Meditations – Marcus Aurelius

Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations* is somewhat unique among philosophy readings because it is not an ordered and planned statement of a philosophical system or position, rather it is something more like a diary, much of it being written while the emperor was out on campaigns to defend Rome’s borders. Unlike Epictetus’ *Discourses* (which was written by one of his students), *Meditations* was penned by the man himself but the personal nature of the content and the unsystematic, almost haphazard structure make it clear that it was never intended for publication.

Given the way it was written, *Meditations* suffers from some of the same problems that *Discourses* does. As I have already mentioned, it is completely unstructured with topics being discussed at random and to varying degrees of depth with almost no attempt made at any reasoned, supported arguments. It is also extremely repetitive with the exact same ideas recurring again and again right to the end of the final chapter.

However, it is decidedly unfair to make these criticisms against *Meditations*, and its author in particular, because it was never meant to be anything other than it is; that is, a journal-like collection of the writer’s thoughts, undoubtedly often in response to things going on in Marcus’ life at the time, and the personal recordings of a man attempting to find a way to live up to his highest ideals and values.

One benefit of the text being composed the way it was is that we get a glimpse into the man behind the emperor’s robe. We see him not just outline the Stoic values he believed in but also chastise himself for failing to live up to them, wrestle with certain things that obviously caused him distress and even offer himself advice about how to overcome those problems (*Meditations* is full of practical advice), and note his personal reflections about himself, for example, we hear him, with a touch of regret, resign himself to the fact that the “contrary pull” of his station (as emperor) has meant that the path of a philosopher is no longer open to him. Such a perspective is rare in philosophical writings and is of no small benefit for someone seeking to understand Stoicism not just as a set of philosophical concepts, but as a way of living.

*Meditations* is not long, around one hundred and twenty pages, and is divided into twelve chapters (books). In the first chapter, Marcus goes through the people around him and lists the things he has learned from each of them and the following eleven chapters are comprised of short, (usually no more than a handful of lines) epigrammatic reflections on his actions or on various aspects of Stoic philosophy.

The Sage

(3.16.2) “And if all people mistrust him, for living a simple, decent, and cheerful life, he has no quarrel with any of them, and no diversion from the road which leads to the final goal of his life: to this he must come pure, at peace, ready to depart, in unforced harmony with his fate.”

(4.49.1) “Be like the rocky headland on which the waves constantly break. It stands firm, and round it the seething waters are laid to rest.”

(7.68) “…Judgement says to Circumstance: ‘This is what you really are, however different you may conventionally appear’; and Ready Use says to Event: ‘I was looking for you. I always take the present moment as raw material for the exercise of rational and social virtue…”

(12.1.2) “If, then, when you finally come close to your exit, you have left all else behind and value only your directing mind and the divinity within you, if your fear is not that you will cease to live, but that you never started a life in accordance with nature, then you will be a man worthy of the universe that gave you birth.”

Life (2.17.1, 7.46)

Marcus has **a pessimistic and gloomy take on human existence** and this is very much a key theme in the *Meditations*; “all things of the body stream away like a river, all things of the mind are dreams and delusions; life is warfare, and a visit in a strange land; the only lasting fame is oblivion.”

Despite this overriding negative theme, Marcus does urge us to make the most of our short and unimportant lives, telling us that **we should not have any concern for a particular length of life, and rather “live for the sake of living”.**

*Short and Cheap* (2.4, 2.6, 2.12, 2.17.1, 3.4.1, 4.3.3, 4.6, 4.17, 4.26, 4.32, 4.37, 4.48, 5.23, 5.24, 5.33, 6.36, 7.46, 8.21, 9.28, 9.32, 10.15, 11.18.6, 12.7, 12.21, 12.32)

Marcus frequently comments on **the brevity and cheapness of life**. Our bodies, even our memories of them, and all sensory objects; everything vanishes so quickly. In light of this, **everything is cheap, contemptible, shoddy, and perishable**. Think about how many people have died over time; death litters history, and all in a brief space of time. Life is short and cheap; “Yesterday sperm: tomorrow a mummy or ashes” – “In no time at all ashes or bare bones”.

Considering how little time is allocated us, **we ought to use what time is left remaining to us wisely, meaning we should closely watch and keep our directing minds pure and on task**, that is, in accordance with our nature as rational and social beings**.** At one place, he calls this“clear[ing] away your clouds”. There is a strong sense of urgency in the *Meditations* surrounding this idea. We must work on improving ourselves *now*.

*Repetitive* (4.32, 6.37, 6.46, 7.1, 7.49, 9.14, 10.27, 11.1.2, 12.24, 12.26)

**Life is just constant repetition of the same things again and again;** people marrying, having children, dying, fighting, feasting, trading, farming, plotting, falling in love, etc. Whoever has seen the present has seen everything; “all things are related and the same” - “for the study of human life forty years are as good as ten thousand”. He quips, “All the same as now: just a different cast.”

*Insignificant* (2.12, 3.10, 4.3.3, 5.23, 5.24, 6.36, 7.35, 8.21, 9.30, 10.17, 10.31, 12.7, 12.32)

**Our lives are insignificant and ultimately unimportant**. Marcus cautions us to “look at the speed of universal oblivion [and] the gulf of immeasurable time both before and after [your life]”. The whole earth is just a tiny speck in space, how much smaller and emptier is your little “cranny”?

The same effect can be had thinking about the lives of all those people who lived long before you, the lives that will be lived long after you, the lives of those in foreign tribes you will never meet, etc. Human life is mere smoke and nothing.

In addition, **the ‘benefits’ of life are all meaningless**; the “’prizes’ of life empty, rotten, puny: puppies snapping at each other, children squabbling, laughter turning straight to tears.”

*Change* (4.3.4, 4.36, 4.42, 5.10.2, 5.23, 5.33, 6.4, 6.15, 7.18, 7.25, 8.6, 9.19, 9.28, 9.32, 9.35, 10.11, 10.18, 12.21)

**All things change** almost faster than you can look at them… until they are no more. This prompts Marcus to say, “The universe is change: life is judgement.”

There are both positive and negative aspects of this fact of the universe; however, **change in itself is neither inherently bad nor inherently good**.

**The negative: In this constant “flux of being, time, movement, [and] things moved” that is life, there is nothing of value**.

**The positive (1): We cannot achieve anything without change and change itself is in perfect harmony with the Whole**. As examples; we cannot take a bath unless the wood which heats the water is not changed nor can we be nourished unless what we eat is changed into material useful for our bodies.

**The positive (2): Change constantly creates new things out of the same material so that everything is always young. Loss is nothing more than change.**

**Although all things change, everything is familiar because it is all composed of the same material, just expressed differently.**

*Temporary* (4.33, 4.35, 5.33, 6.15, 6.36, 9.30, 12.32)

**All things fade quickly and turn to myth before “utter oblivion drowns them”**. Things that were once famed (including people) are now nothing more than a “mere name or not even a name: and if a name, only sound and echo.” Even everlasting memory is ultimately “utter emptiness”.

**Given that things are so intransient why should we value any of them**? Marcus compares it to fancying one of the little sparrows that fly past – gone before we can even see it.

*Struggle* (7.61)

**Marcus compares the art of living to wrestling, as opposed to dancing**, because it requires one to always stand “ready for what comes and… not [be] thrown by the unforeseen.”

*Contemptible / Disgusting* (8.24, 12.24)

Marcus sees **life and everything in it as ultimately disgusting**. He compares life to bathwater – “all soap, sweat, grime, greasy water, the whole thing disgusting”. This particular attitude becomes especially prevalent when we analyse things into their respective parts (see ‘analysis’ section), which are often less appealing than the coarse perceptions we are able to make.

He also says that if we could look down on all human activity from a great height we would “despise it”.

Time (3.10, 4.43, 7.29, 8.36, 12.26)

**We live only in the present moment, which is but a “mere fragment of time”**; the past is gone and the future is uncertain.

Therefore, we ought not to let ourselves become upset by dwelling on things that happened in the past or things that may occur in the future; **the past and the future cannot weigh heavily on you, only the present**.

Marcus compares time to a “violent stream” carrying things away as soon as they come into sight.

Death (2.11.1, 2.12, 2.14.2, 2.17.2, 3.3, 3.5, 3.7, 4.5, 4.15, 4.21, 4.47, 4.48.2, 4.50, 5.10.2, 5.33, 6.23, 6.28, 6.47, 6.49, 6.56, 7.6, 7.29, 7.32, 7.35, 8.18, 8.20, 8.25, 8.58, 9.3, 9.17, 9.21, 9.33, 10.7.1, 10.18, 10.29, 10.36, 11.3, 12.5, 12.23, 12.36)

Marcus talks about few things more than death in the *Meditations* and he is very concerned with **accepting and confronting death honestly and authentically**. The overall message is that **death is not something to be feared**. Marcus uses a sailing analogy to capture this idea; “What of it, then? You embarked, you set sail, you made port. Go ashore now.” In fact, Marcus considers **a soul ready for release from the body, a noble thing.**

**Everything in the Whole must perish, and ‘perish’ just means ‘change’. Since nature made this ‘perishing’ and since nature is ordered, harmonious and well-maintained it follows that ‘perishing’ is not harmful.**

**Since life is temporary, short and meaningless; and the things in it equally devoid of meaning, we should wait for death calmly and peacefully**, “like a soldier waiting for the Retreat from life to sound” **and depart easily when the time comes**. Marcus uses the analogy of an olive falling when it is ripe, blessing the earth which bore it and grateful to the tree which gave it growth.

He also compares an ‘early’ death to a comic actor dismissed from the stage early. “But I have only played three of the five acts.” “True, but in life three acts can be the whole play.” The moral of this analogy is that **you have no say in either the beginning or the end of your life**. **The appropriate attitude then is to just go in peace.**

In reflecting on what happens when a person dies and their soul migrates into the air, Marcus affirms that they (souls) “continue for a time, then change, dissolve, and take fire as they are assumed into the generative principle of the Whole”. In response to the question of how the air can accommodate all souls from the beginning of time, he likens the situation to the way the ground can hold all physical corpses, i.e. they decompose in the ground making way for new ones. It is the same as if someone were to ask how a single animal can absorb the huge quantity of food it will consume over its lifetime; obviously all of that food gets digested and assimilated, ultimately going into the construction and maintenance of the body.

Marcus offered a number of consolations for death:

1. **If the gods exist, they wouldn’t lead us to any harm. If they don’t exist or don’t care about us then this life is of no value and not worth fearing the termination of anyway**.
2. **Death looked at analytically, i.e. stripped of all associated, irrational images, is nothing more than a function of nature**. Only children are afraid of what is natural.
3. **It matters not whether we live a long or a short life**, “even three hours… are sufficient”. First, in death only the present moment is lost, for no one can lose what she doesn’t have and no one can possess the past or the future. Since death is the loss of a moment only, irrespective of how long a life was, the loss is the same in both cases and therefore neither (a long or short life) ought to be preferred. Second, the same things continually come around again and again (see “repetitive” section above), so it doesn’t matter whether we see those same things for a hundred years, or two hundred years, or an infinite amount of time. Third, if you knew you would die tomorrow or the day after, the addition of an extra day would make no difference to you, hence there should be no difference between “life to the umpteenth year and life to tomorrow.”
4. **Death is nothing more than the dissolution of the elements of which every living creature is composed**; a mystery of nature.
5. **Death is inevitable**.
6. **Death is either 1) change and dispersal into the elements of the universe (if we are atoms) or 2) (if we are a unity) 2a) transferal to another life (of “mind and divinity”) or 2b) insensibility/extinction (in which case there will be no more experience at all)**. Either way, death is nothing to be feared.
7. **Consider a list of people who lived long lives**. **Did they gain anything over those who died early? No. And they are all dead now anyway**.
8. **Life is not of such great value that we ought to worry over its loss**. Think of all the things you do and reflect on whether losing them through death ought to make death a cause for fear.
9. **Look at the infinity of time behind and ahead of you. What difference does death at three days or three generations make?**
10. **Death is a “relief from reaction to the senses, from the puppet-strings of impulse, from the analytical mind, and from service to the flesh.”**
11. **Death is also a release from having to deal with others**, specifically “the sort of characters which… contaminate your soul” – “the deliverance death brings is not deliverance from the like-minded.” Marcus sees himself living “out of tune with [his] fellows” and urges death to come quickly before he too forgets himself and joins them in their folly. However, he also cautions us that we should not “feel any less warmth for them… but keep true to your own character – friendly, kind, generous.”
12. **You do not resent your weight, so you also ought not to resent your life span**, i.e. you should think of your life span as just another uncontrollable fact of nature.
13. **Death is completely natural.** Everything in nature is aimed at cessation just as must as beginning and duration. Marcus gives the analogy of a ball being thrown up inevitably falling back to the ground, pointing out that it isn’t ‘good’ on the way up and ‘bad’ on the way down.
14. **All termination and change is also a sort of death and you don’t fear this.** Specifically, Marcus refers to the termination of an activity, the pause after a judgement is finished and the stages of life (childhood, adolescence, prime, old age). So, **what is there to fear in “the termination, the pause, and the change of your whole life?”**
15. **Anything which comes to an end at the appropriate time does not suffer just for being a cessation. Rather, it is a good because “it falls in due season for the Whole, thereby both giving and receiving benefit.”**

Directing Mind / Soul (2.2, 2.13, 3.12, 3.16, 4.29, 4.41, 5.10.2, 5.16, 5.19, 5.26, 5.33, 5.34, 6.14, 6.16, 6.32, 7.28, 7.29, 7.33, 8.26, 8.29, 8.41, 8.43, 8.48, 8.51, 8.56, 9.7, 9.22, 9.42.2, 10.11, 10.38, 11.1, 11.12, 11.19, 12.3.1, 12.26, 12.33)

Humans are made up of flesh, breath, and directing mind. The first two are ours to the extent that we have to care for them; the third is ours in the full sense of being who we are. The flesh “you should disdain”, the breath, being nothing more than inconstant wind, is no better. This leaves **the “directing mind” (or soul), which is the most important part of our being**. Marcus also shares Epictetus’ distaste for the body; “You are a soul carrying a corpse” and recommends that we remember the body is just a vessel which contains the “principle of life… the man himself.” The body is nothing without the directing mind, like a pen without a writer or a whip without a driver.

Marcus also says, slightly differently, that humans are comprised of body (sense perceptions), soul (impulse), and mind (judgements). We share sense perceptions with cattle, response to the “puppet-strings of impulse” with wild beasts and people like Nero, and judgements with atheists, people who betray their country, and other such disreputable folk. **The mark of the good person then is one who accepts what happens as *fate* and keeps her directing mind pure**.

**We should keep our directing minds pure and just, and in a constant state of rational and social activity**. Marcus compares his mind to a spring of clear, sweet water. Even if he throws mud or dung (problems, obstacles) into it, the spring will break this filth down and wash it away, leaving itself untainted.

**Working on our directing mind should also comprise one’s joy.** In fact, it is the nature of the directing mind to be “self-content with acting rightly”.

We ought to focus on **making sure our directing minds (the “divinity within”) aren’t enslaved by the “strings of selfish impulse” or suffering “disquiet at your present or suspicion of your future fate” and are kept “uncontaminated by passion, triviality, or discontent at what is dealt by gods or men.”** A mind free from passions is an impregnable fortress. **It must also “stay immune to any current in the flesh”.**

**Nobody can interfere with you keeping your directing mind pure and strong**. **This is totally in your control and “immune to any external impediment”**. On the other hand though, everything related to your “poor carcass” (body) and “little breath” (soul/impulse) is not in your power.

**“Things of themselves cannot touch the soul at all… The soul alone turns and moves itself”**. This is another key idea, i.e. that externals cannot influence us without our explicit approval.

**Even though we are “born above all for the sake of each other”** (see “human nature” section below)**, our neighbour’s directing mind is completely indifferent to us.** Each directing mind is its own sovereignty; otherwise another person’s wickedness could result in my harm, and the fact that it can’t is a fundamental principle in Stoic ethics.

**The mind should only be concerned with the present: the future and the past are both purely indifferent to it at any moment**.

**Your mind takes on the character of your most frequent thoughts; “souls are dyed by thoughts”** so watch the kind of thoughts you entertain carefully.

**The directing mind is not impaired by pain.** It should be able to withdraw and preserve its serenity even while the body is suffering pain. It cannot be touched by “fire, steel, tyranny, slander, or anything whatever”.

**Marcus also reflects on how the rational soul is not bounded by time or space**; it “traverses the whole universe and the surrounding void, explores the shape of it, [and] stretches into the infinity of time”.

He compares the soul to a sphere which retains its integrity if it doesn’t bulge or contract for other things but keeps constant in the truth of all things.

Someone who “shuts the eye of the mind” is a “beggar”.

Judgement (2.15, 3.9, 4.3.4, 4.7, 4.39, 5.19, 5.26, 6.52, 7.14, 7.38, 7.68, 8.40, 8.47, 8.49, 9.13, 11.16, 11.18.7, 12.22, 12.25)

**“Judgement says to Circumstance: ‘This is what you really are, however different you may conventionally appear”.**

**Our power of judgement is what ensures that our directing mind remains aligned with our nature**, i.e.that of a rational and social being**.**

“***Things* cannot touch the mind**: they are external and inert”; nor can other people or any change of circumstance cause us harm. Rather, it is our mind that creates anxieties through its judgements. In fact, **we cannot be harmed unless we judge an occurrence bad – but we can always refuse to judge it so**. This principle is so important that it can be said **our judgements determine our lives**; “All is as thinking makes it so.” Marcus believes this so strongly that he says we should remain untroubled even if our body is subjected to “knife or cautery, or left to suppurate or mortify”.

**We must be careful not to add our own judgements of good or bad or unwarranted conclusions to initial perceptions**. You are told that someone is maligning you? That is all – you have not been told that you are harmed.

**If you remove the judgement (and you can do this immediately), you remove the thought; remove the thought and the problem disappears too**. Marcus holds that this is true, even in the case of pain.

Analysis (3.11, 6.13, 7.29, 7.54, 8.11, 8.13, 8.21, 8.26, 9.25, 9.36, 10.37, 11.2, 11.16, 11.17, 12.10, 12.18, 12.29)

**We ought to subject everything that is presented to our minds to a methodical and truthful examination**, stripping it to its “essential nature” so that we can see it clearly, naked, in all its “shoddiness” and “come to despise the thing itself”. He recommends that we “turn it inside out and see what it is like, what it becomes in age, sickness, death.” **This method should also be applied to life itself.**

**Then, we can ask pertinent questions of it** like, what is it? What is it composed of? How long will it last? What is its function in the world? What virtue is required to deal with it? **Marcus also specifically recommends dividing events into their “causal” and “material” aspects,** i.e. place the object/event in the causal stream which ultimately culminates in it and separate out the physical parts which comprise the whole.

Some examples Marcus gives to help us remember what things really are (and therefore keep us on track for the good) include; roast meat being nothing but the dead body of a pig or bird, wine being just the juice of grapes, sex being just the friction of a membrane; gold and silver being mere sediments; and your clothing being nothing more than animal hair.

He also talks of dissecting songs into their “individual notes” and asking yourself whether this is something that can overpower you.

Universe / Nature / Providence / Fate (2.3, 2.16, 2.17.2, 3.2, 4.10, 4.23, 4.26, 4.27, 4.29, 4.34, 4.40, 4.45, 5.1.1, 5.3, 5.8.2, 5.8.4-5, 5.10.2, 5.13, 5.25, 5.30, 6.1, 6.10, 6.36, 6.38, 6.39, 6.42, 6.45, 6.54, 6.58, 7.9, 7.23, 7.57, 7.68, 8.45, 8.50, 9.22, 9.28, 9.35, 9.39, 10.5, 10.6, 10.7.1, 10.7.2, 10.20, 10.25, 10.35, 11.4, 12.14, 12.23, 12.26, 12.30)

**“Ready Use says to Event: ‘I was looking for you. I always take the present moment as raw material for the exercise of rational and social virtue”.**

Marcus saw **the Universe (or Nature) as a complex, interrelated Whole made up of individual threads all governed by a divinely-directed Providence**. We even ought to think of the Universe as a living creature of one substance and one soul. This Whole is in possession of a “social intelligence” which is manifest in the way it has made **the lower for the sake of the higher and set the higher in harmony with each other; a key social idea** for Marcus. Sometimes, he even speaks of ‘nature’ through the use of the feminine pronoun, ‘she’.

This means that **Fortune (good or bad luck) is not random, but rather, emerges from this ordered system** and **everything that happens has been “fated by the Whole from the beginning and spun for your own destiny.”** This is essentially an endorsement of determinism, to which Marcus seems quite committed.

We ought to gladly surrender to Fate, even if it seems cruel at times, because it leads to the “health of the universe and the prosperity and success of Zeus.” **Whatever happens, only happens because it brings advantage to the Whole**. This is a consoling aspect to Fate or Destiny.

Just as **all material bodies combine to make one harmonious whole**, “so **all causes combine to make Destiny one harmonious cause.**” These two aspects of the Whole are important to Marcus, the causal and the material; together they comprise the Universe.

Because the Whole is harmonious, **everything that happens in the world is just**. By its very nature, **there is no wrong in the Whole**. This means that **we ought not to resent anything which happens** because this amounts to a “revolt from Nature” and a severing (or “maiming”) of the connection and continuity of the Whole. **We should happily accept what “universal nature wishes me to have now”** because **what is for the benefit of the Whole is for the benefit of the individual, and vice versa;** “What does not benefit the hive does not benefit the bee either.”

It is a key principle in Stoicism that **we ought to “follow the reason and the rule of… the Universe”** in all things because **nothing harmful is in accordance with nature.**

**All things are connected (“meshed together”) and respond to each other (“a sacred bond unites them”)**. Nothing is truly distinct and isolated. In addition, **what comes after is always in affinity to what went before because all is harmoniously interconnected through a rational connection**. This is no “mere succession, but a wonderfully inherent affinity.”

**Universal nature uses the substance of the universe like wax, first creating this shape, then melting it down and creating that. There is no harm in this process.**

**Marcus also thought of himself (and everybody else) as an integral part of this connected Whole with his own purpose to fulfil to help “order the world”. We all work together towards the same end**; some of us with conscious attention, others without knowing it. The world even has need of the critic who seeks to oppose or destroy production; even his role is essential in the creation of the perfect Whole.

**The Whole (Nature) is harmonious and well-ordered even though “incidental effects” in isolation can appear “far from lovely”**. When we consider these, often unpleasant, individual features in light of the Whole, we can learn to appreciate them and even find them appealing. Marcus gives the example of the cracks in a loaf of bread which are really a failure of the baker, but can catch our eye and stimulate our appetite. He also talks about how “lion’s gaping jaws, poison, every kind of mischief are… consequential products of that which is noble and lovely.” Seeing them in the grander scheme of things also lets us see them in a different light.

**The Whole is also perfect despite the things in it that seem to be decaying, old or losing their usefulness.** Marcus compares this to someone finding fault with a carpenter who, in the course of his work, also produces wood shavings. The only difference is the carpenter has somewhere to throw his rubbish whereas the Whole has nothing outside of itself. Rather, in a quite ingenious fashion, the Whole reuses it’s ‘rubbish’ and creates something afresh from it, eliminating the need for a rubbish dump.

**Whatever the Whole issues to us is law**. Anyone breaking the law is a fugitive. Since “pain, anger, or fear denote refusal of some past, present, or future order”, that is, the refusal of ‘law’; then to feel these emotions is to be a fugitive.

Someone who “stands aside and separates himself from the principle of our common nature in disaffection with his lot” is a “tumour on the universe”.

Marcus considers the situation if the universe is a “stew, an intricate web, and dispersal into atoms” or “unity, order, and providence.” If it is the former, then there is no need to be troubled about anything. But if the latter, then we ought to stand firm and revere it.

In a similar fashion, he also talks about the Whole being either a god or purposeless – a random arrangement of atoms and molecules. If the former, all is well; if the latter, there is nothing to stop you giving yourself purpose and acting accordingly.

And again, he talks about the Whole being either unavoidable destiny, providence open to prayer, or a random “welter”. If the first, there is no point resisting. If the second, you ought to strive to make yourself worthy of divine assistance. If the third, you still have a directing mind within that you can use to provide order and purpose.

Marcus mentions several times in the *Meditations* the Stoic metaphysical conception of the Universe being cyclical in nature and periodically renewing itself in fire but he never commits himself to this idea, always treating it as a mere possibility. One alternative to this is the idea that the Universe simply “renews itself through eternal mutations.”

*Mystical* (8.54, 8.57, 9.8)

Marcus also displays something of a mystical leaning towards the Whole, which he doesn’t really flesh out in any detail, by talking about a mind which “embraces all things… spreads everywhere and permeates no less than the air: it is there for all who want to absorb it”.

He also talks of the “flow and diffusion of the universal mind” as being a “constant radiation”, not an exhaustible stream, which impacts lightly on obstacles in front of it, settling there and illuminating whatever receives it. Anything unreflective deprives itself of this light.

Marcus thinks irrational creatures somehow share in one animate soul and rational creatures partake in a single intelligent soul.

*The City* (5.22, 7.5)

**If the city isn’t harmed then the citizen isn’t harmed either**. Marcus even recommends that if you think you have been harmed; check to see if the city has also been harmed. If it hasn’t, then neither have you.

He often urges himself to **focus on the “common benefit and harmony”**.

Human Nature (2.1, 3.4.4, 3.7, 4.3.2, 4.29, 4.49.2, 5.3, 5.16, 5.29, 6.16.1, 6.33, 6.58, 7.11, 7.22, 7.24, 7.55, 7.74, 8.7, 8.12, 9.42.4, 10.2, 11.10, 11.18.1)

**Human beings are naturally *rational* and *social* beings** (“rational directly implies social”)and anyone who “runs away from social principle” is a “fugitive”. Marcus spends a lot of time discussing these aspects of our nature and recommending that we live accordingly.

It is an important aspect of Marcus’ Stoicism that we **follow not just universal nature but our own nature (i.e. the nature of a human being)** as well. And **for a rational being, acting in accordance with nature means acting in accordance with reason**. In fact, he says that the only thing we ought to value is to act or refrain from acting “according to our proper constitution”. He also points out that **acting in accordance with our nature is for our benefit**.

**For a rational nature, the right path is to “withhold assent to anything false or obscure in the impressions made on its mind, to direct its impulses solely to social action, to reserve its desires and aversions to what lies in our power, and to welcome all that is assigned to it by universal nature.”**

In addition, **no one can prevent us living in accordance with our nature**.

**There is nothing contrary to our nature in pain, as long as we are doing our proper duty**.

**We are each “born for cooperation”**. Marcus gives the example of the upper and lower teeth working together to chew food. This means that **acting in opposition to each other is against our nature**. He explicitly mentions that anger and rejection also amount to action in opposition to each other.

He defends the idea we are “born for community” by claiming that inferior creatures are made in the interest of the superior and the superior in the interest of each other. (The animate are superior to the inanimate and the rational are superior to the merely animate)

**“Caring for all men”, that is, loving others, is human nature.**

**Marcus lists the following elements which make up “man’s proper nature”; just, high-minded, self-controlled, intelligent, judicious, truthful, honourable, free**. In general, we were made to be good.

Marcus talks about three principles in man’s constitution. **The first is the social. The second is resistance to the promptings of the senses or the impulses. The third is an unhurried and undeceived judgement**.

People

*Kinship* (2.1, 2.13, 2.16, 3.4.4, 4.4, 4.29, 5.6.1, 5.20, 5.30, 6.23, 6.39, 6.45, 7.13, 7.31, 7.70, 7.73, 8.26, 8.34, 8.43, 8.59, 9.9, 9.22, 9.23, 9.42.4, 10.6, 11.8, 11.21, 12.26)

**We have a natural kinship with other people, not through blood or seed, but through the fact that we all have thinking minds (“unity of mind”), that is, we are all rational beings**. This means that we ought to welcome the actions of other people, no matter what they are and never “turn away from another human being”. Marcus even goes so far as to say that **it is our *duty* to not just do good to others, but also “love these people among whom destiny has cast you – but your love must be genuine**.” In this collective, we should be related to each other like the limbs of an organic unity, “created for a single cooperative purpose” – if you think of others merely as a “part”, i.e. not as a “limb”, then you don’t “love your fellow men from your heart”.

Marcus believes that **all things which share a common quality “tend to their own kind”**. So watery things flow together and earthy things incline to earth. Irrational creatures associate together in hives, flocks, etc.; rational creatures in civic communities, friendships, households, etc.; and even higher things, like stars, share a sort of unity.

Marcus defends the idea that **“the whole human race shares a common constitution”** by observing that mind is common to all of us, which means reason (that which dictates what we should or should not do) is common to us too, which means law is common to us. In that case we are all citizens which means we share in a constitution. And a constitution must belong to a community; in this case, the universe.

Marcus goes even further than this though. We are so closely connected to our fellow human beings that “**what benefits one person benefits other people too”**.

He also says that **every action we undertake should directly aim at complementing a life of social principle**; anything else pulls life apart, destroying its unity, like “an individual in a democracy unilaterally resigning from the common harmony.”

Someone who “splits his own soul away from the soul of all rational beings, which is a unity” is a “social splinter”. Marcus compares a person who has severed himself from society or performed an unsocial act to a hand or foot severed from the body. However, unlike the severed body part, such a person can reconnect with that unity.

Marcus also investigates this theme through the analogy of a branch. He says that a branch cut off from a neighbouring branch is also necessarily cut off from the whole tree. A human who severs him or herself from just one other person cuts him or herself off from the whole community. There are two differences between the human and the branch though; first, we cut ourselves off through hatred or rejection, and second, we can “grow back again to our neighbour and resume our place in the complement of the whole.”

It follows from all of this that **we ought to be kind without expecting anything in return**, like a vine which asks for nothing else once it has produced its fruit.

*Other People* (5.10.1, 5.20, 5.36, 6.20, 7.3, 7.29, 7.43, 7.65, 8.14, 8.15, 8.17, 8.59, 9.11, 9.27, 9.34, 9.42.3, 9.42.4, 10.4, 10.11, 10.13, 10.15, 10.19, 10.36, 11.9, 11.18.2, 11.18.9, 11.18.11, 12.12, 12.16)

Marcus talks about how difficult it can be to tolerate some of the people around him. **To the extent that other people are obstacles to us, they ought to be indifferents**.

**He also often talks about other people in negative terms**, e.g. as “ants toiling and carrying… [or] puppets dancing on their strings”, however, **he still recommends that we tolerate them or “teach him kindly”,** rather than “snort at them”. If the latter, **our teaching must not be ironic or critical. It should be “affectionate, with no hurt feelings”.**

In fact, **Marcus was extremely magnanimous towards those who could have been considered his opponents**. He uses a game as an analogy. If an opponent accidentally scratches us in a game, we don’t take offence. We should act the same in other areas of life too. We can “overlook much of what they do… without suspicion or enmity” and “leave the wrong done by another where it started”. He also urges us to “never treat the misanthropic as they treat mankind.”

We ought to **identify the beliefs other people hold about morality (what is good and what is bad) because this will help us understand them and not find their actions surprising or strange**; just as we wouldn’t find it strange to see figs growing on a fig tree, we will be able to understand that they have no choice in the matter; i.e. **actions follow directly from beliefs**. Wanting a bad person not to do wrong is like wanting a fig tree not to produce figs, or a baby not to cry, or some other inevitable fact of nature.

What if someone blames or criticises us, or even hates us? **There is no harm in the ignorant behaving as the ignorant do. If you expected something different, *you* are to blame because you ought to have known that an individual of that character would keep his trust**, i.e. do what his character dictates.

But Marcus doesn’t advocate looking down on people or ignoring them, even if they get upset over something a Stoic finds indifferent. Rather, **we ought to help others to the best of our ability without getting caught up in their (erroneous) way of thinking**, when they think for example, that the loss of an indifferent is actually harmful; “‘Yes, but they are important to these folk.’ Is that any reason for you to join their folly?”

In dealing with other people, Marcus finds **blame to be a completely useless attitude**. If you can correct someone, correct them; if not, put the matter right. If you can’t do that either, blame still serves no additional purpose.

Marcus recommends that you **live the life you have left as if you were on a mountain, presumably meaning as if you were alone, i.e. not making decisions to please other people**. If these people don’t like the “true man living in accordance with nature” that you present to them, let them kill you, for this is a better fate than living a life like theirs.

**When assessing other people, we ought to look to who they really are, not who they present themselves to be**, i.e. “what sort of people they are when eating, sleeping, coupling, shitting, etc.”

Attention / Purpose (2.5, 2.16, 3.4.2, 4.2, 4.24, 5.11, 8.19, 8.51, 11.21)

You ought to **devote your full attention to performance of the task at hand** with “precise analysis, with unaffected dignity, with human sympathy, [and] with dispassionate justice”.

Marcus believed in the Aristotelian idea that **everything exists for a purpose and is doing well when it fulfils this purpose**. **All of our actions should therefore be directed towards a goal**. We should never act at random, without purpose or conscious attention. **We must avoid all things casual and never say or do what is unnecessary**; “remove all superfluity”. Removing redundant thoughts removes redundant actions too. We should especially eliminate prying and malicious actions.

**Constantly examine yourself to see to what use you are now putting yourself**.At all times we ought to be able to answer the question, ‘What is on your mind now?’ with complete frankness and without shame.

However, Marcus does concede that **we ought to take time for some leisure as well.**

Independence (3.5, 4.18, 4.29, 5.3, 7.12, 7.55, 7.67)

**Although we are a “limb” in a compound Whole, we ought to retain a strong sense of independence** – our “duty is to stand straight – not held straight.”

This sometimes means **keeping to your own path in the face of criticism**. In general, **we ought not to concern ourselves with what others say or do, only with our own actions**.

Someone who “depends on others and does not possess within him all he needs for life” is a “beggar”.

Morality (2.1, 2.11.4, 2.13, 4.8, 4.26, 5.5, 5.12, 5.16, 5.25, 5.34, 6.2, 6.21, 6.22, 6.30.1, 6.33, 6.41, 6.47, 7.31, 7.44, 7.63, 7.64, 7.68, 8.1, 8.10, 8.26, 8.28, 8.55, 9.1, 9.4, 9.5, 9.16, 9.38, 9.42.2, 10.16, 10.32, 10.34, 11.10, 11.13, 11.18.3, 11.18.8, 11.18.9)

**We ought to define ‘good’ and ‘evil’ as things within our control.** If we don’t, when someone does us ‘evil’ or our ‘good’ is frustrated (as will certainly be the case at times), we will blame the gods and hate the men responsible. This is an injustice. Limiting morality (good and evil) to things that fall under our control means that we can keep our directing minds clear and focused on action in accordance with nature.

**Bad people are bad only through ignorance of what is good and what is evil**. Marcus sees this plight as a serious disability, no less so than an affliction which removes the distinction of light and dark. He quotes Plato; **“No soul likes to be robbed of truth”, and adds that this holds true for all virtues**. A kind of proof of this comes in the realisation that nobody consents to being called unjust, cruel or selfish, even the most unjust, cruel and selfish among us, i.e. everybody considers themselves just and noble.

**We can only suffer harm when we do wrong ourselves**. This means that no one can harm us because “none [can] infect me with their wrong.” **If someone does wrong (e.g. an unkind or selfish or cruel act) they do harm only to themselves**. What is this to you? **Let others see to their own dispositions, their own actions**.

Despite how this expression sounds, it isn’t a callous principle and Marcus isn’t advocating that we ignore injustice. He just means that **good and evil lie within each person, as something we each have total control over, so someone else’s actions cannot affect *you* for better or worse**. Conversely, because you don’t control anyone else’s directing mind, the state of *your* directing mind shouldn’t be dependent on theirs.

Consider the situation when someone despises you. Remember that their ‘despising’ attitude is their concern, not yours. They have injured the goodness within them by holding to this attitude, while *your* goodness remains untainted. **You should not lower yourself and compromise your own values because someone else has compromised theirs**.

In addition to specific wrongs, **we also suffer harm when we persist in self-deception and ignorance**.

**Pain is not an evil for two reasons; 1) There is nothing in pain that is against our nature, and 2) Pain does not harm our governing intelligence.** Pain cannot damage our rational or our social nature. Marcus also quotes Epicurus, “Pain is neither unendurable nor unending, as long as you remember its limits and do not exaggerate it in your imagination.”He goes so far as to say that even if wild beasts are tearing off your limbs, the mind can still preserve itself in tranquillity.

**Marcus consistently urged himself to virtuous action, or what he also called “proper duty”.** There is nothing more important than our “proper duty”; in fact, **our sole consideration should be whether our actions are those of a good man or a bad man**; “there is only one thing of value, to live out your life in truth and justice, tolerant of those who are neither true nor just.”

**Your joy should come from doing your “proper work”.**

He specifically mentions the following virtues; goodness, purity, seriousness, unpretentiousness, affection, integrity, dignity, hard work, self-denial, contentment, frugality, kindness, independence, simplicity, discretion, magnanimity. Some other “true” goods include wisdom, self-control, courage, and justice.

For Marcus, **‘justice’ arises from the idea that the lower is created in the interests of the higher.** And all other virtues take their being from justice. This is because justice cannot be preserved if we are concerned with indifferents, or gullible, or quick to change.

Marcus also talks a lot about **kindness saying it is invincible if it is sincere. Aggression met with kindness is completely impotent**; “What can the most aggressive man do to you if you continue to be kind to him?”

**Another good for a rational creature is community**.This follows through some Aristotelian purpose-directed, teleological reasoning; because each creature is made in the interest of another [see “human nature” section above], its end also lies in action for another. Since a creature’s end is for its benefit and its good, it follows that its good lies in community.

**The good does not lie in logic, wealth, glory, indulgence, etc.; it can only be found in living in accordance with your nature, i.e. the nature of a human being. The good that all rational creatures seek lies in having principles of good and evil, specifically, the good is that which makes someone brave, free, self-controlled and just and “resides in a just disposition and just action, with this the limit of their desire.” Anything which makes one the opposite of these is evil.** In fact, more grief comes from the “consequent anger and pain, rather than the original causes of our anger and pain.”

**Everything that lies between virtue and vice is indifferent.** Marcus compares these ‘externals’ to “leaves” being scattered on the ground. These “leaves” (your children, praise, criticism, blame, etc.) come around in their time and then are blown away by the wind, having been short-lived and inconsequential.

Marcus affirms that **someone who wishes to follow nature must be indifferent to those pairs of opposites to which universal Nature is also indifferent**, i.e. “death and life, fame and ignominy, pain and pleasure, wealth and poverty… [they] are not in themselves either right or wrong”, nor are they good or evil.

In chapter 9.1 Marcus covers a number of evils (which he calls ‘sins’ in this passage) including; **injustice (harming one another); lying (the conscious liar is bad for causing injustice and the unconscious liar bad for being “out of tune with the nature of the Whole); the pursuit of pleasure as a good and the avoidance of pain as an evil (such a person will blame Nature for the unfair distribution of things between good and bad people).** Anyone who fears pain will also fear the future which is an “immediate sin” and anyone who pursues pleasure will not hold back from injustice.

**There are wrongs of omission as well as wrongs of commission**.

**Good or ill, and virtue or vice, lie not in feeling or “roundabout discussion”, but in action**.

The Passions (2.10, 3.4.3, 11.18.10, 12.19)

**We ought to avoid being gripped by excessive passion**. Marcus uses the analogy of a wrestler vying for the greatest prize of all, “to avoid being thrown by any passion” – “It is the gentle who have strength, sinew, and courage – not the indignant and complaining. The closer to control of emotion, the closer to power.” He talks of how the “agents of emotion… make you a mere puppet on their strings.”

Offences of lust are more serious than offences of anger because the latter result from a “sort of pain and involuntary spasm”, whereas the lust-led offender has “given in to pleasure”, making them somehow more “abandoned”.

Philosophy (2.17.2, 6.12, 9.41, 11.5)

**Philosophy is the only thing that can help us in living**, i.e. “Being a good man”. Philosophy is concerned with ensuring 1) our directing mind remains “inviolate” and free from harm, 2) we are masters over pleasure and pain, 3) we do nothing without aim, truth, or integrity, 4) we act independently of other people’s actions or failures to act, 5) we accept all that happens, and 6) we are able to await death with a “glad confidence”.

**We should return to philosophy again and again because it is a comfort for life.**

Suicide (2.11.1, 5.29, 8.47, 10.8.3, 10.32)

**We are free to “leave this life at any moment”** and we ought to keep this possibility in mind at all times. **If you cannot live a virtuous life for some reason (although no one and nothing ought to be able to prevent you) then suicide is always an option**. Borrowing an analogy from Epictetus, Marcus says, if the fire smokes, we ought to just leave the house.

If there is an obstacle in your path too great to remove or circumvent and life is not worth living if you cannot overcome this obstacle then there is still no need to be distressed because you can always “depart this life, as gracious in death as one who does achieve his purpose, and at peace, too, with those who stood in your way.”

This is really the ultimate in taking control of your life and a classical Stoic principle – if you have no control over your life, you can *take* control by ending it.

Practical (2.1, 2.5, 3.13, 4.3.1, 4.6, 4.11, 6.11, 7.22, 7.26, 7.28, 7.47, 7.48, 7.56, 7.62, 7.69, 8.2, 9.30, 9.42.1, 9.42.2, 10.30, 11.13, 11.18.7)

**When you first wake up in the morning, take a moment to think about all of the terrible people you will meet during the day**. This is a form of mental preparation to enable you to keep to your principles in the face of rude or unpleasant people who might otherwise bring you to anger or some other disruptive state of mind.

**We ought to perform each action as though it were the last of our lives**.

**Always have your “doctrines”, or principles, ready at hand and apply them to every situation**; like doctors always have their tools close by for any emergency treatment.

**Frequently retreat inwards, into your own mind, to “renew yourself”** through visiting a few and fundamental doctrines that “wash away all your pain and send you back free of resentment”.

**When you are distressed, quickly “return to yourself”.**

**Some tips on how to love all men; remember 1) “all men are brothers”, 2) “they go wrong through ignorance”, “in a short while both you and he will be dead”, and 3) “the man has not harmed you”** because he has not made your directing mind worse.

**When having problems with someone, put things in perspective; remember that in a short time you will both be dead**. Or phrased through a more modern expression – “life is too short”.

**When someone wrongs you, don’t judge them as they do themselves, see them as they are in plain truth.**

**When someone does you wrong, consider the judgement that led him or her to that act.** When you understand this you will pity them, rather than feeling surprise, or anger, or blaming them. Two responses are possible: either 1) you will realise you share their view of the good, in which case you should understand and forgive or 2) you no longer judge such things good or evil and it will be easier for you to be patient with them.

**Again; anytime someone wrongs you, consider what wrong *you* are committing**. If you are disturbed by their action, it must be because you are placing value on money, pleasure, reputation, or some other indifferent.

**If someone hates you, remember that that is their concern, not yours. Maintain your own virtue, let them maintain theirs how they see fit.**

**Always think about earthly things as if looking down on them from some point high above to help keep things in perspective.** To this end, Marcus also advises that you imagine you are moving along with the stars.

**Constantly dwelling on the changes of the elements into each other** is another tool for helping to keep things in perspective.

**Imagine you were now dead or had not lived. The rest of your life is now a bonus.**

**Before you act always ask yourself how this action sits with you and whether or not you will regret it later.**

**Whenever someone does wrong, e.g. steals, ask yourself, “Is it possible for there to be no thieves in the world?” It is not possible, so we should not wish for it.** Doing this for every kind of ‘bad’ person will make it easier for us to be kinder to them.

**Use particular virtues to counter particular wrongs,** e.g. gentleness as an antidote to cruelty.

**How can we remove judgements about other people’s actions which we think have harmed us? By remembering that no moral harm has been caused to you.**

Religious (2.1, 2.3, 2.4, 2.11.2, 2.13, 3.13, 4.31, 5.27, 5.33, 6.23, 6.44, 7.31, 7.54, 7.70, 10.8.4, 10.11, 11.3, 11.20.2, 12.5, 12.7, 12.12, 12.26, 12.28)

Regarding the existence of the gods, Marcus says they are “visible to our eyes” (he was possibly thinking of the planets and stars here) and even if he couldn’t see them, he has never seen his own soul either and yet he believes in that.

We ought to “live with the gods”, or “follow” them, which means being content with our lot and performing the wishes of divinity, i.e. following our minds and reason (which are fragments of Zeus). The gods don’t want “servile flattery”, rather, they want everything to do its proper work; the dog to do the proper work of a dog, the fig tree of a fig tree – and man the proper work of a man, i.e. to develop himself in their image, that is, rationally.

The gods care for humanity. In this then, they have taken thought for our good. This must be true because there could be no advantage to them in causing us harm. And even if they didn’t care for us, then they would certainly consider the common good, and since “what happens to me is a consequential part of that, I should accept and welcome it.” And even if they took thought for nothing at all, it would still be open to us to engage in what is best for us, i.e. according to our nature as rational and social beings.

The gods have put it in our power to avoid falling into harm.

The human mind is a “fragment of divinity.”

We ought to be grateful to the gods and always maintain an attitude of reverence and commitment “of all your being”, worshipping and praising them because they are “supremely good and supremely just”. It goes without saying that we should never blame the gods for anything. They are completely incapable of doing wrong.

Marcus speaks of god as the “governor of [the] universe and of us as an “emanation” from that god.

No human action can succeed without reference to the divine so we should call on them in everything we do.

Marcus explicitly criticises the Christians for attempting to deal with death by “mere revolt” rather than a specific decision to embrace and accept it.

Other

(2.16) We harm ourselves when we; resent anything which happens, turn away from another human being, give in to pleasure or pain, dissimulate in any way, and fail to direct our actions towards a goal, but rather act at random.

(3.11) Everything either comes from god (through fate or destiny) hence we ought to accept it as for the best, or from our fellow humans (even one ignorant as to his true nature) in which case we ought to respond with kindness and fairness.

(4.3.3) Fame is nothing; everything fades quickly, applause is vacuous, and your “apparent supporters” are fickle.

(4.19) Fame is nothing because not only will your supporters be dead soon, so will you too. And even if those who remember you are immortal and memory of you guaranteed, what benefit is there to you? Not just because you are dead, but because praise itself is of no benefit.

(7.34) Fame is empty because what we had once done is quickly covered over and buried, the same way drifting sand constantly overlays previous layers of sand.

(4.20) Praise adds nothing. The beautiful is beautiful in itself. An emerald loses nothing if it is not praised.

(6.16.1) Praise is nothing more than the “mere rattle of tongues”. Glory is no better.

(4.26) Keep simple.

(5.9) Marcus urges himself not to be too hard on himself if he doesn’t fulfil all of his high ideals; “be glad if most of your actions are on the right side of humanity.”

(6.6) “The best revenge is not to be like your enemy.”

(6.23) Since we have reason and they do not, treat “dumb animals and generally all things and objects with generosity and decency”.

(7.17) Marcus sees the imagination as something we ought to overcome insofar as it carries us away with its images and causes us additional problems.

(7.29) (9.7) We ought to “erase the print of imagination”.

(7.27) You ought not to dream of what you don’t have; rather reflect on all the blessings that have come your way. However, be careful not to let your pleasure in them create a dependency or you will suffer distress if they are absent.

(8.32) We will encounter external obstacles in life but there are no obstacles to justice, self-control and reason. We can accept the obstruction as it is and change our plan of attack to overcome it.

(8.35) Or even better, we can turn the obstruction into something beneficial, into material for our own use, and use it to further our aims.

(9.7) We ought to quench desire, rather than seek to satisfy it.

(9.40) Why not pray for freedom from fear, desire, and regret; rather than for the presence or absence of this or that? Instead of the prayer being, “How can I sleep with that woman?” your prayer should be, “How can I lose the desire to sleep with her?” Or instead of, “How can I save my little child?” you ought to pray, “How can I learn not to fear his loss?”

(10.23) The grass is not greener elsewhere. Everything is the same no matter where you are.

(11.15) Goodness reflects immediately in the “aura” of the individual, “written on your forehead, immediately clear in the tone of your voice and the light of your eyes.”

(11.18.5) We ought to be careful before judging others because “many things are done as part of a larger plan” and to judge someone you need to know a “great deal” first.

(11.20.1) Marcus doesn’t talk much about metaphysics but believes, in line with contemporary thought, that we are made up of a mingling of the four elements of fire, air, earth and water. The former two tend to rise while the latter two tend to sink down – they are all held in place however by the Whole of your body which assigns them their place and forces them to remain in a position unnatural for them.

(12.4) Marcus reflects on how diligently we would manage our thoughts if a “god or some wise tutor” assured us that all of our internal thoughts or intentions would be broadcast to everyone.

(12.6) We ought to practice even what we can never master.