

History of Ideas
August Main Intake 2019-20
First Essay
1000 words, 15%
Due date: Monday 11 November 2019, 11:59pm

* If the essay is more than 10% above the word count this will be taken into account when determining the grade of the essay. The bibliography and references in brackets are not included in the word count. **The essay must be based on the recommended reading** (both primary source extracts and secondary sources).

** Any materials used which are not on the recommended reading list **must be provided electronically** on TCOLE via the "Extra readings that I have used for my essay" link immediately below the Turnitin essay submission link. You can upload these files as PDFs or image files (JPEG, TIFF etc.), but the parts used in the text must be highlighted so that it is clear to your teacher what you have used.

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Question One:

Is Marcus Aurelius a Stoic sage offering timeless advice to his readers? Or is he, as Bertrand Russell claims, a “pathetic figure;” an inventor of “consolations” for a “tired” age?

Reading:

Primary Source

This primary source extract is provided on the following pages:

Aurelius, M 2019, *Meditations Extract*, Trinity College Foundation Studies, Melbourne.

Secondary Sources

The following secondary sources are available as PDFs on TCOLE. Please use the Trinity computer labs for printing. These secondary sources are meant to help you understand and analyse the primary source. They are not intended to be the main source of information for your essay and should be used carefully.

De Botton, A 2000, *The consolations of philosophy*, Penguin, London.

Recommended pages:
96-99, 106-112.

Nietzsche, F 1990, *Beyond good and evil: prelude to a philosophy of the future*, Penguin, Harmondsworth.

Recommended pages:
10 (aphorism no. 9).

Russell, B 1996, *History of western philosophy*, Routledge, London.

Recommended pages:
248-56.

Skolimowski, H 2000, ‘Dialogue with Marcus Aurelius: on the past informing the future,’ *World affairs: the journal of international issues*, vol. 4, no. 4, pp. 60-69.

Recommended pages:
60-69.

Introduction¹ and notes² by D. Townsend (2019)

Marcus Aurelius was a Roman emperor and Stoic philosopher. He ruled Rome from 161 to 180 AD. His family belonged to Rome's elite. His mother, Domitia Lucilla, was a Roman noble whose family members had served as high-ranking *consuls* (generals). Marcus' father, Marcus Annius Verus, was a *praetor* (a Roman politician) who also belonged to a wealthy family. Verus' father (Marcus Aurelius' paternal grandfather) was a Roman Senator.

When Marcus was around three years old, his father passed away. This led to Marcus being adopted by his grandfather and later by his uncle, Antoninus Pius. In 138, the Roman Emperor Hadrian selected Antoninus Pius as his successor. In 161, Antoninus chose Marcus as his successor.

In his famous text, *Discourses on Livy* (1531), the Renaissance political philosopher Machiavelli describes Marcus Aurelius as having been one of Rome's great rulers.³ While Marcus might well have been one of Rome's best leaders, the merits of Marcus' Stoic beliefs have been questioned. Notable philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Bertrand Russell have criticised Stoic beliefs. Russell believes that Marcus' philosophical beliefs are illogical and that Marcus is merely offering "consolations," words of comfort, to himself and his readers. However, other scholars, including Alain de Botton and Henryk Skolimowski, describe Stoic teachings much more positively, and consider Stoic beliefs applicable to people today. In a fictional interview with Marcus, Skolimowski considers what Marcus might say about our own age.

The *Meditations* and Stoicism

The Greek title of Marcus' text, the *Meditations*, is *Ta Eis Heauton*, meaning "thoughts to himself." The book was seemingly never intended for widespread publication. The *Meditations* is essentially a diary; it can be understood as Marcus turning his attention inwards, reflecting on his life and the human condition.

The basis of the *Meditations* is the Stoic worldview that Marcus adopted. Stoicism was a philosophy that was *practised*, a set of beliefs that were intended to be incorporated into one's life. The Stoics believed that God is a part of all creation and that God (or nature) controls all life. God is the *logos*, a Greek word which can be translated as

¹ In your essay, refer to this introduction as (Townsend 2019, p.3). List in your bibliography as Townsend, D 2019, *Introduction and notes to Marcus Aurelius essay*, Trinity College Foundation Studies, Melbourne.

² In the case of the footnotes accompanying the primary source, the author is also Townsend. If you wish to use such information **in your essay** give the footnote number preceded by the letter 'n' as well as the page number. For example: (Townsend 2019, n. 3 p. 3). List it in your bibliography (if you have not already done so) as Townsend, D 2019, *Introduction and notes to Marcus Aurelius essay*, Trinity College Foundation Studies, Melbourne.

³ Machiavelli, N *Discourses on Livy* 1996, trans. H Mansfield & N Tarlov, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p. 32.

“eternal reason.” The universe is, then, for the Stoics, fundamentally rational as it is guided by a higher power. However, despite believing in the concept of fate, the Stoics also accept the notion of free-will: Stoics teach that human beings have the freedom to choose how they respond to their predetermined circumstances.

To answer this essay question, you will need to consider whether the advice Marcus provides in the *Meditations* can be considered useful. Is Marcus a wise Stoic philosopher, a “sage,” who provides timeless advice to help us live our lives? Or are his views contradictory and unhelpful?

Extracts from Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* (c. 170-180)⁴

Adapted for TCFS use from Aurelius, M 2006 *Meditations*, ed. M. Hammond, Penguin Books, London & Aurelius M 1910 *Meditations*, trans. G. Long, Blackie & Son, London.

Book One

[*Marcus begins the Meditations by expressing his gratitude to his family, friends, teachers, and the gods. He notes what he has learnt from each person.*]

- 1.1. [I learnt] From my grandfather Verus: decency and a mild temper.
- 1.3. From my mother: piety, generosity, the avoidance of wrongdoing and even the thought of it; also simplicity of living, far removed from the habits of the rich.
- 1.5. From my tutor...to tolerate pain and feel few needs; to work with my own hands and mind my own business; to be deaf to malicious gossip.
- 1.6. From Diogenes...to tolerate plain speaking; to have an affinity for philosophy...to write essays from a young age; to love the camp-bed, the hide blanket, and all else involved in the Greek training.⁵
- 1.9. From Sextus, a kindly disposition, and the example of a family governed in a fatherly manner, and the idea of living according to nature...and to tolerate ignorant persons, and those who form opinions without consideration...⁶
- 1.14. From Severus: love of family, love of truth, love of justice...[From him I received] the idea of a commonwealth⁷ based on equality and freedom of speech, and of a monarchy which values above all the liberty of the subject; [I learnt] a constant and vigorous respect for philosophy; beneficence, unstinting generosity, optimism...⁸
- 1.16. From my [adoptive] father: gentleness, and an immovable adherence to decisions made after full consideration; no vain taste for so-called honours; stamina and perseverance; a ready ear for anyone with a proposal for the common good; to reward impartially, giving everyone their due; experience of where to tighten, where to relax...
- 1.17. From the gods: to have good grandparents, good parents, a good sister, good teachers, good family, relatives, and friends – almost everything...[I am thankful to the gods that] I was not brought up any longer than I was with my grandfather's mistress, and that I kept my innocence, leaving sexual experience to the proper time and indeed somewhat beyond it. That I came under a ruler and a father who was to strip me of all conceit and bring me to realise that it is possible to live in a palace without feeling the need for bodyguards or fancy

⁴ Refer to this extract in your essay as (Aurelius, *Meditations* ex. 1.1), changing the section number according to the section you are using. Refer to this extract in your bibliography as: Aurelius, M 2019, *Meditations Extract*, Trinity College Foundation Studies, Melbourne.

⁵ Diogenes was Marcus' painting instructor; he seems to have taught Marcus to appreciate philosophy as well as embrace the discipline and toughness of the Stoic (although it may be a reference to the practices of Socrates [see *Phaedo*] or possibly the Spartans).

⁶ Sextus was a professional philosopher.

⁷ "Commonwealth" (or "kingly government") here means an independent country or community.

⁸ Believed to be Roman politician Gnaeus Claudius Severus Arabianus, one of Rome's consuls and politicians.

uniforms, candelabra, statues, or the other trappings of suchlike pomp, but that one can reduce oneself very close to the station of a private citizen and not thereby lose any dignity or vigour in the conduct of a ruler's responsibility for the common good...That I acquired a clear and constant picture of what is meant by the life according to nature, so that, with regard to the gods, their communications from that world, their help and their inspiration, nothing now prevents me living the life of nature: my falling somewhat short, still, is due to my own fault and my failure to observe the promptings, not to say the instructions, of the gods.

Book Two

2.1. Begin the morning by saying to yourself: today I shall meet people who are meddling, ungrateful, aggressive, treacherous, malicious, unsocial. All this has afflicted them through their ignorance of true good and evil. But I have seen that the nature of good and what is right, and the nature of evil and what is wrong; and I have reflected that the nature of the offender himself is akin to my own—not a kinship of blood or seed, but a sharing in the same mind, the same fragment of divinity.⁹ Therefore I cannot be harmed by any of them, as none will infect me with their wrong, Nor can I be angry with my kinsman or hate him. We were born for cooperation, like feet, like hands, like eyelids, like the rows of upper and lower teeth. So to work in opposition to one another is against nature: and anger or rejection is opposition.

2.14. Even if you were destined to live three thousand years, or ten times that long, nevertheless remember that no one loses any life other than the one he lives, or lives any life other than the one he loses. It follows that the longest and the shortest lives are brought to the same state. The present moment is equal for all; so what is passing is equal also; the loss therefore turns out to be the merest fragment of time. No one can lose either the past or the future – how could anyone be deprived of what he does not possess?

So always remember these two things. First, that all things have been of the same kind from everlasting, coming round and round again, and it makes no difference whether one will see the same things for a hundred years, or two hundred years, or for an infinity of time. Second, that both the longest-lived and the earliest to die suffer the same loss. It is only the present moment of which either stands to be deprived: and if indeed this is all he has, he cannot lose what he does not have.

2.16. The soul of man harms itself, first and foremost, when it becomes (as far as it can) a separate growth, a sort of tumour on the universe: because to resent anything that happens is to separate oneself in revolt from Nature, which holds in collective embrace the particular natures of all other things. Secondly, when it turns away from another human being, or is even carried so far in opposition as to intend him harm—such is the case in the souls of those gripped by anger. A soul harms itself, thirdly, when it gives in to pleasure or pain. Fourthly, whenever it dissimulates, doing or saying anything feigned or false. Fifthly, whenever it fails to direct any of its own actions or impulses to a goal, but acts at random, without conscious attention—whereas even the most trivial action should be undertaken in reference to the end. And the end for rational creatures is to follow the reason and the rule of that most venerable archetype of a governing state—the Universe.

⁹ Marcus believes each human being has part of the divine, or God, within them. See section 12.26.

In man's life his time is a mere instant, his existence a flux, his perception fogged, his whole bodily composition rotting, his mind a whirligig,¹⁰ his fortune unpredictable, his fame unclear. To put it shortly: all things of the body stream away like a river, all things of the mind are dreams and delusion; life is warfare, and a visit in a strange land; the only lasting fame is oblivion.

What then can escort us on our way? One thing, and one thing only: philosophy. This consists in keeping the divinity within us inviolate and free from harm, master of pleasure and pain, doing nothing without aim, truth, or integrity, and independent of others' action or failure to act. Further, accepting all that happens and is allotted to it as coming from that other source which is its own origin: and at all times awaiting death with the glad confidence that it is nothing more than the dissolution of the elements of which every living creature is composed. Now if there is nothing fearful for the elements themselves in the constant changing of each into another, why should one look anxiously in prospect at the change and dissolution of them all? This is in accordance with nature: and nothing harmful is in accordance with nature.

Book Three

3.4. Do not waste the remaining part of your life in thoughts about other people, when you are not thinking with reference to some aspect of the common good. Why deprive yourself of the time for some other task? I mean, thinking about what so-and-so is doing, and why, what he is saying or contemplating or plotting, and all that line of thought, makes you stray from the close watch on your own directing mind.

No, in the sequence of your thoughts you must avoid all that is casual or aimless, and most particularly anything prying or malicious. Train yourself to think only those thoughts such that if you were suddenly asked: 'What is on your mind now?' you could say with immediate frankness whatever it is, this or that. [This is so] your answer can give direct evidence that all your thoughts are straightforward and kindly, the thoughts of a social being who has no regard for the fancies of pleasure or wider indulgence, for rivalry, malice, suspicion, or anything else that one would blush to admit was in one's mind...

Book Four

4.3. Men seek retreats for themselves—in the country, by the sea, in the hills—and you yourself are particularly prone to this yearning. But all this is quite unphilosophic, when it is open to you, at any time you want, to retreat into yourself. No retreat offers someone more quiet and relaxation than that into his own mind, especially if he can dip into thoughts there which put him at immediate and complete ease: and by ease I simply mean a well-ordered life. So constantly give yourself this retreat, and renew yourself. The doctrines you will visit there should be few and fundamental, sufficient at one meeting to wash away all your pain and send you back free of resentment at what you must rejoin...

Finally, then, remember this retreat into your own little territory within yourself. Above all, no agonies, no tensions. Be your own master, and look at things as a man, as a human being, as a citizen, as a mortal creature. And here are two of the most immediately useful thoughts you will dip into. First that *things* cannot touch the mind: they are external and inert;

¹⁰ An object, usually a child's toy, that whirls and spins.

anxieties can only come from your internal judgement. Second, that all these things you see will change almost as you look at them, and then will be no more. Constantly bring to mind all that you yourself have already seen changed. The universe is change: life is judgement.

4.7. Remove the judgement, and you have removed the thought ‘I am hurt’: remove the thought ‘I am hurt’, and the hurt itself is removed.

4.8. What does not make a human being worse in himself cannot make his life worse either: it cannot harm him from outside or inside.

4.10. ‘All’s right that happens in the world.’ Examine this saying carefully, and you will find it true. I do not mean ‘right’ simply in the context of cause and effect, but in the sense of ‘just’ – as if some adjudicator were assigning dues. So keep on observing this, as you have started, and in all that you do combine doing it with being a good man, in the specific conception of ‘good man.’ Preserve this in every sphere of action.

4.17. No, you do not have thousands of years to live. Urgency is on you. While you live, while you can, become good.

4.35. All is ephemeral, both memory and the object of memory.

Book Five

5.1. In the morning, when you are reluctant to get up, have this thought ready to mind: ‘I am rising to do the work of a human being. Do I still resent it, if I am going out to do what I was born for, the purpose for which I was brought into the world? Or was I created to wrap myself in blankets and keep warm?’ ‘But this is more pleasant.’ Were you then born for pleasure – all for feeling, not for action? Can you not see plants, birds, ants, spiders, bees all doing their own work, working together to put in order their several parts of the universe? And then you do not want to do the work of a human being – you do not hurry to the demands of your own nature. ‘But one needs rest too.’ One does indeed: I agree. But nature has set limits to this too, just as it has to eating and drinking, and yet you go beyond these limits, beyond what you need. Not in your actions, though, not any longer: here you stay below your capacity. The point is that you do not love yourself – otherwise you would love both your own nature and her purpose for you...

5.27. ‘Live with the gods.’ He lives with the gods who consistently shows them his soul content with its lot, and performing the wishes of that divinity, that fragment of himself which Zeus has given each person to guard and guide him. In each of us this divinity is our mind and reason.

5.31. How have you behaved up to now towards gods, parents, brother, wife, children, teachers, tutors, friends, relations, servants? Has your principle up to now with all of these been ‘say no evil, do no evil’? Remind yourself what you have been through and had the strength to endure; that the story of your life is fully told and your service completed; how often you have seen beauty, disregarded pleasure and pain, forgone glory, and been kind to the unkind.

Book Six

6.3. Look within: do not allow the special quality or worth of any thing to pass you by.

6.6. The best revenge is not to be like your enemy

6.7. Let one thing be your joy and comfort: to move on from social act to social act, with your mind on god.

6.13. How good it is, when you have roast meat or suchlike foods before you, to impress on your mind that this is the dead body of a fish, this the dead body of a bird or pig; and again, that the Falerian¹¹ wine is there mere juice of grapes, and your purple edged robe¹² simply the hair of a sheep soaked in shell-fish blood! And in sexual intercourse that it is no more than the friction of a membrane and a spurt of mucous ejected. How good these perceptions are at getting to the heart of the real thing and penetrating through it, so you can see it for what it is! This should be your practice throughout all your life...

6.30. Take care not to be Caesarified,¹³ or dyed in purple:¹⁴ it happens. So keep yourself simple, good, pure, serious, unpretentious, a friend of justice, god-fearing, kind, full of affection, strong for your proper work. Strive hard to remain the same man that philosophy wished to make you. Revere the gods, look after men. Life is short. The one harvest of existence on earth is a godly habit of mind and social action.

6.34. As for pleasure, pirates, catamites,¹⁵ parricides,¹⁶ and tyrants have enjoyed it to the full.

6.54. What does not benefit the hive does not benefit the bee either.

Book Seven

7.6. How many who once rose to fame are now consigned to oblivion: and how many who sang their fame are long disappeared.

7.7. Do not be ashamed of help. It is your task to achieve your assigned duty, like a soldier in a scaling-party. What, then, if you are lame and cannot climb the parapet by yourself, but this is made possible by another's help?

7.8. Do not let the future trouble you. You will come to it (if that is what you must) possessed of the same reason that you apply now to the present.

7.26. When someone does you some wrong, you should consider immediately what judgement of good or evil led him to wrong you. When you see this, you will pity him, and

¹¹ Falerian wine was a highly-desirable drink made from grapes. It was made in Campania, a region in southern Italy.

¹² Dying a garment (such as a robe or cloak) purple was costly; the colour purple was associated with royalty.

¹³ Most likely a reference to the fate of Julius Caesar (100-44 BCE). After winning a civil war, Caesar became “dictator for life.” Roman senators would eventually react to Caesar by assassinating him.

¹⁴ The colour purple was associated with high status. See section 6.13.

¹⁵ This refers to a practice in ancient Greece and Rome. A “catamite” was a youth who was in an intimate relationship with a young man.

¹⁶ “Parricide” refers to the killing of a parent or relative.

not feel surprise or anger. You yourself either still share his view of good, or something like it, in which case you should understand and forgive: if, on the other hand, you no longer judge such things as either good or evil, it will be the easier for you to be patient with the unsighted.

7.36. ‘A king’s lot: to do good and be damned.’

Book Eight

8.47. If your distress has some external cause, it is not the thing itself that troubles you, but your own judgement of it—and you can erase this immediately. If it is something in your own attitude that distresses you, no one stops you correcting your view. So too if you are distressed at not achieving some action you think salutary, why not carry on rather than fret? ‘But there’s an obstacle in the way too solid to move.’ No cause for distress, then, since the reason for failure does not lie with you. ‘But life is not worth living if I fail in this.’ Well then, you must 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.

Book Nine

9.4. The sinner sins against himself: the wrongdoer wrongs himself, by making himself morally bad.

9.29. The universal cause is like a winter torrent: it carries everything along with it. So, man, what does that mean for you? Do what nature requires at this moment. Start straight away, if that is in your power: don’t look over your shoulder to see if people will know. Don’t hope for Plato’s utopian republic, but be content with the smallest step forward, and regard even that result as no mean achievement...

Book Ten

10.1. My soul, will you ever be good, simple, individual, bare, brighter than the body that covers you? Will you ever taste the disposition to love and affection? Will you ever be complete and free of need, missing nothing, desiring nothing live or lifeless for the enjoyment of pleasure?...Will you ever be such as to share the society of gods and men without any criticism of them or condemnation by them?

10.3. All that happens is an event either within your natural ability to bear it, or not. So if it is an event within that ability, do not complain, but bear it as you were born to. If outside that ability, do not complain either: it will take you away before you have the chance for complaint. Remember, though, that you are by nature born to bear all that your own judgement can decide bearable, or tolerate in action, if you represent it to yourself as benefit or duty.

10.5. Whatever happens to you was prepared for you from all eternity, and the mesh of causes was ever spinning from eternity both your own existence and the incidence of this particular happening.

10.16. No more roundabout discussion of what makes a good man. Be one!

Book Eleven

11.4. Have I done something for the common good? Then I too have benefitted. Have this thought always ready to hand: and no stopping.

Book Twelve

12.15. The light of a lamp shines on and does not lose its radiance until it is extinguished. Will then the truth, justice, and self-control which fuel you fail before your own end?

12.17. If it is not right, don't do it: if it is not true, don't say it.

12.19. Realise at long last that you have within you something stronger and more numinous than those agents of emotion which make you a mere puppet on their strings. What is in my mind at this very moment? Fear, is it? Suspicion? Desire? Something else of that sort?

12.26. When you fret at any circumstance, you have forgotten the number of things.

You have forgotten that all comes about in accordance with the nature of the Whole; that any wrong done lies with the other; further, but everything which happens was always so in the past, will be the same again in the future, and is happening now across the world; that a human being has close kinship with the whole human race—not a bond of blood or seed, but a community of mind. And you have forgotten this too, that every man's mind is god and has flowed from that source; that nothing is our own property, but even our child, our body, our very soul have come from that source; that all is as thinking makes it so; that each of us lives only the present moment, and the present moment is all we lose.

12.29. The salvation of life lies in seeing each object in its essence and its entirety, discerning both the material and the causal: in applying one's whole soul to doing right and speaking the truth. There remains only the enjoyment of living a link succession of good deeds, with not the slightest gap between them.