Meditations

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MARCUS AURELIUS

Marcus Aurelius was Emperor of the Roman Empire for almost two decades, from 161–180 C.E. He was born Marcus Annius Verus and brought up by his grandfather, a Roman consul (Marcus's father having died when he was young). He came from a fairly distinguished family and enjoyed a well-educated, upper-class youth that would have included study of classical literature in both Latin and Greek, as well as rhetoric and philosophy. He did not regard himself as a philosopher, but simply as a student of philosophy—a subject that became increasingly important to him later in life. In 137, the childless emperor Hadrian selected the senator Antoninus Pius as his successor, who in turn designated his nephew and adoptive son, Marcus, as his own successor. At this point, Marcus added the family name of Aurelius Antoninus to his own. In 161, Antoninus's death made Marcus Emperor; Marcus then made his adoptive brother, Lucius Verus, his co-regent. His entire reign was troubled: early on, the Empire was devastated by a plague brought back by soldiers fighting against the Parthians (an empire in what's now Iran), followed soon after by the invasion of Germanic peoples from the north. In 168, Marcus himself marched with the armies to fight in what were known as the Marcomannic Wars on the Empire's northern frontiers. *Meditations* was written during this last decade of his life, during a period marked by upheaval on the borders, revolt within, and the deaths of loved ones. Marcus was married to a woman named Faustina and had at least 13 children with her. He was succeeded by his son, Commodus, whose reign was both more peaceful and far more scandalous than his father's.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the ancient world, philosophy was not primarily an academic discipline; it was seen as practical, a set of guidelines for life—more akin to how religion is thought of today. Centuries before Marcus lived, a philosophical school called Stoicism emerged, founded by a teacher in Athens named Zeno (c. 332–262 B.C.E.); it was further expounded by Chrysippus (280–c. 206 B.C.E.). Stoics believed that the world is rationally organized and can therefore be understood. The world is directed by the *logos*, a word that's notoriously difficult to translate—in human beings, it refers to the faculty of reason, and within the universe at large, it refers to the rational principle organizing the cosmos and is roughly synonymous with "nature" or "God." That is, it's not just an impersonal force, but a substance that pervades and animates all things. The *logos* determines everything that happens in the universe, and its design for the universe is harmonious and good. By Marcus Aurelius's time, Stoicism was considered to be a practical school of thought, popularized by a slave-turned-philosopher named Epictetus. For Marcus, Stoicism was stripped of its more abstract speculations about the universe and focused on the ethics of everyday life—how to live well in a seemingly unpredictable world where people are often stricken with misfortunes, and above all how to prepare for death. Marcus's answers to such questions involve striving for objectivity in one's perception of the world, acting according to one's role as part of the harmonious universe, and governing one's reactions to events beyond their control.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Meditations references Plato's dialogues, such as the *Republic* (which Marcus mentions directly) and *Symposium* (to which Marcus alludes). Marcus Aurelius was also influenced by a Stoic work titled *The Handbook of Epictetus*, or the *Enchiridion*, compiled by Arrian earlier in the 2nd century. Marcus's own education, conducted in both Latin and Greek, would almost certainly have included Vergil's epic the *Aeneid* as well as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Finally, *Meditations* might be compared to *Pensées* ("Thoughts") by the 17th-century French philosopher Blaise Pascal—though, unlike Marcus, Pascal seems to have intended his jottings on philosophy, religion, and life for eventual publication.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Meditations*
- **When Written:** c. 170s C.E.
- **Where Written:** On the frontiers of the Roman Empire
- **When Published:** Recopied throughout the Middle Ages; first published in print form in the 16th century
- **Literary Period:** Classical
- **Genre:** Philosophy; Journal

EXTRA CREDIT

A Long History and Enduring Fame. Despite being a private work that was never intended for publication, *Meditations* was passed down over the centuries. Historically, the first recorded mention of *Meditations* was in the 10th century, when manuscript collector Bishop Arethas of Caesarea mentions copying Marcus Aurelius's Greek "Treatise to Himself." The first Latin printed edition was made at Zurich in the 1550s. In 2002, the *Modern Library*'s English edition made a national bestseller list in the United States.

A Reputation to Match. Along with Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, and his adoptive father Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius was traditionally regarded as one of the Roman Empire's "Five Good Emperors"—a classification first made by Niccolò Machiavelli in 1531—for his admirable life and governance.

PLOT SUMMARY

As a collection of Marcus Aurelius's philosophical reflections, *Meditations* doesn't have a coherent plot structure, but each of its 12 books focuses on several recurrent themes—living a philosophical life, social relationships, nature and the gods, and mortality.

In Book 1, Marcus Aurelius expresses his thanks to various influences in his life, like his family, his predecessor and adoptive father Antoninus Pius, and even the gods for imparting virtuous lessons and setting him on the path of philosophy.

In Book 2, Marcus reflects on the difficulties of dealing with unpleasant people. It's important to remember that all people share in a divinely given, rational nature (the logos) and to refrain from getting angry at others. In fact, belief in divine Providence should shape one's life in every way, reminding them that every individual is part of a greater whole, thereby helping them reject bitterness and live with gratitude. Getting distracted by lesser things, like what's going on in other people's minds, only leads to unhappiness. Because life is so brief and subject to change, only philosophy can help a person control their thoughts, accept life, act justly, and die well.

Book 3: The most important strategy for a person's soul, Marcus says, is to break down and rationally analyze everything that happens—to understand the true nature of things and events. To this end, a person should keep their philosophy handy, just as a doctor keeps his tools nearby in case of emergency.

Book 4: A person's most important refuge is within the self. According to Marcus, if you choose not to be harmed by something that happens to you, you *won't* be harmed by it, because the mind can't be hurt by anything outside of it. In life, there's no such thing as "fortunate" or "unfortunate"—it's all in how people interpret what happens to them.

Book 5: A person's most important work is "being human," experiencing things and practicing virtues in response. Even when you encounter obstacles, as in dealing with difficult people, you can adapt to them, work around them, and develop obstacles into opportunities for the soul's betterment.

Book 6: Nature, inhabited by the divine *logos*, governs everything in harmony. Life may seem random, but that's no cause for anxiety. No matter what, everything will be absorbed back into the *logos*, and in the meantime, one's job remains the same: have a goal and live in harmony with nature as one pursues that goal.

Book 7: Each individual is part of a larger whole and should strive to get along well with others. Marcus stresses that we're all human, we'll soon die, and we can afford to show each other compassion. In any case, another person's actions can't stop you from practicing virtues. Your soul's well-being is in your own hands.

Book 8: Marcus advises to stay humble—you haven't fully attained a philosophical life. Don't complain or blame others. Just focus on building your own life out of the materials you've been given, one action at a time, and keeping your attention fixed on the present. Posthumous fame is a pointless goal.

Book 9: Injustice, lying, and other misdeeds mock the gods, because we're designed to work together—all rational beings who share in the *logos*. Everything we do should ultimately be directed toward society's benefit, since individual good isn't distinct from that. Do the best you can, even if you fall short of your ideals and other people don't appreciate you.

Book 10: Be satisfied with what you have, be unselfish, and set practical goals. Accept whatever happens, remembering that life is a training-ground for one's *logos*. A healthy mind isn't enslaved by worry or the need for others' approval.

Book 11: From Marcus's perspective, the soul is responsible for making something of itself and accepting the inevitability of death calmly. Everyone has the potential to do this, and nobody else can prevent them from it. At the same time, developing good judgment and treating others justly takes a lifetime of practice.

Book 12: A philosophical life is always attainable, but people get in their own way. The only solution is to forget the past, trust God for the future, and practice virtue. Don't be troubled by other people's opinions, which can't affect you, or their misbehavior, which is a result of their ignorance. Your own reactions are the only thing within your control. It's a privilege to have lived in a great **city**, and death is no disgrace. The length of one's life and the timing of one's exit are the gods' doing. It's Marcus's place to exit life gracefully.

CHARACTERS

Marcus Aurelius – Marcus Aurelius was Roman Emperor from 161–180 C.E. and the author of *Meditations*. The book is a collection of Marcus's personal reflections and Stoic philosophical exercises written during the last decade of his life, many of them during military campaigns on the Empire's frontiers. Though Marcus writes almost nothing about himself, the *Meditations* reveal him to have cared about self-discipline, modesty, treating others justly, and, like a good Stoic philosopher, living in accordance with nature and preparing his soul for death. He shows much gratitude toward the gods, toward his parents, and especially toward his adoptive father

and predecessor as Emperor, Antoninus Pius, for arranging his life so that he could be successful as an Emperor and, even more, as a person dedicated to philosophy.

Antoninus Pius – Antoninus was Marcus Aurelius's uncle and adoptive father. A Roman senator, Antoninus was named successor of the Emperor Hadrian and, in turn, he named Marcus his own successor. He reigned from 138–161 C.E. Marcus credits Antoninus for being his model for living according to philosophy: he describes his predecessor as steadfast, modest, hardworking, and pious toward the gods.

TERMS

Philosophy – In *Meditations*, philosophy doesn't refer to an abstract course of academic study, but to a person's way of life. This was the more common understanding of philosophy in the ancient world, and it was especially true of the popularized Stoicism that **Marcus Aurelius** followed. Marcus often refers to philosophy as a set of practical guidelines by which a person directs their daily life, especially in light of life's brevity, instability, and inevitable mystery. A set of mental tools kept near at hand, philosophy helps a person keep their mind steady and unshaken despite pain, upheaval, mistreatment by others, and inevitable death. *Meditations* itself is a collection of Marcus's philosophical exercises, jotted down amidst the rigors of daily life as emperor.

Logos – A Greek term, *logos* has many meanings, referring to everything from words, discussion, and philosophical discourse to the metaphysical source of all things in the universe. The latter sense is found most often in *Meditations*. **Marcus Aurelius** uses *logos* to refer both to the divine that infuses and directs all things in nature and to the "fragment" of God, the rational mind, that is found in every person. It's one's *logos* that gets trained by philosophy and serves as the basis of common ground between human beings. It's also the animating part of a person that, separated from their substance, gets absorbed into the universal *logos* upon their death.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

PHILOSOPHY, THE MIND, AND LIVING WELL

The collection of short sayings titled *Meditations* comes from the personal journals of Marcus Aurelius over the years (161–180 C.E.) that he was Roman Emperor. *Meditations* isn't a formal philosophical treatise; it's a series of brief mental exercises designed to help Marcus think and act well—in other words, to live a good life according to the Stoic philosophy he favored. (Stoicism taught that human beings should always try to act reasonably and in harmony with nature. Since actions proceed from thoughts, training the mind was believed to help a person regulate their actions.) Through scattered sayings, it's possible to gather Marcus's outlook on the meaning of life. Marcus argues that life's purpose is simply to live well according to one's divine, or reason-directed, nature. In order to achieve this, one should train the mind to react reasonably—and ideally, virtuously—to all external circumstances.

From Marcus's perspective, the point of life is to live well. For him, this means using one's short life to live as the gods intend: "At some point you have to recognize [...] from what [divine] source you spring; that there is a limit to the time assigned you, and if you don't use it to free yourself it will be gone and will never return." Basically, a person is divinely created; life is short, so there is only a short time in which to train one's mind to live in accordance with one's god-given nature.

Given that human life is brief, ever-changing, and unpredictable, what should people look to for guidance? Philosophy, Marcus asserts: "Which means making sure that the power within stays safe and free from assault [...] not dependent on anyone else's doing something or not doing it. [...] And above all, that it accepts death in a cheerful spirit[.]" One's mind, in other words, does not have to be controlled by external circumstances, and one should learn to accept both the duration of their life and all that fills their life, whether good or bad.

According to Marcus, a person can live well by training their mind. Marcus's Stoic outlook holds that thoughts lead to actions: "The things you think about determine the quality of your mind. Your soul takes on the color of your thoughts." What the mind dwells on thoroughly shapes a person's soul and thus their actions. Therefore, one's reactions to the world are governed by one's mind: "Nothing that goes on in anyone else's mind can harm you. [...] Then where is harm to be found? In your capacity to see it. Stop doing that and everything will be fine. Let the part of you that makes that judgment keep quiet[.]" If a person controls their mind's reactions to things, then a person can't ultimately be hurt by what's happening in someone else's mind or by any other external circumstance.

Marcus goes on to suggest that because a person can control their own mind, they can, to a certain extent, be free from external circumstances. Attending to one's own mind enables a person to be content regardless of their circumstances. "If you can privilege your own mind [...] that should keep you clear of dramatics, of wailing and gnashing of teeth. You won't need solitude—or a cast of thousands, either," Marcus says. In other

words, if one has learned to understand and control one's mind so that it isn't shaken by circumstances, a person doesn't have to retreat from society or be surrounded by peers in order to live well.

No matter what happens, there is no reason that external circumstances should prevent a person from acting virtuously—demonstrating qualities like self-control, generosity, justice, and humility. Marcus writes, "So remember this principle when something threatens to cause you pain: the thing itself was no misfortune at all; to endure it and prevail is great good fortune." No matter what happens to a person, it's still within their power to act virtuously, and even if something bad happens, the so-called misfortune can be turned to one's advantage if they use the obstacle as an opportunity to cultivate the mind.

Though Marcus's meditations are succinct, the sheer number of them—and the frequent repetition of many precepts—suggests that even if life's purpose is straightforward, that doesn't mean it's *simple*. Training the mind is a constant battle, in his view, and something that's only accomplished through dedicated practice.

RELATIONSHIPS AND THE CITY

Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* are directed to himself alone—they're short excerpts from his personal journals, and he designed them to help him think and act well. But just because Marcus wrote his *Meditations* for himself, that doesn't mean he saw life as an individualistic endeavor. The Stoic belief that "we are what we think"—that one's actions proceed from their thoughts—also impacts the way people relate to those around them. Plus, Stoic thought holds that being connected to a healthy community is integral to living a good life (the goal of the practice of philosophy). This is because human nature is social; humans are meant to come together to form harmonious **cities**, which in turn make up the world as a whole. Because the health of the individual soul is tied to the community's health, individuals should strive to benefit one another. And in order to live together harmoniously, people should also be realistic about one another's behavior. Marcus suggests that people must be mindful of two things—collective obligations and individual limitations—to live well in a community, or city.

According to Marcus's Stoic mindset, human beings are not meant to live in isolation; they share common life in a community, or "city," and should strive to mutually benefit one another. Human nature is "civic," or belongs to a community, so what's good for a person must also be good for the city and the world, and vice versa: "[My nature is] [r]ational and civic. My city and state are Rome […] But as a human being? The world [is my city]. So for me, 'good' can only mean what's good for both communities." To live well, a human shouldn't regard oneself as an isolated individual; one must remember one's nature as a citizen of one's city and of the world, and determine what's "good" (what makes for a good life) in relationship to those entities.

One way to know something is "good" is if it benefits one's fellow citizens. Marcus explains, "So by keeping in mind the whole I form a part of […] I will do nothing selfish, but aim instead to join them, to direct my every action toward what benefits us all and to avoid what doesn't. If I do all that, then my life should go smoothly." Under normal circumstances, in other words, someone who strives to benefit one's peers and humanity as a whole can expect to live a harmonious life, with the individual's life contributing to and reflecting the larger whole.

Because a person is part of a community, they consequently have certain obligations to others and shouldn't resist this: "You participate in a society by your existence. Then participate in its life through your actions […] Any action not directed toward a social end [is] a source of dissension. Like the man in the Assembly—a faction to himself, always out of step with the majority." From Marcus's perspective, individualism is antisocial, not virtuous. A person should always avoid dissension and instead seek what promotes social harmony.

People should be realistic about others' behavior, neither expecting too much nor letting others' behavior affect them too much. A person can try to persuade other people to act well, but there's only so much one can do: "Do your best to convince [other people]. But act on your own, if justice requires it. If met with force, then fall back on acceptance and peaceability. Use the setback to practice other virtues." In other words, Marcus advises against using other people's failures as an excuse for one's own actions; in fact, facing such setbacks is one of the best ways to practice virtue.

No matter how other people act, recognizing common humanity (especially the limitations all human beings face) can promote harmony within relationships. Marcus writes, "To feel affection for people even when they make mistakes is uniquely human. You can do it, if you simply recognize: that they're human too […] And, above all, that they haven't really hurt you. They haven't diminished your ability to choose." Another person's mistakes, that is, can't take away a person's ability to make one's own decisions—plus, all people face similar limitations, so it's worthwhile to be compassionate.

Ultimately, even when keeping mutual limitations in mind and striving for compassion, it's not reasonable to expect virtue from bad people. Keep in mind, Marcus writes, "that to expect a bad person not to harm others is like expecting trees not to secrete juice, babies not to cry, horses not to neigh—the inevitable not to happen. […] If you're still angry then get to work on that." There's no point in resenting a person for acting according to their nature; it only harms the one who's being resentful.

Marcus's views of life in the city reflect his approaches to individual life. It's not possible to live harmoniously without paying attention to one's role within the community. At the same time, living with other people is complicated, and since we can't change others, we ultimately promote harmony by controlling our own reactions rather than having unrealistic expectations of others.

NATURE AND THE GODS

In Marcus's *Meditations*, there isn't a strong distinction between nature and the divine. Everything in nature comes from the divine, and the divine is imbued in everything. This has direct implications for the way a person should live—especially if that person seeks to live according to Stoic teachings. Marcus credits the gods for laying out the conditions of his life in a favorable way: "I was shown clearly and often what it would be like to live as nature requires. The gods did all they could […] to ensure that I could live as nature demands." The gods' arrangement of the circumstances of Marcus's life teach him how to live well. Based on his own experience of the gods' favor, Marcus argues that a good life depends on living in harmony with natural processes, which ultimately means living the way the gods have designed us to live.

Marcus holds that nature is harmoniously designed and is itself divine. The gods have designed the world as a harmonious whole, and this shapes how people should react to events in their individual lives: "For there is a single harmony. Just as the world forms a single body comprising all bodies, so fate forms a single purpose, comprising all purposes. […] Accept [whatever happens] because of what it leads to: the good health of the world[.]" In other words, the gods' concern is the harmony of all creation. This singleness of purpose should help a person accept whatever happens in their own lives as being an integral part of the harmony of the whole. One should also strive to live in harmony with nature because it makes them what they are: "I walk through what is natural, until the time comes to sink down and rest. To entrust my last breath to the source of […] my father's seed, of my mother's blood, of my nurse's milk. Of my daily food and drink through all these years." One's conception, birth, growth, sustenance—everything that forms and shapes a person—is part of nature.

When a person seeks to live in harmony with nature, they live their life according to the divine design. Because nature is harmoniously designed, it's possible to discern the gods' pattern for human behavior. For example, Marcus writes, "Injustice is a kind of blasphemy. Nature designed rational beings […] to help—not harm—one another […] To transgress [nature's] will, then, is to blaspheme against the oldest of the gods." Mocking the gods is not so much a matter of saying something offensive about them as living out of accord with other created beings—ignoring the clear, god-designed pattern of nature.

Behaving virtuously is acting in accordance with divinely created nature. Marcus explains, "Someone like that—someone who [strives to become virtuous]—is a kind of priest, a servant of the gods […] an athlete in the greatest of all contests—the struggle not to be overwhelmed by anything that happens." Someone who pursues virtue is not only living according to the gods' design, but enjoys a kind of personal communion with the gods in daily life.

Walking in harmony and communion with the gods—by living according to nature's pattern—even helps a person to die well. Marcus observes that living things are constantly undergoing change: "If it doesn't hurt the individual elements [of a living thing] to change continually into one another, why are people afraid of all of them changing and separating? It's a natural thing. And nothing natural is evil." Because nature isn't evil (nature was harmoniously designed by the gods), there is no evil to be feared in natural transformations, including death.

Marcus concludes that even if it turned out that life *is* random and not divinely directed, that doesn't fundamentally change anything about what's expected of a person. And in case life *is* directed by God, then a person should try to live in such a way that they're "worthy of God's aid. If it's confusion and anarchy, then be grateful that on this raging sea you have a mind to guide you." Marcus himself has faith that, indeed, "Providence" directs a harmonious world. However, even if a person doesn't share Marcus's belief in the gods' design behind natural patterns, that person can still use their mind to live according to nature, and thereby live well.

MORTALITY AND DYING WELL

Judging by how many of his sayings focus on death, it's clear that Marcus Aurelius made a special effort to train his mind to face this inevitability. It's not surprising—mortality would have haunted any person living in the ancient Roman Empire, but it was especially pressing for Marcus, as he led armies into battle, survived plague outbreaks, and faced the dangers of high-profile public service. It's also not surprising that Marcus's basic Stoic principles—living reasonably and according to nature—shaped his thoughts about mortality and death. In fact, these principles helped him to consider death as just another challenge: like everything else in life, death is a part of nature; therefore, a person can reason about it. Based on these principles, Marcus argues that dying is a natural process, and since dying in harmony with nature and the gods don't deprive a person of anything that's ultimately important, death shouldn't be feared or resisted.

Dying is natural, and therefore, like anything else in life, a person can use their reason when considering death. Like anything else in life, Marcus writes, dying can be considered logically: "if you look at it in the abstract and break down your

imaginary ideas of it by logical analysis, you realize that it's nothing but a process of nature, which only children can be afraid of. (And not only a process of nature but a necessary one.)" By looking at dying rationally, rather than being controlled by imagination, one can see that dying isn't a fearful thing.

Not only is death necessary, dying is as natural to the soul as birth to the body: "So this is how a thoughtful person should await death [...] simply viewing it as one of the things that happen to us. Now you anticipate the child's emergence from its mother's womb; that's how you should await the hour when your soul will emerge from its compartment." Because death is such a natural part of life—other natural processes even prepare a person for it—it shouldn't create undue anxiety.

Death is part of the gods' governance of the whole world, so one can react to it reasonably. Marcus explains, "The time and stopping point are set by nature [...] [Death is] a good thing—scheduled by the world, promoting it, promoted by it. This is how we become godlike—following God's path, and reason's goals." By recognizing that nature governs life, and that death is part of nature's harmonious goals, one can maintain a reasonable attitude about death. Acting reasonably (in accordance with nature) means that no matter what, one is staying on a divine path.

Not only is death natural and therefore subject to human reason, it's also inevitable, so a person can only control one's reaction to its arrival. A person can't control the predetermined length of their life, but they can anticipate its eventual end and prepare for it. "Five years or a hundred—what's the difference? [...] the length [was] fixed by the power that directed your creation, and now directs your dissolution. Neither was yours to determine. So make your exit with grace—the same grace shown to you," Marcus writes. A person cannot determine their length of life, but no matter the timing of their "exit," they can choose to react to death with "grace," thankful for the time they've been granted.

In the end, death's inevitability doesn't stop a person from pursuing what's most important—acting in harmony with God: "What is it you want? To keep on breathing? What about feeling? desiring? growing? [...] But if you can do without them all, then continue to follow the *logos* [the divine reason within a person] and God. [...] To prize those other things [...] is an obstacle." Marcus suggests that though people get hung up on living, desiring indefinite life (in its current form) isn't necessarily reasonable. He further implies that death doesn't end a person's ability to follow God by following reason, so it's short-sighted to focus on the things that *do* end with death.

Marcus repeatedly comes back to the subject of death in *Meditations*. Though one could read this as a sign of Marcus's personal anxiety, it also makes sense that for him, death was simply the ultimate example of the daily battle everyone faces—to control one's thoughts in order to act, as much as humanly possible, in harmony with nature.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

CITY

In *Meditations*, the word "city" can literally refer to Rome or another city, but it can also symbolize the world as a whole. This is connected to the Stoic philosophical view that parts combine harmoniously to make up greater wholes—just as citizens make up a city, and multiple cities ultimately make up the world, with the well-being of individuals inseparable from the well-being of the larger community and world. While identifying himself as a Roman, Marcus Aurelius also mentions the importance of remembering that he is "a citizen of [a] higher city" (i.e., a citizen of the world), thus figuring individual cities as the households that make up one town. In another place, he reminds himself that his "city" is the world. He also writes that when a person is making decisions, they should always consider what's best both for oneself and for their city, since a person can't live a good life without being connected to a thriving city—or a global community.

VOYAGE AND RIVER

Marcus Aurelius occasionally refers to human life as a voyage or waterborne journey to symbolize the brevity and instability of human life. Fittingly, Marcus is writing in the last years of his life, and he emphasizes that a person should know the right time to "disembark" from their journey—that is, to die. He argues that once we internalize this truth that life itself is short lived, we won't get too attached to fleeting things or events. This idea aligns with the Stoic view that a person should always be calmly prepared for death. Indeed, Marcus describes life as a constantly flowing river to indicate that life is unstable, and therefore that it's pointless to get hung up on either good or bad circumstances—neither one lasts for long. He also uses the same image to emphasize that the things we sail past on the "river" of life don't offer firm ground to land on—almost as soon as they appear, they're gone again. Again, this is Marcus's way of emphasizing that life is constantly in flux and is incredibly fleeting.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Modern Library edition of *Meditations* published in 2003.

Book 2 Quotes

I. When you wake up in the morning, tell yourself: The people I deal with today will be meddling, ungrateful, arrogant, dishonest, jealous, and surly. They are like this because they can't tell good from evil. But I have seen the beauty of good, and the ugliness of evil, and have recognized that the wrongdoer has a nature related to my own—not of the same blood or birth, but the same mind, and possessing a share of the divine. And so none of them can hurt me. No one can implicate me in ugliness. Nor can I feel angry at my relative, or hate him. We were born to work together like feet, hands, and eyes, like the two rows of teeth, upper and lower. To obstruct each other is unnatural. To feel anger at someone, to turn your back on him: these are obstructions.

Related Characters: Marcus Aurelius (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

This is the very first "meditation" that Aurelius jots down in his journal. As an emperor fighting on a battlefield, Marcus had to deal with all sorts of people daily—generally unpleasant ones, as his list of adjectives in this passage suggests. However, he immediately exhorts himself not to resent them. Marcus has an advantage over these types—he's capable of distinguishing good from evil. Yet, at the same time, he's really no different from these people; like them, he has a god-given, rational nature. This has immediate implications for Marcus's dealings with them. For one thing, because of their shared rational nature, Marcus knows he must act compassionately toward them. To do otherwise would be "unnatural," because rational natures are meant to work together. For another thing, and perhaps most importantly, Marcus must not allow himself to be "implicated [...] in ugliness," meaning that he shouldn't let other people's misbehavior affect his own practice of virtue. One can't control others' actions, only one's reaction to them—so when he's mistreated, it's up to Marcus to react with kindness instead of retaliating in kind. It's telling that Marcus's first thought-exercise focuses on these themes. Dealing constantly with difficult people, he sought to practice his philosophy both for the betterment of his own soul and for the benefit of his city and Empire.

The body and its parts are a river, the soul a dream and mist, life is warfare and a journey far from home, lasting reputation is oblivion.

Then what can guide us?

Only philosophy. Which means making sure that the power within stays safe and free from assault [...] And making sure that it accepts what happens and what it is dealt as coming from the same place it came from. And above all, that it accepts death in a cheerful spirit, as nothing but the dissolution of the elements from which each living thing is composed. If it doesn't hurt the individual elements to change continually into one another, why are people afraid of all of them changing and separating? It's a natural thing. And nothing natural is evil.

Related Characters: Marcus Aurelius (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

The first part of this quote sums up Marcus's views about life's brevity and instability. Everything is constantly changing, nothing lasts for long, and death is always looming. In light of these truths, he asks, what can a person rely on? To him, philosophy is the answer. It's important to note that by "philosophy," Marcus doesn't refer to an abstract academic discipline. In the ancient world, philosophy was regarded as a practical pursuit, a set of guidelines and principles for daily living. Marcus then summarizes what philosophy (for him, Stoicism) consists of: paying attention to his own mind, accepting whatever happens as part of nature's orderly plan, and accepting death itself as a natural event. Marcus was able to talk about death in this way because he viewed "nature" as a harmonious process of continual change and dissolution. Humans' deaths are no different, in this view—they make up part of the overall harmonious whole, human bodies and souls changing back into their constituent elements. Because nature isn't evil but a necessary and harmonious flow of events, it makes no sense to fear or resist death—it's just one more natural process. But, in an unstable world, simply believing these things doesn't remove anxiety. That's why, according to Marcus, practicing philosophy is essential.

Book 3 Quotes

Hippocrates cured many illnesses—and then fell ill and died. The Chaldaeans predicted the deaths of many others; in due course their own hour arrived. [...] Heraclitus often told us the world would end in fire. But it was moisture that carried him off; he died smeared with cowshit. Democritus was killed by ordinary vermin, Socrates by the human kind.

And?

You boarded, you set sail, you've made the passage. Time to disembark. If it's for another life, well, there's nowhere without gods on that side either. If to nothingness, then you no longer have to put up with pain and pleasure, or go on dancing attendance on this battered crate, your body—so much inferior to that which serves it. One is mind and spirit, the other earth and garbage.

Related Characters: Marcus Aurelius (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Marcus Aurelius considers the inevitability of death, which he does frequently in *Meditations*. He starts off by naming several famous figures who are all dead: Hippocrates was a famous physician in classical Greece, the Chaldaeans were a people of ancient Mesopotamia who were known for their astrology, and Heraclitus was an ancient Greek philosopher who taught that fire was the world's basic material. Democritus and Socrates were both ancient Greek philosophers as well, Socrates having died by execution.

There is an ironic note, even a humorous one, in this catalogue of notable deaths. Physicians and fortune-tellers can cure sickness and predict deaths, but they can't avoid dying themselves. Despite his lofty speculations about the end of the world, Heraclitus couldn't avoid dying under inglorious circumstances. Ultimately, then, death is something beyond human control. Typically, the timing and conditions of one's death can't be planned in advance. In Marcus's view, this should actually free people from obsession with dying. When a person's time comes, they will either continue living in the gods' presence or else they'll be oblivious and no longer burdened with the "battered crate" of the body. (Marcus unambiguously elevates the soul over the body, which he equates with "garbage.") Accepting this can help a person to live a good life in whatever time is allotted to them.

13. Doctors keep their scalpels and other instruments handy, for emergencies. Keep your philosophy ready too—ready to understand heaven and earth. In everything you do, even the smallest thing, remember the chain that links them. Nothing earthly succeeds by ignoring heaven, nothing heavenly by ignoring the earth.

Related Characters: Marcus Aurelius (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

In this meditation, Marcus exhorts himself to keep his philosophy handy for emergencies. He likens philosophy to a doctor's medical instruments, which are always near at hand in case a medical emergency comes up. Similarly, a person who practices philosophy needs to have the mind filled with ideas that can be quickly accessed in a time of need. Philosophy, in other words, comprises a set of tools that perform a healing function in the soul, much as a doctor's instruments do for the body. A person who practices philosophy needs to keep their tools handy by regularly training the mind. One way of doing this is by remembering the interconnection of everything: for a Stoic, all parts of the universe are linked together in a harmonious plan. Doing this also helps a person remember that, to keep one's soul healthy, one should not ignore either "heavenly" nor "earthly" things—spiritual things and tangible, everyday things are parts of the same universal whole, too. This quote is a key example of the role philosophy played for some people in the ancient world, functioning as a set of practical guidelines for living. It also suggests that Marcus penned his *Meditations* with the goal of keeping his philosophy sharp and available for "emergencies."

Book 4 Quotes

39. Nothing that goes on in anyone else's mind can harm you. Nor can the shifts and changes in the world around you.

—Then where is harm to be found?

In your capacity to see it. Stop doing that and everything will be fine. Let the part of you that makes that judgment keep quiet even if the body it's attached to is stabbed or burnt, or stinking with pus, or consumed by cancer. Or to put it another way: It needs to realize that what happens to everyone—bad and good alike—is neither good nor bad. That what happens in every life—lived naturally or not—is neither natural nor unnatural.

Related Characters: Marcus Aurelius (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

This passage focuses on an important aspect of Marcus's Stoicism. Throughout *Meditations*, he repeatedly reminds himself that it's a waste of time to worry about what's happening in anybody else's mind. Fretting about someone else's thoughts saps a person's strength for virtue, and it also impairs the relationship between people. This is because a person can't control another person's thoughts—they can only control their own reactions to other people. In other words, if somebody does something upsetting, they haven't really harmed you. Instead, your *reaction* to their behavior is what harms you.

The same holds true for any other development outside a person's control. One must therefore train their "capacity to see [things]" such that their judgment—controlled by their reason—doesn't harm them. According to Marcus, this is how a person can be suffering from stab wounds or cancer and remain spiritually undisturbed. Stoic beliefs also held that the universal *logos*, or rational power in the universe, controlled everything in an interconnected harmony. So when someone strives to live like a good Stoic ("live naturally"), they should receive every event as an aspect of that harmonious whole, but not as inherently "good" or "bad."

Book 5 Quotes

I. At dawn, when you have trouble getting out of bed, tell yourself: "I have to go to work—as a human being. What do I have to complain of, if I'm going to do what I was born for—the things I was brought into the world to do? Or is this what I was created for? To huddle under the blankets and stay warm?"

—But it's nicer here....

So you were born to feel "nice"? Instead of doing things and experiencing them? Don't you see the plants, the birds, the ants and spiders and bees going about their individual tasks, putting the world in order, as best they can? And you're not willing to do your job as a human being? Why aren't you running to do what your nature demands?

Related Characters: Marcus Aurelius (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

In this meditation, Marcus essentially gives himself a pep talk. He doesn't just rebuke himself for laziness, but for neglecting to do what he's made to do. In his view, life isn't about enjoying pleasant sensations. Instead, it's about taking action—doing a job. Just huddling in bed and enjoying the comforts of life makes a person little different from lesser animals, which are also capable of enjoying sensations. Humans are meant to live rationally, exercising their reason regarding what they experience, and not being ruled by sensations. For Marcus, this is the best motivator for getting out of bed—fulfilling his divinely given role as a human being. If animals don't shrink from fulfilling their roles, humans, being rational, should be even more eager to fulfill theirs. Like other creatures, humans are naturally designed to contribute to an orderly, harmonious universe—the many events of their lives, large and small, making up a whole life which, in its turn, fits in with other lives.

27. "To live with the gods." And to do that is to show them that your soul accepts what it is given and does what the spirit requires—the spirit God gave each of us to lead and guide us, a fragment of himself. Which is our mind, our *logos*.

Related Characters: Marcus Aurelius (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

Logos is a notoriously difficult word in ancient philosophy. This Greek word, as Marcus Aurelius explains it here, basically refers to the rational mind within a person. However, this mind also connects to something much bigger—the *logos*, or rational spirit, which fills the entire universe and suffuses all things. The *logos* within a person is given by, and in a sense an expression of, the *logos* that fills and directs everything in nature.

This understanding of the word *logos* helps make sense of what it means when Marcus talks about the Stoic injunction to live according to nature. When a person's soul accepts the *logos*, or the "fragment" of God that exists within him, he is able to reason about the events of his daily life in such a way that he behaves virtuously, not being unduly disturbed by outside events or shaken by desires within. And when he lives this way, according to his nature and the nature of the universe, he can think of himself as truly living "with the gods."

29. You can live here as you expect to live there.

And if they won't let you, you can depart life now and forfeit nothing. If the smoke makes me cough, I can leave. What's so hard about that?

Until things reach that point, I'm free. No one can keep me from doing what I want. And I want what is proper to rational beings, living together.

Related Characters: Marcus Aurelius (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

Though he doesn't mention suicide much in *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius appears to support it in principle, at least under certain circumstances. That is, if a person is completely prohibited from living according to their principles (that is, living in this life as one would live in the afterlife), then they don't lose anything by choosing to end their life. He likens it to simply as leaving a room in which you can't breathe.

However, this would be a very rare circumstance, since under most conditions, a person following Stoic philosophy strives to guard his mind from external events in order to choose his own actions on a rational basis. Therefore, ending one's own life would rarely be seen as justifiable. One famous example was Cato, a Roman statesman of the first century B.C.E. Cato committed suicide instead of compromising his principles by reaching an agreement with his enemies in Julius Caesar's army. As seen in Dante's *Purgatorio*, Cato was admired for this stance even by later medieval Christian writers.

Book 6 Quotes

12. If you had a stepmother and a real mother, you would pay your respects to your stepmother, yes...but it's your real mother you'd go home to.

The court... and philosophy: Keep returning to it, to rest in its embrace. It's all that makes the court—and you—endurable.

Related Characters: Marcus Aurelius (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

Marcus Aurelius seldom writes directly about his experiences as Roman Emperor, perhaps because his goal wasn't to record events for posterity or even for his own remembrance, but to train his mind to react well to daily struggles. Here, he draws a comparison between the court and philosophy—the two major focuses of his life—and a stepmother and a mother. He suggests that while a person would show respect to their stepmother, it's their mother who can truly be embraced. Imperial life is admirable and worthy, in other words, but philosophy is home, the place that truly gives a person identity and meaning in life. Another way of looking at this comparison is that, to an extent, being Emperor is incidental to Marcus's life—the most important thing in his life is philosophy, because only philosophy can train him to handle events at court, and indeed within himself, in a virtuous way. The quote suggests that while court life constantly threatened to pull Marcus away from what he valued most, he made a concerted effort to keep philosophy foremost in his life.

And if [the gods] haven't made decisions about me as an individual, they certainly have about the general welfare. And anything that follows from that is something I have to welcome and embrace. [...] [My nature] is rational. Rational and civic.

My city and state are Rome [...] But as a human being? The world. So for me, "good" can only mean what's good for both communities.

Related Characters: Marcus Aurelius (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

Marcus begins this passage with a discussion of the gods' power. Even if the gods don't control the events of individual lives (something he personally doesn't doubt), they seem to have arranged circumstances for the world in general—and that should be enough for a person. That's because the nature of each human being is social, or "civic," not just individual. For Marcus, this means that whatever is good for Rome or for the world at large—his two communities—is also good for him. For a Stoic like Marcus, only an individual can take control over what happens within their own mind, regardless of outside circumstances. Yet, at the same time, that doesn't mean that the individual is unconcerned about their community or isolated from it. The gods have arranged the world so that parts make up wholes, and everything exists in a harmonious interrelationship. This is why a person can embrace their city's well-being as their own, and why concern for one's own soul doesn't mean living as a hermit.

50. Do your best to convince them. But act on your own, if justice requires it. If met with force, then fall back on acceptance and peaceability. Use the setback to practice other virtues.

Remember that our efforts are subject to circumstances; you weren't aiming to do the impossible.

Related Characters: Marcus Aurelius (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Marcus offers some principles for interacting with other human beings. He doesn't explain what "they" need to be convinced of, but presumably, this advice applies to any situation in which one person is trying to persuade others to follow a certain course of action. But even if one fails to be convincing, that doesn't excuse a person from going ahead and acting as best they can under the circumstances, even without others' support. This accords with Marcus's Stoic view that a person can only control their reactions to other people and cannot control others' actions. Furthermore it shouldn't be regarded as an obstacle when other people show resistance. Instead, it should be accepted as an opportunity to develop once's virtues, like being peaceable.

Marcus also adds that the goal isn't "to do the impossible." Even though Stoic thought sometimes demands a seemingly heroic effort to resist outside influences, it also doesn't lose sight of the fact that people act within specific circumstances, that they're therefore burdened by limitations, and that it isn't reasonable to ignore or downplay those.

Book 7 Quotes

22. To feel affection for people even when they make mistakes is uniquely human. You can do it, if you simply recognize: that they're human too, that they act out of ignorance, against their will, and that you'll both be dead before long. And, above all, that they haven't really hurt you. They haven't diminished your ability to choose.

Related Characters: Marcus Aurelius (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

Despite his frequent emphasis on the brevity of life and the suffering it brings, Marcus Aurelius often shows a paradoxically positive view of human relations. In this meditation, he draws on several Stoic insights in order to encourage himself in his interactions with others. In particular, he reminds himself to not only endure others' mistakes, but to be kind to others on the basis of their shared humanity. In other words, it's possible to be kind to people who've wronged you not in *spite* of the fact that you're human, but *because* of it. That's because, according to Marcus's philosophy, nobody actually *wants* to behave badly; they do so out of ignorance, because their *logos* is insufficiently trained by philosophy. Knowing that they're acting poorly against their own will, one can be compassionate toward such people instead of resenting

them. Like a good Stoic, Marcus also remembers that everyone is dying soon, so it's short-sighted to get hung up on others' slights. Finally, Marcus reiterates the Stoic idea that the only thing that can really harm a person is their own mind—their own reaction to what happens. Thus there's nothing another person can do that can truly harm another, or prevent them from choosing to act well.

Book 8 Quotes

3. Alexander and Caesar and Pompey. Compared with Diogenes, Heraclitus, Socrates? The philosophers knew the what, the why, the how. Their minds were their own.

The others? Nothing but anxiety and enslavement.

Related Characters: Marcus Aurelius (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 102

Explanation and Analysis

In *Meditations*, Marcus almost never refers directly to his own life or his role as Roman emperor. So it's interesting that, in this quote, he tersely contrasts the tenor of famous emperors' lives with that of philosophers' lives. Alexander the Great ruled one of the world's largest empires in the 300s B.C.E.; Julius Caesar and Pompey ruled the Roman Republic much closer to Marcus's own day, dying in 48 and 44 B.C.E., respectively. Diogenes, Heraclitus, and Socrates were all ancient Greek philosophers of the 400s and 300s B.C.E. The big difference between these two groups, as Marcus sees it, is that the philosophers understood the meaning of life—they were able to see the "what, why, and how" of things and events. This knowledge allowed them to guard their own minds and not be swept away by life's changes and chances. In contrast, the emperors didn't own their minds and were consequently subject to anxiety. Their minds were "enslaved" because they were shaken by the pressure and turmoil of rule, unable to stand apart from it. Marcus saw himself as an emperor striving to live philosophically, so one can only speculate as to where he might have placed himself on the spectrum between the rulers' anxiety and the ancient philosophers' serenity.

35. We have various abilities, present in all rational creatures as in the nature of rationality itself. And this is one of them. Just as nature takes every obstacle, every impediment, and works around it—turns it to its purposes, incorporates it into itself—so, too, a rational being can turn each setback into raw material and use it to achieve its goal.

Related Characters: Marcus Aurelius (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

According to Marcus, all rational creatures—connected to the rational spirit in the universe as a whole, known as the logos—are endowed with abilities. Essentially, each person is an extension or expression of the logos. As such, people can reflect nature's ability to absorb and work around obstacles, as if recycling the debris of life for the soul's own benefit. When a person faces any type of obstacle, therefore, they should regard it as potential "raw material" for the soul's training. They should draw on the ability, granted by nature, to incorporate setbacks and make good spiritual use of them. This is one of the most important strategies in Marcus Aurelius's philosophical toolbox, because it helps him look at any development—like conflict with other people, and even the threat of death itself—as less of a problem and more of an opportunity for his own betterment. He believes that anyone can do this, if their mind is trained in the right way.

36. Don't let your imagination be crushed by life as a whole. Don't try to picture everything bad that could possibly happen. Stick with the situation at hand, and ask, "Why is this so unbearable? Why can't I endure it?" You'll be embarrassed to answer.

Then remind yourself that past and future have no power over you. Only the present—and even that can be minimized. Just mark off its limits. And if your mind tries to claim that it can't hold out against *that*. . . well, then, heap shame upon it.

Related Characters: Marcus Aurelius (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Marcus Aurelius considers how to cope with

situations of suffering, offering a practical tool for dealing with seemingly unendurable situations. He recognizes that, in such moments, a person's mind can become an enemy and must therefore be subdued. One of the biggest problems in suffering is that a person's imagination runs away with them. They start picturing every possible scenario and therefore losing control of their own mind. Marcus advises that a person should keep the mind fixed as much as possible on the present moment. Instead of worrying about enduring the next thing, they should just focus on getting through what's right in front of them. The present is all that's real for a person—running back to the past or forward into the future creates problems, deepens anxiety, and makes it harder for a person to control the mind. The trick is to keep firm boundaries around the present and, in that way, to contain the mind's task to something more manageable.

Book 9 Quotes

❝ 23. You participate in a society by your existence. Then participate in its life through your actions—all your actions. Any action not directed toward a social end (directly or indirectly) is a disturbance to your life, an obstacle to wholeness, a source of dissension. Like the man in the Assembly—a faction to himself, always out of step with the majority.

Related Characters: Marcus Aurelius (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 123

Explanation and Analysis

Marcus saw life as inescapably social. At first glance, this might seem to conflict with his emphasis on the individual mind. However, because of his belief in life and the world as in interconnected harmony, these two emphases fit together neatly in his mind. Because human beings are individual parts of a greater whole, their well-being can't, by definition, differ from that of the whole world. That's why no human action that isn't "directed toward a social end" can be anything other than disruptive and divisive to both an individual and their community. At the same time, only an individual can cultivate their mind in such a way that his or her actions benefit the community. But individualistic actions—those "out of step with the majority"—are not the goal. In fact, these aren't valued at all in Marcus's society, because they're viewed as detracting from the community, not contributing to it. In that sense, individualistic actions are viewed as unnatural.

❝ 29. The design of the world is like a flood, sweeping all before it. The foolishness of them—little men busy with affairs of state, with philosophy—[...]

Do what nature demands. Get a move on—if you have it in you—and don't worry whether anyone will give you credit for it. And don't go expecting Plato's *Republic*; be satisfied with even the smallest progress, and treat the outcome of it all as unimportant.

Related Characters: Marcus Aurelius (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Marcus again emphasizes the fleeting, constantly changing nature of life. Because life is like this, it's silly to view anything—be it political affairs or even philosophy—as ultimate, or worth getting attached to. But that doesn't mean life is meaningless. A person still has a job to do, because human nature is rational and designed to live according to that god-given rationality. Marcus therefore exhorts himself to make the use of whatever time remains to him and to do what's right, as much as it's possible for him to do so. However, he shouldn't worry about how posterity will remember him; he should do the best he can regardless of what others think about it, because he can't control their reactions, only his own choices. Interestingly, he also tells himself to keep his standards realistic. Plato's *Republic* was considered to be a foundation political text, and Marcus would no doubt be very familiar with it. Yet he tells himself not to worry about measuring up to the ideal—the important thing is to make progress and fulfill his duties, regardless of the outcome he's able to see.

Book 10 Quotes

❝ A healthy sense of hearing or smell should be prepared for any sound or scent; a healthy stomach should have the same reaction to all foods, as a mill to what it grinds.

So too a healthy mind should be prepared for anything. The one that keeps saying "Are my children all right?" or "Everyone must approve of me" is like eyes that can only stand pale colors, or teeth that can handle only mush.

Related Characters: Marcus Aurelius (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 142

Explanation and Analysis

Marcus suggests that a healthy mind is no different from other well-developed senses. A good sense of hearing or smell can make use of sensory input without being overwhelmed by it, while a strong stomach doesn't get upset by strange foods, but simply processes them for nourishment. A healthy mind should be similarly "ready for anything." An unhealthy mind constantly worries about things outside its control—like children's wellbeing or other people's approval. This is like someone who can't stand bright colors or substantial foods—whose senses aren't well developed. A healthy mind, in contrast, receives, breaks down, and uses whatever it encounters, much like other well-trained senses. Though Marcus's example of bodily senses is a bit simplistic (sensory reactions aren't just a matter of training), the comparison is clear: a person must train their mind in order to not be overwhelmed by what the world throws at it.

Book 11 Quotes

15. The despicable phoniness of people who say, "Listen, I'm going to level with you here." What does that mean? It shouldn't even need to be said. It should be obvious—written in block letters on your forehead. It should be audible in your voice, visible in your eyes, like a lover who looks into your face and takes in the whole story at a glance. A straightforward, honest person should be like someone who stinks: when you're in the same room with him, you know it. But false straightforwardness is like a knife in the back.

Related Characters: Marcus Aurelius (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 151

Explanation and Analysis

This is one of Marcus's more colorful examples of human virtue. He suggests that when people make a conspicuous show out of their honesty, they're most likely being fake. If someone is really honest, then it should be self-evident—in other words, it shouldn't need to be announced. You should be able to look at a person and see they're being honest, as obviously as one could look at a lover and know their feelings—or like a smelly person whose presence can't be ignored. This humorous example is a clear illustration of the Stoic view that actions proceed from thoughts. Because one's thoughts manifest in behavior, a virtue like honesty should come naturally to a person whose thoughts are honest. It should not require a special effort, much less an ostentatious show. That's why dishonesty is so offensive to Marcus—it's an attempt to pretend at something that's obviously not within a person. It's not just evidence of dishonesty; it's a clear demonstration that a person has failed to practice philosophy.

Book 12 Quotes

36. You've lived as a citizen in a great city. Five years or a hundred—what's the difference? [...]

And to be sent away from it, not by a tyrant or a dishonest judge, but by Nature, who first invited you in—why is that so terrible?

[...] This will be a drama in three acts, the length fixed by the power that directed your creation, and now directs your dissolution. Neither was yours to determine.

So make your exit with grace—the same grace shown to you.

Related Characters: Marcus Aurelius (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 170

Explanation and Analysis

This is the book's closing meditation, which means that (barring editorial rearrangement in later centuries) it was likely one of the last ones Marcus wrote. Regardless of precisely when Marcus wrote it, it certainly reflects the overall tone of his life. Throughout *Meditations*, he repeatedly challenges himself to prepare his soul for death by regarding dying as just another natural process, an inevitable part of being human that shouldn't be resisted or feared. Now, he reflects gratefully on the "grace" shown to him in being allowed to live at all. Strikingly, he doesn't cite his role as emperor or his wealth—he simply expresses gratitude for having lived "in a great city," a privilege so great that he shouldn't quibble about the number of years. He's also been permitted to live out his life until natural death, not being cut short by violence. He recognizes that the "drama" of his life was predetermined both in its length and the manner of its ending. His only job is to accept that, and

die in a manner befitting the gods' kindness to him. It's also fitting to end *Meditations* on this note, since preparing his soul to "exit with grace" has been Marcus's aim all along.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

BOOK 1: DEBTS AND LESSONS

Marcus Aurelius thanks his grandfather and his parents for imparting virtues like self-control, integrity, religious piety, and generosity. He also thanks his great-grandfather for investing in his education by hiring private tutors.

Marcus Aurelius was Roman Emperor from 161 to 180 C.E. In Book I of his Meditations *(divided into sections by later copyists and publishers), Marcus expresses his gratitude to various people to whom he's indebted. The values he mentions anticipate some of the book's overall themes of living philosophically both in a community and before the gods.*

Marcus is indebted to various teachers: his first teacher taught him not to get caught up in sports rivalries. Diognetus taught him to practice philosophy and to adopt an austere lifestyle. Rusticus taught him to train his character and to study rhetoric. Apollonius taught him to pay attention to the logos and to remain steady no matter what happens; Sextus taught him how to live according to nature.

Marcus's thank-yous provide a good introduction to the book's themes. Marcus's "first teacher" was likely a household slave, Diognetus was Marcus's drawing teacher, Rusticus was a city prefect, and Apollonius of Chalcedon and Sextus were both Stoic philosophers. The logos *refers to the universal divine power which also manifests in each person's rational mind.*

Severus taught Marcus to value Thrasea, Helvidius, and Cato and to imagine a society characterized by equal laws and liberty of subjects. Marcus's adopted father taught him to consider the public good, to ask good questions, to take a measured attitude toward material comforts, and not to be self-congratulatory. Like Socrates, Antoninus Pius could both enjoy and abstain from things moderately. His self-control was "the mark of a soul in readiness."

Thrasea, Helvidius, and Cato were all Roman practitioners of Stoicism, showing that Marcus studied philosophy from a young age.Antoninus Pius was Marcus's predecessor as Emperor as well as his adoptive father.The reference to Socrates is to Plato's Symposium, *in which Socrates is praised for his detachment and his soul's constant "readiness" for death.*

Marcus also thanks the gods for granting him a good family, teachers, and acquaintances. He thanks them for giving him a father who taught him to not to live an ostentatious lifestyle as a ruler. He's grateful, too, that he wasn't excessively talented in rhetoric or poetry, and that he was clearly shown what it means "to live as nature requires." He also gives thanks to the gods for his loving wife, and that in his pursuit of philosophy, he hasn't gotten bogged down in either quackery or obscure scholarship.

Marcus's reverence for the gods recurs throughout the book. Surprisingly, Marcus gives thanks for the things he's not *good at because they might have occupied too much of his time, taking him away from philosophy. Philosophy—by which Marcus means "living as nature requires," a practical pursuit rather than an abstract, academic one—will emerge as the most important thing in his life.*

BOOK 2: ON THE RIVER GRAN, AMONG THE QUADI

1. When a person wakes up in the morning, they will have to deal with all sorts of people, many of them unpleasant. People have unpleasant characters because they're unable to discern between good and evil. But Marcus knows that he shares a divine nature with all people, even the unpleasant people, and therefore he refuses to be angry at them—it would be unnatural.

The heading of this section of the book is "On the River Gran, Among the Quadi." The Quadi were a Germanic tribe against whom Rome fought in the Marcomannic Wars, and the River Gran was in what's now Slovakia—then on Rome's northern frontiers. Marcus's first thoughts while encamped with his armies reflect the difficulties of dealing with people. The key, he tells himself, is to remember people's common nature, and that people are therefore meant to live in harmony.

2. Marcus tells himself to remember that he's an old man; he should stop distracting himself with books, refuse to be enslaved by impulses, and not fear the future.

During this last decade of Marcus's life, he shuns both external and internal distractions. The nearness of death also helps him keep his emotions in check and steady his mind. Though all this sounds demanding, Marcus sees it as a simple prescription for a good, philosophically guided life.

3. Everything in nature is full of divine Providence. The individual is part of that whole. Whatever the whole does, including every change, is good for all the parts. Remembering this should allow Marcus to reject bitterness and die with gratitude to the gods.

"Providence" is another way of referring to God, specifically the divine power directing all of nature, both as a whole and as interconnected parts. Because Providence ultimately controls everything, Marcus can live and die without anxiety.

6. Marcus should "concentrate every minute like a Roman—like a man" on doing what's before him. If he does everything as if it's the last thing he ever does, and refuses to let his emotions engulf his mind, then he can succeed at this. It's not necessary to do many things in order to live a good life. The gods ask no more than this.

Marcus believes that living as best he can as "a man" and "a Roman" is his ultimate goal in life, and the gods' primary desire for him, too. Notably, these ordinary identities rank higher for him than being an emperor.

7. It's important to resist both external and internal confusion—distracting things in the outside world, and lack of directing purpose in one's life.

Marcus's meditations are often repetitive, a reminder of the book's purpose as a collection of philosophical exercises: Marcus revisits ideas in order to instill concepts firmly in his mind. One of these key ideas is the importance of keeping an orderly mind and a consistent focus in life.

8. Nobody has ever suffered because they ignored what was going on in other people's minds. But if you don't understand your *own* mind, Marcus says, you're sure to be unhappy.

Marcus's own mind is his biggest focus—failing to understand it, and worrying about others' instead, is one of the primary sources of distraction and anxiety in life.

11. If the gods exist, then there's nothing to be afraid of. They have given humans everything necessary to live well in this life and the next. And even when seemingly harmful things happen, if they don't harm a person's character, then they can't truly hurt them.

Marcus's Stoic view of the gods' control gives him confidence in the world's orderly pattern. An orderly mind goes along with this: it can endure even if outwardly harmful things happen to a person.

12. All things vanish quickly—including famous people whose opinions count for a lot. We're given intellectual powers in order to understand this. In a similar way, when we look at dying and break it down logically, we can see that it's only a necessary, natural process that nobody should be afraid of.

A well-trained mind is able to recognize that life is fleeting and that death, as part of nature, is not something to fear. Stoics believed that breaking things down into their constituent elements was a helpful tool for reminding oneself of these things.

16. The soul degrades itself in various ways: (i) by being disgruntled at what happens, (ii) by harming another person, (iii) By letting either pleasure or pain overpower it, (iv) by being artificial, or (v) by acting without a goal.

The integrity of the soul, or mind, is paramount. Usually this integrity is disrupted when someone lets themselves be shaken too much by external things or fails to direct their actions purposefully.

17. Life is brief, changeable, and hard to understand. In light of this, only philosophy can guide a person. Philosophy lets a person keep "the power within" safe—above pleasure or pain, random action, dishonesty, or dependence on anyone else. Philosophy also helps a person accept what happens and accept death cheerfully. A person can accept death when they understand that elements are constantly dissolving and changing into one another—as is only natural.

Philosophy is the key to a life of stability—it helps preserve one's integrity of mind through all life's events, and indeed all the way to death. A person prepares for death by looking at it logically—it's just another instance of life's constant transformation.

BOOK 3: IN CARNUNTUM

1. Even if we live a long life, Marcus says, we can't guarantee that our minds will stay up to the task of contemplating the world. Sure, it will still be possible to feel biological urges and use one's imagination, but the ability to understand one's duty, analyze, and make decisions will be gone. So one must hurry—it's not just death that's approaching quickly, but a possible end to our mind's grasp.

Carnuntum, the title of this section, was a fortress on the Danube River. Marcus Aurelius was known to have been stationed here with his armies in 172–173. Here, Marcus emphasizes that philosophy is a matter of urgency because we don't know how long our minds will be up to the task.

2. Those who are "at home with Nature" can see beauty in things like the cracks on top of a loaf of bread, ripe fruits, bent stalks of wheat, and a lion's furrowed brow—all of which go unnoticed by most people. These things aren't beautiful in themselves, yet they enrich nature as a whole. Paying attention to such things helps a person see beauty in all stages of life, too.

Being "at home with Nature" means being attentive to its patterns throughout all of life. This practice isn't simply a matter of seeing beauty in unexpected places, but of training oneself to see every element of one's own life as part of a necessary, harmonious whole.

3. Even the famous and formidable have died, some of them in disgraceful ways. As for Marcus, he's already made his life's **voyage**, and it's "time to disembark." Even if death brings nothingness, at least he'll no longer have to put up with his battered body, which is inferior to the mind.

For Marcus, one of the keys to living a philosophical life is being prepared for death. Part of this is his belief in the superiority of the mind to the body.

4. A person must practice "winnowing [the] thoughts," so that if they're asked what they're thinking, they can reply quickly and honestly. And their thoughts will be revealed as straightforward, unselfish, and not shameful. A person who can do this is "a kind of priest" who's in touch with the divine within, and "an athlete in the greatest" contest—the struggle not to be overwhelmed by what happens. Such a person trusts that everything is for the best, knowing that all rational things are connected.

A person who's constantly disciplining their thoughts won't hesitate to share them. Such a person has trained their logos, *the rational mind that's in touch with the divine, and is therefore connected to the gods. This is a constant struggle, like an athlete training rigorously for a contest. But they can be encouraged by the belief that their rational mind, and indeed all rational things, harmoniously connect.*

7. If a person goes through life focusing on the mind, life should be free of too much drama. And they can thrive whether there are few other people around or many. Such a person doesn't waste time worrying about death—it's just one more thing to accomplish, and to be done in a "rational, civic" state of mind.

This kind of mental discipline simplifies life. It also helps a person to feel satisfied no matter the circumstances that surround them, even impending death. Marcus occasionally emphasizes the "civic" nature of the rational mind, meaning that the individual's mind is connected to the life of their community.

11. The most important thing for "spiritual growth" is the ability to logically and accurately analyze whatever happens. Doing this enables a person to understand the value of a thing, both to oneself and to the world as a whole—which also helps a person understand oneself as "a citizen of that higher **city**" of which cities are households. In this way, when a person analyzes what happens, they can determine if something is due to God, or chance, or someone else, who is (as always) to be treated with kindness and justice.

This awareness of the greater whole is important for someone's "spiritual health"—they know they're part of a greater "city" (i.e., "the world") and that whatever happens somehow promotes their own well-being as well as that of their community. Understanding the nature of things also helps a person assess the real value of things and determine their significance.

13. Much as a doctor keeps his surgical tools nearby (in case of emergency), so too should people keep their philosophy handy. The earthly can't succeed without the heavenly, and vice versa.

Philosophy is likened to a doctor's tools, as they're both used for healing. Someone who practices philosophy understands that the earthly and heavenly are interconnected.

16. Life is more than the body's sensations (even beasts experience those) or the soul's desires (any human has them). And even bad people can use their minds to guide them. What distinguishes the good person is that they warmly welcome what fate sends. They don't let their soul be discouraged by false beliefs, unjust actions, or fear of death.

Still, the mind is more important than bodily sensations or even inner desires, because it regulates a person's reactions to whatever happens. A person with a healthy mind can be unafraid of fate.

BOOK 4

3. People always wish they could get away to the country or the ocean or the mountains. But to Marcus, that's silly: it's entirely possible to "get away" by going within. The soul is the most peaceful place there is, constantly available for a moment of renewal. After going inwards, a person can quickly return, ready to face the world.

The mind is a person's most important "getaway" because it's always available. Marcus thinks that people should retreat here often in order to help them face life's events.

If you're upset about people's misbehavior, Marcus says, consider that rational beings exist for one another's benefit, and that everybody dies eventually. Then just stay quiet. If fate bothers you, remember that it's due to either God or atoms. If it's your reputation, remember how soon everyone is forgotten. No matter what, "the back roads of your self" are a refuge. Disturbance only comes from within.

By taking refuge in the mind, a person can be reminded of their rational nature, which they share with other human beings, and which will eventually come to an end in death. Death and fate are either random or controlled by the divine. Either way, a person should find peace in philosophy.

7. If you choose not to be harmed, you won't *feel* harmed. And if you don't feel harmed, then you haven't been.

According to Stoicism, a person can only really be harmed by their own mind. Thus, no matter what happens to them externally, they can't be hurt by it unless they choose to be.

8. Something can only ruin your life if it ruins your character.

Building off of his last point, Marcus suggests that something is only ruinous if it destroys a person's ability to live philosophically.

12. Someone should always be ready to reconsider their position. However, changing one's position should only be based on a conviction of what's right—not on what's popular.

A person's mind should be their own—capable of persuasion, but not easily swayed.

19. It makes no sense to desire fame, because those who remember you posthumously will soon die out, too. And even if your memory was immortal, what good would that do you, either in this life or the next?

Fame should be kept in perspective—by definition, human memory cannot last.

21. After they die, buried bodies decompose; similarly, souls in the air eventually diffuse into fire and are absorbed into the source, the logos.

Stoicism held that human beings consist of substance and logos*; the latter gets reabsorbed back into the universal* logos.

24. For a peaceful life, it's best to do fewer things, and to do them better. According to Marcus, most things we say and do are inessential. Whatever you're doing, ask yourself if it's necessary. Also get rid of unnecessary assumptions, because unnecessary actions flow from them.

Part of living a good life involves determining what's really essential and focusing on that. This includes thoughts, since thoughts lead to actions.

32. In all ages, people have done the same kinds of things—marrying, having children, going to war, partying, working, complaining, and falling in love. And in every age, people's lives vanish. They soon return to the elements that formed them.

Throughout history, human life doesn't really change. The same kinds of things happen, and they always come to an end, with people's elements being reabsorbed back into the universe.

39. Nothing that happens in another person's mind can harm you—or anything that happens in the world around you. Harm is found in one's capacity to see harm. If you stop judging that something bad has occurred, you'll be fine. What happens in anyone's life isn't inherently good or bad.

Marcus reiterates his view that external things, especially others' thoughts, can't really harm a person; only a person's reactions—their judgments, or their determinations that what's happened is good or bad—are harmful.

45. Life isn't random; everything is logically connected, harmoniously ordered—"an astonishing concordance."

If a person keeps in mind the "concordance" of all things, refusing to see events as "unfortunate," they can react to things rationally and remain unharmed by them. Above all, outside events can't hinder a person's ability to practice virtues, which is what they're naturally inclined to do. Virtues spring from the mind and not from outside influences.

49a. Nothing that happens is "unfortunate." Rather, it's fortunate when something happens and a person remains unharmed by it. Another person might have a different reaction. It makes no sense to call one "fortunate" and the other "unfortunate." Nothing that happens prevents a person from allowing their nature to fulfill itself by acting justly, generously, with self-control, and all other good qualities.

According to Marcus, "fortunate" and "unfortunate" are a matter of perspective. The difference between the two is a person's reaction to their circumstances, which in turn is determined by the person's mind. A well-regulated mind understands that nothing can stop them from pursuing virtue, the most important thing.

BOOK 5

1. When it's hard to get out of bed in the morning, tell yourself that you don't have anything to complain about, because you're doing the work you were born to do—being human. You weren't made to huddle under the blankets, but to experience things as your nature demands. If you loved yourself enough, you'd do it.

Life is about experiencing things and training oneself to react to them as one's rational nature demands. It's a demanding job, but it's what people are designed to do. This underlines the fact that, for Marcus, philosophy isn't a passive pursuit, but an active, ongoing one.

5. If you lack one virtue, then practice what virtues you *can*—you have much to offer besides excuses.

Here, Marcus emphasizes that everyone has some virtues they can develop and put into practice.

6. When you do somebody a favor, don't look at it as an opportunity to be repaid someday. Instead, be like a vine that produces grapes, a dog after a hunt, or a bee with its honey. A human being doesn't make a fuss about helping another.

Doing good should be a natural expression of humanity, like a bee making honey, or any living thing fulfilling its natural purpose.

7. Pray simply and straightforwardly, or don't pray at all.

From Marcus's perspective, religious practice should be like any other aspect of a person's life—stripped of complications.

8. Whatever happens to us is destined and part of a single harmony. The world comprises all bodies; fate comprises all purposes. According to Marcus, we should accept purposes the way we accept a doctor's prescription—knowing it won't necessarily be pleasant, but it will be healing. So whatever happens, accept it not just for your own sake, but for the sake of the whole world's well-being. The whole is damaged if any part of it is destroyed.

The world is a harmonious place. This affects the way people react to hardship. Even if something is painful, it should be looked upon as part of one's improvement—and since a person is part of a greater whole, it's part of the world's well-being, too.

9. Don't get discouraged when you fail. Celebrate having acted like a human and try again. Think of philosophy as a soothing ointment. Philosophy "requires only what your nature already demands."

Trying to act philosophically is "human"—aligning with human nature—and therefore worth celebrating. Philosophy is really just a method of restoring and strengthening a person's inherent nature.

10. The world is so mysterious that even the Stoics get confused. But rather than getting discouraged about life's seeming meaninglessness, remember that nothing can happen that isn't natural, and that you can refrain from doing anything that God and yourself don't approve of.

This "natural" aspect of life should be a comfort; because nature is harmonious, there's meaning in everything, even if it's not immediately apparent.

13. Human beings are made up of "substance and what animates it." Neither of these things began to exist or can stop existing. Each part of a person will transform into another part of the world, and another and another.

Because of nature's harmonious design, human beings are embedded within nature's constant transformations, an integral part of the whole.

16. The things a person thinks about determine the mind's quality; the soul, in turn, is colored by one's thoughts. So it's good to think about things like these: a good life can be led anywhere; the good of a rational being is unselfishness—lower things are meant to benefit higher, and higher things are meant to benefit one another.

In Stoicism, a person is the product of their thoughts, so a person must take care to dwell on good things. Such things include detachment from external circumstances and the interconnection of all rational things.

19. Things cannot gain access to the soul. The soul directs itself by interpreting the things before it.

The soul's job is to interpret the external world, which can't otherwise enter the soul.

20. Our job in life is to put up with other people. But when people disrupt our tasks, becoming obstacles, we must adapt and work around them. In that way, the obstacle moves action forward—"What stands in the way becomes the way."

Life is unavoidably social, but when other people become hard to deal with, such obstacles should become a new path, not a roadblock.

22. If something doesn't harm the community, then it can't harm its members.

Because life is a harmonious whole, the well-being of individuals and community is the same.

23. Things flow past us constantly, like a **river**—there's nothing stable. So it's ridiculous to feel either prideful or distraught. Irritations don't last.

From Marcus's perspective, the flowing stream of life should prevent people from becoming too attached or bothered by external things.

26. The mind rules the soul. It shouldn't be disturbed by the flesh. Mind and body are linked, so of course sensations make their way into one's mind. Don't resist these natural sensations, but don't let the mind judge them as "good" or "bad."

Sensations are inevitable, but again, it's up to the mind to deal with them; the philosophical mind doesn't get overwhelmed by them.

27. Living with the gods means accepting what we're given and doing what the spirit requires—our mind, or logos, a fragment of God.

When a person lives according to their God-given logos, *they're living a divine life.*

29. A person can live in this world as if it's the afterlife. If others won't let them, then it's okay to exit life now. Until then, a person is free. Nobody can stop them from doing what they want most—living as a rational being.

In theory, according to Marcus, suicide can be permissible, but only if a person is truly being prevented from acting according to their rational nature. In the vast majority of cases, a person should be able to act rationally no matter what's happening in the world.

33. Soon, a human being is just dust. The things people want in life are trivial. Objects are unstable; senses are easily deceived. There's nothing to do but wait for death. In the meantime, honor the gods, treat others as they deserve, and be stricter toward oneself than toward others.

In any case, life is short, and a person should do the best they can by making the most of their circumstances, treating oneself, one's community, and the gods rationally.

37. Good fortune is what a person makes for oneself. It's a matter of good character, intentions, and actions.

As Marcus sees it, there's no objective condition called good luck. It's all in how a person interprets and acts upon a given situation.

BOOK 6

1. Nature is governed by the logos, which does no evil and harms nothing.

All of life is divinely governed, which impacts a person's attitude toward events, since the gods don't have evil intentions

2. What matters is that a person does the right thing, no matter the circumstances—even if they're dying or "busy with other assignments."

Dying is just one more "assignment" for someone trained in philosophy.

8. The mind makes of itself what it chooses, out of what it experiences.

The most important thing is not what happens to a person, but what the mind makes of those things. Marcus emphasizes this lesson several times throughout Meditations, *such as when he says that circumstances aren't necessarily "fortunate" or "unfortunate"—it's the mind that makes them that way.*

10. If the universe is random, then there's no reason for anxiety—a person will eventually be "dispersed." On the other hand, if there's order, then a person can be at peace, having faith in the ordering power.

Marcus doesn't discount the possibility that the universe is random, but he doesn't see this fundamentally changing a person's attitude. Either way, he believes that there's nothing to fear in life.

12. Pursuing both the court and philosophy is like having both a stepmother and a mother. The first deserves honor, but the second is the one you go home to.

Philosophy should be Marcus's first allegiance—as his "home" and his nurturer—not his role in politics.

13. It's important to pierce through one's perceptions—breaking things down to see what they really are (things like roasted meat, or wine, or having sex). When we start getting attached to things, this helps us see that they're really pointless.

There's nothing wrong with material things, but when they're broken down into their constituent parts, we can see that they're not worth getting attached to. None of these things last.

15. The world is constantly in flux. Human life is like a **river**—the things we go past don't offer us firm ground. As soon as we see them, they're gone. Life itself—our breath—is no different.

Similarly, nothing lasts, including life. Life should be viewed as a fast-moving voyage in which the scenery constantly changes.

16. The only thing we should prize in life is to do what we're made to do. Every trade or art has a specific goal; life is the same way. If we keep prizing lesser things, we'll be susceptible to envy and fear, never at peace and angry at the gods. Only by prizing our own minds can we be satisfied with life.

In such a life, it's important to maintain a clear goal so that a person's mind isn't constantly thrown off course. Material things can't bring peace; only cultivating one's mind can do that.

20. When sparring in a ring, we don't blame others for gouging with their nails or head-butting; we just keep an eye on them. It's the same in the rest of life—excuse others' behavior, keep your distance, and don't hate them.

Marcus doesn't view other people as inherently bad. In any case, blaming them, even when they cause you harm amidst life's struggles, accomplishes nothing.

21. Both Alexander the Great and his mule driver died and were absorbed into the universe.

It doesn't matter if someone is the greatest of emperors, like Alexander—they die just like their servants do.

27. Don't lose your temper when people act according to what they think is best for themselves. Instead, demonstrate to them that what they're doing isn't good.

It's useless to get angry at people; it's better to appeal to their rational nature by reasoning with them.

30. Marcus tells himself to "be the person philosophy has tried to make you." Antoninus should be his model: he was steady, reverent, modest, and methodical in everything. He was satisfied with little things in life, he worked hard all day, and he was pious toward the gods without lapsing into superstition. Imitating him is the path to a clear conscience at death.

Marcus's adoptive father and predecessor as emperor, Antoninus Pius, is his model for living a philosophical life. Antoninus lived a balanced, intentional, and active life that Marcus seeks to emulate in order to both live and die well himself.

33. It's normal to feel pain in our bodies when we use them as they're meant to be used. Similarly, stress is normal in a typical human life.

Stress is to be expected in life; what matters is how a person reacts to stress.

36a. Everything derives from the "universal mind" (the logos)—everything from a lion's jaws to thorns to mud. All of these things come from "the good and beautiful." Instead of seeing such things as alien, think of the source from which they spring.

Because everything comes from the divine, we can have a positive regard even for seemingly harmful or useless things. We all share the same source.

41. Most of our misbehavior comes from mislabeling things as "good" or "bad" and blaming God or our enemies for the bad.

Our interpretation of life's events impacts our behavior in response to them—thinking they're good or bad instead of accepting them.

42. All human beings are part of the same "project." Some are conscientiously working on it, while others don't; some of the latter are whiny and obstructive. Those people are needed, too, and the gods will use a person one way or another. Still, it's up to each person to decide which role they'll occupy.

No matter what, everyone is used by the gods in the "project" of existence. The difference is what kind of role a person will play—suggesting that a person can choose to either resist or cooperate with the gods' design.

44. Whatever the gods decide is good. And even if they don't decide things about individual lives, they do care about the world's welfare—and anything that flows from the overall welfare is good for the individual. And even if the gods determine nothing (a belief Marcus derides as "blasphemous"), each person can certainly make decisions about what benefits himself and his **city**.

The gods' design is good. Though Marcus believes the gods are concerned about each person, he says this belief isn't necessary; because the universe is harmonious, what's good for the world must necessarily be good for the individual. By "city," Marcus refers both to Rome and the world at large.

48. When discouraged, think about your friends' good qualities—it's good to see others' virtues (like energy, modesty, and generosity) on display.

Here, Marcus discusses some aspects of human relationships. People's good qualities can encourage their peers.

50. Try to convince others, but if needed, act independently. If people resist you, use this opportunity to practice other virtues.

If people resist common action, then this shouldn't be regarded as an obstacle but as a chance to find a different way forward.

52. You don't have to turn something into an issue. External things can't shape our decisions unless we choose to let them.

People's circumstances only have a significant impact on them if they choose to let them. People can instead choose to let things go.

53. Really listen to people and try to get inside their thinking.

Understanding other people takes a concerted effort, but understanding what motivates them—hence why they act the way they do—is a key to accepting them.

58. Nobody can stop you from living according to nature.

Ultimately, it's up to an individual to live as harmoniously as possible with others. Yet it's also each individual's responsibility to practice virtue—nobody else can do that for them.

BOOK 7

3. A person's worth depends on what they devote their energy to.

A person should be judged based on what they think is valuable—that is, on what they dedicate their mind to, thereby shaping their actions.

5. Either do the best you can on a task, or delegate it to someone who's better suited for it. The point is that the community's needs are met.

The good of the community is the most important thing, and people should cooperate toward that end. The individual's ego is subordinate to community well-being.

7. There's no shame in needing help, like a wounded soldier who needs his comrades' help.

Since the parts of a community make up an interdependent whole, the well-being of an individual impacts the whole, and vice versa.

9. Everything is interconnected and harmonious—one world made up of everything, one divinity present in everything, a shared logos.

Human cooperation reflects the harmony of the whole universe, which in turn is based on and governed by the gods.

10. All substance is soon absorbed back into nature, and what animates substance is restored to the *logos*.

Human beings are, according to Stoic doctrine, made up of substance and an animating power—neither of which lasts forever.


13. Until you realize that you're a part of a larger whole—just like a limb is part of a body—you won't see helping other people as its own reward.

When the universe is an interconnected whole, helping others is the same as helping oneself.

16. There's no point in being scared of change. You can't burn firewood or eat food without transforming things. It's the same with human processes, and they're just as important to nature.

Everything changes. A person should learn to see the changes in their life, up to and including death, as just another one of these processes, thereby making it less frightening.


22. It's human to think well of other people even when they make mistakes. You can do this by recognizing that *they're* human, that they're acting ignorantly, and that you'll both be dead pretty soon. Anyway, nothing they've done can inhibit your own choices.

Recognizing shared humanity, and the shortness of life, helps people forgive each other, and maintain responsibility for their own actions.



26. When someone mistreats you, consider what their intentions were—then you'll feel sympathetic toward them. If their ethics are the same as yours, you can forgive them. And if they're misguided, then you can show compassion.

It's important to understand each person's ethical guidelines (i.e., their philosophy)—people are simply the product of these, either not yet completely conformed to their philosophy or mistaken in their choice of one.


31. Be simple, be humble, and focus on right and wrong. Care about others and follow God.

In this teaching and the ones that follow, Marcus urges himself to keep focused on simple precepts in life.

33. Chronic pain can be endured, because it doesn't affect the mind. If pain is unendurable, then it'll bring about its own end.

Even ongoing pain (something he probably knew about after multiple military campaigns) will either kill him or make him stronger.

46. Nobility and virtue can't be equated with preservation of life. "A real man" doesn't worry about how many years he's going to live—he tries to live his allotted years as well as possible.

Marcus believes that the length of life shouldn't be his focus, but living well within whatever time he has.

54. No matter what's happening at any given moment, a person has the option of accepting it humbly, treating another person justly, and resisting any irrational thoughts.

External events never prevent a person from acting rationally—that is, humanly, the way they're designed to act.

55. Don't worry about what other people are thinking. Keep looking straight ahead, where nature is leading. Everything has a role; lower things exist for higher ones (those with logos), and higher things for one another. We were made to work together. We were also made to resist bodily urges, to master them with our thoughts—they're made for us and not vice versa.

Further, everyone is designed to cooperate. Marcus believed in a hierarchical world in which "lower" people served higher; in his view, this was all a reflection of the god-given natural order of things. Within a person, too, lower urges are intended for the use and mastery of the higher (the thoughts).

61. A person shouldn't live life like a dancer, but like a wrestler, ready for assaults.

Life is a fight that requires constant training and vigilance. This aligns with Marcus's purpose in penning his Meditations*: to train his mind.*

67. Your well-being is in your hands, and it doesn't require much. You don't have to be a great scholar or scientist. Just be someone who seeks freedom, is humble, serves others, and obeys God.

Even though life is a fight, it also doesn't require anything special—you just have to desire your mind's freedom from the circumstances surrounding you.

68. Anything that happens is an opportunity to practice virtue. You have to judge events by seeing what they really are and adapting to them by deciding they're what you really need.

According to Marcus,certain circumstances are given to you in order to be analyzed and used for the practice of virtue.

69. The perfect character lives life "without frenzy, or sloth, or pretense."

A person shouldn't be frantic, or lazy, or dishonest about their life. Avoiding these things helps one develop a balanced character that benefits others as well as oneself.

74. The most useful—and natural—thing is to be of use to others.

Though a person is ultimately responsible only for their own development of virtue, they should also use that virtue for the benefit of their community.

BOOK 8

1. Be humble, because you haven't attained philosophy yet. Don't worry about your reputation, but strive to live undistractedly as nature demands. That's the only way to live.

Marcus recognizes that he hasn't mastered his philosophy. However, this shouldn't discourage him—it's his job to keep striving, regardless of the outcome or how others react. This holds true no matter what happens.

2. When something happens, ask how it affects you, and whether you can change your mind about it.

This teaching briefly sums up a Stoic approach to life's events—analyzing them and determining the best way to react.

3. Alexander, Caesar, and Pompey knew nothing but anxiety, whereas Diogenes, Heraclitus, and Socrates had their own minds.

Marcus contrasts philosophical pursuits (Diogenes, etc.), which yield mental peace, to the trials of governance faced by Alexander the Great and later Roman rulers.

7. For a rational mind, progress means getting control of one's perceptions, acting unselfishly, accepting what one does or doesn't have control over, and embracing what nature demands. Nature gives everything a purpose.

Progress in life is within each person's control; it's a matter of focusing their mind in such a way that they can react reasonably to whatever happens, trusting in nature's purposes.

9. Don't complain to anybody about life at court, even to yourself.

Complaining, especially about Marcus's singular role as emperor, benefits no one.

14. A person's beliefs about pleasure and pain, life and death, determine their actions, so don't be shocked when that person acts accordingly.

People act according to their beliefs, so their behavior shouldn't be surprising. Accepting the roots of others' behavior helps a person relate to them without resentment.

17. Blaming people gets you nowhere—it's like blaming the gods or atoms—and you shouldn't do any pointless actions.

Because the gods (or else random chance) govern the universe, casting blame is a pointless waste—it doesn't change anything.

25. Even the most brilliant people are short-lived. Your elements, too, will someday be scattered. Either your life will be snuffed out, or you'll get "marching orders and another posting."

Here, Marcus emphasizes that we can't know what the afterlife will be like; all we know is that life is short. Marcus's use of military terminology—"marching orders"—reflects war's prominence in his life and its impact on his thinking of life as a battle.

27. There are three relationships in life: with one's own body, with the divine, and with the people around you.

Life can be broken down into three kinds of relationships. According to Stoic thought, analyzing life this way can help a person see themselves, people, and circumstances more realistically and make reasonable decisions about t hem.

29. You have it within your power to keep your soul from harm. Just see things as they really are, eliminating false perceptions.

A person guards their soul by analyzing things and avoiding getting caught up in false ideas about reality.

30. Whether you're speaking to the Senate or to anyone else, don't be overbearing, and choose your words carefully.

Interactions with any type of people, no matter their social status, are worthy of careful thought and a diplomatic attitude

32. It's up to you to build your life out of the materials you've been given. Even when you face obstacles, these are opportunities for alternatives. Take it one action at a time.

Nobody can control their circumstances, but they can control what they make of them, including the seemingly bad things, like obstacles.

35. One of your rational abilities is to work around obstacles, turning them to your own purposes.

As rational beings, humans can transform obstacles into opportunities instead of becoming angry about them.

36. Don't let your imagination run away from you. Just be concerned about the present—your mind can handle that much.

One's imagination can also become an obstacle, but it must be kept in subjection to the mind and the present.

41. No matter what external things happen, the only thing that's really "harmful" to rational creatures is obstruction of the mind's workings.

Because they're rational—possessing minds—human beings can't ultimately be harmed by whatever happens to them.

44. Why worry about posthumous fame? Future generations are just as mortal and as flawed as people today; it shouldn't matter what they think of you.

Mortality is another aspect of being human, and it's a good reason to let go of worries about fame, which isn't within a person's control

48. The mind is a fortress that can't be breached.

Because the mind is within a person's control, nothing external can threaten its security.

50. There's no point in asking "why" when you see things in the world that seem broken or useless. Nature wastes nothing.

Nature, a harmonious force, never makes mistakes or neglects anything. People can trust the rational force at work within nature instead of being bewildered by apparent randomness.

51. Try to be a clear freshwater spring, not a muddy cistern. Do this by working constantly to gain freedom.

Clarity of mind is the most important thing for the soul's freedom. It's completely within a person's control, under the power of the choices they make, regardless of what other people do or say. Neglecting this control results in an unclear, or "muddy," mind.

55. Neither the world nor individuals are harmed by evil acts done to them. People can stop being harmed when they choose.

Harm depends on a person's interpretation of events. So regardless of what evil things happens to a person externally, they don't necessarily have to be hurt by them.

56. Though we depend on one another, our wills are our own. Our happiness is our own responsibility.

A person's will belongs to them alone. Not only can nobody else harm another's will, they also can't promote another's happiness.

59. You can either instruct or endure other people.

It's possible to influence other people by teaching them, but if that's ineffective, Marcus advises to put up with them as best you can, and don't let them disturb your mind.

BOOK 9

1. Injustice mocks the gods. Nature intends that human beings help each other; acting otherwise is irreligious. So is lying (because nature has given us the ability to distinguish between true and false), and pursuing pleasure while fleeing pain, seeing them as respectively good and bad. Nature doesn't privilege good or bad over the other.

The gods have designed humanity to work together and treat one another justly. Nature also promotes harmony, so misinterpreting nature's outcomes as good or bad is as disrespectful to the gods as mistreating another human being.

3. Don't resist death—it's just another natural stage of life. A person shouldn't be in a hurry to die, or indifferent to it, but neither should he be afraid. It's like the birth of the soul.

Death is likewise part of nature, which should shape people's response to it. Marcus no doubt focuses on death throughout Meditations *because he constantly faced it on the battlefield and expected his own could come at any time. Indeed, anyone living during the second century was forced to think about the reality of death on a regular basis.*

8. All creatures with the logos share the same rational soul. It's like how all creatures see by the same light and breathe the same air.

All things are part of nature, and all rational beings have a bit of divinity—the rational spirit, or logos*—within them.*

11. The gods are patient with people, so why can't you be?

Building on his last point about how all rational beings have a bit of divinity within them, Marcus emphasizes that people should therefore regard each other as the gods do and treat one another accordingly

21. We experience all sorts of "deaths." The end of childhood or youth; even cessation from activity, or the end of a train of thought. What is so terrible about those?

Death isn't a foreign phenomenon. People experience lesser "deaths" as they progress through life, suggesting that final death shouldn't be feared as an enemy.

23. All actions should, whether directly or indirectly, be directed toward a "social" purpose. Anything else becomes divisive.

Because human beings are interconnected, all their efforts should aim at social harmony.

26. Suffering is caused by "not allowing the mind to do its job."

The mind's job is to regulate its reactions to things that happen. When the mind fails, suffering results. The entirety of Meditations *is designed to help Marcus train his own mind to "do its job."*

27. When somebody insults you, try to understand what's happening inside that person's soul, and remember that the gods help that person just like they help you.

People have the same struggles, which should lead us to compassion even when mistreated.

29. Don't worry about getting credit for what you do—just start doing it. And don't "go expecting Plato's *Republic*." Be happy if there's a little progress. And realize that unless people's minds are really changed, you'll get nothing better than pretended obedience.

Plato's Republic *was a foundational text of political philosophy with which Marcus was certainly familiar. He tells himself not to worry about attaining Plato's standard for governance—instead, he wants to just focus on making progress and persuading others.*

32. Unclutter your mind by remembering the size of the world, the infinity of time, and the rapidity of change.

Keeping life in perspective is a key to the mind's clarity. An individual is small, both within the scope of the universe and of ever-changing history. By keeping this in mind, a person can root out inessential thoughts.

40. If you pray, don't just pray for things to happen or not happen—pray not to feel fear, desire, etc.

Marcus seldom gives directions for what we might think of as "religion" (philosophy filling that category in many ways), but here he suggests that the training of one's attitudes is a more important request from the gods than specific happenings.

42. When you encounter someone with an unpleasant trait, remember that the gods have distributed other, better qualities to balance it out. And always remember that no matter what somebody has done, their actions can't damage your mind. It's better to blame yourself for being surprised when someone behaves according to their traits.

From Marcus's perspective, someone else's failings should be no obstacle to thinking and behaving the right way.

BOOK 10

1. Marcus asks his soul if it will ever stop yearning for what it doesn't have and instead be satisfied with what it has right now. Everything is a gift from the gods and is therefore good.

Marcus's ongoing struggles are apparent, as he rebukes himself for failing to be satisfied with his circumstances and for complaining.

3. Whether something is "endurable" or not, quit complaining. Either you'll be destroyed, or your mind will make the thing endurable.

Here, Marcus reminds himself of his mortality in order to stop complaining. If something doesn't kill him, his mind is capable of putting the suffering into perspective.

4. As a part of a whole, you have no right to complain about the part allotted to you. Whatever benefits the whole can't harm the parts. Don't be selfish, and focus on what benefits the community.

Marcus also focuses on the good of the larger community in order to combat unhelpful attitudes. When tempted to complain, he should remember that life isn't only about his satisfaction.

8. If you embrace sanity (understanding things for what they are), cooperation with nature, and disinterest in the flesh, then you'll be a new person. It doesn't matter if anyone else thinks so.

It's always within a person's power to change their life by living the way they're supposed to, no matter what anyone else thinks.

9. Actions should aim at practical goals, exercising thought, and maintaining confidence in your understanding.

No actions should be wasted. Each action should have a point, and a person should focus their thoughts toward that goal unwaveringly.

12. Life isn't guesswork. If the road is clear, then follow it; if not, get good advice and follow the best path you can.

Even if the future isn't always clear, a person should just do the best they can in cooperation with others.

15. Live as if you're in the wilderness. Your "**city**," after all, is the world.

Marcus suggests that because the whole world is his home, it doesn't really matter where he lives—what matters is how he lives.

16. Don't just talk about what a good person is, *be* one.

Marcus already knows how to live a good life according to his philosophy. Here, he exhorts himself to put into practice what he believes.

22. There are only three possibilities: to keep living, to end your life by choice, or to die after having met your obligations. This gives you reason to be optimistic.

Keeping in mind life's brevity simplifies things. Either you'll live or die, and you'll either meet your goals or choose to die if you're prevented from meeting them.

25. To feel something like grief, anger, or fear is like being "a fugitive from justice," because you're trying to escape the law of nature.

Nature determines what happens, so resisting life's circumstances is fundamentally unjust.

27. History is basically just the repetition of the same events, even if the cast of characters changes.

Nothing really changes throughout history. Realizing this helps a person put events and their significance into perspective.

31. Life is just training for your logos, and it's enough to live life well, by observing things accurately.

It's up to each person to live as best they can—as much in accord with their rational nature—with what they're given.

35. If a person's senses are healthy, they should be able to handle anything. Similarly, a healthy mind shouldn't keep worrying or being anxious about others' approval.

Human beings are endowed with everything they need in order to live philosophically, and to live without useless fear of others

BOOK 11

1. A rational soul can make of itself whatever it wants. It also cares for its neighbors, is truthful, humble, and just.

It's up to an individual to shape their soul. At the same time, they have obligations to their communities as well, which don't conflict with individual well-being.

2. It's best to become indifferent to everything (except for virtues) by breaking down and analyzing its constituent parts.

Taking things apart, in order to understand their nature, helps a person respond to things reasonably instead of become either too attached or too upset by them.

3. A strong soul makes its own decision about separation from the body, not doing so in response to external forces, or with drama, like the Christians do.

During Marcus's reign, the growing Christian religion was viciously persecuted by provincial governors in some parts of the empire. However, it's unknown how directly responsible Marcus was for the persecutions. In these remarks (which scholars have suggested were interpolated by a later editor), Marcus disdains what he regards as the Christians' dramatic embrace of martyrdom—it's unbefitting a strong soul, which greets death with indifference.

8. When people cut themselves away from their community through hatred, they don't realize they're cutting themselves off from "the whole civic enterprise." But the gods make it possible for us to reattach ourselves.

People can't thrive if they detach themselves from their city, because individuals' well-being is contingent on that of the greater whole.

13. If somebody hates you, that's their problem. Your job is not to do anything hateful, and to be patient toward everyone, no matter what.

People should pursue good relationships with others by acting well, not resenting others, and being transparent.

15. People who say something like, "I'm going to level with you," are fake. People's honesty should be self-evident.

A person who's truly honest doesn't need to brag about their honesty. Virtues like honesty should be clear and unambiguous.

16. Everyone has the potential to live a good life. They just have to learn to study the nature of things, train their perceptions, make judgments, and accept what happens. Nobody is prevented from pursuing good.

Living philosophically is within anyone's reach. That doesn't mean it's a simple process, however. Training one's judgment is a lifelong task, and necessary for benefiting others.

18. It takes a great deal of knowledge to be able to judge other people's actions justly. Being angry or grieving over what others do causes more damage than the actions themselves. Sincere kindness is the most effective tool for setting another person straight, not accusations or meanness. In addition, it's not "manly" to fly into a rage. A man is courteous and kind, and not a whiner, either.

Lack of control in one's behavior is unseemly, and complaining about one's circumstances shows that one's mind is untrained.

27. (Marcus now lists various short quotes and allusions he finds worth remembering.) The Pythagoreans encourage looking at the stars at dawn and thinking about their consistency—they always do their tasks the same way.

Marcus uses this section of his notebooks as a collection of valuable insights from others. His note about the Pythagoreans emphasizes his theme of remaining focused, steadfast, and consistent while pursuing one's goals.

36. Epictetus: "No thefts of free will reported."

One's free will cannot be violated—basically, nobody can threaten one's ability to make their own choices. Epictetus was a Stoic philosopher who died during Marcus's lifetime and whose writings Marcus studied avidly.

39. If you want a rational, healthy mind, Socrates says, then work on it. And if you already have, then stop squabbling.

Philosophy isn't something that a person achieves once and for all; it requires steady, earnest effort. Fighting with others suggests that a person hasn't progressed as far as they think they have.

BOOK 12

1. Everything you're striving for is attainable right now, but you keep getting in your own way. You just need to forget about the past and trust God with the future. In the present, practice reverence (acceptance of what nature gives) and justice (speaking the truth and acting as you should). And when it comes to death, what you're *really* afraid of is not dying, but never having lived properly.

In this last section of the Meditations, *Marcus takes a somewhat more introspective turn, perhaps anticipating how soon he'll die.*

2. If you learn to see your soul the way God sees it—stripped bare of everything earthly—will you desire things like earthly possessions and fame?

Marcus's exhortations to himself suggest that philosophy isn't something he feels he's achieved once and for all—it requires ongoing work, trial and error, and readjustment of perspective.

4. We love ourselves more than we love other people, and yet we care more about their opinions than our own.

Marcus touches on some of the ironies and common failings of humanity. People love themselves best, yet they constantly run after others' approval instead of doing the really worthwhile thing and attending to their own minds.

5. If we protest the deaths of the most godlike people, then we imply that the gods are unfair. But the gods don't do anything that isn't right or natural, so we know it must be fair.

It's Marcus's view that the gods do nothing unjust. Therefore nobody's death is unjust, even the best people's. Protesting death pointlessly resists the gods' will.

14. If there's a God, then try to be worthy of God's help. And if the world is nothing but randomness, then be grateful you have a mind that'll guide you through the storm; it can't be swept away, even if the rest of you is.

Perhaps Marcus, too, still had doubts about the gods, but he found his mind a worthwhile guide through life. He practices philosophy—even by writing Meditations*—in order to train his mind for any "storms."*

16. You can't expect a bad person not to harm others—it's like expecting "babies not to cry, horses not to neigh." It's inevitable. If it makes you angry, then you need to work on that.

Some people's bad behavior comes as inevitably as a baby's or an animal's cries. Since it can't be helped, a person should manage their own reactions instead.

20. Don't undertake anything without a purpose, or for any reason besides the common good.

People should stay focused on purposeful action that's geared toward the collective good, instead of being aimless.

23. There's no disgrace in death. It arrives on time, a part of nature's schedule in renewing all things. When we follow God's path, we become godlike.

Living according to nature is living in accordance with the gods. That includes accepting death when it comes, which is an honorable part of nature as a whole.

26. A person's mind is from God. In fact, everything and everyone comes from that same source. So life is about how a person chooses to see things—and living in the present, because it's all we have.

Because everything comes from God, a person can maintain a wider perspective about their life and everything the encounter—it's all linked to a pervasive divine power.

27. Most of the things we want are trivial. It's more "philosophical" to practice virtue and obey God without being showy about it. False humility is intolerable.

Most of the time, however, people get caught up in little things, or else they practice philosophy in a superficial way, for others' approval.

28. If somebody asks how you can be sure there are gods, tell them to just look around. Besides, the soul is invisible, too.

It's not uncommon to doubt the gods' existence, but Marcus thinks the world's existence is sufficient proof. And why should someone doubt the gods more than their own soul?

36. Marcus has lived as a citizen in a "great **city**." Being sent away from it by Nature (not exiled by a corrupt judge) isn't so bad. The length of life, and the timing of its dissolution, aren't his to determine. He's been shown grace, and he can leave life behind gracefully.

In Marcus's final meditation, he reflects on his life as a whole. He has been blessed to live in Rome and in the world. In light of this privilege, he can't complain about having to leave it behind. He will try to die as he lived—according to nature.

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