

Book Club: Marcus Aurelius' "Meditations"

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There are no conflicts of interest to report for this episode.

In this episode, we will be discussing some themes observed in [Meditations](#), a collection of notebooks written by the 16th Roman emperor, Marcus Aurelius, during the last years of his reign. His writings are still relevant to us and resonate within us, as the emperor himself struggled with some core questions that anyone who is living this thing called life might ponder.

If not already, we hope this podcast/article inspires you to read this deeply reflective writing by Marcus Aurelius. He may spur you on to engage (furthermore, if you already have been) in such practices.

This PDF is a supplement to the podcast "Psychiatry & Psychotherapy" **Episode 120** found on [iTunes](#), [Google Play](#), [Stitcher](#), [Overcast](#), [PlayerFM](#), [PodBean](#), [TuneIn](#), [Podtail](#), [Blubrry](#), [Podfanatic](#)

Briefly, on Marcus Aurelius (121 AD - 180 AD)

- He was the 16th Roman emperor (161 AD - 180 AD) and known as the "last of the five good emperors" and a "philosopher king."
- Although he was the wealthiest and most powerful man in the world at the time, his efforts to be self-disciplined and engaged in philosophy kept him from abusing his position.
- His father died when he was three years old and he was brought up by his mother and his grandfather, an intimate of the emperor (Hadrian). He was adopted by Antoninus (then emperor, who was also Hadrian's adoptive son), as Hadrian saw greatness in Marcus. Marcus received the typical education of a well-born young Roman where he was privileged to be educated by 18 tutors, consisting largely of rhetoric and philosophy.
- He was rapidly promoted through the ranks of political hierarchy, learning the skills required to administer the city of Rome and its empire.
- When he became emperor, he made his brother joint emperor (Lucius Verus). Marcus was the sole emperor for the final eleven years of his reign.
- During his 19 years as emperor, he expanded the system for child support for poor families in Italy and revised court systems, allowing correspondence of

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Greek and Latin which allowed other cases to be heard throughout Italy and not just Rome and increased the juridical powers of the senate. (Waterfield, xvii, 2021).

- Marcus died a few weeks short of his 59th birthday. His health had never been strong and had also been weakened by the plague that was ravaging the empire.

About the book:

- This collection of 12 notebooks is a journal – deeply personal writing by Marcus Aurelius that was not intended to be published. He was influenced by stoics to critically examine and improve himself. Sometimes he writes in the first person but some other times he uses “you” as if he were admonishing and advising himself.
- The notebooks as a whole were written from 172 AD -180 AD, during the last decade of his life. He frequently mentions death, which is understandable given how he himself struggled with his own health and was in the midst of constant wars and a plague that was going on during that time.
- *Meditations* is written in Greek, the language of philosophy and Stoicism, whereas Marcus’s native language is Latin.
- The style of the notebooks is that of mini essays, sometimes made up of only one sentence. Some writings appear unpolished and ungrammatical which suggests he might have been jotting down his thoughts in his ponderance.
- There is much repetition in *Meditations* that it becomes somewhat obvious the core topics that Marcus thought about over the years. Stoics encouraged the practice of writing down over and over again which fixed things better in the mind.

Marcus Aurelius and Stoic Philosophy:

- Stoicism’s name comes from the Painted Stoa of Athens, a large colonnade in Agora where Zeno of Citium used to meet his students and discourse on philosophy (fourth to third BCE). “A couple of centuries later, Stoicism was taken up by members of the educated and ruling classes of Rome...Many preferred its rival, Epicureanism, but the toughness of Stoic moral discipline appealed to the robust and militaristic Roman ethos, and it allowed and even encouraged a man to pursue a public career, as many upper-class Romans expected to. A Stoic had, above all, a duty to himself to make himself a man of virtue, but an aspect of

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that was being good to others, and this might well entail a public career" (xxxiii, Waterfield, 2021).

- Marcus was drawn to Stoicism because it allowed him to reconcile his aims of being a good man and a good emperor – e.g., “Slaves and emperors are equal if they can both accept the roles destiny has assigned them and do the best they can within those roles, especially toward their fellow men.”
- He was also drawn to Stoic’s stance on orderliness of the universe, the belief that the world has been created by and maintained by a benign deity. Therefore, every person’s experience is unique and meaningful. In contrast, Epicureans saw the world as a randomly generated conglomeration of atoms. Thus, they denied the existence of gods and exercised a view that there is no care for human beings.
- Stoics held a view that virtue was knowledge. Their four primary virtues include:
 - prudential wisdom (knowledge of good and bad)
 - courage (knowledge of what to fear and not to fear)
 - moderation (knowledge of what to pursue and what to avoid)
 - justice (knowledge of what to give or what not to give others)
- Progress in Stoicism is not about acquiring new faculties or powers, but learning to trust and depend on your rational faculty.
- A sage, per Marcus Aurelius, was one who utilizes reason and rational faculty. “...who has the knowledge of the beginning and the end, and of that all-pervading Reason which orders the universe in its determinate cycles to the end of time.” Avoiding “pathos” (apatheia), or irrational emotion or passions, and using one's mind to understand the world (to do one's part in nature's plan, to live/work together and treat others fairly and justly) and thereby finding tranquility can lead to “eudaimonia” (happiness, or blessedness), which allows one to accept the moment as it presents itself, not being controlled by the desire for pleasure or by the fear of pain.

Themes from the book discussed in the podcast:

- Death
 - 2.11. Act, speak, and think like a man ready to depart this life in the next breath.

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- 6.28. Death frees us from the feigning of our senses, the tyranny of our passions, the vagaries of thought, the bondage of desire.
- 7.21. Soon you will have forgotten everything, and everyone will have forgotten you.
 - *“Know if you are venturing out in something, know there are no dead ends, only roadblocks... All we come to is roadblocks and roadblocks we can problem-solve.”* - Dr. Puder
 - *“Death does a good job at helping us refocus.”* - Hassan
- Being content & grateful
 - The whole of book 1 - a series of gratitudes
 - 1.4. Thanks to my great-grandfather, I didn't have to waste my time in the public schools but had good tutors at home instead and learned that one cannot spend too much money on such things.
 - 4.31. Cherish your gifts, however humble, and take pleasure in them.
 - 7.27. Don't hanker after what you don't have. Instead, fix your attentions on the finest and best that you have, and imagine how much you would long for these if they weren't in your possession. At the same time, don't become so attached to these things that you would be distraught if you were to lose them.
 - 8.9. No one should ever hear you complaining about palace life, no one, not even your own ears.
 - *“He tried to just really not let his status as an emperor rule him. He essentially wrote this book as a jotting kind of a journal; really personal, private kind of things.”* -Grace
- Money, power and fame
 - 4.19. The man who pants after praise and yearns to “make history” forget that those who remember him will die soon after he goes to his grave.
 - 4.33. For all things fade away, become the stuff of legend, and are soon buried in oblivion...In the end, what would you gain from everlasting remembrance? Absolutely nothing. So what is left worth living for? This alone: justice in thought, goodness in action, speech that cannot deceive, and a disposition glad of whatever comes, welcoming it as necessary, as familiar, as flowing from the same source and fountain as yourself.
 - 8.44. Give yourself the present. Those who chase after future fame fail to realize that the men whose praise they crave tomorrow will be no different from the men whose opinions they despise today, and all these men will

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die. What do you care whether tomorrow's men know the sound of your name or say nice things about you?

■ *"What struck me the most was how much I could relate to someone 2000 years ago who was basically the king of the world."*- Serena

- Jealousy, anger and judgment towards others
 - 4.6. What do you expect from people like him? Certain effects naturally and necessarily flow from certain causes. To want him to behave otherwise is like asking the sap not to flow in a fig tree. Besides, what's the point of fretting about it? In a moment you will both be dead, and a moment later, no one will even be able to remember your name.
 - 6.6. The best revenge is not to do as they do.
 - 7.26. When someone wrongs you, ask yourself: what made him do it? Once you understand his concept of good and evil, you'll feel sorry for him and cease to be either amazed or angry. If his concept is similar to yours, then you are bound to forgive him since you would have acted as he did in similar circumstances. But if you do not share his ideas of good and evil, then you should find it even easier to overlook the wrongs of someone who is confused and in a moral muddle.
 - 10.30. Whenever you are about to find fault with someone, ask yourself the following question: what fault of mine most nearly resembles the one I am about to criticize? ...By redirecting your attention in this way, you will soon forget your anger as you realize that he can't help himself any more than you can.
- Nature
 - 5.3. Claim your right to say or do anything that accords with nature, and pay no attention to the chatter of your critics. If it is good to say or do something, then it is even better to be criticized for having said or done it. Others have their own consciences to guide them and will follow their own lights. Don't be gazing after them, but keep your eyes on the straight path ahead of you, the path of your own nature and of the nature of the universe. The path of both is the same.
 - 6.58. No one can stop you from obeying the laws of your being, and nothing will happen to you that nature does not approve.
- Duty/Responsibility and virtues

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- 4.17. Don't act as though you'll live to be a thousand. Your days are numbered like everyone else's. In what remains of your allotted time, while you still can, become good.
- 6.30. Don't be a Caesar drunk with power and self-importance; it happens all too easily. Keep yourself simple, good, pure, sincere, natural, just, god-fearing, kind, affectionate, and devoted to your duty. Strive to be the man your training in philosophy prepared you to be. Fear God; serve mankind. Life is short; the only good fruit to be harvested in this earthly realm requires a pious disposition and charitable behavior.
- 7.13. Doing good to others is still a duty, not yet a service unto yourself.
- Attitude towards hardship & empathy
 - 4.49. Be like a rocky promontory against which the restless surf continually pounds; it stands fast while the churning sea is lulled to sleep at its feet. I hear you say, "How unlucky that this should happen to me!" Not at all! Say instead, "How lucky that I am not broken by what has happened and am not afraid of what's about to happen. The same blow might have struck anyone, but not many would have absorbed it without capitulation or complaint." ...The next time you are tempted to complain of your bad luck, remember to apply this maxim: "Bad luck borne nobly is good luck."
 - 5.8. Accept the prescriptions of nature as if they were intended for your own health, even if at times they may seem cruel or disagreeable to you. Remember that they are for the good of the universe and for the pleasure of God. Nothing is prescribed for any part that does not benefit the whole. After all, it would violate the nature of anything to act against its own interest in governing its part.
 - *"(As mental health providers) we drown with them (patients) for a while...this eye to eye moment of contact and then, that is enough for them to keep fighting, and then they get to the edge."*- Dr Puder
- Change
 - 7.18. Is it change that you fear? But what can happen without it? What is dearer to nature or more vital to the universe? Look at everything that sustains you. Can you take a warm bath if the wood you burn to heat the water doesn't change? Can you digest your food if it doesn't change? Can any of your needs be met without change? Don't you see, then, that the

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change resulting in your earth is not different and similarly feeds the life of the universe?

- 9.13. Today, I got out of trouble, or rather I got trouble out of me. The trouble was not outside, but inside, and depended on my point of view.
- 9.19. All is change. You yourself are continuously changing and being destroyed bit by bit. So is the whole universe.
- 11.35. "The green grape, the ripened grape, the dried raisin, change after change, not into nothing, but into something that is not yet" (Epictetus, Discourses III.24,91.).
- Kindness
 - 5.6. A horse gallops, a dog hunts, a bee makes honey, one man helps another, and the vine bears fruit in due season. You ought to be like that third fellow, who does good without giving it a second thought.
 - 7.63. "No one," said Plato, "knowingly chooses to live without the truth." Or without justice, wisdom, compassion, and the like. Keep this thought perpetually in mind, and you will treat everyone more gently.
 - *"Why be angry at someone who cuts you off when you're driving down the highway because they are people too and extensions of ourselves" - George*
- Destiny
 - 10.5. Whatever happens to you was destined to happen from before time began. Your entire existence as well as the smallest details of your works and days were woven into the woof of cause, the weft of effect from all eternity.
- Other nice ones
 - 6.48. When your spirits need a lift, think of the virtues and talents of those around you— one's energy, another's modesty, the generosity of the third, something else in a fourth. Nothing is so inspiring or uplifting as the sight of these splendid qualities in our friends. Keep them always in mind.
 - 12.9. Be a boxer, not a gladiator, in the way you act on your principles. The gladiator takes up his sword only to put it down again, but the boxer is never without his fist and has only to clench it.

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Summary:

We hope that you are enjoying this book discussion mini-series. Our next book will be Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* ([this version](#)). If you have any thoughts on this book, or our thoughts about it, join the conversation [here](#).

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