and maintenance of the empire in its first few hundred years. But the later history of Christianity, the earlier history of Stoicism, and the variable role of Confucianism in China suggest that ideas can be shaped to the needs of different masters and missions.

The more material tools of governance—police, soldiers, officials, laws, forms, and procedures—would seem more practical than the effort to win hearts and minds. So it is striking that Roman officialdom lacked so many of the basic materials of successful administration. Pliny's letter about the Christians is just one example of the many times he found it necessary to refer a minor matter directly to the emperor. Certainly the Chinese emperor was protected from such distractions by layers of bureaucracy and established procedures.

How about the quality of officials? The Chinese made this top priority through competitive civil service exams designed to select the most gifted and well-prepared students, regardless of their wealth or family connections. Indeed the system was an end run around family, clan, and regional ties: an important part of the effort to supplant feudalism with a uniform state. Officials were, for instance, not assigned to serve in their home areas, where personal connections might pull them away from state responsibilities. Cicero's letter to his brother refers to more complex arrangements in the Roman Empire; some assistant officers are appointed by the state, others are personal allies of the new governor. Cicero also reminds us of the numerous private interests in Roman provinces. He tells his brother to watch out for the *publicani*—private citizens who purchased the right to collect taxes, clearly a public function in the Chinese Empire. Did the wide range of private responsibilities in the Roman Empire increase corruption? Or did its more independent judiciary raise the barrier against corruption? As a lawyer, some of Cicero's most famous trials were prosecutions of corrupt officials. The standard of behavior he expresses to his brother reads like a model for any age, but his words also betray the numerous obstacles to attaining them.

These readings might suggest innumerable comparative questions about the Roman and Chinese empires. Some readings discuss the role and status of soldiers: One might ask why their status was higher in Rome. The mention of Chinese eunuchs and of Roman slaves might lead one to ask about Chinese slaves (less common) and Roman eunuchs (rare in the West). The Han debate about salt and iron might lead the reader to ask about Rome (which monopolized salt but not iron) or the role of government monopolies in other times and places.

The study of the Roman Empire has always posed comparative questions about more recent empires, especially the British Empire in the nineteenth century and, for many, the global empire of the United States today. The addition of China, or the history of any other empire, helps us see more patterns and ask more questions that might better help us better understand ourselves.