

Marcus Aurelius

I was three years old the first time I saw my father hit my mother. He punched her in the face. She had made the mistake of embarrassing him in front of his family. You see she had started to cry when he continued to cut her down in front of them. I guess she was supposed to just take the criticism in stride or agree with him. Whatever the case, it affected me to the core. At three years old I decided that it was my duty to protect my mother. From then on, whenever I thought they were arguing, I would throw myself in-between them and yell "Don't hurt my mommy!" I also learned that day, that as much as I loved my mother, she had shown weakness in crying. Emotions were something that had to be repressed! What does this have to do with Marcus Aurelius? Well, until we got to the Stoics in this class I felt like I had absolutely nothing in common with any of the philosophers. In fact, for the most part, they seemed like spoiled brats with too much time on their hands. But, start talking about duty, fate, suffering and will power; those are things I can relate to.

Marcus Aurelius (121-180AD) Emperor of Rome from 161-180AD and was thought to be one of the "five good emperors" of Rome. His original name was Marcus Annus Verus. His mother, Domita Calvilla, and father, Annus Verus, were both from wealthy and politically prominent families. Marcus's father died when he quite young (somewhere between 3 months and 3 years old depending on the source) and his mother died when he

was about 6 or 7 years old. After his parents death he was adopted by his paternal grandfather, Marcus Annus Verus II. Later, when he was seventeen, he was again adopted, this time by his uncle Antoninus Aurelius (commonly known as Antoninus Pius). Antoninus Pius had himself been adopted by the Roman Emperor Hadrian and through this line Marcus Aurelius eventually became Emperor of Rome. The reign of Aurelius earned him the prestigious title of, The Philosopher King. The Roman historian Herodian described Aurelius as of a moderate lifestyle, irreproachable character, and able to provide solid evidences on his philosophical thinking for the people's benefits.

By all accounts, Marcus was a quiet and thoughtful child with an almost unnatural sweetness of character. Hadrian noticed what a unique child Marcus was and using a play on the family name Verus, nicknamed him Verissimus, meaning most true or sincere. He was educated at home by tutors, Herodes Atticus and M. Cornelius Fronto, the later becoming a lifelong friend. Marcus says in his Meditations "To the Gods I am indebted for having good grandfathers, good parents, a good sister, good teachers, good associates, good kinsmen and friends."

Marcus turned away from the studies of rhetoric and poetry at the age of 11 and threw himself wholeheartedly into the study of law and philosophy. He began to practice Stoicism in earnest by the time he was a teenager. It is said that he worked so hard at living a laborious and abstemious life that his health suffered. The stoic philosophy had taught

him to work hard, to endure misfortune, to fulfill his duty and to deny himself. One of Marcus's great fears as a young man was that he would be unable to live the Stoic's life as an Emperor. His adopted father was able to convince him that being Emperor was his fate and as a Stoic he knew that he could not escape his fate. To his father's credit, he taught Marcus that he could be a good man and an Emperor. Marcus writes "I am thankful to the Gods.....for a father who could bring me to the knowledge that it is possible for a man to live in a palace without wanting either guards or embroidered dresses, or torches and statues.....with respect to the things which must be done for the public interest in a manner that befits a ruler". Marcus understood that fate was not something that should lead to despair, but rather help you to change your focus and come into alignment with the World Reason. Here is where we start to understand that although our lives may be fated our will is still free. The stoic understands the difference between control and influence. He does his best to influence his life by doing the best he can in all his works with the understanding that ultimately control is out of his hands. However, the stoic accepts the outcome without bitterness or anger, for he does have control over his emotions.

To understand Marcus Aurelius you have to more fully understand the Stoic philosophy. Stoicism is a philosophy founded in Greece by the philosopher Zeno around 300 BC. The Stoics taught that destructive emotions resulted in errors in judgment, and that a person of "moral and intellectual perfection", would not suffer such emotions. Stoics were concerned with the active relationship between the Logos (cosmic mind or God) and our free will, and the belief that serenity came to those whose will was in accord with the

Logos. Because of this, the Stoics presented their philosophy as a way of life, and they thought that the best indication of an individual's philosophy was not what a person said but how he behaved. Stoicism teaches self-control as a means of overcoming these destructive emotions and that becoming a clear and unbiased thinker allowed you to understand the universal reason. Marcus suggests that whether to put restrictions to our desire or not is up to the individual. But, the main reason why human beings should quench their desire is the imminent risk of having the desire for the wrong thing. Though desire for something means a belief that the thing is good, having an impulse towards it is wrong. It is worth noting that Marcus has recommended that we should not desire, but we should welcome what befalls us. Nevertheless, people ought to associate their desires with pursuit, and welcome with contentment everything they receive.

One of the primary purposes of Stoicism involved improving the individual's ethical and moral well-being. Being virtuous meant having a will that was in agreement with nature. Marcus wrote "This thou must always bear in mind, what is the nature of the whole, and what is my nature, and how this is related to that, and what kind of a part it is of what kind of a whole; and that there is no one who hinders thee from always doing and saying the things which are according to the nature of which thou art a part." Living according to reason was to live in harmony with the universe. "Everything is right for me that is right for you, O Universe. Nothing for me is too early or too late that comes in due time for you. Everything is fruit to me that your seasons bring, O Nature. From you are all things, in you are all things, to you all things return."

The true Stoic lived his life in the present. Marcus practiced daily reflection and self-reminders. An example from his *Meditation* "Say to yourself in the early morning: I shall meet today ungrateful, violent, treacherous, envious, uncharitable men. All of these things have come upon them through ignorance of real good and ill... I can neither be harmed by any of them, for no man will involve me in wrong, nor can I be angry with my kinsman or hate him; for we have come into the world to work together..." "Do not act as if thou wert going to live ten thousand years. Death hangs over thee. While thou livest, while it is in thy power, be good."

Marcus derived his passion for stoicism from reading the philosophical writings of Epictetus. Earlier stoics relied on their ability to persuade an audience. The ethos (credibility), logos (logic), and pathos (emotions) were also the foundations relied on by Epictetus. The Epictetus student practiced aversion to desires and impulsiveness as well as developing a love of humanity. In accordance with Epictetus thinking, Aurelius maintained the belief that philosophy should be put into practice instead of being "philosophized". Therefore, the bringing of philosophies into action is highly regarded according to Epictetus who maintained that philosophy should be part of a person's day-to-day activities.

Marcus believes we should be concerned only with things being just and loving that which is given. He defines “acting justly” as acting in a communal way, and further claims that regardless of where we are, we ought to think as a universal citizen. The appeal to this idea is it suggests that people should act well for humanity, for each person has a duty to contribute toward the welfare of the community as a whole. Conversely, a person who fails to contribute fully to the communal well-being will be acting in a disloyal manner.

Ultimately, Marcus denies the existence of a conflict between the so-called good of a group of people and the common good of an individual person where this individual is a part. He asserts, since this nature of the whole thing tends to bring about good things for every part, and that which cannot hurt the city cannot hurt its citizens. Moreover, he claims that the stability, perfection, and well-being of the whole might depend on things that happen to every part. He further likens the relationship among community and the distinct rational individual people to the body and limbs that become perfectly integrated in order to function together as a unit. This comparison between the body- and-limb relationship and the city-and-citizen relationship is reflected in *The Meditations* where Marcus writes. “....for we are made to work in harmony, like a man’s two feet or hands, eyelids, or the row of upper and lower teeth. To work against one another is against nature.....” Marcus observed that nature is satisfied with itself only when everything goes well.

The stoic principle of being disinterested in yourself is better understood once we realize that we are not entitled to all good things. If we were, the Logos would make sure that we had them. For example; our text book shows that we are not entitled to have good, just, healthy, loving and supportive parents, just parents. We do, however have a duty to our parents that has nothing to do with whether we like them or they deserve it. Anger, aggression, disrespect and arrogance have no part in a true Stoic's heart. In direct contrast the Stoic is compassionate, generous, patient, honorable and fulfills his duty unconditionally. Marcus wrote "Does another man do me wrong? Let him worry about that. He has his own temperament and his own way of acting. As for me, I have only what Nature wills me to have; I do what my own nature wills me to do."

This brings me back to why I felt a particular affinity for the Stoics and Marcus Aurelius particularly. My parents divorced while I was still quite young. We lived a meager life, struggling to survive from paycheck to paycheck. I did not spend any time worry about the lot we were given. What good would it do? I went to work. I helped pay the bills. I joined the army at 17. I fulfilled my duty to my family and my country. To give up was not an option. I believed, as the Stoics, that God only tests the strong. I believed, and still do, that my personal trials were not a misfortune, but a test of my resolve and that they would be for the ultimate good.

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