

Marcus Aurelius: Historical and Philosophical Context

Work and the Human Condition: Fall 2008

I. Historical Context: Rome

II. Aurelius' Life

III. Philosophy after Aristotle

IV. "To Himself"

V. Central Themes

I. Some Major Events in the Rise of Rome

c. 510 BCE	Rome becomes a republic
282	Rome destroys Etruscans, possesses all of Italian peninsula
264-151	Punic Wars – Rome controls all of western Mediterranean
171-146	Wars with Macedon, resulting in annexation of Greece
133	Rome acquires Pergamum (western Turkey)
c. 100-31	Era of civil wars, struggle for dominance among prominent senators
58-51	Julius Caesar conquers Gaul
44	Caesar assassinated
31	Victory of Augustus in civil war; beginning of Roman Empire
68/9 CE	Year of “four emperors”
96-180	Era of adoptive succession

II. Marcus Aurelius

121	Born into a political family (father & grandfather both held high offices)
c. 135	Hadrian begins to groom Aurelius for eventual rule
137	Hadrian adopts Antoninus as son and successor
138	Death of Hadrian; Antoninus becomes emperor, adopts Aurelius and Lucius Verus as sons and co-heirs
145	Marries Faustina
147-170	Marcus & Faustina have 14 children -- 8 die in childhood, 4 as infants
161	Death of Antoninus; Aurelius becomes emperor, Verus becomes "junior" emperor
169	Death of Verus; Aurelius sole emperor
170-173	On the Danube frontier fighting Germans; composes Books II and III
173-180	Probably composes Books IV-XII
176-178	Probably composes Book I
180	Dies, succeeded by son Commodus

III. Post-Aristotelian Philosophy

Major “Schools”

- Peripatetic
- Neoplatonism
- Scepticism
- Epicureanism
- Stoicism

Epicureans

Universe is made up of atoms, which move chaotically about.

Gods are uninterested in us
Soul is composed of atoms

Universe is random -- we are free

Highest good is pleasure.

Stoics

Universe is material but governed by a principle of order and reason – Logos
God/Logos source of order
Soul is a divine spirit – highest part is the guiding mind of reason, connected with Logos

Universe is deterministic – freedom consists in controlling one’s judgments and passions – In order to get what you want, you have to want what you get.

Highest good is a life lived in accord with universal reason – *apatheia*, equanimity in the face of all things.

IV. “To Himself”

Composed as *philosophical exercises*

Truly, “meditations” – *hypomnēmata*
ideas, images, exhortations, arguments
for him to reflect upon and to ponder

Drew upon his own studies -- includes
quotations or paraphrases from other
philosophers

Not written with any audience but himself in
mind

Repetitive

Sometimes cryptic

V. Themes

- Discipline of Assent: *Accept only those representations that are objective or adequate*
- Discipline of Desire: *Desire only that which is willed by the universal Logos* (i.e., whatever actually happens!)
- Discipline of Action: *Act so as to serve the whole of humanity*
- Ideal of a “good man”
- Death
- Transience of life
- “divine spirit” or *daimon*
- Providence or atoms – the choice between Epicureanism and Stoicism (in which Stoicism is the better)
- The body – “the flesh”
- Eternal return
- Duties
- Relation between the individual and the Whole of humanity (or Cosmos)