

Labyrinth article – David Porreca – 30 September 2009

Marcus Aurelius: The Philosopher-Emperor...

Family Life

Born in 121 C.E. to an upper-crust family from Baetica province in southern Spain, Marcus Aurelius benefitted from the best upbringing available to any Roman of his time. His mother had inherited a fortune accumulated by her ancestor, the orator, lawyer and witty socialite Gn. Domitius Afer, under the reigns of Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius and Nero. Marcus Aurelius' father died while he was young, so he was raised in his grandfather's household. The grandfather had been three times consul, and was a relative of the emperor Hadrian, so Marcus had the opportunity to view the inner operations of power throughout his youth. He was also blessed with an earnest character, which predisposed him to make good on the opportunities offered him.

He himself was married to the daughter of Hadrian's successor as emperor, Antoninus Pius. Marcus considered his father-in-law to have been an exemplary man, and a model to follow as he became ruler. He had thirteen children, of which five outlived him: four girls and one boy, who grew up to be known as the emperor Commodus.

Political Life

Upon the death of Antoninus Pius in March of 161, Marcus Aurelius took power and made an unprecedented decision: to grant his adoptive brother, Lucius Verus, the status of co-emperor, equal in every respect aside from the office of pontifex maximus. Lucius fought the Parthians in the East and reluctantly undertook some early campaigns against Germanic tribes along with Marcus.

Their harmonious co-rule was interrupted by the first of many severe crises that would strike the Empire in the next century and beyond. A devastating plague broke out in 166 among the army camps on the Parthian front and spread quickly through an empire that had grown wealthy and populous over the past several generations. Lucius died of a stroke while fleeing a plague-ridden army camp on the outskirts of Aquileia (Venice) in 169.

Marcus spent the last decade of his life as sole emperor, dying on campaign in Dacia in March 180. He had selected his biological son Commodus as successor, breaking a long-standing and successful tradition of emperors being chosen by adoption rather than among blood kin.

Intellectual Life

Thanks to his privileged upbringing, Marcus Aurelius had some very high-profile mentors. One was Quintus Iunius Rusticus, a descendant of one of the Stoics killed in the emperor Domitian's purges, and himself twice consul. Rusticus gave Marcus the works of the Stoic author Epictetus to study, a gesture which had a profound influence on the young man.

Marcus Aurelius also learned rhetoric from the most accomplished master of the art in his day: Marcus Cornelius Fronto. The two exchanged numerous letters, many of which have survived to reveal a deep and complex friendship between the two men.

Marcus Aurelius also benefitted from interaction with the leading scientist, philosopher and physician of his day: Galen. The latter was chosen as the emperor's personal doctor, and retained the position of imperial physician under all of Marcus' successors until his own death in 199 (or 216).

...And His *Meditations*

Marcus Aurelius is known as the "Philosopher-Emperor" on account of the survival of his personal memoirs which contain numerous reflections of a philosophical and moral nature. Commonly known as the *Meditations*, his own title for the work was "Eis Heauton", "To Himself". The story of its survival by pure chance is a remarkable one: It was never intended for publication, and the text was unknown until the late fourth century. It is not mentioned again in any historical record until the year 950, and only a single manuscript of it survives, which dates from the late 14th or early 15th century. The text of the 1559 printed edition was drawn from a different manuscript which is now lost, so there exist two slightly different versions of the text.

Marcus wrote the *Meditations* while on military campaign, where he spent most of the decade of the 170's. The text as we know it today is laid out in twelve books, which does not represent the author's own division of the text. Book I is a series of expressions of thanks addressed to various people to whom Marcus Aurelius felt he owed some aspect of his personal development. Books II-XII are written in a disjointed style, with sections ranging from a single sentence to page-long discussions. The impression one gets when reading the *Meditations* is that each section is a "thought-for-the-day", written abstractly by prompted by some significant event or encounter.

In recording his personal reflections, Marcus returns frequently to certain themes that preoccupied him. He often comments on the transience and changeable nature of all things, especially of fame and praise, and even the posthumous reputation of prominent people. He considers material possessions, including one's own body, to be transient, and therefore of little importance in the grand scheme of things. He had an intimate awareness of the fleetingness of life, a realization earned the hard way through the loss of seven of his children, his adoptive brother, his friend Fronto, and of countless fellow-citizens of the plague. He also experienced the horrors of

war first-hand, another potent source of inspiration for reflections on life and death. He had a high regard for nature, respecting the fact that everything comes from nature, resides in it and returns to it. Despite being perched at the highest possible echelon of power, he retained a conscious connection to the web of life that sustains all being. He also contends that no physical thing is bad or good: since things are inanimate, they cannot act, and only action is involved in questions of morality.

He also reflects upon the concepts of fate, free will and causation, suggesting that destiny is like a prescription: if you accept it, the universe will prosper. In other words, a man should do a man's work just as a fig should do a fig's work, and everything will go well. Marcus also considers humans to be both rational and social creatures: we act rationally for a social purpose. The care of all people is natural to each person. The tone of his writing is one of a man confronted with daily reminders that not everyone lives up to his ideals, and that he must continually work at convincing himself of their truth and validity.

He struggles between believing that the universe is governed by a divine plan or that events are the result of random collisions of atoms. Broadly speaking, the two perspectives reflect the views of the Stoic and Epicurean schools of thought, respectively. Marcus considered both to be plausible, and never decided the question to his own satisfaction. That said, he did seem to have an aesthetic preference for the existence of some divine providence. Nevertheless, he managed to create a practical guide for action from either perspective. On the one hand, if the universe is governed by sheer randomness, why resist it? One should act the way one is supposed to wherever one finds oneself. On the other hand, if there is divine providence, one should be worthy of divine help by acting morally.

His focus on correct action is also reflected in his discussions of time. He quite reasonably considered past events to be beyond our control and therefore of no concern for correct action. The future is uncertain and therefore also beyond our control and no better guide for action. Only the present offers the possibility for correct action, both by righting past wrongs and instructing others to correct action so as to ensure a better future for all.

He was also a great believer in the soul's control over the self. Since external events can't be controlled, you may as well control what you can: yourself. Letting go of your own reaction to annoying things is the only way of living without annoyance. Pushed to its logical conclusion, this thought led him to have contempt for death, since it happens to everything and is therefore nothing special to be feared or welcomed.

Marcus Aurelius' reflections hold an appeal for modern readers on account of his reflex toward tolerance, freedom and peace. He saw himself both as a citizen of Rome and a citizen of the world. He believed in the value of free expression, of equal rights and justice for all people. The idea of loving one's neighbour he considered a

property of the rational soul. He suggests that one can avenge wrongdoings by not becoming like the wrongdoer.

Despite all these lofty ideals, Marcus Aurelius orchestrated some of the bloodiest fighting done by Roman forces since Trajan's conquests. His reflections on justice did not prevent a profoundly unjust legal distinction between "better" (*honestiores*) and "lesser" (*humiliores*) citizens from developing during his time. He was preoccupied with the question of how to judge the character of others, no doubt because he was constantly surrounded by the sycophants who gravitate naturally toward centres of power. He was constantly torn between the attraction of a contemplative life of withdrawal and a life of action in society.

In his reflections we see a man constantly striving for self-motivation. He struggled with the declining energy levels of a man in his fifties, with the physical discomfort of military campaigns, with the physical temptations of life in the palace, with the repeated loss of loved ones. He had to frequently remind himself to control his anger and suffer fools and vexatious people with equanimity, and he believed that manliness could best be shown through kindness to all.

"Depart then serenely, for he who releases you is serene."

-Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* XII, 36