# *Introduction*

*John Sellars*

The *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius is consistently one of the best-selling philosophy books among the general public. Over the years, it has also attracted a number of famous admirers, from the Prussian king Frederick the Great to US president Bill Clinton.[1] It continues to attract large numbers of new readers, drawn to its reflections on life and death. Despite this, it is not the sort of text read much by professional philosophers or even, until recently, taken especially seriously by specialists in ancient philosophy. It is a highly personal, easily accessible, yet deceptively simple work.

On the face of it, what we find are a series of notebook jottings, reminders that Marcus has written to himself, comments on events that have happened to him, reflections on his own mortality, and a few quotations from things that he has been reading. There is little in the way of structure and a good deal of repetition. The first book is somewhat different and looks far more deliberate and planned: Marcus' aim there is clearly to pay respect to individuals who have been an important influence on him, and each entry follows a standard format.[2] The following eleven books, however, do not follow any obvious plan. It seems reasonable to assume that what we have are Marcus' notes in the order in which they were written without any subsequent editing.

Despite that lack of formal structure, a number of core themes emerge, and the work as a whole has a sense of cohesion and unity. Marcus continually reminds himself that how he experiences the world around him and events in his own life is shaped by the judgements he makes about things (e.g. *Med.* 2.15, 8.47, 12.8, 12.26). In this, he was drawing on the teaching of his Stoic predecessor Epictetus (e.g. *Ench.* 5), whom he tells us in Book 1 he had been reading (1.7). He also often reflects on the fact that Nature is in a continual process of change (e.g. 2.17, 4.43, 6.15), a view often associated with the early Greek philosopher Heraclitus, who was an important influence on the early Stoics and whom Marcus quotes

a number of times (esp. 4.46, 6.42). His reflections on death and, in particular, his own mortality are best understood as just one example of a wider set of passages contemplating the fact that everything continually changes (e.g. 4.14, 7.23, 10.7, 12.36). He also often stresses the unity of Nature and the fact that everything, including us, exists as merely a part of a larger, unified entity (e.g. 8.34, 11.8). Closely connected to this is the idea that we as human beings are also members of a single global community of humankind by virtue of our shared rationality (e.g. 4.4, 9.9). On all of these topics, Marcus was drawing on core ideas in Stoic philosophy.

During the twentieth century, the *Meditations* attracted fairly limited scholarly attention compared to some other ancient texts, but there were a number of notable studies. Early on, A. S. L. Farquharson produced his substantial edition and commentary on the text, which was published posthumously in 1944. After that, Brunt's seminal article (1974) stands out, as does the first book-length study by Rutherford (1989).[3] In France, Pierre Hadot produced a number of shorter studies (1972, 1978), culminating with the publication of his book *La Citadelle intérieure* (1992; translated as *The Inner Citadel*, 1998). But Marcus also attracted a number of high-profile critics. Respected scholars of ancient philosophy accused him of mouthing nothing more than an 'unphilosophical religion'.[4] He was often presented as deeply misanthropic and melancholic, perhaps even a drug user.[5] All these claims have been largely swept aside in the current resurgence of interest in his work.

This renewed interest in Marcus' *Meditations* has developed in the wake of the wider rehabilitation of Hellenistic philosophy over the last fifty years. Since the turn of the millennium, scholars who had worked in early Stoicism started to move forward to reconsider the efforts of the Roman Stoics. A. A. Long's book on Epictetus (2002), followed by Brad Inwood's collection of studies on Seneca (2005), did much to reaffirm the philosophical importance of these two later Stoics, as did Reydams-Schils' wider study of the Roman Stoics (2005). Marcus too has attracted some positive reassessment by a variety of scholars, many of whom are contributors to this volume. Although there may still be some sceptical voices out there, Marcus now has a number of vocal admirers prepared to defend the interest and value of the *Meditations* as a work of ancient philosophy. The most substantial recent study is without doubt the two-volume monograph by Marcel van Ackeren (2011), who also edited a previous companion to Marcus Aurelius and co-edited the proceedings of a conference held in Germany (van Ackeren 2012; van Ackeren and Opsomer 2012).[6] In the decade since those volumes were published, there has been a lot of new

work on Marcus Aurelius and Roman Stoicism more widely, including a detailed commentary on the first half of the *Meditations* (Gill 2013). Multiple new translations into English have also appeared in recent years, attesting to the work's ongoing popularity.[7] The chapters in this volume try to take into account this new work, offering an up-to-date panoramic view of the current scholarly debates surrounding the interpretation of the *Meditations*.

What of its title, the *Meditations*? As we have seen, the work appears to be a series of private notebooks written by Marcus Aurelius for his own benefit and not intended for wider circulation. As such, originally it probably had no title.[8] The only surviving manuscript is untitled. The standard title in Greek – *To Himself* (*eis heauton*) – comes from the first printed edition, based on a second – but now lost – manuscript.[9] While some have suggested that the title may have been simply added by the editors of that first edition, there is evidence to suggest that it was already in use. In the early sixteenth century, the German humanist Johann Reuchlin mentioned the title before the first edition appeared, and, much earlier, the ninth-century bishop of Caesarea, Arethas, used it as well.[10] The English title was coined by Meric Casaubon in the seventeenth century – *Meditations Concerning Himselfe* – but it was some time until this became the standard. In the eighteenth century, it was translated as *Conversation with Himselfe* and *Commentaries* as well as *Meditations*.[11] The most popular translation in the nineteenth century, by George Long, was entitled *Thoughts*.[12] It continued to be issued under titles such as *To Himself*, *Thoughts*, and *Communings with Himself* into the early twentieth century.[13] It is only over the last century that *Meditations* has become the standard English title of Marcus' notebook reflections.

There has been a good deal of discussion about what kind of text the *Meditations* is. Much of this was prompted by Pierre Hadot's suggestion that one ought to see this work as a series of 'spiritual exercises' (1998: 35–53). Hadot's early work on this topic, published in the 1970s, was an important influence on the late work of Michel Foucault, who examined practices of what he called the 'cultivation of the self' in Graeco-Roman antiquity (1988: 37–68). It is now generally accepted that the *Meditations* is indeed a personal text, written by Marcus for himself as part of a project of ethical self-development, not explicitly intended for wider circulation. However, whether Marcus had some hypothetical reader other than himself in the back of his mind when he was writing remains a subject of debate.[14]

There has also been much discussion, prompted by a provocative article by John Rist (1982), about the extent to which Marcus was a Stoic. On a number of topics, he has been taken to be heterodox or inconsistent. Central here are the series of passages where Marcus seems to equivocate over whether the cosmos is providentially ordered or simply the product of atomic chaos – providence or atoms – and another series of passages where Marcus appears to draw a distinction between a potentially immaterial mind and the soul that permeates the body.[15] While the first might be thought to betray the influence of Epicureanism, the second might be taken as evidence of Platonic sympathies. This image of Marcus as a confused eclectic has been challenged in recent years, and all the chapters in this volume defend to differing degrees the view that Marcus was indeed a Stoic, engaging with or presupposing a wide range of Stoic ideas. However, this is not to say that he was unoriginal, and multiple chapters explore both the question of orthodoxy alongside reflections on the distinctiveness of the *Meditations*. In both cases, answers to these sorts of questions often refer back to the more-or-less unique literary form of the text. Marcus did not spell out in full the Stoic doctrines to which he was committed because – in a text addressed to himself – there was no need to do so. Assuming that these private notes were composed over an extended period of time and not subsequently polished for wider consumption, it should also not be surprising to see occasional shifts in terminology and ways of expressing key ideas across the work – something that we might rightly call inconsistency in a published treatise, but which is perhaps unfair and unrealistic to expect in a text of this kind.

Marcus has also sometimes found himself in a double bind, criticised for deviating from Stoic orthodoxy while at the same time dismissed as unoriginal – the unthinking disciple who gets it wrong.[16] But in the light of recent work, he is now more often seen as fully convergent with orthodox Stoic philosophy, and any 'deviations' reflect his own personal adaptation and approach, no different in kind from the variety of views attributed to earlier members of the Stoa. A whole host of previous Stoics have been called out for being heterodox in some way or rejecting some core Stoic doctrine, from Aristo to Diogenes of Babylon, Boethus of Sidon, Panaetius, and Posidonius, and yet they all remain squarely within the Stoic tradition.[17] The same applies to Marcus.

The *Meditations* is also often presented as a unique text, unlike anything else that survives from antiquity. Marcus has himself also sometimes been seen as an isolated individual, cut off from the wider intellectual activity of his day, writing alone for himself in his campaign tent on the outer edge of

the Empire. Yet we know that Marcus had multiple philosophy tutors in his youth and was probably well acquainted with the intellectual currents of his day (1.6–9). Although the *Meditations* is indeed unusual, insofar as it is a text written by someone to themselves, the sort of therapeutic admonishment that Marcus offers shares much in common with what we find in the work of his contemporary Galen. In his *The Affections and Errors of the Soul*, we find Galen stressing the importance of the judgements people make about things, reflecting on potential difficulties in advance, and emphasising the need to repeat key doctrines and keep them close to hand.[18] Indeed, many of the key therapeutic strategies that we find in the *Meditations* can also be found there. We have no evidence to suggest an influence in either direction – although we do know that they knew each other; Galen acted as Marcus' personal physician for a while – but reading these two texts together sheds fresh light on the *Meditations* as the product of a wider intellectual climate.

It is also important to avoid what has been called the 'sanctification' of Marcus, seeing him as a wise old sage, the philosopher-king on the throne of Rome.[19] That image developed very quickly and can be found in a number of the ancient accounts of his life, such as the biography in the *Historia Augusta*.[20] What the *Meditations* records, though, are his personal struggles, his internal weaknesses, and the themes that predominate are presumably those on which he felt the need to do the most work.[21] While at first glance this might appear to open up Marcus to a charge of inconsistency or hypocrisy, in fact it ought to be unsurprising. He comments so often on the need to act well towards others, for instance, presumably because this was an area in which he struggled and knew he needed to address. Marcus was no sage and is quite open about some of his shortcomings. What we get is an intensely personal account of one imperfect man's efforts to try to become a better person. The reason why the *Meditations* has become a perpetual bestseller is that all this is highly relatable; none of us are sages either.

In the chapters that follow, we see the *Meditations* approached from a variety of angles. We begin with Caillan Davenport's account of Marcus the man, both emperor and author (Chapter 1). Among the full range of relevant ancient sources, Davenport draws on Book 1 of the *Meditations* as a key source of information about Marcus' family relationships, his intellectual influences, and his character. This is followed by Francesca Alesse's exploration of the *Meditations* as a piece of writing (Chapter 2). What kind of text is this, and what is its purpose? This has been a topic of much discussion in recent years, and Alesse gives a full critical discussion of the

debate to date, as well as highlighting some of the *Meditations*' distinctive features.

As I have already noted (p. 4), one topic that has preoccupied recent scholarship is the extent to which Marcus is an orthodox follower of Stoicism. This issue is examined afresh by Benjamin Harriman (Chapter 3), who notes the reported influence of Aristo on Marcus. Aristo is often described as a 'heterodox Stoic', although it is worth adding that he nevertheless remained a Stoic. This opens up wider questions about how broad a tradition Stoicism was in antiquity and the extent to which someone might deviate on certain issues and yet continue to identify as a Stoic. However, as Harriman shows, many points where Marcus may initially appear to be heterodox can, after closer examination, be shown to be in line with standard Stoic thinking.

The subsequent chapters deal thematically with core ideas that run through the *Meditations*. Gretchen Reydams-Schils examines Marcus' interest in Nature and the connected topics of fate and providence (Chapter 4). She highlights the fact that Marcus was in fact deeply preoccupied with issues in physics or natural philosophy, to the point that it would be highly distorting to read the *Meditations* as primarily a work of practical ethics. In her discussion, Marcus also comes through as a committed Stoic philosopher. Moving from the macro to the micro level, Lothar Willms turns our attention to Marcus' reflections on the self and the soul (Chapter 5). He pays close attention to the language and terminology that Marcus uses here, examining them against the backdrop of Stoic psychology. Once again, the question of orthodoxy arises, and the extent to which Marcus' comments might betray Platonic influences. Willms argues that by attending to the literary features of the text and its psychagogic motives it becomes easy to see that these apparently Platonic passages ought not to be taken too literally.

A central theme running through the *Meditations* is the role that value judgements play in shaping our experience of the world, our emotions, and our actions. Jean-Baptiste Gourinat explores this issue (Chapter 6), again placing Marcus against the backdrop of earlier Stoic thinking. He highlights not only the Stoic goal of wanting to escape from harmful negative emotions such as fear and anger, but also the positive project of cultivating good emotions that Marcus and earlier Stoics insist are a vital part of a good human life. Questions about what a good human life might look like also occupy Brad Inwood, who considers the extent to which Marcus' ethical outlook is grounded on or presupposes core ideas in Stoic physics (Chapter 7). The Stoic goal was to live in agreement with Nature, and

Inwood considers the role that both knowledge of Nature as a whole and knowledge of human nature might play in this ideal. One question deliberately left hanging is the extent to which Marcus sees the mind as something autonomous, outside the causal determinism of Nature.

Continuing with ethical themes, Christopher Gill examines what Marcus has to say about the virtues and how they contribute to living a happy life (Chapter 8). As Gill notes, the Stoic claim that virtue alone is sufficient for a happy life is one of the defining features of their ethics. The Stoics combine this with their distinctive attitude towards external things, classifying some as preferred and others as dispreferred. Marcus, like Epictetus, pays relatively little attention to that division, and so again parallels with the earlier Stoic Aristo come to mind.[22] Despite this, Gill also stresses the ways in which Marcus follows what we might call mainstream Chrysippean Stoic thought, while also highlighting the distinctive features of Marcus' own approach to ethics.

Marcus' reflections on Nature understood as an integrated whole and his interest in ethical questions concerned with how best to live come together in his remarks about human society. The cosmos, he tells us, is like a city, of which we are all citizens.[23] This and related topics are discussed by Jula Wildberger (Chapter 9). As in previous chapters, Marcus' comments are set against the backdrop of earlier Stoic thinking in both physics and ethics. Wildberger does not shy away from raising concerns about Marcus' own political activities during his time as emperor and asking if these can be squared with his professed philosophical views. Marcus' own love for his fellow human beings may in fact have been somewhat limited. However, rather than see this as the basis for a charge of hypocrisy, we might instead note that his awareness of this weakness may have been the motivating force behind his frequent comments on this topic in the *Meditations*. He was reminding himself of this core Stoic idea precisely because it was an area where he needed to work on himself.

The final two chapters deal with the reception of the *Meditations*. In Chapter 10, I examine the fate of the *Meditations* immediately after Marcus' death and what we know of the transmission of the text up until it was first published in the sixteenth century. I then focus on the reception of the *Meditations* in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[24] In Chapter 11, Donald Robertson examines the perhaps unexpected impact of the *Meditations* on the development of twentieth-century psychotherapy. Setting this against the background of wider therapeutic themes in ancient thought, Robertson notes the ways in which Marcus and Stoicism influenced early pioneers in psychotherapy up to and including cognitive-behavioural therapy.

It is perhaps in this arena, quite different from the confines of academic philosophy, that the *Meditations* has left its greatest mark. It is a book to which countless readers continue to turn for ethical and psychotherapeutic guidance. Yet, as the essays in this volume demonstrate, it is one grounded on a complex set of philosophical ideas and open to rich and sophisticated readings that go far beyond the practical concerns of the casual reader.

CHAPTER 1

# *Marcus Aurelius*
## *The Man and the* Meditations

*Caillan Davenport*

Most Roman emperors are inscrutable figures, whose words survive only in propagandistic pronouncements (such as Augustus' *Res Gestae*), in bureaucratic missives to individuals, cities, and states, and in collected ephemera – a poem here, a witty saying there.[1] The impulse to produce biographical treatments of the emperors, to understand their personalities and policies, nevertheless continues unabated on these shaky evidential foundations. There are two exceptions to this general trend. One is the emperor Julian, who reigned for a mere eighteen months between 361 and 363 but who left behind a substantial collection of letters, some personal, some public, as well as assorted speeches and treatises. The other is the subject of this chapter and this *Companion*, Marcus Aurelius. His correspondence with his tutor in Latin rhetoric, M. Cornelius Fronto, covers a quarter of a century, c. 139–66, beginning with Marcus' precocious teenage years, then extending through his marriage to Faustina and the birth of his children, his assumption of the purple in 161, and the first part of his reign as co-Augustus with his brother Lucius Verus. These are not official letters, composed by imperial functionaries (we have plenty of those as well), but private correspondence, never intended for publication, a combination of daily trivialities with more profound thoughts on life, love, and loss. The *Meditations* is the reflections of the older Marcus written in the 170s after the death of Verus, with the weight of an empire ravaged by foreign invasions sitting on his shoulders alone. He spent most of these years outside Rome, based at Carnuntum and Sirmium, leading the campaign against the northern tribes pressing on the Danubian frontier, or in the East, after a revolt by one of his most trusted generals, Avidius Cassius, in 175. The *Meditations* looks back to the past to Marcus' upbringing and formative influences (personal, political, and philosophical), but they are firmly rooted in the turbulent world of the present, as Marcus exhorts and encourages himself to be a good emperor, and a good man, despite the manifold challenges he faces in life.

## Texts and Contexts

There is no indication that Marcus ever intended the *Meditations* to be published. We do not know its original title, if it even had one. The first printed edition of the Greek text, based on a manuscript which has since been lost, was produced at Zurich in 1558–9. It bore the title 'The twelve books of Marcus Antoninus the emperor and philosopher to himself'. The Byzantine archbishop Arethas (c. 850–935) had also used the descriptor 'to himself' (*eis heauton*). This was not the only title applied to the work in antiquity, however. The earliest attested reference, which occurs in one of the fourth-century orations of Themistius, describes the text as 'instructions' or 'precepts' (*parangelmata*).[2] The tenth-century lexicon known as the *Suda* calls it a work written by Marcus 'on the conduct of his own life' (*tou idiou biou agōgēn*). The 1634 English translation by Meric Casaubon was entitled 'Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, the Roman Emperour, his Meditations concerning Himselfe', which helped to enshrine *Meditations* as the standard English title.[3] The division into twelve books, first attested in the tenth century, was likewise not Marcus' own. There is a clear sign of thematic organisation in Book 1, which focuses on what the emperor has learned from his family, friends, teachers, and the gods.[4] Book 2 bears the title 'Matters [written] among the Quadi on the Gran', a tributary of the River Danube, while Book 3 is called 'Matters [written] at Carnuntum', the capital of Pannonia Superior. But the overall impression is that the text consists of Marcus' private thoughts, written in an unorganised fashion as personal notes or a journal.[5] After the emperor's death in 180 near Sirmium, the notes were probably collected and preserved by an imperial official (it is unlikely his son Commodus would have shown any interest in it). The text was subsequently copied and circulated among interested parties but remained largely unnoticed: none of Marcus' imperial successors is known to have turned to it for guidance.

The correspondence of Cornelius Fronto, Roman senator, orator, and tutor to both Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus, came to light in the early nineteenth century. Cardinal Angelo Mai discovered part of a codex containing Fronto's letters in 1815 in the Ambrosian Library in Milan, which he published that same year. By very good fortune, Mai was subsequently appointed to the Vatican Library, where he found the rest of the codex. He published a complete edition in 1823. The codex dated from the fifth century, but only 388 pages out of a total of 680 remained. Moreover, the text of Fronto's letters was very difficult to recover, since it was found on a palimpsest underneath the Acts of the Council of Chalcedon of 451. Mai made use of chemicals to bring Fronto's correspondence to light, but this relatively crude