

THE MEDITATIONS OF  
MARCUS AURELIUS  
ANTONINUS

TRANSLATED BY

JOHN JACKSON

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

CHARLES BIGG

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divine will in decency, and sinning not in word or deed against truth and justice.

Such a man, though all should mistrust him and sneer at his claim to live a simple, modest, and cheerful life, displays no anger at any of these, nor swerves a jot from the path that leads to life's end,—that end which it behoves him to reach in purity, calmness, and readiness to depart, and with unforced acquiescence in his destiny.

## IV

WHEN the governing part within us is in harmony with Nature it stands in such a relation to the course of events as enables it to adapt itself with ease to the possibilities allowed it. For it requires no specific material to work in, but its efforts to attain its purpose are conditional, and when it encounters an obstacle in lieu of what it sought it converts this into material for itself, much as a fire lays hold of the objects that fall into it. These would have sufficed to extinguish a flickering lamp, but the blazing fire in a moment appropriates the fuel heaped on it, and uses it as a means whereby to mount higher and higher.

Do not act at random or otherwise than is prescribed by the exact canons of the art of living.

Men are continually seeking retreats for themselves, in the country, or by the sea, or among the hills. And thou thyself art wont to yearn after the like.—Yet all this is the sheerest folly, for it is open to thee every hour

to retire into thyself. And where can man find a calmer, more restful haven than in his own soul? Most of all he whose inner state is so ordered that he has only to penetrate thither to find himself in the midst of a great peace—a peace that, to my mind, is synonymous with orderliness.

Therefore betake thee freely to this city of refuge, there to be made new. And cherish within thee a few brief and fundamental principles, such as will suffice, so soon as they recur to thee, to wash away all pain and bid thee depart in peace, repining not at the things whereto thou returnest.—For what is it that vexes thee?—The evil of man's heart?—Call to mind the doctrine that all rational beings exist for the sake each of other, that to bear and forbear is part of justice, and that men's sins are not sins of will. Reflect how many before thee have lived in enmity, suspicion, hatred, and strife, and then been laid out and reduced to ashes.—Think of this and be at rest.—But, perchance, it is the lot assigned thee from the sum of things that troubles thee.—Then recall the dilemma—'Either Providence or atomic theory,' and all the proofs that went to show that the universe is a constitutional state.—Maybe, the ills of the flesh will prick thee somewhat.—Then remember that the mind, when once it has withdrawn itself to itself and realized its own power, has neither part nor lot with the soft and pleasant, or harsh and painful, motions of thy breath; and ponder again the doctrines of pain and pleasure to which thou hast hearkened and assented.—Or, again, thy little meed of

glory may cause thee a twinge.—Then look and see how speedily all things fall into oblivion ; what a great gulf of infinite time yawns behind thee and before ; how empty are the plaudits of men ; how fickle and unreasoning are they who feign to praise thee, and within what narrow boundaries that praise is circumscribed. For the whole earth is but a point ; and what a fraction of the whole is this corner where we dwell ! Nay, how few even here—and they how insignificant !—will be thy panegyrists.

So much is left thee : forget not to retreat into this little plot of thyself. Above all, let nothing distract thee. Do not strain and struggle, but maintain thy freedom and look things in the face as befits a man and a male, a member of the state, and a mortal creature. And, among the principles which are ever most ready to hand for thee to turn to, let these two find a place : first, that things in themselves have no point of contact with the soul, but are stationed motionless without, while all unrest proceeds solely from the opinion within ; second, that all the objects thou now beholdest will anon change and be no more. Think, and think often, how many changes thine own eyes have witnessed, and know that the universe is mutation, and life opinion.

If the intellectual part of us is common to all, so is 4 the reason which gives us our status as rational beings. Granted this, the reason which bids us do or not do must needs be common also. Hence it follows that there is one law ; and if the law be one, we are all fellow-

subjects, and, as such, members of one body-politic : that is, the universe is a species of state.—For what other conceivable political community is there, of which the whole human race can be said to be citizens ?—And from this city of the universe must proceed those very faculties of intellect and reason, with our conception of law. There is no other possible source ; but precisely as the earthly part of myself has been assigned me from some universal earth, and the fluid from the contrary element, while breath, warmth, and heat must each have had their proper fount, in virtue of the axiom that nothing can come from nothing any more than it can return from nothing,—so too must the intellect have had its definite origin.

5 Death is akin to birth in that both are mysteries of nature : in the one there is composition ; in the other, decomposition : in both the antecedent and resultant elements are the same.—At all events, it is not a thing to be ashamed of, for in it there is nothing save what is consonant with the nature of rational life, and nothing that is repugnant to the laws of our being.

6 It is a matter of nature and necessity for men of this type to act as they do.—And, in general, remember the truth that, in a little while, both thou and he will be no more ; and yet, a little while, and not so much as your names will be left.

7 Take away opinion, and where is the plaint ' I have been harmed ' ? Take away this plaint ; and where is the harm ?

8 That which renders not man worse than himself

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cannot render his life worse, or work him evil, whether from within or from without.

The nature that determines the universally advantageous has perforce done this thing.

Remember that all that befalls man befalls him justly. Observe this precept with diligence and thou wilt discover its truth, and know that all things happen, not merely by necessary sequence, but in accordance with justice,—dispensations, as it were, of a power rewarding us as we have merited.

Observe it, then, as thou hast begun, and, whatever thou doest, do it with the goodness that is the essential part of our conception of the good man; and in every action hold fast to this principle.

Let not thy thoughts be those of him who wrongs thee, nor such as he would have thee think, but look on things as they are in reality.

It is our duty to have these two principles of action ever in readiness: one, to do nothing but what is dictated on behalf of the common good by the ruling and legislative faculty; the other, to be prepared to change our ground if there be found some one who can correct an opinion of ours or point the way to a better. But this transition must arise from a conviction of its justice or of its conducing to the general welfare. Only these or similar motives should be admitted—not any consideration of pleasure or glory.

Hast thou reason?—I have.—Then why not use it? For, with this doing its work, what more wilt thou have?

Thou camest into the universe as a part of a whole:

thou wilt vanish into that which bare thee; or, rather, thou wilt be transmuted and received afresh into its generative principle.

15 There are many grains of incense sprinkled on the same altar. One falls an instant before the other; but what imports it?

16 Within ten days they who now look on thee as a species of wild beast or ape, will hail thee as a god, if thou return to thy philosophy and the worship of reason.

17 Act not as though the years of thy life were ten thousand. Destiny hangs over thy head. While life is thine become good, ere it be too late.

18 What infinite vexation is spared the man who looks not to what his neighbour has said, done, or thought, but only to his own deeds, that they be just and holy!

†For it behoves the good man to cast no curious glance on the character of others †, but to run his race straight towards the goal, looking neither to right nor left.

19 The man whose hopes flutter round future fame fails to see that the depositaries of his memory will soon be dead, each and all, speedily to be followed by their successors in the heritage, till at last every spark of that recollection, transmitted through foolish ambition, brief remembrance, and speedy extinction, shall have died out in darkness.

But admit that memory and rememberer are alike immortal: what is this to thee? I ask not what it is to the dead; but what is fame to the living? †It may have a certain value as means to an end; but is it

seasonable for a man to neglect the gifts Nature has given him, to hang on the words of another ?†

Every form of the beautiful contains the beginning<sup>20</sup> and the end of its beauty in itself, nor has praise any part in it whatsoever. Accordingly, nothing changes whether for better or worse through praise. And this, I take it, holds good even in the case of the vulgar conceptions of beauty; for instance, material objects and works of art. Shall we then say that the one true beauty stands in need of applause? Nay, no more than law and truth, than kindliness and modesty. Which of these is beautified by praise or deformed by blame? Does an emerald lose its value unless we go into raptures over it? Does gold, ivory, or purple? a sword, a blossom, or a shrub?

If the soul continues to exist, how comes it that the<sup>21</sup> air from time eternal has space for them all?—As well ask: How does earth, for age after age, find room for her dead? The truth is, that just as here below our bodies endure for a time and are then transmuted and dissolved, and make room for the other dead, so the souls that have passed into the air subsist awhile, then change, and fuse, and turn to flame, and are caught up once more into the generative power of the universe, so that the new-comers find an abiding-place.

Such would be our answer on the hypothesis that the soul preserves her existence. It is not enough, however, simply to consider the multitude of corpses thus buried: we must take into account the animals devoured every day by man and beast. What numbers

are consumed, and find a tomb of sorts in the bodies they serve to feed! Yet space suffices for them all; for nature assimilates them to our blood or transmutes them into the elements of air and fire.

Where then are we to seek for the truth of the matter? In analysis of everything into the material and the formal.

22 Stray not thus aimlessly; but in every impulse take account of justice, and in every impression preserve the activity of thy understanding.

23 All that is best for thee, O Universe, is best also for me. Nothing, that comes in thy good time, to me comes early or late. To me, O Nature, all that thy seasons bear is fruit. From thee come all things, in thee they abide, and to thee they return.

The poet cries 'O city of Cecrops, land beloved'; and canst thou not say 'O city of God, O land of love!'

24 'Do little and be happy', quoth the sage.—But is it not better to do the things that are needful, whatsoever and howsoever the laws of our being, as living creatures and by nature members of one community, prescribe? For this resolve brings with it not merely the happiness of well-doing, but that of little-doing. For the vast majority of our deeds and words are aught but necessary. Eliminate these, and how much toil and trouble will vanish with them!

Hence, on every occasion, let us ask ourselves, 'Is this one of the needless things?', remembering, at the same time, that it is not enough to eliminate the idle

in action, but that we must purge our thoughts as thoroughly: for so only can we prevent the motiveless in deed from following in their train.

Make trial whether thou canst walk in the steps of 25 a good man; one who accepts with cheerfulness his lot in the sum of things, and deems it bliss enough if his own deeds be just and his nature kindly.

Hast thou seen to all these things? Then look to 26 this. Disquiet not thyself: become simple.—Does a man sin?—He sins to himself.—Hath aught befallen thee?—It is well: all that falls to thy lot was fore-ordained thee from the first and interwoven with thy destiny.—In a word, life is short: profit by the present in justice and reason; and be temperate in thy hours of ease.

Either the universe is an ordered whole or a chaos, 27 confused it may be, but still a whole.—Or thinkest thou that order can reign in the little world within thee, and disorder in the great world without? And this when all things, separate and diffused though they be, are still united in a common sympathy!

Character black, effeminate, stubborn, bestial, puerile, and brutish; doltish, counterfeit, ribald, knavish, and tyrannical!

If that man is a stranger in the universe who knows 29 not what is in it, no less stranger is he who knows not what takes place therein. He who flees from the law of community is a renegade. He whose mind's eye slumbers is blind indeed. He who has not within him all that is needful for life, but craves the help of another,

is a veritable pauper. He who divorces and sunders himself from the laws of universal Nature, because, forsooth, the course of things pleases him not, is an excretion on the universe. For the same Nature that produces this or that produced thee too. Lastly, he who tears out his own soul from the one universal soul of all rational life makes himself a splinter from the state.

30 One man may have no cloak; another, not a book in the world; yet both be philosophers. And here is a third that goes half naked, and still he says: 'Bread I have none, yet I hold fast to reason!'

31 Love the art thou hast learned, and rest therein: and complete thy pilgrimage through life as one who has whole-heartedly entrusted all things to heaven—one who would not be a tyrant over his fellow-man and will not be a slave.

32 Call to mind, say, the times of Vespasian. It is the same old spectacle—marriage and child-bearing, disease and death, war and revelry, commerce and agriculture, toadyism and obstinacy; one man praying that heaven may be pleased to take so-and-so, another grumbling at his lot, another in love or laying up treasure, others, again, lusting after consulships and kingdoms.

All these have lived their life, and their place knows them no more. So pass on to the reign of Trajan. All again is the same, and that life, too, is no more.

Similarly contemplate all the other great eras of time and nations, and note how many after some supreme effort fell and were resolved into their elements.—Chief of all, recall to mind the multitudes thine own eyes have

seen dragged hither and thither in vain emprises, all because they refused to do the work they were formed to do, to hold fast to this, and rest content.—And here it is needful to remember that a law of value and proportion sanctions the amount of attention to be bestowed on every action. For so it will cause thee no qualm, shouldst thou treat the things of lesser moment with no more seriousness than they deserve.

The everyday words of an earlier generation need a glossary now, and similarly the famous names of old—Camillus, Caeso, Volesus, and Leonnatus—ring strange to a modern ear. Scipio and Cato will soon follow, and in a little while Hadrian and Antoninus will share the same fate. So quickly does human glory fade into the legendary; so quickly is it merged in absolute oblivion.

These instances of mine have been men to whom circumstances have lent a sort of meteoric splendour; as for the rest, let the breath but quit their body and they vanish 'unhonoured and unsung'. And what is this 'undying fame' at the best? A vanity of vanities.

What then is left towards which a man is justified in bending all his energies? Only this; a mind attuned to justice, action devoted to the good of the community, a tongue that knows not falsehood, and a disposition that hails every turn of fortune as necessary, as foreknown, and as proceeding from the same first cause and flowing from the same fount.

Submit thee to Fate of thine own free will, that she spin the threads of thy life to whatever end it please her.

35 All is ephemeral, the remembering alike with the remembered.

36 Ever reflect that the existent exists solely in virtue of change; and let the thought be familiar to thee, that there is nothing so dear to the universal Nature as to change the old order of things and make new like to them. For all that is may be regarded as the seed of that which shall come after it; though to thy mind there is no seed save that which fructifies the earth or the womb,—a popular philosophy in all truth!

37 Death is hard upon thee;—and thou as far removed as ever from simplicity, quietude, and peace with all men; still suspecting harm from things without thee, still unable to see that the only wisdom is to do the right!

38 Look into the governing principles of men, even the wisest, and see what manner of things they pursue and avoid!

39 The root of what is to thee evil is not situate in the mind of another, nor yet in the changes and vicissitudes of thy fleshly dwelling.—Where then?—Simply in whatever part of thee lies the faculty which pronounces this or that an evil. Let this court, then, suspend its verdict, and all will be well. Though its nearest neighbour, this poor body of thine, should be cut and cauterized, should fester and decay, still let the power that passes judgement on these hold its peace; in other words let its verdict be, that nothing can be either good or evil which is calculated to befall the evil and good alike.



For whatever indiscriminately falls to the lot of the man who lives in harmony with Nature and the man who lives in discord with her, is neither for Nature nor against her.

Let this thought be ever present to thee : that the universe is a single life comprising one substance and one soul. Observe how all things have reference to this one universal perception, all acting with a single impulse, all co-factors in the creation of all that is, and all threads indissolubly united in one web.

Thou art, as Epictetus said, a little soul burdened with a corpse.

It is no more an evil to suffer change than a good to come into existence through change.

Time is a rushing torrent, a stream fed by life and its changes. One thing swims into sight and is swept away, another comes fleeting past, and a third will anon be here to take its place.

All that can happen is as natural and trite as the roses in spring or the fruits of autumn. In this category fall disease and death, evil-speaking and double-dealing,—in a word, all the joys and sorrows of the fool.

In the chain of events, what follows is always a natural sequel to what preceded. Life is not an irrational arithmetical series with one term independent of the other and no principle save necessary sequence, but a reasoned progression ; and precisely as all that is ordered harmoniously, so all that comes into being is signalized, not by bare succession, but by a marvellous unity of purpose.

46 Ever remember that, as Heraclitus said, the death of earth is the birth of water and the death of water the birth of air, while the same holds true of air and fire, and conversely. Remember too the plight of him who cannot recall whither his way leads, and reflect that man is forever falling out with what is closest to him all life through—the reason that governs the universe ; while the phenomena that meet his eyes each and every day still seem to him strange and unfamiliar. Bethink thee, our part is not to imitate the dreamers who in their sleep still seem, in a sense, to act and speak, but to be awake in word and deed ;—† no children, at every instant in need of their parents ; but men, untrammelled by tradition and self-reliant.†

47 Were some god to speak to thee : ‘ To-morrow thou shalt die, or at most on the third day ’ ; this respite of a day would seem a thing of naught, did a spark of nobility redeem thee.—For what a difference !—Then deem it no great matter whether thy end shall come after untold years, or with the morrow’s dawn.

48 Bethink thee, time and again, how many leeches that bent their solemn brows on patients innumerable have followed them to death ; how many astrologers that magnanimously foretold the end of others ; how many sages that discussed at portentous length mortality and immortality ; how many captains that slew their thousands ; how many tyrants that breathed terror and insolence and meted out life and death, as though exempt from the common lot ! Nay, how many entire cities have, so to say, given up the ghost—Helice,

Pompeii, Herculaneum, with untold others! Add to the tale all thou thyself hast known, one by one. This man closed his neighbour's eyes, was himself laid low, and another paid him the selfsame tribute—and all within how brief a space! In a word, scan the things of life and know that they are ephemeral and worthless; yesterday an embryo, to-morrow a mummy or a little dust.

Traverse therefore this little moment of time at peace with Nature, and reach thy journey's end in all content, as an olive that ripens and falls, blessing the Nature that bare it and giving thanks to the tree whereon it grew.

Be as a cliff at whose foot the billows break, and 49 break again; but it stands firm, and by-and-by the seething waters about it sink to rest.

'Woe is me, that I should have lived to see this day!' Nay, say rather, 'Happy am I, that under this stroke I remain of good cheer, uncrushed by the present and unappalled by the future!'—For such a blow might have fallen on any man, but how few could have sustained it with equanimity! Why then count the one a disaster rather than hail the other as a blessing? Wilt thou say that human misfortune can consist in aught save deviation from man's nature? Or thinkest thou that what is in accord with Nature's will can be a deviation from that selfsame Nature? What then? Thou hast but learned what her will is. And can this mischance rob thee of justice, high-mindedness, temperance, good sense, caution, truthfulness, decency, free-

dom, and all the rest whose presence it is that enables this nature of man's to come by her own?

In conclusion, then, remember, if aught chance which tends to drive thee into grief, to apply this principle: 'This thing is no misfortune, but the ability to bear it with fortitude is a blessing indeed.'

50 A somewhat unphilosophical, but still efficacious, help towards contempt of death, is to review those who have clung most tenaciously to life. What has it profited them more than those who were cut down before their prime? Somewhere or other they all lie in darkness—Caecilianus, Fabius, Julian, Lepidus, with all their ilk, who carried forth many to their graves, only to be at last carried forth themselves.

In sum, the difference in time is small; and look how it must be spent! What an infinity of trouble; what scurvy companions; how frail a body must we expect! So think not life a treasure to be lost with tears, but look to the abyss of time behind thee and the unbroken tract ahead, and ask: In this what differs three days or thrice the years of the Gerenian sage?

51 Make for the shortest path, which is that of Nature; in other words, healthiness in every speech and action. For a man with this purpose in life is freed from all loitering and vexation, all thought of ways and means, and all affectation.