

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

ROMAN PHILOSOPHY

Greece and Rome The adage which says that Greece (meaning Greek culture and thought) conquered Rome even while the Roman military was overwhelming Greece, in the final two centuries of the classical era, applies in spades to the influx of Greek philosophy into early Roman thought.

Lucretius Lucretius (*The Nature of Things*, 50 B.C.E.) is an epic poem, in the same dactylic-hexameter meter we know from Homer and Virgil, and is an excellent instance of one of the greatest Roman philosophical texts highly dependent on Greek writing, in this case on the thoughts of Epicurus, the fourth century Greek moralist. Lucretius also thrived on the cosmological speculative physics of the Milesian (Asia Minor) philosophers. From those writers Lucretius formed or enriched his idea that the fundamental substance is atoms linking to one another in the void, and conjoining to form such random developments as organic life.

Seneca and Stoicism In the years following Lucretius (d. 55 B.C.) two of the finest Roman minds—Cicero (d. 43 B.C.) and Seneca (d. 65 A.D.)—drew their spiritual inspiration largely from the fund of Stoic ideas, a world view founded in late fourth century B.C. Athens, and destined to grow in strength throughout the Roman Empire. The basic thrust of this worldview was to promote self-control and the human peace that comes from co-operating with others, as well as from understanding how the world works. Cicero imposed a skeptical spin—‘our knowledge is limited—on this philosophy, while Seneca stressed control over the passions, and the dangers of sacrificing our independent judgments of things.

Marcus Aurelius To the modern reader, the most accessible of Roman philosophers is the Emperor Marcus Aurelius (121-180 C.E.), whose *Meditations* continue the Stoic trend of much Roman thought, while inflecting it with the standpoint from which he wrote—as a military commander on the front line, snatching a night time respite whenever he could, to write the text of his deeply human memoir, which he had no thought of publishing. Life lasts but a moment, he says, and we should coolly observe and enjoy our brief moment, meanwhile keeping our eye on the whole cosmos, and avoiding the delusions of vanity or flattery. While the world view of Marcus Aurelius still belongs to the Greek sphere, and is far from the Christian—lying ahead—it seems a harbinger of that one-god Platonism which was to shake Saint Augustine (354-430 C.E.) and to make of his *Confessions* a new kind of voice in the Roman world.

Saint Augustine Is it a philosophical voice we hear in Augustine? His speculations on God interweave with his reflections on memory, despair, guilt, hope. The fund of moral investigations that swarms through Roman Stoic and Epicurean thought, and that links Greek to Roman intellects, emerges in Augustine at the far end of considerations, intimate and sweeping, which will no longer be contained inside the framework of Greco-Roman thought.

Reading

Farquharson, A.S.L., *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus*, Oxford, 2008.

Inwood, B., ed. *Seneca: Selected Philosophical Letters*, translated with introduction and commentary, Oxford, 2007.

Discussion questions

Were the leading philosophies of ancient Rome all derived from Greek thought? What was the relation of Augustine’s thought to the Greeks? Did he inherit many of his ideas from the Greek Neoplatonists who were a formative element in later Roman cultural development?

The philosophical perspectives dominant in Roman philosophy were largely ethical, centered on questions about how to live the good life. Is there an element of logic, metaphysics, or theory of history in the Roman intellectual tradition?

While it is true, as in the adage above, that the Romans were in some sense conquered by their Greek subjects, would we say that the Romans made something new and fresh from what the Greeks gave them? What would you see as the distinctively Roman contribution to world thought?

Marcus Aurelius (121 A.D.- 180 A.D.; Emperor 161 A.D. -180 A.D.)

Stoics and Epicureans. We have been advancing through Roman literature by way of genres, and come at the end to philosophy, which requires a special prologue. At its peak, *Greek* philosophy, especially in Plato and Aristotle, had tried out systematic speculation, and established a power of rigorous dialectic with imagination which has left its mark on the formal study of philosophy to this day. But there were other themes in Greek philosophy, most influentially the schools of Stoicism and Epicureanism which came to flower in the third century B.C. These two branches of thought devoted their attention to the moral life, though not without concern for the ontological background of the universe in which human behavior is framed. Both the Stoics and the Epicureans, with their emphases on self-discipline, moderation, and toleration, exercised huge influence on Roman society and culture.

The Meditations. All this by way of direct approach to Marcus Aurelius, for whom Stoicism was an inspiration and staff of support throughout a hectically busy life at the top of the social/administrative ladder. Marcus' philosophy is embedded in a single book, which he called *To Himself*, and which we call the *Meditations*, and which is a living masterpiece of Stoic—and broadly human—wisdom. We will return to the book. Who was the man?

The Life of Marcus Aurelius. Marcus Aurelius was born in Ucubi, south east of Cordoba, Spain, to a family of wealth and distinction. His great grandfather had been a Senator, while Marcus' mother had inherited great wealth from her own father. This was already the formula for success, and Marcus, following the expectations of his class and educational aspirations, moved to Rome, where he spent his formative youth years in a upscale neighborhood, the Caelian Hill. (It will have struck us all, in this class, that Rome served as the magnet for all its future luminaries, though the leaders of Roman literary culture hailed widely from distant parts of the Empire.)

Education. In Rome Marcus was home-schooled, as were all young men of his class and expectation, Attracted by the ideal of the 'philosopher,' he went through a stage of dressing in dark rough cloaks, and sleeping on the ground—occupational traits of one kind of 'ancient philosopher'—until falling under the influence of Fronto, whom the Emperor Hadrian appointed tutor to Marcus Aurelius, and who—himself a wealthy and independent scholar---remained a prudent and affectionate guide to Marcus Aurelius throughout his life. Marcus was studious as well as active, and seemed destined for a superior role in practical political administration.

Imperial succession. In 138 B.C. the Emperor Hadrian chose Antoninus Pius to succeed him—Hadrian morbidly concerned with the decline in his health. As part of the succession deal, Hadrian stipulated that Antoninus should adopt Marcus Aurelius as his son. Pursuant to that deal Antoninus, taken as all were by the abilities of Marcus Aurelius, passed a law permitting his 'son' to assume the (very important) role of *quaestor*, before the age of twenty-four; and from there on the Emperor made all the necessary maneuvers required to prep Marcus as *his* successor. In 161 the death of Antoninus Pius opened the way for (a thoroughly reluctant) Marcus Aurelius, to become the last of the Antonine Emperors.

The worries of ruling. We are making our way back to a book, *The Meditations*, which Marcus Aurelius jotted down 'to himself' in intervals of camp and court life between 170 A.D. and 180 A.D. By the time Marcus was pushed to that brilliant literary survival tactic, his reign had become more than difficult, and more than a challenge to a man who, though a quick learner and a brilliant 'ruler,' had a strong withdrawal streak of the private intellectual in him. (Marcus' reign had started well, but already in 162 A.D. Rome had been hit by devastating floods which had killed most of the livestock in the city, destroying whole settled areas, and setting off a long lasting famine which had to be countered by opening emergency grain supplies. Not much later the frontiers of the Empire fell under attack from a wide variety of Marcomanni, Quadi, Sarmatians, and Germanic tribes avid to get their pillaged share of the Imperial fruits. The worries of ruling soon beset Marcus Aurelius, who was above all conscientious, and the

literary result is a world classic of Stoic wisdom and good sense. The end of his life was essentially the conclusion of this book, which, as you will see, was essentially his life turned inside out.

Supreme self-help book. You will have little trouble following the themes of this work, which highlight the importance of self-control, self-examination, indifference to petty behaviors, a sense of our cosmic setting, a refusal to be bullied by the seeming urgency of the moment. No self-help book, on the shelves at Barnes and Noble, can light a candle to the wisdom of the *Meditations*.

Here is a passage from Book One, in which Marcus is praising his father, for the virtues he learned from him:

whensoever any business upon some necessary occasion was to be put off and omitted before it could be ended, he was ever found, when he went back to the matter again, the same man that he was before. He was accurate in examination of things and in consultations, and patient in the hearing of others. He would not hastily give over a search into any matter, as one easy to be satisfied with sudden notions and apprehensions. He was careful to preserve his friends; nor at any time would he carry himself towards them with disdainful neglect, and grow weary of them; nor yet at any time would he be madly fond of them. He had a contented mind in all things, a cheerful countenance, care to foresee things afar off, and to take order for the least, without any noise or clamour.

Readings

Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Hammond (New York, 2006.)

A Companion to Marcus Aurelius, ed. Van Ackeren (New York, 2012.)

Discussion questions

What explains the great attraction of Marcus Aurelius to Stoicism and Epicureanism? Do those philosophies contain the potential for the kinds of insight Saint Augustine (as a Christian) will instinctively work from? Does the Stoicism of Seneca—you may want to research this—resemble that of Marcus Aurelius?

In what ways is Marcus Aurelius' *To Himself* a response to the immediate pressures of his own life? What were those pressures? What finally was his attitude toward them?

Would you call Marcus Aurelius a philosopher, or a practical man of considerable wisdom? To answer this you would need to establish a working definition of 'philosopher,' which is not so easy. In Greco Roman times the philosopher was sometimes the sage, sometimes—as in Plato—the brilliant dialectician. What does 'philosopher' mean to us today?