

Socratic Themes in the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius

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ABSTRACT: Although Marcus Aurelius refers to Socrates only a handful of times in the *Meditations*, and often only to name him as an example of an illustrious figure now long dead, this chapter argues that there is a distinctive Socratic character to the philosophical project that we see at work in Marcus's notebook writings. In those few places where Marcus does invoke Socrates it is usually in connection with one of the central preoccupations of the *Meditations*, in particular the notion of taking care of oneself, the primacy of virtue, and the need for self-control. Moreover, Marcus' practice of writing to himself may also be seen as a Socratic enterprise, when approached in the light of a suggestive passage from Epictetus. This chapter i) examines Marcus's knowledge of Socrates and the sources he used, and ii) explores the Socratic themes in the *Meditations* noted above. Although Marcus does not explicitly say much about Socrates, I suggest that he probably considered the *Meditations* to embody a deeply Socratic project.

1. Introduction

Marcus Aurelius mentions Socrates a dozen or so times in the *Meditations*.¹ To these explicit references we can add a few quotations from the Socrates of Plato's dialogues where he is not named.² Of these few scattered references to Socrates, some merely name him in a list of illustrious people who are now dead:

Heraclitus, after many speculations about fire which should consume the Universe, was waterlogged by dropsy, poulticed himself with cow-dung and died. Vermin killed Democritus; another kind of vermin Socrates. What is the moral? You went on board, you set sail, you have made the port.³ M. Aur. *Med.* 3.3

... so many grave philosophers, Heraclitus, Pythagoras, and Socrates; so many heroes of old, captains and kings of later days. *Med.* 6.47

¹ The full list is *Med.* 1.16, 3.3, 3.6, 6.47, 7.19, 7.66 (thrice), 8.3, 11.23, 11.25, 11.28 (twice), and 11.39 (cf. Rigo 2010, 196–197). Note also the reference at 10.31 to Σωκρατικός which Farquharson 1944 and Hard 2011 translate as “a follower of Socrates” (cf. Hammond 2006: “in Socrates' circle”), but Haines 1916, Staniforth 1964, and Hays 2003 take it to be a proper name, “Socraticus.”

² These are *Med.* 7.44, 7.45, and 7.46.

³ I quote the translation in Farquharson 1944 throughout, occasionally modified.

How many a Chrysippus, a Socrates, an Epictetus has Eternity
already sucked down! *Med.* 7.19

Alexander, Julius Caesar, and Pompeius, what are they by
comparison with Diogenes, Heraclitus, and Socrates? *Med.* 8.3

These passing mentions make up a third of the total references to Socrates in the *Meditations*. The first three passages simply highlight that even great men will die. The fourth is part of a passage that argues that the life of a philosopher is preferable to that of a great political leader because it is more autonomous and involves fewer external demands. None says anything substantive about Socrates except to count him among one of the great philosophers of the past.

Putting these passages to one side, we are left with only a handful of places where Marcus Aurelius mentions Socrates. At first glance, then, it looks as if Marcus has little to say about Socrates and, by extension, did not owe him any great debt. Indeed, Marcus and Socrates look as if they embody two quite different images of the philosopher. Socrates was preoccupied with debate, discussion, argument, criticism, and the cross-examination of others. This was a live activity between different people, whether it be conducted in the marketplace or, as nowadays, in a seminar room. Marcus was by contrast quite different in outlook: a solitary, introspective, reflective thinker; a private writer of philosophy rather than a participant in oral debates, writing to and for himself. In what follows I shall suggest that, despite this apparent difference in outlook, there is in fact a strong Socratic current running through the *Meditations*, and a close look at those few places where Marcus does engage with Socrates explicitly will help to bring this into view. I shall also suggest, with reference to a passage in Epictetus, that there is another way in which Marcus may have taken inspiration from Socrates when writing the *Meditations*. In order to support these claims we first need to gain a clearer sense of what Marcus may have known about Socrates.

2. Sources

What did Marcus Aurelius know about Socrates? What could he have known, writing as he was over half a millennium after Socrates' death? From where did he draw his information? The two authors from whom Marcus quotes most

often in the *Meditations* are Epictetus and Plato, both of course celebrated for their portraits of Socrates.⁴

2.1. Epictetus

Marcus's debt to Epictetus is well known. He himself reports that he borrowed from the library of his friend Rusticus a copy of the notes (ὑπομνήματα) of Epictetus,⁵ a term that Arrian uses in his preface to his record of Epictetus's lectures that we now know as the *Discourses* (Διατριβαί).⁶ Marcus quotes from the four surviving books of the *Discourses* and he preserves a number of otherwise unknown passages from Epictetus, presumably deriving from now lost books of the same work.⁷ Indeed, he quotes from Epictetus more often than he does any other author.⁸ Given this, it seems reasonable to suppose that Epictetus's portrait of Socrates would have been an important influence on Marcus's own image of him.

Socrates was an important role model for Epictetus, who regularly referred to him (alongside Diogenes the Cynic) as an exemplary figure.⁹ Epictetus also shared with previous Stoics an admiration for a variety of Socratic doctrines, such as the identification of virtue with knowledge, the unity of the

⁴ The distinctions between exact quotation, paraphrase, and allusion are not always clear. The authors whom Marcus draws on most frequently in the *Meditations* are Epictetus, Euripides, Heraclitus, and Plato. According to Rigo 2010, 339–344 he does so 10, 7, 4, and 5 times respectively; Hammond 2006, 222–224, who includes looser allusions, suggests 12, 7, 12, and 17 times respectively. Either way, Epictetus and Plato both figure in the three most cited authors in the *Meditations*.

⁵ See *Med.* 1.7 (test. 11 Schenkl 1916).

⁶ Arr. *Epict. diss.* Praef. 2. Subsequent references to the *Discourses* take the form: Epictetus, *Diss.*

⁷ It is generally thought that Arrian's *Discourses of Epictetus* originally comprised of eight books. This is based on the statement in Photius, *Bibl. cod.* 58 (17b11–20 = test. 6 Schenkl 1916). Aulus Gellius's reference to (and quote from) Book 5 is also often noted (*NA* 19.1.14 = fr. 9 Schenkl 1916). Photius also mentions another work in twelve books (*ibid.*), although this is usually assumed to be mistaken. See further Souilhé 1975, xi–xix.

⁸ See Rigo 2010, 339–344. The full list is: *Diss.* 1.28.4 (in *Med.* 7.63), *Diss.* 3.22.105 (in *Med.* 11.36), *Diss.* 3.24.86–7 (in *Med.* 11.33), *Diss.* 3.24.88 (in *Med.* 11.34), *Diss.* 3.24.91–2 (in *Med.* 11.35), *Diss.* 4.6.20 (in *Med.* 7.36). In addition, *Med.* 11.37, 11.38, and 11.39 are fr. 27, 28, and 28a in Schenkl 1916. Not mentioned by Rigo are fr. 26 Schenkl, from *Med.* 4.41, and fr. 28b (added by Oldfather 1925–28), from *Med.* 4.49.

⁹ On the Socratic character of Epictetus's thought see Long 2000 and Long 2002; note also Gourinat 2001. On Epictetus's references to Diogenes the Cynic (and how they compare with his remarks about Socrates) see Schofield 2007; note also Billerbeck 1978.

virtues, and the necessity (and indeed sufficiency) of virtue for a good life.¹⁰ Equally important, as A. A. Long has brought out, Epictetus was deeply Socratic in his whole approach to philosophical education.¹¹ The *Discourses* recorded by Arrian do not contain sermons or diatribes but rather Socratic conversations in which the lead protagonist acts as a moral guide. Like Socrates, Epictetus can be self-deprecating in his claims to knowledge, displays limited interest in natural philosophy, and is most concerned with how he and his interlocutors can lead a good life. Like the Platonic dialogues, Epictetus's discussions sometimes involve youthful students but on other occasions include confrontations with older and often important individuals who already possess firmly held beliefs. In both cases Epictetus subjects them to Socratic cross-examination. In sum, Socrates influenced both the form and the content of the *Discourses* and stands as an idealized image of the sort of person that Epictetus and his pupils aspire to become. If Marcus read Epictetus, as we know he did, he could not have failed to have been impressed by the image of Socrates he found therein which, as Long notes, appears or is alluded to "on every other page."¹²

Epictetus's own knowledge of Socrates appears to have drawn heavily on Plato. He read widely among the dialogues and drew on the *Alcibiades*, *Apology*, *Crito*, *Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, *Republic*, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Philebus*, *Timaeus*, and *Laws*.¹³ However, Socrates is typically abstracted from his Platonic context and presented as a Stoic role model. There are also numerous things that Epictetus attributes to Socrates that are not attested in the Platonic dialogues or the works of Xenophon, opening up the possibility that he also had access to other Socratic material now lost.¹⁴ In the present context, though, that is a question we must put to one side.

Among Marcus's explicit statements about Socrates we find at the end of Book 11:

Socrates used to say: 'What do you want? To have souls of rational or irrational beings?' 'Rational.' 'What rational beings, sound or inferior?' 'Sound.' 'Why don't you seek them?' 'Because we have

¹⁰ On Socratic elements in Stoicism more widely see e.g. Long 1988 and Striker 1994.

¹¹ See Long 2000 and, at greater length, 2002.

¹² Long 2000, 85.

¹³ For a full list of passages see Jagu 1946, 161–162.

¹⁴ For a complete list of Socratic testimonia in Epictetus not paralleled in the extant sources see the texts assembled in SSR I C 515–29.

them.’ ‘Why then do you fight and disagree?’ *Med.* 11.39 (SSR I C 545)

This passage, as Rutherford notes, has no parallel in Plato or Xenophon but there is nothing un-Socratic about it.¹⁵ Giannantoni lists it as an independent testimonium for Socrates. It is worth noting, though, that it follows after a string of quotations from Epictetus.¹⁶ The compressed dialogic form is also reminiscent of numerous exchanges in the *Discourses*. Perhaps this comes from one of the lost books of the *Discourses*? A number of editors of Marcus Aurelius have suggested just this.¹⁷ If so, it is an example of Marcus making use of Epictetus’s portrayal of Socrates.

2.2. Plato

Like Epictetus, Marcus also drew on Plato. He quotes from Plato a number of times and readers have pointed to further allusions to passages from the dialogues.¹⁸ Of particular interest is a series of quotations in Book 7 of the *Meditations*:

But I should have a right answer to give him, as follows: ‘You speak unadvisedly, my friend, if you fancy that a man who is worth anything ought to take the risk of life or death into account, and not to consider only one thing, when he is acting, whether he does what is right or wrong, the actions of a good man or a bad.’ *Med.* 7.44, quoting Pl. *Ap.* 28b

¹⁵ See Rutherford 1989, 181.

¹⁶ Thus *Med.* 11.33 = *Diss.* 3.24.87 (not verbatim); *Med.* 11.34 = *Diss.* 3.24.88; *Med.* 11.35 = *Diss.* 3.24.91; *Med.* 11.36 = *Diss.* 3.22.105; *Med.* 11.37 = Epictetus fr. 27 Schenkl; *Med.* 11.38 = Epictetus fr. 28 Schenkl. Our passage here, *Med.* 11.39, may simply be a continuation of the preceding passage, *Med.* 11.38, and so a continuation of Epictetus fr. 28 rather than an independent text. The division between 11.38 and 11.39 dates back only to Thomas Gataker’s edition of 1652 and in earlier editions, including the *editio princeps* of 1559 and Meric Casaubon’s edition of 1643, they are treated as a single text. See further Sellars 2018, 333.

¹⁷ See e.g. Leopold 1908, loc. cit. (“locus omnino inter fragm. Epicteti recipiendus”); Trannoy 1925, 134; Theiler 1951, 344; Dalfen 1987, 106. Schenkl 1894 omitted it from his collection of the fragments of Epictetus but, in the light of Leopold’s remark, added it in Schenkl 1916. Although Farquharson 1944, 418, appears to agree, later, at 881, he says “there is no adequate ground” for taking it to be a fragment of Epictetus. On the status of this fragment see Sellars 2018.

¹⁸ See n. 4 above.

For really and truly, men of Athens, the matter stands like this: wherever a man takes post, believing it to be the best, or is posted by his captain, there he ought, as I think, to remain and abide the risk, taking into account nothing, whether death or anything else, in comparison with dishonour. *Med.* 7.45, quoting Pl. *Ap.* 28d.

But, consider, my friend, whether possibly high spirit and virtue are not something other than saving one's life and being saved. Perhaps a man who is really a man must leave on one side the question of living as long as he can, and must not love his life, but commit these things to God, and, believing the woman's proverb that no one ever escaped his destiny, must consider, with that in his mind, how he may live the best possible life in the time that is given to live. *Med.* 7.46, quoting Pl. *Grg.* 512d

In these three passages Marcus quotes from Plato's Socrates and was evidently drawn to them by their shared theme: acting rightly is more important than mere survival. These are the only places where Marcus explicitly draws on Plato for accounts of Socrates. While some of Marcus's other remarks about Socrates have loose parallels with passages in Plato's dialogues, they could equally have come from other sources that make similar remarks, not least Epictetus.¹⁹ Even so, it seems reasonable to suppose that Plato's dialogues, just as they are for us, were central in shaping Marcus's image of Socrates.

2.3. Other Sources

Marcus mentions Xenophon only once and makes no use of his Socratic writings.²⁰ He also quotes Antisthenes once, but without naming him, and we only know that the line in question is from Antisthenes because Epictetus also quotes it.²¹ It seems likely, then, that Epictetus was Marcus's immediate source here and that Marcus did not know Antisthenes' Socratic works directly. More intriguing is a passage from Book 7 that deserves to be quoted in full:

¹⁹ See e.g. *Med.* 11.23 (*SSR* I C 542) for which editors have pointed to Pl. *Phd.* 77e, although the connection is thin, and *Diss.* 2.1.15, which is an equally plausible source. Note also *Med.* 7.63 where Marcus appears to paraphrase Plato (*Soph.* 228c), but is probably quoting the paraphrase by Epictetus (*Diss.* 1.28.4).

²⁰ See *Med.* 10.31.

²¹ See *Med.* 7.36 and Epictetus, *Diss.* 4.6.20 (both *SSR* V A 86).

How do we know that Telauges was not in character superior to Socrates? It is not enough that Socrates won more glory by his death, argued more fluently with the sophists, spent the whole frosty night in the open with more endurance, thought it braver to refuse, when ordered to arrest Leon of Salamis, and ‘carried his head high in the streets’ (a trait in regard to which one might question whether it was true). No, we have to consider this: what kind of soul Socrates had, whether he could be content with being just in his dealings with men and righteous in his dealing with the gods, whether he was neither hastily indignant with wickedness nor a servant to any man’s ignorance, whether he neither accepted as unfamiliar anything assigned by Universal Nature or endured it as intolerable, nor submitted his mind to be affected by the affections of the flesh. *Med.* 7.66 (SSR I C 541; VI A 87)

Editors have noted a number of parallels between parts of this passage and other Socratic sources, in particular Plato.²² The phrase “carried his head high in the streets” could come from the *Clouds* of Aristophanes.²³ But there may be another source standing behind this passage. Who was the Telauges who is being compared with Socrates? According to tradition he was the son of Pythagoras and possibly the teacher of Empedocles.²⁴ He was also the title character of a now lost Socratic dialogue by Aeschines.²⁵ It appears as if that dialogue involved a debate between Socrates and Telauges, who was presented as a scruffy ascetic Pythagorean, with Aeschines hoping to present Socrates as the superior figure by referring to incidents from Socrates’ life.²⁶ Marcus’s response was to say that Socrates’ real superiority came from the excellence of his soul rather than the outward appearance of a Cynic-like lifestyle.

²² Farquharson 1944, 142 notes parallels with *Symp.* 221b and *Ap.* 32d.

²³ Compare ἐν ταῖς ὁδοῖς ἐβρενθύετο with *Nub.* 362, ὅτι βρενθύει τ’ ἐν ταῖσιν ὁδοῖς, and cf. Pl. *Symp.* 221b.

²⁴ See Diog. Laert. 8.43. See further Macris 2016.

²⁵ See Diog. Laert. 2.61 (SSR VI A 22). The surviving evidence is gathered together in SSR VI A 83–90. Note also the older collections in Krauss 1911 (where *Med.* 7.66 = vest. 21) and Dittmar 1912 (where *Med.* 7.66 = fr. 45). For further discussion of the *Telauges* see Krauss 1911, 102–113 and Dittmar 1912, 213–244, and the summary of their views in Farquharson 1944, 749–750. Note also, more recently, Lampe 2015, 67–68.

²⁶ Here I follow Farquharson 1944, 363–364 and 749–750. Cf. Athenaeus 5, 220a–b (SSR VI A 84). Demetrius, *Eloc.* 291 (SSR VI A 89) suggests that Aeschines’ portrait of Telauges was deliberately ambiguous and could be taken as either mockery or admiration.

Is it possible that Marcus read Aeschines' Socratic dialogues? Our other sources for the *Telauges* are relatively late and include Proclus and Priscian, so it may not be impossible. The apparent allusions to Plato and Aristophanes in this passage could equally have their origin in Aeschines instead. Ultimately we just do not know, but this passage does open up the possibility that Marcus had access to and made use of a wider range of Socratic material than has come down to us today.

Finally we might note a handful of references to Socrates in the correspondence between Fronto and Marcus. In the letters we see Fronto writing to the young Marcus extolling the virtues of Socrates in both wisdom and eloquence.²⁷ Although the few passing references that survive do not add much in the way of content, they do suggest that the figure of Socrates was presented to Marcus as a role model during the formative years of his education.

2.4. Summary

It seems likely that Marcus's image of Socrates as an exemplary figure relied quite heavily on the similar image we find in Epictetus. Epictetus's famous exhortation "if you are not yet a Socrates, still you ought to live as one who wishes to be a Socrates"²⁸ could easily stand as a summary of the role that Socrates plays for Marcus: an exemplary model of a philosophical life. Although Marcus did draw on Plato, as indeed Epictetus had done, the Socrates we find in the *Meditations* is what we might call a Stoicized role model; that is, an exemplar of virtue rather than a questioning gadfly.

Beyond Marcus's primary interest in Socrates as a philosophical role model we should also note a few places where he refers to anecdotes about Socrates that suggest an interest in the man himself:

Socrates used to call the opinions of the multitude like other things: 'Bogies', things to frighten children. *Med.* 11.23 (*SSR I C* 542)

Socrates' message to Perdiccas to excuse a visit to his court: 'to avoid', he said, 'coming to a most unfortunate end, that is, to be treated handsomely and not to have the power to return it'. *Med.* 11.25 (*SSR I C* 543)

²⁷ See e.g. Fronto, *Ep. ad M. Caes.* 3.16 (Van Den Hout 1988, 48; cf. Haines 1919–20, 1.100–102).

²⁸ Epictetus, *Ench.* 51.3 (trans. Oldfather 1925–28).

What a man Socrates was in his under garment only, when Xanthippe took his upper garment and went out; and what he said to the friends who were shocked and returned when they saw him in that dress. *Med.* 11.28 (SSR I C 544)

Some editors have tried to find Platonic sources for these passages; Giannantoni lists them as testimonia in their own right. Putting the question of sources to one side, they illustrate that Marcus had an interest in Socrates the man and the stories about him alongside his idealization of him as a sage.

3. Themes

We now have a clearer sense of the sources for and influences on Marcus's image of Socrates. As I have already noted, there are only a handful of passages where Marcus discusses Socrates directly. Yet in those few places Marcus connects Socrates with topics that are in fact central to the *Meditations* as a whole. We might take this to be Marcus reminding himself in his private notebook of the Socratic provenance of these key ideas. Alternatively he might be invoking Socrates as a role model to inspire himself to further self-improvement. Ultimately we do not know, but even so these passing references help to highlight the Socratic character of Marcus's own philosophical project. In what follows I shall focus on what I take to be three central and closely interconnected themes.

3.1. *Care of Oneself*

One of the central themes in Socrates' philosophy is the idea of taking care of oneself (ἐπιμελεῖσθαι ἑαυτοῦ).²⁹ In the *Apology* Plato famously has Socrates say:

Are you not ashamed that you give your attention to acquiring as much money as possible, and similarly with reputation and honour, and give no attention or thought to truth and understanding and the perfection of your soul?³⁰ *Pl. Ap.* 29d–e.

²⁹ On this theme in Socrates' philosophy, which a number of commentators have described as his central preoccupation, see Sellars 2003, 36–39 (with further references). In recent years it has received renewed attention in the wake of the work of Michel Foucault; see Foucault 1997, 281–301.

³⁰ I quote the translation in Hamilton and Cairns 1961.

A little later he repeats the same thought:

For I spend all my time going about trying to persuade you, young and old, to make your first and chief concern not for your bodies nor your possessions, but for the highest welfare of your souls.

Ap. 30a–b

This is Socrates' god-given mission: to encourage himself and others to undertake self-examination with a view to improving the condition of their souls. As we have already seen, Marcus quotes from the *Apology* himself; in fact he quotes two passages that come immediately before the ones just cited. In the passages chosen by Marcus, Socrates emphasizes that his mission to take care of his soul and to encourage others to do the same ought not to be compromised in the face of danger or even death (*Ap.* 28b and 28d, quoted above). It would be better to die than to live a life in which the excellence of one's soul has been corrupted. A similar thought is expressed in Marcus's third quotation from Plato's Socrates that follows immediately after these two from the *Apology* (*Gorg.* 512d, quoted above).

This Socratic theme of care of oneself is a central preoccupation in the *Meditations*. Marcus's project there is explicitly to take care of himself. In the *Alcibiades* (127d–130c), Socrates drew a distinction between the body (σῶμα) and the soul (ψυχή), insisting that to take care of oneself involves taking care of the soul, the body being merely an instrument of the soul. Marcus draws a similar distinction, in his case tripartite, between flesh (σαρκία), spirit (πνεῦμα), and governing part (ἡγεμονικόν).³¹ Like Socrates he sets aside the body, suggesting that we ought to devote ourselves to the cultivation of the governing part of the soul. Following Epictetus, Marcus insists that in order to live well all we need do is master the ruling reason within us, located in the governing part (e.g. *Med.* 2.5). In particular he insists, again following Epictetus, that we ought to pay less attention to what goes on in the souls of other people and instead focus our attention on taking care of our own soul (e.g. *Med.* 2.8, 2.13). In the present context it is worth noting that as well as using the Epictetean term ἡγεμονικόν, more or less interchangeably with reason (λόγος), Marcus also uses δαίμων, perhaps as a nod towards the Socratic character of the task at hand (e.g. *Med.* 3.12). Indeed, Marcus is explicit that his turn inwards was inspired by Socrates:

³¹ See *Med.* 2.2; also 3.16, 7.16, 12.3. Marcus is not always consistent in his use of terminology for the three parts, on which see Gill 2013, 88–89.

But if nothing higher is revealed than the very divinity (δαίμων) seated within you, subordinating your private impulses to itself, examining your thoughts, having withdrawn itself, as Socrates used to say,³² from the sense-affections, and subordinated itself to the gods and making men its first care; if you find all else to be smaller and cheaper than this, give no room to anything else, to which when once you incline and turn, you will no longer have the power without a struggle to prefer in honour that which is your own, your peculiar good. *Med.* 3.6

Marcus's writing "to himself" is itself part of this project of taking care of oneself. It is an act of self-examination and self-exhortation of the sort recommended by earlier Stoics such as Seneca, and undertaken through the process of writing.³³ But Marcus makes no mention of Seneca; his point of reference is Socrates. Where he differs from Socrates is that his concern is almost exclusively with taking care of himself rather than exhorting others to do the same. Marcus's project is Socratic in the sense that he takes up Socrates' injunction, but he does not take on the role of Socratic educator himself.³⁴ That should of course come as no surprise given that we are dealing with a private text not intended for wider circulation. Marcus is only writing for himself.

3.2. *Virtue*

Closely related to care of oneself is the importance attached to virtue (ἀρετή) by both Marcus and Socrates. Indeed, the task of taking care of oneself is ultimately the same as the task of cultivating virtue insofar as both aim at a soul in an excellent state. This comes through very clearly in the passage quoted earlier in which Marcus compares Socrates with the Pythagorean Telauges (*Med.* 7.66, above). If Socrates was superior to Telauges, it was due to the excellence of his soul and the virtuous actions that emanated from it.

³² The phrase "as Socrates used to say" has been taken variously as a reference to Pl. *Phd.* 83a–83b (Gill 2013, 110), *Ti.* 61d (Tranoy 1925, 22), and Epictetus, *Diss.* 3.12.15 (Farquharson 1944, 42; Dalfen 1987, 18).

³³ See e.g. Sen. *De Ira* 3.36.1–3, although here the focus is on daily self-examination only and he does not explicitly mention writing. On the theme of self-writing more widely see Foucault 1997, 207–222.

³⁴ Compare with Epictetus, *Diss.* 1.15, where Epictetus also focuses attention on self-care and discourages excessive concern about the mental states of others.

It was virtue, then, and nothing else that made Socrates a figure worthy of emulation. Marcus displays little interest in other characteristics usually associated with Plato's Socrates, such as his irony or erotic relationships. This is the sense in which Marcus operates with a Stoicized image of Socrates, inherited from Epictetus. The primacy of virtue is a recurrent theme in the *Meditations*, although Marcus often refers to specific virtues, and in particular justice (δικαιοσύνη), rather than referring to virtue in the abstract.³⁵ Our guide when acting must always be justice, Marcus insists (*Med.* 4.12). A central part of justice is patience (ἀνέχεσθαι), and in particular patience in the face of the actions of others given that (echoing Socrates) all wrongdoing is involuntary (e.g. *Med.* 4.3.2; also 4.26, 7.22, 7.26). Our central concern ought to be a just frame of mind and actions for the sake of the common good rather than anything external such as reputation or posthumous fame (*Med.* 4.33). Marcus continually reminds himself that a virtuous disposition is the highest—indeed only—good, while death, reputation, and material goods are irrelevant concerns (e.g. *Med.* 6.2). In one passage he contrasts this view with that of the majority of people:

You could apprehend the character of what the majority of men fancy to be 'goods' like this. If a man were to conceive the existence of real goods, like wisdom, temperance, justice, fortitude, he could not with those in his mind still listen to the popular proverb about 'goods in every corner', for it will not fit. But with what appear to the majority of men to be goods in his mind he will listen to and readily accept what the comic poet said as an appropriate witticism.³⁶ *Med.* 5.12

There is a clear contrast obvious to all, Marcus suggests, between the (real) goods of the soul and (only apparent) material goods. In this he is simply following standard Stoic doctrine.³⁷ But, as we have seen, he explicitly associates the idea with Socrates rather than referring to one of the early Stoics. That ought to come as no great surprise given that the Stoics both emulated Socrates on this point and drew on his arguments for the claim that virtue is sufficient for a good

³⁵ In *Med.* 11.10 the primacy of justice for Marcus is made explicit when he suggests that all the other virtues spring from it. See also *Med.* 8.39.

³⁶ The allusion is to a passage in Menander that refers to someone who has so many material goods that "he has no room left to shit"; see further Gill 2013, 153–154.

³⁷ On the early Stoic theory of value, see the texts collected in *SVF* 3.68–116; note also Long and Sedley 1987, 1.368–374 (§ 60).

life.³⁸ For present purposes, though, the point worth noting is that Marcus associated the doctrine with Socrates.

3.3. *Self-Control*

The third theme, closely related to the previous two, is what we might call self-control. Marcus often presents his project to take care of himself, which involves the cultivation of virtue, as one that involves greater self-mastery that will ultimately lead to freedom (ἐλεύθερος).³⁹

Nature did not so blend you with the compound Whole that she did not permit you to circumscribe yourself and to bring what is its own into submission to itself. *Med.* 7.67

Whenever you are obliged by circumstances to be in a way troubled, quickly return to yourself, and do not, more than you are obliged, fall out of step; for you will be more master of the measure by continually returning to it. *Med.* 6.11

Marcus sees this focus on self-control as a Socratic virtue. He makes this explicit in the extended eulogy to his adopted father, Antoninus Pius, which comes towards the end of the series of such reminiscences that occupy Book 1:

What is recorded of Socrates would exactly fit him: he could equally be abstinent from or enjoy what many are too weak to abstain from and too self-indulgent in enjoying. To be strong, to endure, and in either case to be sober belong to the man of perfect and invincible spirit. *Med.* 1.16 (§§ 9–10 Farquharson; §§ 30–31 Dalfen)

Here Marcus could be thinking of the accounts of Socrates in Xenophon (*Mem.* 1.3.14–15) or Plato (*Symp.* 220a–b) where he is presented as indifferent to physical pleasures and pains, with the second more likely given that we know Marcus read at least some Plato. Marcus echoes Socrates' indifference to external circumstances himself when he writes:

³⁸ See further Long 1988 and Striker 1994. In particular compare Pl. *Euthyd.* 278e–281e with Diog. Laert. 7.103–4 (*SVF* 3.117, 119).

³⁹ See e.g. *Med.* 6.16, 7.67.

Provided you are doing your proper work it should be indifferent to you whether you are cold or comfortably warm, whether drowsy or with sufficient sleep, whether your report is evil or good, whether you are in the act of death or doing something else. *Med.* 6.2

The ‘invincible spirit’ (ἀήττητος ψυχή) that Marcus attributes to Antoninus and, by extension, Socrates was a standard feature of the Stoic sage.⁴⁰ Epictetus defines the invincible person as “he whom nothing that is outside the sphere of his moral purpose (προαίρεσις) can dismay.”⁴¹ Elsewhere Epictetus adds that the sage is invincible because his only concern is his moral purpose, which can never be hampered by external forces.⁴² This indifference to external circumstances is of course standard Stoic doctrine and a corollary of the focus on virtue as the only good.⁴³ Like other Stoics before him, Marcus associates this attitude with the figure of Socrates.

3.4. Summary

These three Socratic themes run throughout the *Meditations*. In one of the passages mentioning Socrates that we saw earlier, all three come together. For this reason it is worth quoting again, this time more fully:

If you discover in the life of man something higher than justice, truth, temperance, fortitude, and generally speaking than your understanding contented with itself, where it presents you behaving by the rule of right, and satisfied with destiny, in what is assigned to you and is not yours to choose; if, I say, you see something higher than this, turn to it with all your heart and enjoy the supreme good now that it is found. But if nothing higher is revealed than the very divinity seated within you, subordinating your private impulses to itself, as Socrates used to say, from the sense-affections, and subordinated itself to the gods and making men its first care; if you find all else to be smaller and cheaper than this, give no room to anything else, to which when once you incline and turn, you will no longer have the power without a struggle to

⁴⁰ See e.g. Stobaeus 2.99.19 (*SVF* 1.216), with Hadot and Luna 1998, 46 and Gill 2013, 77.

⁴¹ Epictetus, *Diss.* 1.18.21 (trans. Oldfather 1925–28).

⁴² See Epictetus, *Diss.* 3.6.5–7.

⁴³ See e.g. the texts in *SVF* 3.117–68; note also Long and Sedley 1987, 1.354–357 (§ 58).

prefer in honour that which is your own, your peculiar good. For it is not right to set up a rival of another kind to the good of Reason and of the Commonwealth; the praise of the multitude, for example, or place or wealth or pleasurable indulgence. *Med.* 3.6

Socrates is the guide here in Marcus's affirmation that the highest good is understanding (διάνοια), taken to be the seat of the virtues (justice, temperance), and identified with one's inner god (δαίμων). All impulses (όρμαι) ought to be subordinated to this understanding, which should be our first care. Marcus's Socratic project of care of oneself is one that involves the cultivation of virtue combined with intense self-discipline. Here Marcus follows Epictetus in turning to the figure of Socrates as the key point of reference, rather than to an early Stoic such as Zeno or Chrysippus. Although that might seem odd for someone proclaiming to be a Stoic, Stoics had throughout the history of the school turned to precursors such as Socrates and, to a lesser extent, Diogenes of Sinope as idealized role models rather than to the founders of their own school.⁴⁴

4. Socratic Self-Writing

Notwithstanding these Socratic themes in the *Meditations*, Marcus and Socrates might still appear quite different in their wider approach to philosophy, as I noted earlier. While Socrates engages in public, oral cross-examination, Marcus adopts private, written introspection. Yet as we have seen, both were intensely concerned with self-cultivation, even if they went about it in quite different ways. Could Marcus really have seen what he was doing as Socratic in spirit? There is an intriguing passage in Epictetus that might help to shed some light here:

Did not Socrates write? – Yes, who wrote as much as he? But how? Since he could not have always at hand someone to test his judgements, or to be tested by him in turn, he was in the habit of testing and examining himself, and was always in a practical way trying out some particular primary conception. That is what a philosopher writes; but trifling phrases, and 'said he', 'said I', he leaves to others ... *Diss.* 2.1.32–3 (*SSR I C* 519)

The immediate context of this passage is a warning to students not to prioritize literary composition over moral improvement: produce fine actions, not fine

⁴⁴ See Long 1988.

prose. The final line looks like a swipe at Plato, implying that his literary philosophical works fail to live up to the Socratic ideal of philosophy as a lived practice. Strikingly, though, this passage might easily stand as a description of what Marcus was doing in the *Meditations*: testing and examining himself through the medium of writing. If Marcus read this passage it is not difficult to imagine him taking inspiration from it for his own philosophical writing. As Epictetus says, this is how a philosopher ought to write, and this is how Socrates wrote. It is certainly possible that Marcus was familiar with this text.⁴⁵ While modern scholars might doubt the veracity of Epictetus's claim about Socrates,⁴⁶ Marcus may well have taken it at face value. If he did, he may have explicitly modelled the *Meditations* on what he took to be a Socratic model of philosophical writing. We can only conjecture here, and there is no firm evidence to confirm that Marcus conceived his own *Meditations* as an example of the Socratic writing described by Epictetus. But given that Epictetus was an important influence on Marcus, both in general and with regard to his image of Socrates, it seems likely that Marcus would have known this passage. By writing to himself, Epictetus says, Socrates was able to subject himself to the sort of cross-examination he inflicted on others. This was in tune with Socrates' own view that ultimately each person must take care of themselves, for it is not something that anyone can do on their behalf.⁴⁷ It is also what we see Marcus doing in the *Meditations*, although there Platonic-Socratic cross-examination is combined with Stoic-Socratic training for virtue. There is no doubt that the content of the *Meditations* was influenced by Socrates; it is possible that the form was inspired by him too.

⁴⁵ Some editors have noted a parallel between *Diss.* 2.1.15 (i.e. slightly before this passage, in the same chapter) and *Med.* 11.23. See e.g. Haines 1916, 315, Trannoy 1925, 132, Theiler 1951, 344, Dalfen 1987, 104.

⁴⁶ Oldfather 1925–28 1.222 calls it “a very strange passage.” He notes Diog. Laert. 1.16 which says that according to some people Socrates wrote nothing, the implication being that others in antiquity claimed that he did write. Long 2002, 73 connects the remark with the writing in one's soul mentioned in Pl. *Phlb.* 39a.

⁴⁷ Thus Pl. *Ap.* 30a–b, exhorting each person to take care of their own soul.

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