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THE *MEDITATIONS* OF MARCUS AURELIUS A STUDY



R. B. RUTHERFORD

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The aim of the Oxford Classical Monographs series (which replaces the Oxford Classical and Philosophical Monographs) is to publish outstanding theses on Greek and Latin literature, ancient history, and ancient philosophy examined by the faculty board of *Literae Humaniores*.

TO MY PARENTS

... habetur quod, cum Marcus mortuum educatorem suum fleret vocareturque ab aulicis ministris ab ostentatione pietatis, ipse dixerit: 'permitte' inquit 'illi, ut homo sit. neque enim vel philosophia vel imperium tollit affectus.'

(*Historia Augusta: Vita Pii* 10. 5)

Preface

SOME of the limitations of this work are deliberate. It is not a biography of Marcus Aurelius or a detailed narrative of his reign, for which the reader may consult the standard life by Anthony Birley. Nor is it a full account or analysis of Marcus' philosophy or of his relation to earlier thinkers. Although I have said a good deal about his Stoicism and its effect upon his writing, I doubt if evidence permits us to determine in detail from what sources an educated Roman of the second century AD derived his knowledge of specific ideas and theories. The principles and vocabulary of Stoicism were well known, if in a somewhat diluted and non-technical form, and the overlap with other schools of philosophy at this date was considerable. The details of academic discussion and philosophic polemic may at an earlier age have been congenial to Marcus, but it is not these concerns which dominate the *Meditations*.

The object of this study is to explain the background, purpose, and character of the *Meditations*, and to suggest the ways in which the work may most fruitfully be read and interpreted. Marcus' book, once an accepted spiritual classic, is not much read nowadays, and literary criticism of his work is almost non-existent. I have attempted to show that this work, although intimate and private, is more varied and richer in texture than is sometimes supposed. The author recognisably draws upon more established literary traditions, his style and thought are enriched by wide reading, and the intensity and severity of his writing are modified by quotation and allusion, satirical wit, rhetorical virtuosity—in general, the skills of a self-conscious literary artist. I have drawn frequent comparisons with more well-known philosophic writers in antiquity, especially Plato, Lucretius, Horace, Seneca, Epictetus, and Plutarch. Sometimes this is because their works were known to or influenced Marcus, but the comparisons are also intended to show that despite the unusual character of his work, Marcus Aurelius is not an isolated or freakish figure lurking in the obscurity of late classical literature: the tasks of moral self-discipline and preparation for death, the purposes which the *Meditations* chiefly serve, have a

central and honourable place in the work of artists and thinkers throughout antiquity. I hope that in the process of illustrating Marcus' book I have also kept this wider picture in mind. Some of the material I have collected, particularly in the notes, may be of some use to those interested, like myself, in the interaction of philosophy and rhetoric in the intellectual world of Greece and Rome.

The original focus of my research was on the style and literary aspects of the *Meditations*, but it is an unrealistic and reductive enterprise to separate the things said from the way in which they are said. I have therefore discussed Marcus' view of life, and in particular his religion, at some length, always attempting to relate my conclusions closely to the text of the *Meditations*. The obscurity and ambiguity of some passages have meant that certainty, always hard to obtain in these areas, has been impossible. Here even more than elsewhere it has been my aim to gather and comment on some evidence that others may find relevant in amending or refuting the picture of Marcus Aurelius which the present study offers.

This is in some ways a personal work, and I will not conceal the fact that, with some qualifications, I find the view of life expressed in the *Meditations* both sympathetic and admirable. But this study is not intended as hagiography (Marcus has suffered often enough in the past from naïve or extravagant praise), and I have often criticised or questioned Marcus' outlook, or offered contrasting quotations from other moralists. My own temperament and preferences must inevitably colour some of my evaluations. But I have tried to make my subjectivity explicit; readers will doubtless apply their own correctives.

I have many debts to recount, but none more lasting and important than those I owe to my parents, whose faith, encouragement, and constant support made it possible for me to come to Oxford and impelled me to make a success of my time here. As an undergraduate and a research student at Worcester College my enthusiasm for classical studies was quickened by the inspiring teaching of Robin Lane Fox, Michael Winterbottom, and the late Martin Frederiksen, all of whom readily advised and helped me at every stage. Donald Russell of St John's College supervised my research, and it was he who first

turned my attention to the Second Sophistic and the world of Marcus Aurelius. Those who have also worked under him will best know how well he combines solid learning with a humane and sympathetic understanding of the difficulties of research. I have gladly adopted many of his suggestions, and am grateful for his patience and kindness. I must also thank the Craven Committee of the University of Oxford for electing me to a Craven Fellowship which enabled me to spend the Michaelmas term of 1980 at the University of Heidelberg; during my time there, Professor and Mrs A. Dihle and Dr Gerard O'Daly did much to make my visit both tolerable and profitable. Mr E. L. Bowie and Professor I. G. Kidd examined this work as a D. Phil. thesis in 1985, and made many helpful comments and corrections. Since October 1981 I have been able to pursue my work in ideal surroundings, and in the company of an unrivalled circle of classical scholars, first as a Research Lecturer and then as a Tutor at Christ Church. I am very grateful to the Governing Body for electing me to these posts, and to my colleagues for their constant kindness and courtesy, which have made the college a home from the beginning. Friends in Oxford and elsewhere have helped me in countless ways: for their tolerance and generosity I thank especially Stephen and Ruth Halliwell, Victoria Harris, Doreen Innes, Emily Kearns, Barbara Macleod, Peter Parsons, Nicholas Purcell, Corinne Richards, Oliver Taplin, and Catherine Whistler. I must also mention here the meticulous work of those who typed the text of thesis and book, namely Glenys MacGregor, Alison Menzies, Rachel Woodrow, and especially Caroline MacNicoll; the notes and other appurtenances are my own responsibility.

One debt remains to be acknowledged. Of all my teachers, Colin Macleod most deeply influenced my critical approach; at the most difficult stage of my research he generously offered advice and suggested numerous lines of thought which have invariably proved rewarding; and his integrity, dedication, and humanity made him an example in life as well as scholarship. The first draft of this study was completed on the day before his death. I am deeply conscious how much his close and careful scrutiny would have enhanced its value. For his teaching and friendship, I wish to record my belated thanks.

R. B. RUTHERFORD

Abbreviated Titles for Works of Reference

<i>ANRW</i>	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt</i> , ed. H. Temporini and W. Haase (Berlin and New York, 1972-).
Arndt-Gingrich	W. Bauer, <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> , ed. W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich (Chicago 1957).
<i>ERE</i>	<i>Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics</i> , ed. J. Hastings (Edinburgh 1908-26).
LSJ	H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, H. S. Jones, <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> (9th edn., Oxford 1940; with Supplement, 1968).
<i>OCD</i>	<i>The Oxford Classical Dictionary</i> , 2nd edn., ed. N. G. L. Hammond and H. H. Scullard (Oxford 1970).
<i>ODCC</i>	<i>Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church</i> , ed. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone. (2nd edn. with revisions, Oxford 1983).
<i>OLD</i>	<i>Oxford Latin Dictionary</i> , ed. P. Glare (Oxford 1968-82).
<i>PIR</i> ¹ and <i>PIR</i> ²	<i>Prosopographia Imperii Romani</i> (Berlin, 1st edn., 1897-8, 2nd edn. 1933-).
<i>RE</i>	<i>Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft</i> (Stuttgart 1893-).
<i>RLAC</i>	<i>Reallexicon für Antike und Christentum</i> , ed. T. Klauser <i>et al.</i> (Stuttgart 1950-).
<i>SVF</i>	<i>Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta</i> , ed. H. von Arnim (Leipzig 1903-24).
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> , ed. G. Kittel, tr. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids and London 1964-76).

Other Conventions

DIFFERENT editions of the *Meditations* use widely varying systems of subdividing chapters. My references follow the divisions in Farquharson's text. Fronto is cited according to volume and page of the Loeb edition by C. R. Haines. Musonius Rufus is cited from the edition by O. Hense (Leipzig 1905); this text is reproduced, with different pagination and without critical apparatus, in the study by C. E. Lutz, *YCS* 10 (1947).

Abbreviations for classical authors follow the conventions laid down in LSJ and the *OLD*. Abbreviations for periodicals normally follow the system of *L'Année Philologique*, though I have occasionally expanded some titles which are less commonly found.

Marcus Aurelius: A Biographical Note¹

MARCUS AURELIUS, born at Rome in AD 121 as M. Annius Verus, was of Spanish extraction, son of a consular who was also brother-in-law of Antoninus Pius. He lost his father in early childhood (see *Meditations* i. 2), but was soon favoured with the patronage of the emperor Hadrian, who had assumed the throne in 117. Hadrian gave him the nickname Verissimus, and in 136 betrothed him to the daughter of L. Ceionius Commodus, consul of that year, Hadrian's proposed successor. Ceionius died in 138, whereupon Hadrian turned to the sober and trustworthy Antoninus Pius, adopting him and requiring him to adopt both Marcus and Ceionius' son Lucius Verus.² Pius' accession was untroubled, and he governed responsibly and well from 138 to 161, a period of prosperity, senatorial freedom, and relative peace on the frontiers.³ Meanwhile Marcus was educated by the most eminent rhetorical and philosophic teachers of his day, and at an early stage began to serve under Pius (he was quaestor in 139, consul with Pius in 140, consul for the second time in 145, and received the *tribunicia potestas* and proconsular *imperium* in 146). In 145 he married Pius' daughter Faustina, and a daughter was born in the following year. Marcus was clearly senior to Lucius Verus (consul only in 154), but upon his accession insisted that they should reign as colleagues, Verus' titles and powers being immediately augmented. Verus' reputation has suffered from much gossip reported in the unreliable *Historia Augusta*, which paints him as a playboy; yet his ties with Marcus were close, and he seems to have been a reliable administrator and adequate general.⁴ Verus died in 169.

¹ This summary makes no pretence of originality: it is simply intended as a brief introduction to Marcus Aurelius' career for those previously unfamiliar with the period.

² T. D. Barnes, *JRS* 57 (1967) 65 ff. argues forcefully that Hadrian intended Verus to be Antoninus' successor. *Contra*, see A. R. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius* (rev. ed., London 1987) 240. (References to this work are always to the revised edition.)

³ On the reign of Pius see A. Garzetti, *From Tiberius to the Antonines* (Eng. tr. London 1974) 441-71, with ample bibliog.; also Birley, ch. 3-5. Despite Marcus' tributes in i. 16 and vi. 30, he remains a rather shadowy figure.

⁴ P. Lambrechts, *Antiq. Cl.* 3 (1974) 173-211 = R. Klein (ed.) *Marc Aurel* (Darmstadt 1979) 25 ff., attempted a rehabilitation, but has not been generally followed. See also Barnes (n. 2), P. A. Brunt, *JRS* 64 (1974) 5-6.

Marcus himself reigned from 161 to 180. Frontier problems and indeed invasions occupied his attention for many of those twenty years. Britain, Parthia, and especially the many tribes of the German provinces and the free Germans north of the Danube all caused recurrent problems, and Marcus campaigned himself in north Italy and Germany in 168 and 170-5 (against the Marcomanni, the Quadi, and the Sarmatii), and again in Pannonia and Germany from 177 until his death from illness, on campaign near Vienna, in March 180. In 175 he was also hampered by internal strife, with the revolt of Avidius Cassius, governor of Egypt and Syria. Cassius claimed that news had reached him of the emperor's death, and the full extent of his guilt remains doubtful.⁵ Scandal implicated Faustina, Marcus' wife, as Avidius' lover and fellow-conspirator. The rebellion failed and Avidius was murdered by a centurion; the historian Dio Cassius presents Marcus' reaction to the revolt as one of pity, sorrow, and readiness to forgive.⁶ (Modern readers have sometimes attempted to find references to this affair, and to Faustina's supposed infidelities, in the *Meditations*. All such enquiries remain speculative, however intriguing. Of Faustina, as of Verus, he says nothing but good in Book I.⁷)

Another disaster of Marcus' reign was the plague of 166-7 and later, apparently brought back from Parthia by Verus' armies.⁸ It is not clear how far this affected population. Meanwhile, wars and generous donations of largesse diminished the treasury dangerously. Bureaucracy and busy officialdom flourished, but no strong threads of long term policy can be readily discerned. Nevertheless, Marcus' lifetime was soon idealised as a Golden Age (Dio Cassius 71. 36. 4), partly because of the violent contrast provided by the disastrous reign of his son Commodus (born 161, reigned 180-192), who was eventually assassinated and execrated as a tyrant.

⁵ See Birley 182-9; R. Syme, *Roman Papers* v (Oxford 1988) 689-701.

⁶ Dio, *Epit.* 72. 17-31 is the fullest account.

⁷ For speculation of this kind see Brunt (n. 4) 13, 18-19. On Faustina see *Med.* i. 17. 8, in which the author thanks the gods 'that my wife is as she is, so obedient, so affectionate, so simple'; on Verus *ibid.* § 4: 'that I met with such a good brother, able by his character not only to rouse me to take care of myself but at the same time to cheer me by his respect and affection.' See also viii. 25, 37.

⁸ See J. F. Gilliam, *AJP* 82 (1961) 225-51 = Klein (ed.), *Marc Aurel* 144-75.

In retrospect, Marcus' reign also arouses interest in modern readers because of the continuing growth of Christianity (already familiar and persecuted in the time of Nero, and judiciously controlled by Trajan).⁹ The emperor must have known about the existence of the cult, but it may still have seemed of little importance at this time. In the *Meditations* he mentions Christians only once, with disapproval (xi. 3, in a phrase which has been doubted as possibly a later gloss); his teacher Fronto denounced them with the ignorant clichés of polemic; and two episodes of persecution occurred under Marcus' authority and presumably with his knowledge: the martyrdom of the apologist Justin (AD 167?), after a trial conducted by Marcus' close friend Rusticus,¹⁰ and the executions at Lyons in response to a public outcry in 177 (though the date has been questioned).¹¹

The *Meditations*, unknown to the authors who describe his reign, were presumably written during his final years. They offer exceptional access to the thoughts of a Roman emperor in a period which is, even by ancient standards, very ill-documented. For narrative accounts of Marcus' life and reign we have to turn to an epitomized portion of Dio Cassius' monumental history of Rome, written in Greek between AD 197 and c. 225,¹² and to a sketchy biography included in the notoriously unreliable *Historia Augusta* (probably compiled in the late fourth century).¹³ There is also a valuable, though fragmentary, collection of letters exchanged by Marcus and his tutor Cornelius Fronto (occasional letters by others such as Verus also appear), but these are badly preserved and many are hard to

⁹ See Tac. *Ann.* xv. 44. 3-8; Suet. *Cl.* 25. 4; Plin. *Ep.* x. 96-7; Epict. iv. 7. 1-6; Fronto ii. 282 (= Minucius Felix, *Octavia* 9. 8). See further ch. v, nn. 30-2.

¹⁰ *Acta Iustini*, in H. Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford 1972) 42 ff.; different and perhaps more authentic version in R. Knopf, G. Krüger, and G. Ruhbach, *Ausgewählte Märtyrerakten* (4th edn., Tübingen 1965) 15 ff.

¹¹ Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* iv. 16. 7-9, v. *praef.* (partly reproduced in Musurillo 62 ff., Knopf-Krüger-Ruhbach 18 ff.). On the date see T. D. Barnes, *JTS* 19 (1968) 517-19, and in *Les Martyres de Lyons* (Paris 1978).

¹² See esp. F. Millar, *A Study of Cassius Dio* (Oxford 1964). G. W. Bowersock, in his review in *Gnomon* 37 (1965) 469-74, criticises Millar's arguments for dating the beginnings of Dio's work as early as 197.

¹³ There is a convenient Penguin translation of the earlier Lives, with a detailed introduction, by A. R. Birley, *Lives of the Later Caesars* (Harmondsworth 1976); see also his *Marcus Aurelius* 229-30.

date.¹⁴ The majority of these letters come from the period before Marcus Aurelius became emperor. The social, political, and economic background, though not the personalities of the period, can be further illuminated from public documents and inscriptions, though only in a very few cases is there reason to suppose that the formulation bears much relation to Marcus' own views and words.¹⁵

¹⁴ The most accessible edn. is that of C. R. Haines (Loeb Classical Library, London and New York 1919-20); the fullest critical edn., that of M. P. J. van den Hout (Leiden 1954). For an outstanding modern study see E. Champlin, *Fronto and Antonine Rome* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980). Champlin discusses the chronology of the correspondence in detail, in *JRS* 64 (1974) 136-59.

¹⁵ See esp. J. H. Oliver and R. E. A. Palmer, *Hesperia* 14 (1955) 320 ff.; J. H. Oliver, *Marcus Aurelius: Aspects of Civil and Cultural Policy in the East*, *Hesperia* Suppl. 13 (1970); W. Williams, *ZPE* 17 (1975) 37 ff.; id., *JRS* 66 (1976) 78-82. On Marcus and the law see Birley 133-9, 179-83, 199-200.

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