

Marcus Aurelius

Emperor and Philosopher

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Emperor and Philosopher Marcus Aurelius Antoninus

Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (Aurelius) was born into a wealthy family in Rome, Italy on 26th April A.D. 121 to Marcus Annus Verus and Domitia Lucilla. As stated in the Introduction of “Meditations” after the death of his father (Aurelius was still a young child at the time) his grandfather, also named Marcus Annis Verus adopted him. (Rees, 1960, viii)

As a privileged youth, Aurelius was afforded many things, including individual private tutoring at his home in Rome. (Rees, 1960, p. viii) Within the pages of Meditations, Book I, it is clear to the reader that Aurelius was very fond of not only his family, but some of his tutors as well. Aurelius acknowledges individually, the people who impacted and influenced his life in one way or another, whether it was by teaching him the lessons of life and preparing him for his future and what laid before him or one of a deep meaningful and genuine love and admiration for his family and their adoration for him and the traits he inherited from each person mentioned in Book I. (Aurelius, 1944, p. 1-6) During his childhood, Aurelius was taught in the languages of Latin and Greek, in addition to lessons of Greek literature. Aurelius had one particular tutor that he favored most and held a great deal of affection for, Marcus Cornelius Fronto.

Not long after beginning his studies with Fronto, who was a leader in the literary movement of the day, and affected a highly precious style studded with archaisms: Aurelius abandoned an education that stressed form rather than content. (Rees, 1960 p. viii-xvii) At the rather young age of twelve, Aurelius adopted the dressing style of a philosopher and shortly thereafter, the hardiness, pursuing his studies clad in a Greek style cloak and sleeping on the ground, depriving himself of some of the basic comforts in life. Only at his mother’s continued urging did Aurelius take to sleeping on a bed made of straw and animal skins. (Scarre, 1995,

p.112) It was also about that time Marcus Aurelius begin to see philosophy not as an abstract theory, but as a way of life.

Aurelius' Early Political Life

When Aurelius was just seventeen, Emperor Hadrian died. However before his death, Emperor Hadrian adopted his successor, Titus Aurelius Antoninus and made it clear to Antoninus, that after he became emperor, he was to adopt Aurelius as a prospective future successor. Since Aurelius spent a majority of this life in and around the circle of the senate and court, Hadrian knew Aurelius and believed he would indeed be an excellent choice for a future emperor.

At the age of nineteen, Aurelius became a leader of the senate. As time passed, Aurelius took on more and more official responsibilities, which placed him in a powerful position of support and counsel for the aging Antoninus. During this time, Aurelius continued his studies in philosophy and started to develop an interest in law.

At the age of twenty-four, Aurelius married Emperor Antoninus Pius' daughter, Faustina (who died in A.D. 175). Together they had several children of which a few did not survive to an age past needing a nurse-maid. Two of Aurelius' most known children are his son Commodus, who at the age of seventeen became co-emperor along side of Aurelius from A.D. 177 until Aurelius died in 180; and his daughter Lucilla, who at the age of eleven was betrothed to, and later married her father's earlier co-ruler, Lucius Verus, who was in fact formally considered her uncle. (Wikipedia, internet). After his adoptive father (Antoninus Pius) died on 7 March 161, Aurelius became emperor. (Rees, 1960, p.vii-xvii)

Aurelius' Influences and Works for the Period

Aurelius was both a great emperor and philosopher. He served as emperor, either jointly or alone from 161 to 180. (Scarre, 1995, p.112). As a philosopher, Aurelius' "Meditations" were more in the way of his understanding, and his belief on how to live one's life following the Stoic philosophy. "Epictetus's teachings exerted a profound influence on the last great Stoic, Emperor Marcus Aurelius". (Cunningham & Reich, 2009, p.93)

The reign of Aurelius was marked by bitter and near-continuous warfare, plague, invasion and uprising. The progression of calamities is reflected in the bleak stoicism of The Meditations. (Scarre, 1995, p.112) Shortly after Aurelius became emperor, the Parthian War broke out in A.D. 162 and in 165 the campaigns which ensued, brought with it a devastating plague (165 – 167) that overwhelmed large portions of the empire. Finally, the war against a group of Danubian tribes started in A.D. 168 and lasted the rest of Aurelius' life, with the exception of a two year interruption between A.D 175 to 177. (Rees, 1960, p.x)

As can be determined from reading Aurelius work, his thoughts were deep and so were his actions. As Emperor, Aurelius ruled in Stoic fashion as well. Aurelius struggled to maintain balance between his public duty and responsibilities and his personal convictions.

(Cunningham/Reich, 2009, p.93) Like nearly all emperors, Aurelius spent most of his time addressing petitions and hearing disputes on matters of law and he took great care in the theory and practice of legislation. Professional jurists called him "an emperor most skilled in the law" and "a most prudent and conscientiously just emperor". He had a keen interest in three areas of the law: the manumission of slaves, the guardianship of orphans and minors, and the choice of city councillors (*decuriones*). (Wikipedia, "Legal and administrative work")

Aurelius was a fair, straightforward, polished and enlightened ruler. He showed mercy and kindness to his foes and when the empire was at war and short of money, Aurelius opted to sell personal possessions in lieu of raising taxes on the people in his empire in order to fund the wars. Some claim that his greatest fault was his refusal to declare Stoicism as the official religion of the empire. Aurelius probably realized the importance of putting into practice his belief; how he viewed the way one should lead their life of good and positive in nature. In realizing this fact, Aurelius would have found value in the order of free will and had he imposed a specific religion for the empire, people may likely have oppose the idea, rather than accept it. (MurphsPlace, internet) Actions speak louder than words, and Aurelius actions would have been very loud and quite clear in his personal value of leading by example. He showed great character in doing what was good and fair, by putting the needs of others first and not raising taxes, nor imposing a specific religion. Aurelis' gentle leading gesture may have prompted people in his empire to be more inclined to seek out the Stoicism Philosophy, rather than rejecting it.

“It is absurdly wrong that, in this life where your body does not give in, your spirit should be the first to surrender.” (Aurelius, M., Meditations, Book VI, No. 29, p.39)

Roman Architecture

The Sanctuary of Fortuna is an excellent example of exactly what Stoicism practice teaches resistance against. Although the architecture of the period was beautifully crafted and was the “cutting edge of Architecture” at the time, the buildings were built not only out of necessity, but done so in a form of indulgence and on the side of extravagant. The birth of such architecture was one way political figures in powerful positions of the period utilized, in order to demonstrate their authority and most often the structures were named for them, by them or in their honor. (Cunningham/Reich, 2009, p. 94) This type of action (or indulgence and

extravagance) is what Aurelius speaks about in his “Meditations” and how the Stoic philosophy warns against being greedy, or excessive and seeking man for pleasure instead of god and nature. As time passed and more buildings were constructed, the size and adornments became greater and grander and dwarfed other buildings that were once revered as the grandest of all.

“What does not benefit the hive is no benefit to the bee.” (Aurelius, M., Meditations, Book VI, No. 54, p.43)

Roman Influence on Contemporary Society

In the world today, we find buildings which mimic certain aspects of the Roman era and architecture marvel of the period. The overall architectural designs are still found in buildings standing today, with the pillar columns, adorned in the bell-shaped design, and detailed with the acanthus leaves, mostly in buildings that housed courts of law and churches. Although new buildings are being constructed in a more modern fashion, those buildings from the Roman era that remain standing, do so with grace and style and should make one stop and consider what life may have been like during the era from which such elaborate work was born and so gracefully crafted.

Concluding Remarks

There are opposing sides to what the true and founding Stoicism’s core belief and teaching really are. Is it a form of self centered philosophy, where a student of Stoicism is only concerned about himself? Could it be wishful hoping and thinking that there is a god and that god, nature and the universe work together as a whole, wanting good for all people? *“Each man’s benefit is what Universal Nature brings to each, and it is his benefit precisely at the time she brings it.”* (Aurelius, M., Meditations, Book X, No. 20, p.75)

Although Aurelius seemed to be a man wrought with struggles and inner battles at times, especially during his time of writing Meditations, I believe his struggles of being torn between being a human man and having an aspiration for self improvement was character building for him, just as it would be for anyone.

After reading several references on Marcus Aurelius as well as the books in his “Meditation”, I conclude for myself that Christianity of today, still closely resembles the Stoic Philosophy, although Christianity may be more closely related to god in all things, it still seems to parallel the Stoic principle quite closely.

As a Christian, I strive to instill in my daily life, including personal and professional aspects, the same things that Aurelius did so very long ago. Those things are; to remain honest, both with yourself and those in your life; to have unwavering morals and to not harbor vanity; to hold onto values and virtues that do not take hold of greed or longing to “keep up with the Jones’s”: to remain sincere and genuine, even when the truth may not be pleasant, either to yourself or others; remain compassionate of those in our lives who have struggles, as we have not walked in their shoes and truly do not have an insight of their life. What may seem trivial to us may be monumental to another, have integrity and do the right thing when nobody is looking. And lastly, honor people sincerely, not for their positions in the community, their possessions in their home or for what they’ve accomplished in their lifetime; but for whom they truly are, an individual who is loving, seeking, searching, yearning, learning, wanting, needing and at times vulnerable. We each hold an extraordinary special inward spirit that resides deep inside. I believe Aurelius knew he had an indefinable connection to the Stoic philosophy and was on a personal mission of searching for his inner greatness and understanding when he was writing “Meditations”.

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