

Marcus Aurelius: The Dialogues

Alan Stedall

'In this delightful and well-written book, Alan Stedall ... has done an enormous service in making some of Marcus Aurelius's reflections very accessible to the modern reader'

Faith & Freedom

'The Dialogues are eminently readable and immediate ... in places it is irresistible'

The Philosopher

'I was drawn deeper and deeper into the simple solid reasoning ... Stedall's imagined dialogue had me fully in the present'

Midwest Book Review

'I knew within a few lines this was going to be a treasure... Stedall is a word master... Bravo!'

The Smoking Poet

Marcus Aurelius, one of the greatest Roman emperors, is remembered less for his military exploits than for his private reflections. His *Meditations*, as they became known, have been a major influence on Western thought and behaviour down the centuries - the pen is mightier than the sword.

Seeking an alternative to faith-based religion, Alan Stedall came across the book and found rational answers to questions about the meaning and purpose of life that had been troubling him. Here too were answers to his concern that, in the absence of moral beliefs based on religion, we risk creating a world where relativism, the rejection of any sense of absolute right or wrong, prevails. In such a society any moral position is considered subjective and amoral behaviour is unchallengeable.

Because the *Meditations* were jotted down in spare moments during a busy life ruling and defending a huge empire, they lack order and sequence. Inspired by the wisdom of Marcus Aurelius, Stedall has sought to present the contents in a more contemporary and digestible way.

To achieve this, he employed the Greek philosophical technique of dialogue to create a fictional conversation between five historical figures who actually met at Aquileia on the Adriatic coast in AD 168. Apart from Marcus, they were his brother and co-emperor, Lucius, the famous Hellenic surgeon of antiquity, Galen, an Egyptian high priest of Isis, Harnouphis, and Bassaeus Rufus, Prefect of the Praetorian Guard.

The Dialogues afford Marcus and his guests the opportunity to express their views on such topics as the brevity of life and the need to seek meaning; the pursuit of purpose; the supreme good and the pursuit of a virtuous life – issues as relevant today as they were in antiquity. By a gentle process of question and answer, Marcus shows up the weakness of his guests' arguments and reveals how a virtuous life may be lived without the threat of eternal damnation or promise of salvation to enforce compliance. Virtue is its own reward.

Alan Stedall is an IT director believing in principle-centred leadership. This has involved leading teams through projects effecting major and business-critical change.

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INTRODUCTION

IT WAS AFTER nineteen years as a Roman Catholic that I found myself progressively uneasy with my faith. That is not to say that the Faith itself had changed; neither had my admiration for many of its celebrants and devotees, whom I continued to find exemplary in their charitable nature, warm-heartedness and liberal outlook. My difficulty arose in my inability to continue to accept certain fundamental beliefs of Christianity.

Specifically, I found increasing difficulty in stating that I believed in life after death; that Jesus was God; that he had performed miracles; that he had been incarnated as the result of an immaculate conception and had risen from the dead. Clearly this is not a short or trivial list of objections to the orthodox Christian faith.

For some years I convinced myself that, although I held these aspects of the faith to be at best unlikely, if not downright impossible, my active participation in the Church was justified because of the manifest benefits of the moral teachings and ethical way of life it promoted.

In truth, I had some difficulty with the Church's obsession with things sexual: its concern that its members

should not use contraceptives; should not practice homosexuality; should not have sex outside of marriage; and that its priests must remain celibate and could not be female. I saw these as unnatural and unhealthy intrusions into personal matters that were nothing to do with vital spiritual issues, and, of themselves, had little to do with morality. To be fair, while I found this peculiar obsession puzzlingly bizarre and medieval, it did not impact upon me personally.

But I did find that reciting *The Credo*, confirming my belief in the miracles I questioned, was becoming increasingly difficult. At first I attempted to convince myself that this was unimportant, that such statements of belief were ritualistic and not to be taken literally in this modern scientific age.

But my discomfort became intolerable when I began to realise that, in reciting the statements in *The Credo*, I was undermining my own sense of integrity, and was basing my faith on an underlying self-deceit. I concluded that, no matter how highly I prized the spiritual, moral and social values of the Christian faith, for me such highly desirable ends could not justify a means that involved self-deceit: a personal faith not based on honesty and truth to oneself is not a faith at all.

This is not to say that I felt in any way disparaging of Christian ethics. From my own perspective, if Jesus had been 'only' a man and had consequently died fully and

finally for his beliefs set out in the Gospels, then I find this to be even the more admirable than the orthodox Christian view of him as God who was subsequently resurrected. As a mere mortal man, he would have made the final and ultimate sacrifice to become the living (and dying) embodiment of Gandhi's exhortation to 'be the change you wish to see in the world'.

For my own part, I felt no need of the promise of an after-life to justify my attempts to live the best life that I could in the here and now. Indeed, the promise of a heaven, and threat of a hell, were not only superfluous, they actually contaminated virtuous attempts at moral behaviour by suggesting that this could be achieved only through a set of external (and eternal) promises and threats. From my perspective it seemed that leading the good life, or even the valiant pursuit of it, was in fact its own reward; otherwise one would have to conclude that man was, of his nature, essentially evil and could only be coerced onto a moral path by divine intervention. The experiences of my fellow men taught me that this was not so.

So I cast myself adrift from Christianity, from its valued community, its safe harbour of belief and the peace of mind that the faith offers.

An atheistic position, however, was not the alternative destination I sought. The concept of a life and cosmos without purpose is one I find fundamentally obscene. It

implies that the human race is trapped and condemned to suffer pointlessly in the mindless mechanism of a vast emotionless and purposeless cosmic machine – the final outcome of all the strivings, sufferings and achievements of our species over the millennia being reduced to no more than detritus in space by some accidental collision with a passing asteroid.

I read Don Cupitt and tried to get to grips with his attempts to construct a ‘post-religion religion’, but concluded that this was an intellectual fudge, requiring us to believe in a God while at the same time acknowledging that he was dead. I don’t believe He is.

I also dabbled in the teachings of certain Eastern religions but found the underlying concepts – of detaching oneself from the material world and accepting life fatalistically – to be too defeatist for my taste. In my view we do not come to terms with, let alone make the best of, this thing called life by detaching ourselves from it. Even in the darkest of interpretations, life at the very least appears to offer us a short vacation from oblivion. In my view life is to be lived.

What I sought was a set of life-engaging, coherent humanistic precepts based on a spiritual belief that did not require miraculous foundations or divine coercion.

Meditations

IT WAS THEN that I read Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*, translated by Maxwell Staniforth. Here was a historic, real figure who had tried his best to live by essentially pre-Christian Stoic principles and, it seems, had largely succeeded. He didn't give up his belief in God or gods; he wasn't sure whether there was a life after death, but concluded that this shouldn't in any case influence his behaviour in this life. The philosophy that he espoused was one of active and vigorous engagement with life, with the overall objective of improving the physical and spiritual lot of his fellow man.

The Stoic philosophy on which many of Marcus's beliefs were based was founded upon the intellectual lineage of great Greek philosophers such as Socrates, Plato and Cleanthes. However, Marcus's personal belief-set was not purely Stoic: it was heavily biased by, and overlaid with, strong humanistic beliefs. His was not a cold-hearted and detached Stoicism; it was, above all, kindly, cheerful, understanding and forgiving of his fellow man. Contrary to the traditional teachings of Stoicism, Marcus unashamedly grieved the loss of those he loved as much as any other man.

It was in Staniforth's translation that I found the germ of the belief system I was seeking. However, the *Meditations* is essentially, and unapologetically, a set of

personal notes jotted down by Marcus Aurelius, on his many military expeditions, for his own spiritual refreshment. Indeed, the simple and original title for these notes was *To Myself* and it is doubtful that he ever intended them to be read by other eyes. They are not, they do not set out to be, a set of moral teachings. Nonetheless, Staniforth's excellent translation captures not only the personal thoughts and sharp self-criticism of Marcus Aurelius, it portrays his thoughts in an almost poetic form that adds force to their impact.

The fragmentary nature of the *Meditations* can be likened to the shards of a beautiful Grecian urn: each shard is beautiful when examined on its own, but the curious mind desires to know what coherence and beauty they might portray if re-assembled into some semblance of the original artefact.

I could find no work that attempted to do this. I read *The Spiritual Teachings of Marcus Aurelius* by Mark Forstater but was disappointed to find that it seemed as if all he had done was modernise the notes in the *Meditations*, then sort them mechanically into an order of contemporary applicability. This did not offer the overall coherence I was seeking; moreover, much of Marcus's personal style of writing and thinking had been lost. I felt that understanding the character of the man was almost as important as understanding the beliefs that his character had given rise to.

The Dialogues

THIS BOOK is my attempt to construct a largely coherent vessel from the beautiful shards of thinking that Marcus Aurelius left us. I openly confess that I have added to his own ideas where I felt the vessel I was attempting to assemble had essential pieces missing.

In particular, those passages describing the drive to seek meaning in life are wholly my own. I felt them to be fundamental to Marcus's philosophy as they attempt to answer the question that, to his credit, would probably never have occurred to Marcus regarding the underlying need for philosophical engagement in the first place: 'Why bother?'

In the final chapter I try to crystallise what I take to be Marcus's kernel philosophical belief. In doing this I certainly step beyond the various hints that he leaves us, to make his statement of faith more explicit.

On the other hand, I admit that a vast number of 'shards' have not found a place in my artefact. The *Meditations* leaves one spoilt for choice as to which of the 488 individual notes that Marcus left us in his twelve books should be incorporated into a work such as this. Inevitably a re-composer of Marcus's belief system has an end-view in mind and selects elements on this basis.

I chose to adopt a dialogue form for this work for three vital reasons.

Firstly, this form is traditional for philosophical works since it enables the development of rationale and argument with some degree of literary energy, and avoids the risk of becoming too dry.

Secondly, the dialogue structure enables Marcus's views to be represented in a simple, logical sequence that allows a more coherent construction of his position than may be found in the *Meditations*. It is my hope that his belief system may thus be more accessible, and may benefit a wider readership than the more precise and necessarily more academic direct translation.

Thirdly, I myself yearned to hear Marcus openly express and defend his own beliefs. Not finding this in any other work, I determined that the only way to meet my need was to construct the necessary stage myself.

The three characters I have depicted in dialogue with Marcus – his adopted brother, Lucius, the celebrated classical anatomist of the ancient world, Galen, and the Egyptian high priest of Isis, Harnouphis – are real historical figures, as is the main narrator, Bassaeus Rufus, Praetorian Prefect to Marcus. They really did meet at Aquileia on the Adriatic coast in 168. Did they engage in a dialectical discussion such as I have presented? We will never know. However, given Marcus Aurelius's passion for philosophy, and its traditional development through dialectical discussion, I like to think he would not have missed the opportunity, given the celebrated nature of his guests.

Marcus Aurelius summarised his general attitude to life as ‘more like wrestling than dancing’, because ‘life demands a firm and watchful stance against any onset.’³ This seems a somewhat stern and unfashionable view of life from the perspective of the upbeat cultural zeitgeist of Western life in the twenty-first century. It therefore requires some explanation of the circumstances in which Marcus found himself that caused him to take this view of life.

Marcus Aurelius

MARCUS WAS BORN in 121, into a position of privilege within a wealthy Roman family. By this time Rome had expanded into the largest empire the world had ever known, absorbing and assimilating Hellenistic and Egyptian cultures. The Empire was highly organised and centrally controlled. However, its weakness lay in the extent of its expansion. The borders now extended to Britain in the west, Germany in the north, Syria in the east and North Africa in the south: this was a truly vast area to manage, especially given the primitive methods of transport and communication at the time. More importantly, simple geometry dictated that the expansion of territory had vastly increased the length of borders that had to be garrisoned, to prevent local invasions from adjoining nations and tribes, jealous of Rome’s power and wealth.

In effect, the past military triumphs of Rome had led to the growth of an empire that was now so large that defending the conquered territories was a military and administrative task of Herculean proportions. Although the central territories that had been occupied were relatively peaceful, Rome was teetering on the brink of losing control of its borders.

During Marcus's lifetime great events were to occur, some natural (such as the catastrophic plague of 166) and some man-made (for example the rebellion of the Roman legions based in Egypt in 175), that would push the unstable Empire almost past the tipping-point.

Both of Marcus's parents died when he was young and it fell to his grandfather to raise him. As a young man his serious and scholarly ways greatly impressed the Emperor Hadrian, who nicknamed him 'Verissimus',⁴ 'truest'. It seems that Hadrian had early identified Marcus as a possible future successor, and consequently ensured that his upbringing and education were second to none.

In 138 Aelius Verus, Hadrian's chosen successor, predeceased Hadrian. Disappointed, and tired of life, Hadrian determined to die. Since Marcus was then still only seventeen, Hadrian adopted Marcus's uncle, Antoninus, as his successor on the understanding that Antoninus would, at the same time, declare Marcus as his own successor and that Antoninus also adopt the seven-year-old son of Aelius Verus, Lucius. Marcus thereby gained Lucius as a younger

‘brother’. These arrangements were duly carried out and Antoninus became Emperor, being honoured by the Senate of Rome with the title ‘Pius’, reflecting his deep religious convictions and sense of duty.

Describing his uncle Antoninus, Marcus paints a picture of a man who was dedicated, modest and courteous. Certainly Marcus enjoyed a warm relationship with his uncle, who saw to Marcus’s further education in philosophy, the classics and oratory. On Antoninus’s death, at the age of seventy-five in 161, Marcus became Emperor when he was forty.

He accepted the throne reluctantly and only on condition that the Senate appoint his adopted brother, Lucius, as co-Emperor alongside him. There was no precedent for rule by joint Emperors and there certainly had been no obligation on Marcus to force the issue on the Senate. The action demonstrates Marcus’s clear intention to commence his reign as he meant to go on: by acting in accordance with what he held to be right and fair, even when this was in no way demanded or expected of him.

It must be noted that the appointment of Lucius was a bad political move, given his weak nature. He turned out to be an ineffectual leader whose military successes in Syria and Alexandria were won purely on the backs of his generals.

Marcus’s nineteen years in office – to his death in 180 – were marked by a series of major crises, each one of which he overcame through prompt attention and engagement.

In his position of absolute power, but accompanied by absolute responsibility, it was Marcus's avowed intention to preserve and protect the Empire he had inherited. He applied himself to this task conscientiously and wholeheartedly.

The preceding rule of his uncle had been marked by military neglect. Marcus therefore inherited a number of external threats to the Empire that came to a head during his reign but had been in gestation a long time previously.

In 161, the same year of Marcus's ascendancy, the Parthian Empire invaded the eastern borders of the Roman Empire. To drive them out Marcus had to bring legions from as far afield as the Danube, weakening defences there against the menacing Germanic tribes to the north. It took five years of bitter fighting to subjugate the Parthians; only then could the legions from Germany return home. When they did, in 166, they brought with them the plague.

In 169 major fighting occurred on the Hungarian plain. Military resources were now so short, following the plague, that gladiators and bandits were conscripted into special units, and property from the Imperial Palace was auctioned to fund military expenses.⁵

In 170 Germanic tribes invaded the northern borders of the Empire, crossing the Danube and destroying a Roman army of 20,000 men. At the same time a further army of barbarians attacked the Balkans: Greece was invaded, followed by Italy itself, the latter for the first time in hundreds

of years.⁶ It was only by leading his troops in person that Marcus was able to halt and turn these twin tides of invasion.

This Roman success, however, was followed by further enemy incursions, this time by the Moors into Spain. Forces were now withdrawn from Greece to counter this new invasion.

In 172 Marcus was required to put down a rebellion in Egypt, while once again countering new invasions by Germanic tribes from across the Danube. This latest Danubian war lasted a further three years.

In 175 Avidius Cassius, the Roman governor of Syria and 'dear friend' of Marcus, declared himself Emperor, supposedly on the false news of Marcus's death. Cassius then led the legions under his command in Syria and Egypt into open rebellion against Rome, causing panic there. Fortunately Marcus was able to retain the loyalty of his more powerful Danubian legions and, when news spread that he was still alive and about to move against Cassius, the latter was slain by his own officers. Nonetheless, Marcus felt obliged to take a tour of Palestine, Egypt and Greece to understand at first hand the level of internal unrest there.

When Marcus returned to Rome in 176 it was after eight years' absence in the field and he was welcomed as a hero.

In 178 Marcus left Rome for the last time, together with his son, Commodus, once more to face the threat of

invasion by Germanic tribes from across the Danube. It is reported that many fellow philosophers were so concerned for Marcus's safety that they gathered together to clamour against his departure.⁷ Their concern was justified: Marcus was to die, possibly from the plague, two years later in an encampment on the Danube, a month before he would have turned fifty-nine.

It is clear that Marcus tackled the unrelenting stream of threats to the Empire with energy, enthusiasm and an outstanding sense of duty. He spent most of his time, not in the Imperial Palace in Rome, but in military camps on the borders of the Empire, leading and directing his troops at first hand. Through sheer dint of extreme effort, he won the Empire a reprieve for more than a generation from its eventual demise, probably at the cost of his own health.

It would be difficult to overstress the gravity of Marcus's responsibilities during this period. Rome was the sole custodian of Western civilisation's most treasured achievements in the arts, sciences, engineering, philosophy, law and political theory (much of this garnered from the Hellenistic civilisation). The preservation of Rome was, for Marcus, not just the defence of his homeland and its culture, but the preservation of world civilisation itself against the threat of a return to barbarity. With the destruction of the Roman Empire, that occurred after the death of Marcus, Europe was to enter a period of cultural darkness,

bloody wars, religious intolerance and persecutions that retarded progress in the arts and sciences for over a thousand years.

Marcus's personal life was also not free of trouble. His wife Faustina bore him fourteen children but he suffered the grief of seeing not less than seven of them die in early childhood. His only son to survive into adulthood, whom Marcus was obliged to appoint his successor (the only alternative under Roman law would have been to have the boy killed), was an increasing trial to him, displaying worsening fits of bad temper and ill-will. It is reported that, as a boy, Commodus once lost his temper with a bath-keeper who had allowed his bathwater to become luke-warm. In the absence of his father, Commodus ordered that the situation be corrected by the bath-keeper himself being thrown into the furnace.⁸

On succeeding to the throne, Commodus survived his father by just twelve years. Having become a hated, insane despot, he was assassinated by a wrestling companion who strangled him to death.

Marcus praises 'the artless and loving nature' of his wife, Faustina, and grieved her death, never subsequently remarrying or taking a mistress. However, persistent rumour had it that she had been unfaithful to Marcus on more than one occasion and that Commodus was not Marcus's son, but rather the result of a tryst between Faustina and a celebrated gladiator. Moreover, in 175

Faustina was said to have personally inveigled Avidius Cassius to lead the rebellion in Egypt that threatened to usurp Marcus. All letters in the possession of Cassius were conveniently destroyed on his death when the rebellion failed; these might well have included correspondence from Faustina that would have implicated her in the rebellion.⁹ Faustina died in 175, possibly by her own hand on learning the news of the failure and death of Cassius.

Against such a background, the reader will hopefully acknowledge that Marcus's view of life, as being 'more like wrestling than dancing, since life demands a firm and watchful stance against any onset',¹⁰ was very realistic, and indeed generous, considering his heavy responsibilities and personal trials.

After the death of Marcus, the Roman Empire was to enter a protracted period of unrest, characterised by a rapid succession of rulers, each of whom came to office by violently usurping the position of his predecessor. The vitality and strength of Rome's military capability was increasingly expended in internal political struggles. As her ability to fend off external enemies drained away, the demise of the Empire became inevitable. The moral is clear: a strong nation has to be based on an internal political mechanism that is widely accepted as fair, reasonable and just. Once such broad acceptance is lost, a nation rapidly becomes divided against itself and is easy prey to external aggressors: 'a house divided against itself cannot stand'.

This was perhaps Rome's fundamental weakness: its inability to sustain a republic and create a democracy sufficiently robust to defend itself against the challenges of emerging military dictatorships. In the absence of such sustainable and enduring political mechanisms, power fell into the hands of strong, charismatic rulers who commanded the loyalty of one or more of Rome's armies. From the reign of Nerva through to that of Marcus (AD96 to AD180), Rome was fortunate in its 'five good rulers'. At this period Rome is generally regarded as being at the zenith of its power and culture. But its luck ran out disastrously when Marcus's supposed son, Commodus, ascended the throne.

Marcus himself had delivered stability for over a generation to the populations of an empire that stretched over two thousand miles east to west. More importantly, he delivered it through a relatively benign and liberal rule. Arguably his only, though vital, omission was his failure to reform the political mechanisms of Rome so that succession did not depend on the potluck of bloodline, increasingly challenged by dagger and sword. However, given the continuous demands on Marcus simply to hold back Rome's enemies from its borders, perhaps even this criticism is unfair.

Marcus's unflinching sense of public duty and dedication won him the unqualified admiration of his contemporaries: Cassius Dio said after his death: 'He did not have

the good fortune that he deserved, for he was not physically strong, and for almost his whole reign was involved in a series of troubles. But I for my part admired him all the more for this very reason, that amid unusual and extraordinary difficulties he both survived himself and preserved the empire.’¹¹

From the above pen-picture of Marcus’s life, it is clear that his strong personal beliefs supported him through almost two decades of massive leadership responsibilities, multiple bereavements, bitter disappointments and betrayals by those closest to him. They even preserved him from the corruption of virtue that is said inevitably to accompany absolute power: he remained modest, charitable, undaunted and true to his principles to the end.

I hope that Marcus Aurelius, wherever he is, will not be too displeased with my attempt to extract a set of coherent beliefs from notes never intended for this purpose.

Alan Stedall

Birmingham, England, December 24, 2004