

MARCUS AURELIUS AND THE TRADITION OF SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

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ABSTRACT: This chapter examines Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* and considers its status as a work of philosophy by placing it within a broader tradition of spiritual exercises in ancient philosophy. It presents the *Meditations* as a private notebook, never intended for publication, in which Marcus engaged in a series of written exercises aimed at self-examination. In particular, these exercises were aimed at assimilating and digesting key philosophical principles. Central to this process was the practice of paying close attention to principles at all times. In this context the notion of a spiritual exercise is introduced and its use by Musonius Rufus and Seneca is examined; then some specific spiritual exercises in the *Meditations* are discussed.

1. The *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius

The book that we now know in English as the *Meditations* of the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius was given that title by Meric Casaubon when he published his translation in 1634.¹ Over the centuries it has been given a variety of titles in modern European languages, including *Thoughts*, *Commentaries*, *Pensées*, *Reflexions*, and *Ricordi*.² None of these really captures the sense of the Greek title that is preserved in the manuscript tradition, *Ta eis heauton*, which might best be translated as *To Himself*.³ Although it is unlikely that this title was devised by Marcus himself,⁴ it is nevertheless apt and offers a way in to thinking about what Marcus was doing when he was writing these notes.

¹ See Casaubon (1634), who went on to publish an edition of the Greek text in 1643. In what follows I have in general relied on the text and quote from the translation in Farquharson (1944), occasionally modified. There is a more recent edition in Dalfen (1987) and the first volume of a new edition in Hadot and Luna (1998). Material in this chapter has also been incorporated, in a slightly different form, in Sellars (2021).

² For titles of translations up to 1908 see Wickham Legg (1910).

³ The title is recorded in the *editio princeps*, which was based on the now lost Palatine manuscript (on which see Ceperina (2012) 55-56). Many have assumed that the title was taken over from the manuscript, although Ceperina (2012) 47 suggests that it may have been added by Xylander. It is literally rendered by a few translators; see e.g. Rendall (1898). When translated into Latin it is usually, though not universally, translated literally as *ad se ipsum*. It is worth noting that Casaubon's full title in English was *Meditations Concerning Himself*.

⁴ The title is first mentioned by Arethas of Caesarea (c. 850-935), *Scholia in Lucianum* 207,6-7 Rabe, quoted in Farquharson (1944) 158. An earlier mention of the text by Themistius, *Orationes* 6.81c (dated 364; see Farquharson (1944) xv) does not use the title but instead calls the work *Precepts* or *Admonitions* (*parangelmata*). In the *Meditations* Marcus refers to his own writings as *hupomnemata* (little notes), at 3.14.

With the exception of Book 1, which may have been composed separately,⁵ the *Meditations* presents itself as a series of occasional reflections on a wide range of personal and philosophical topics in no particular order and with no obvious structure. There is no reason to think that the text was intended as anything other than a series of notebook reflections on topics preoccupying the author. What we have, then, is a series of private notes in which Marcus is in dialogue with himself.⁶

With a private text like this it can be difficult to know for sure what the author was trying to do. Helpfully Marcus gives us his own account of what he was doing.⁷ Some people look for retreats from the pressures of everyday life by withdrawing to the countryside but as a philosopher Marcus can simply retreat into himself (*eis heauton anachôrein*). He writes “Continually, therefore, grant yourself this retreat and repair yourself (*ananeou seauton*)”. This is not a permanent retreat but simply a brief period of rest and reflection before returning to the business of everyday life. What is the purpose of this retreat? It is to reflect on “brief and fundamental truths” (*brachea kai stoicheiôdê*) already within the mind in order to “wash away all distress” (*to pasan lupên apoklusai*) and to attain “perfect ease” (*eumareia*), which he identifies with “good behavior” (*eukosmia*). He then gives us a couple of examples of what he has in mind, such as reminding himself that he is by nature a social animal in order to keep in check any anger he might feel towards people who behave poorly. He goes on to suggest that there are two fundamental ideas that must be kept ‘ready to hand’ (*procheiros*): 1) that mental disturbances are the product not of things but of our judgements (*hupolêpsis*), and 2) nothing is stable and everything passes, subject to universal flux (*metabolais*). He then summarizes these two principles as concisely as possible, presumably in order to aid memorization: *ho kosmos alloiôsis, ho bios hupolêpsis*, which we might translate expansively as “the cosmos is in continual change; the concerns of human life are the product of opinion”.⁸ When Marcus was writing the *Meditations* he was engaged in a practice of reminding himself of these and other central philosophical principles, in

⁵ On the distinctive character of Book 1 see Rutherford (1989) 48-125, Hadot and Luna (1998), xli-clxxxiii, Gill (2013) lxxv-lxxxiv.

⁶ On the *Meditations* and self-dialogue see Ackeren (2011) 1: 206-287. For a wider discussion of the concept of self in Roman Stoicism, see Reydams-Schils (2005).

⁷ See M. Ant. 4.3. All passages in the remainder of this paragraph come from here. For commentary see Farquharson (1944) 309-11; Gill (2013) 120-22. Brunt (1974) 3 says of this passage “Here surely is the key to the *Meditations*”.

⁸ M. Ant. 4.3.4. As an aside from our central concern here, it is worth noting that these two fundamental principles that Marcus thinks he ought to keep ready to hand are not ethical principles relating to conduct. Instead one is logical (conceived broadly), the other physical. Marcus *is* interested in logic and physics – not logical and physical theory, but rather living in accord with a series of logical and physical claims central to Stoicism. In 4.3 as a whole he shows us how reflecting on doctrines in Stoic epistemology and physics might contribute to the cultivation of a mind at complete ease and in good order.

order (as he tells us) to overcome distress (*lupê*) and to cultivate a state of complete ease (*eumareia*).⁹

In his monograph on Marcus Aurelius entitled *The Inner Citadel* Pierre Hadot characterized this sort of therapeutic self-dialogue as a spiritual exercise.¹⁰ Hadot borrowed the phrase ‘spiritual exercise’ from Ignatius of Loyola but both the phrase and the sorts of practices it refers to have ancient precedent.¹¹ In the next section I shall examine the tradition of spiritual exercises in ancient thought before Marcus, beginning with an ancient discussion of the idea. Then in the section after I shall return to the *Meditations* and consider some of Marcus’s own spiritual exercises in more detail.

2. Spiritual Exercises Before Marcus

Marcus is explicit about his debt to his Stoic predecessor Epictetus, whose *Discourses* (recorded for us by Arrian) he tells us he read.¹² Epictetus was himself influenced by another Stoic, Musonius Rufus, whose lectures he attended at Rome. Notes from those lectures were recorded by Musonius’s student Lucius and the notes from one of those lectures have come down to us under the title *On Exercise* (*Peri askêseôs*).¹³

Musonius’s interest in exercise (*askêsis*) stems from his conviction that philosophy is not merely a theoretical discourse but, fundamentally, an activity aimed at transforming one’s life. The study of virtue, he suggests, ought to be conceived as something akin to the study of medicine or music, namely something we study in order to gain a practical skill.¹⁴ Like a student of medicine or music, “a man who wishes to become good not only must be thoroughly familiar with the precepts which are conducive to virtue but must also be earnest and zealous in applying these principles”.¹⁵ This is where exercise comes in: first one studies the principles or precepts

⁹ Distress (*lupê*) is one of the four principal types of emotion (*pathê*) the Stoics sought to avoid. It is, on their account, a belief (or the product of a belief) in a present evil. See e.g. Diogenes Laertius 7.110-11, Cicero, *Tusc.* 3.24-25 (*SVF* 3.385), 4.14 (*SVF* 3.393) (where it is rendered into Latin as *aegritudo*), with discussion in Sorabji (2000) 29-32.

¹⁰ See Hadot (1992). Hadot first used the phrase ‘spiritual exercise’ in relation to Marcus Aurelius in Hadot (1972).

¹¹ See Hadot (1977), citing Rabbow (1954), with discussion in Sellars (2009) 110-18. Note also Pavie (2012) 19-24.

¹² M. Ant. 1.7.

¹³ The text is preserved in Stobaeus 3.29.78 (3,648-51 WH) and excerpted in Hense (1905) 22-27. The title may well have been added by Stobaeus. It is translated in Lutz (1947) 53-57, from which the translations here are taken. For discussion of this passage see Geytenbeek (1963) 40-50.

¹⁴ See Muson. 6 (Hense (1905) 22,7-9).

¹⁵ Muson. 6 (Hense (1905) 23,1-3).

(*mathêmata*); then one undertakes a period of training or exercise (*askêsis*).¹⁶ Musonius goes on to claim that this period of exercise is more important for the student of philosophy than it is for the student of any other art or craft, insofar as philosophy is the most difficult discipline to master.¹⁷ By philosophy he means the task of becoming a good, virtuous person.

What form should this exercise take? Musonius notes that because human beings are comprised of both body and soul it will be necessary to undertake exercises appropriate to both. It is at this point that Musonius introduces the idea of what he calls *askêsis tês psuchês*, which we might translate as ‘exercise of the soul’, ‘mental training’, or, indeed, ‘spiritual exercise’. We might expect this to be contrasted with a fairly straightforward notion of physical exercise but instead Musonius proposes a composite form of training: “there are two kinds of training, one which is appropriate for the soul alone, and the other which is common to both soul and body”.¹⁸ This second type of training works on both the body and the soul at once and includes things like avoiding physical pleasures, testing oneself in extremes of cold and heat, training to cope with thirst and hunger, and practicing endurance in the face of suffering. These sorts of practices benefit the body and soul at once. But what of purely spiritual exercises? These work on the soul alone and, although Musonius thinks both types of exercise are essential for anyone who aspires to become a good human being, these spiritual exercises are, he suggests, fundamental to philosophy. Musonius gives us an extended definition of what these spiritual exercises involve:

Training which is peculiar to the soul consists first of all in seeing that the proofs pertaining to apparent goods as not being real goods are always ready at hand and likewise those pertaining to apparent evils as not being real evils, and in learning to recognize the things which are truly good and in becoming accustomed to distinguish them from those that are not truly good. In the next place it consists of practice in not avoiding any of the things which only seem evil, and in not pursuing any of the things which only seem good; in shunning by every means those which are truly evil and in pursuing by every means those which are truly good.¹⁹

¹⁶ Muson. 6 (Hense (1905) 23,14-16). On this two-stage conception of philosophical education in Stoicism see Sellars (2009).

¹⁷ See Muson. 6 (Hense (1905) 23,17-24,1). He explains why this is the case: “men who enter the other professions have not had their souls corrupted beforehand [...] but the ones who start out to study philosophy have been born and reared in an environment filled with corruption and evil, and therefore turn to virtue in such a state that they need a longer and more thorough training”.

¹⁸ Muson. 6 (Hense (1905) 25,4-6).

¹⁹ Muson. 6 (Hense (1905) 25,14-26,5).

The central task of spiritual exercises, then, is to keep philosophical principles (in this case, Stoic principles regarding what is and is not good) ‘ready to hand’ (*procheiros*).²⁰ In so doing one will be better placed to become accustomed (*ethizesthai*) to acting in accordance with those principles. It will also involve the practice (*meletê*) of actions that embody those principles. In short, spiritual exercises offer the training necessary to transform oneself according to a set of philosophical ideas so that one consistently lives according to those ideas.

Musonius does not mention any sources for his account, although we might note that the distinction between mental and physical/mental exercises had been made well before by Diogenes of Sinope, who was eulogized at length by Musonius’s pupil Epictetus.²¹ We shall come back to this Cynic ancestry later. It is striking, though, that Musonius makes no mention of his near contemporary in Rome, Seneca. Yet Seneca also engaged in spiritual exercises and he tells us that this was a practice he learned from someone called Sextius:

All our senses must be toughened: they have a natural endurance, once the mind has ceased to corrupt them; and the mind must be called to account every day. This was Sextius’s practice: when the day was spent and he had retired to his night’s rest, he asked his mind, ‘Which of your ills did you heal today? Which vice did you resist? In what aspect are you better? Your anger will cease and become more controllable if it knows that every day it must come before a judge. [...] I exercise this jurisdiction daily and plead my case before myself. When the light has been removed and my wife has fallen silent, aware of this habit that’s now mine, I examine my entire day and go back over what I’ve done and said, hiding nothing from myself, passing nothing by.’²²

This is an example of keeping one’s guiding precepts ‘ready to hand’ and it also prefigures the practice of self-dialogue that Marcus engaged in when writing the *Meditations*. The Sextius mentioned by Seneca is Quintus Sextius, founder of a philosophical school in Rome where two of Seneca’s own teachers, Fabianus and Sotion, had studied.²³ The practice of daily self-examination that Seneca recounts and attributes to Sextius appears to have been Pythagorean in origin and it is described in the Pythagorean *Golden Verses* (*Carmen Aureum*):

Do not welcome sleep upon your soft eyes

²⁰ The topic of keeping principles *procheiros* recurs throughout the works of Musonius’s pupil Epictetus (see e.g. the titles of *Diss.* 1.27 and 1.30) and is echoed in the title of Epictetus’s *Encheiridion* compiled by Arrian (a connection noted by Simplicius, in *Ench.* Praef. 18-20 Hadot).

²¹ See Diogenes Laertius 6.70, with Goulet-Cazé (1986) 195-222. Diogenes draws a distinction between mental and physical exercises but goes on to suggest, like Musonius, that physical exercises also benefit the soul. For Epictetus on Cynicism see *Diss.* 3.22, which is examined in Billerbeck (1978).

²² Seneca, *De Ira* 3.36.1-3 (translated in Kaster and Nussbaum (2010)).

²³ On the school of Sextius see Lana (1992); on Seneca’s teachers see Sellars (2014) 99-102.

before you have reviewed each of the day's deeds three times:
 'Where have I transgressed? What have I accomplished? What duty have I neglected?'
 Beginning from the first one go through them in detail, and then,
 If you have brought about worthless things, reprimand yourself, but if you have achieved good
 things, be glad.²⁴

As well as recommending this practice of evening self-examination, the *Golden Verses* also describe a series of mental and physical/mental exercises of the sort outlined by Musonius, exhorting the reader to become accustomed (*ethizesthai*) to acting in accordance with a series of moral precepts.²⁵

A number of scholars have suggested that the *Golden Verses* is a relatively late text, perhaps dating from the Imperial Period.²⁶ However, as Johan Thom has pointed out, there is evidence to suggest that the text is earlier than that and that it was known to early Stoics such as Cleanthes and Chrysippus, both of whom draw on it.²⁷ If the early Stoics did know this relatively short text then no doubt they would have been familiar with its recommendation of this spiritual exercise.

As well as appealing to these Pythagorean practices, Seneca also comments with approval on Cynic exercises. According to Seneca, Demetrius the Cynic held that it was far better to have just a few philosophical doctrines (*praecepta sapientiae*) ready to use than many of no practical purpose and so, like a wrestler, one ought to be carefully trained (*diligenter exercuit*) in just a handful of essential skills.²⁸ The beginning philosopher, says Demetrius, must make those few, essential doctrines "a part of himself, and by practicing them daily (*cotidiana meditatione*) get to the point that healthy thoughts come of their own accord".²⁹

Seneca was of course by no means alone among Stoics in turning to Cynic predecessors for inspiration. The influence of Cynicism on the early Stoa went well beyond Zeno's supposedly youthful *Republic*,³⁰ and as we have already noted Diogenes of Sinope is reported to have drawn a distinction between mental and physical/mental

²⁴ *Carm. Aur.* 40-44 (translation from Thom (1995) 97). As Thom notes ((1995) 37), these lines are quoted or alluded to by a wide range of ancient philosophical authors, including Cicero (citing Cato the Elder as his source), Seneca, Plutarch, Epictetus, Galen, Porphyry, and Diogenes Laertius.

²⁵ See e.g. *Carm. Aur.* 9, 14, 35.

²⁶ Thom (1995) suggests that Nauck's proposal of the 4th century AD is the *opinio communis*.

²⁷ See Thom (2001), elaborating on points first made in Thom (1995). For Chrysippus compare Aulus Gellius 7.2.12 (*SVF* 2.1000) with *Carm. Aur.* 54, and for Cleanthes compare *Hymn to Zeus* 23-25 (*SVF* 1.537) with *Carm. Aur.* 55-56.

²⁸ See Seneca, *Ben.* 7.1.3-4.

²⁹ Seneca, *Ben.* 7.2.1 (trans. Griffin and Inwood (2011)). Note also Seneca, *Ep.* 16.1.

³⁰ See Goulet-Cazé (2003) for discussion of Cynic themes in the early Stoa. Later Stoics, embarrassed by the seemingly Cynic doctrines of Zeno's *Republic*, tried to present it as a work of Zeno's youth, written under the influence of his teacher Crates but later disowned. But, as Goulet-Cazé shows, Cynic ideas permeated the early Stoa more widely than that.

exercises prefiguring the account in Musonius Rufus. Diogenes Laertius writes of Diogenes of Sinope that:

He used to affirm that training was of two kinds, mental and bodily: the latter being that whereby, with constant exercise, perceptions are formed such as secure freedom of movement for virtuous deeds; and the one half of this training is incomplete without the other, good health and strength being just as much included among the essential things, whether for body or soul. And he would adduce indisputable evidence to show how easily from gymnastic training we arrive at virtue. For in the manual crafts and other arts it can be seen that the craftsmen develop extraordinary manual skill through practice. Again, take the case of flute-players and of athletes: what surpassing skill they acquire by their own incessant toil; and, if they had transferred their efforts to the training of the mind, how certainly their labors would not have been unprofitable or ineffective.³¹

The resonances with the account of exercises in Musonius Rufus are clear. Both draw a distinction between mental and physical exercises, insisting that they are equally essential, but both also acknowledge the mental benefits that come with various forms of physical training.

We can see connections, then, between later Roman Stoic accounts of spiritual exercises by Musonius and Seneca on the one hand, and earlier Pythagorean and Cynic traditions of mental training on the other. Although it is difficult to be sure, given the fragmentary nature of the evidence, the presence of both Pythagorean and Cynic influences on the early Stoics makes it not unreasonable to suppose that they too may have been concerned with spiritual exercises as an important part of philosophical education.³² We do know that some early Stoics wrote books devoted to the topic of *askêsis*, notably Herillus and Dionysius.³³ If this is right, then the concern with spiritual exercises that we find in Roman Stoics such as Seneca, Musonius Rufus, and Marcus Aurelius was not a late innovation but rather a theme running through Stoicism from the outset.

3. Spiritual Exercises in the *Meditations*

While we find descriptions of spiritual exercises in a number of ancient texts, the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius stands out as a text that is itself an extended spiritual exercise. What we find is Marcus engaging in the sort of self-dialogue proposed in the

³¹ Diogenes Laertius 6.70 (trans. Hicks (1925)). This passage is discussed in detail in Goulet-Cazé (1986) 195-222.

³² See in particular the previously unpublished essay ‘Chrysippus on Practical Morality’ in Brunt (2013) 10-27. Brunt suggests that Chrysippus may have shared more in common with Epictetus than is usually supposed, and that “by systematically omitting homiletic material von Arnim induces a false conception of old Stoic morality” (11).

³³ See Diogenes Laertius 7.166-67.

Golden Verses and taken up by Sextius and Seneca. Rather than merely mentally rehearsing the difficulties of everyday life, Marcus's mode of self-dialogue involves writing his thought processes down. It may well be that others produced these sorts of written exercises as well, but the *Meditations* is unique as the only example of such writing to come down to us. In this sense the *Meditations* taken as a whole is an example of a series of written spiritual exercises.³⁴ There are various features of the text that support this, such as the repetition of phrases like 'always remember',³⁵ and it also helps to explain the lack of structure and the repetition of topics. Indeed, the repetitive character of the text, once judged a stylistic weakness, can now be seen as an essential feature of this unique work.³⁶

As well as being able to consider the *Meditations* as a whole as a form of spiritual exercise, it is also possible to pick out a number of specific exercises in the text. Putting aside Book 1, the *Meditations* opens proper with the first chapter of Book 2, which begins: "Say to yourself in the early morning: I shall meet today inquisitive, ungrateful, violent, treacherous, envious, uncharitable men".³⁷ This mental rehearsal of potentially unpleasant events to come is an example of *praemeditatio futurorum malorum*, a common theme in Hellenistic philosophy and discussed at length by Cicero, who reports that Chrysippus had made use of this technique.³⁸ Cicero notes that Chrysippus held the view that "what is unforeseen strikes us with greater force" than what we have already rehearsed in our minds.³⁹ Although, as Cicero makes plain, the technique was not original to the Stoics, it was an established Stoic practice long before Marcus took it up in the *Meditations*.⁴⁰

In Marcus's version here, he responds to his opening rehearsal of the difficulties he might expect to encounter in the coming day by reminding himself of a number of key Stoic doctrines that ought to inform his response. He opens with the thought that the behavior of the unpleasant people he might encounter is ultimately the product of their ignorance (*agnoia*), and so not deliberate on their part. Marcus himself, however, is not ignorant of how he ought to behave so he has no justification to respond in kind. On the

³⁴ For further elaboration of these claims see Sellars (2012).

³⁵ Brunt (1974) 3 (also reprinted in Brunt (2013) 365) notes that phrases such as 'always remember' (*memnêso aei*) are repeated some forty times; see the Index Verborum in Schenkl (1913) s.v. *memnêsthai*, *memnêso* to which Brunt refers, and now Rigo (2010) 129 who lists 46 instances s.v. *mimnêskô*.

³⁶ See further Giavatto (2012) 339-42.

³⁷ M. Ant. 2.1. Other examples of morning exercises are described at M. Ant. 5.1 and 10.13.

³⁸ For the phrase *praemeditatio futurorum malorum* see Cicero, *Tusc.* 3.29. For the mention of Chrysippus see *Tusc.* 3.52 (*SVF* 3.417). For further discussion see Newman (1989) 1477-78. On its prehistory see Hadot (1969) 60-62, referring to Pythagorean practices described in Iamblichus *Vit. Pyth.* 196 (DK 58D6).

³⁹ Cicero, *Tusc.* 3.52 (*SVF* 3.417).

⁴⁰ There are a number of previous Stoic instances, such as Seneca *Ep.* 78.29, 91.3-4, *Vit. Beat.* 26.1. See further Newman (1989), who contrasts Stoic *meditatio* with earlier versions.

contrary, he knows that he and these others share the same nature and that all share in a divine nature, and so, no matter how they behave, he ought to treat them as kinsmen (*sungenês*). Using an analogy with parts of a single organism, Marcus suggests that to work against other people is to act contrary to Nature (*para phusin*), and he concludes by saying that to respond to the negative emotions of others with negative emotions of one's own would also be against Nature.

As we can see, Marcus is implicitly drawing on a range of Stoic ideas in a way that highlights the interconnectedness of the Stoic system. He appeals to i) central ideas in Stoic physics, to give him the resources ii) to avoid jumping to rash judgements that might generate negative emotions, which will in turn mean that he can iii) act towards those whom he meets in the ethically appropriate way. In particular he presupposes a number of Stoic claims: that only virtue is good, that emotions are the product of errors in judgement, and that all humans are part of a single, rational community. By pre-rehearsing encounters with the worst sorts of people he might meet and reminding himself of both the appropriate way to behave in response and the philosophical principles that underpin that response, Marcus is training himself not to rush into making negative judgements about unpleasant people that would, in turn, generate negative emotions, lead to inappropriate behavior, and, ultimately, compromise the integrity of his character and the rationality of his soul. This early morning reflection on the day ahead complements the evening review of the day described by Seneca and both offer very practical examples of philosophical training in action.

Another specific exercise we find in the *Meditations* is often called 'the view from above'.⁴¹ There are a number of examples throughout the text,⁴² of which here is just one representative example:

Watch and see the courses of the stars as if you ran with them, and continually dwell in mind upon the changes of the elements into one another; for these imaginations wash away the foulness of life on the ground. Moreover, when discoursing about mankind, look upon earthly things below as if from some place above them – herds, armies, farms, weddings, divorces, births, deaths, noise of law courts, lonely places, divers foreign nations, festivals, mournings, market places, a mixture of everything and an order composed of contraries.⁴³

⁴¹ See e.g. Hadot (1995) 238-50, discussing Marcus Aurelius alongside a wide range of other thinkers, and also Rutherford (1989) 155-61, focusing on parallels with earlier ancient literature. For this phrase in Marcus, see M. Ant. 9.30.

⁴² As well as 7.47-48 quoted below, see e.g. M. Ant. 3.10, 5.24, 6.36, 9.30, 9.32, 10.15, 11.1, 12.24.

⁴³ M. Ant. 7.47-48. In modern editions this passage is divided into two chapters but this dates back only to Gataker (1652). In the earlier edition by Casaubon (1643) they are printed as a single chapter, '7.27'. There are no chapter divisions in the Greek text printed in Xylander (1559), although his Latin translation is divided into unnumbered paragraphs, where he prints 7.47-49 as a single paragraph. The earliest edition containing chapter divisions I have seen is the reprint of Xylander's text and translation published in Lyon in 1626 (full details in Wickham Legg (1910) 35-36).

This passage and others like it appear to be doing a number of things at once. First there is a meditation on universal flux and the impermanence of all things, designed to offer consolation for loss of various kinds and ultimately consolation for death. Second there is an attempt to see Nature as a whole and to grasp it as a single inter-connected system. Third there is an effort to put into a much wider context everyday human cares and concerns in order to minimize their significance.⁴⁴ This goes hand in hand with offering a series of dispassionate, physical descriptions of things that are often taken to be very important in everyday human life, again in order to downplay their significance. Thus, for example, countries, over which wars are fought, are merely lumps of mud around a pond.⁴⁵ This single mental exercise of viewing things from above does, then, a number of things at once, implicitly appealing to a range of claims from Stoic physics along the way. The frequency with which Marcus repeats or alludes to this vision from above in the *Meditations* highlights the significance he attached to it. In one passage he includes it among three things that he must keep ‘ready to hand’ (*procheiros*), confirming its central place in his repertoire of spiritual exercises.⁴⁶

Marcus’s reflections on ‘the view from above’ also form an example of the way in which many of his spiritual exercises ultimately depend on doctrines in physics and, although his aim is entirely practical, it is potentially misleading to characterize his exercises as merely ‘practical ethics,’ if that is taken to mean the practical application of ethical principles. In the *Meditations* it is the practical application of epistemological and physical doctrines that recurs again and again.⁴⁷ In one particularly striking passage Marcus reflects on the contrast between seeing objects from a purely physical perspective and seeing them overlaid with cultural significance:

Surely it is an excellent plan, when you are seated before delicacies and choice foods, to impress upon your imagination that this is the dead body of a fish, that the dead body of a bird or a pig; and again, that the Falernian wine is grape juice and that robe of purple a lamb’s fleece dipped in a shell-fish’s blood [...]. Surely these are excellent imaginations (*phantasiai*), going to the heart of actual facts (*pragmata*) and penetrating them so as to see the kind of things they really are.⁴⁸

Elsewhere Marcus offers a description of this technique of describing objects from a physical perspective, a technique clearly aimed at undermining excessive attributions of value to such things:

⁴⁴ In a number of passages (e.g. M. Ant. 3.10, 5.24, 6.36, 9.30, 9.32), human life is put into a wider temporal as well as spatial context.

⁴⁵ See e.g. M. Ant. 6.36.

⁴⁶ See M. Ant. 12.24.

⁴⁷ See e.g. 4.3.4 and 2.1 discussed above.

⁴⁸ M. Ant. 6.13.

Always make a figure or outline of the imagined object as it occurs, in order to see distinctly what it is in its essence (*kat' ousian*), naked, as a whole and parts; and say to yourself its individual name and the names of the things of which it was compounded and into which it will be broken up. For nothing is so able to create greatness of mind as the power methodically and truthfully to test each thing that meets one in life, and always to look upon it so as to attend at the same time to the use which this particular thing contributes to a Universe of a certain definite kind, what value it has in reference to the Whole, and what to man [...].⁴⁹

This technique of physical description has the virtue not only of ensuring that objects are valued correctly but also of enabling one to grasp objects as they are in themselves, which is an important end in itself. Many of the spiritual exercises we find in the *Meditations*, including ‘the view from above’, employ this kind of physical perspective on the world, both for its own sake and for its therapeutic benefits.⁵⁰

4. Concluding Remarks

By way of conclusion there are two points that might be emphasized. First, for Marcus and the other Stoics discussed here – let alone all ancient philosophers – there is no suggestion that philosophy was merely a series of spiritual exercises. Musonius Rufus is quite explicit that this sort of mental training comes *after* the study of philosophical theories, upon which it is grounded. Philosophy remains an activity devoted to rational inquiry into what exists and what has value. Musonius’s point is that the study of, say, virtue ought to be not merely for the sake of being able to supply a definition of virtue but ultimately for the sake of becoming a virtuous person.⁵¹ In this he is at one with Socrates. Spiritual exercises do not challenge or replace the sort of rational inquiry usually identified with philosophy, they supplement it. In the *Meditations* Marcus refers to philosophy as an art,⁵² to which his spiritual exercises contribute along the lines that Musonius suggests. First one studies philosophical theory and only after that does one undertake the exercises necessary to digest that information and so transform one’s behavior.⁵³ As Marcus himself puts it, it is a task of dyeing one’s soul a new color,⁵⁴ something that requires the repetition of key ideas, and something that Marcus himself does throughout his own notes to himself. This is analogous to the practical training that a student of an art or craft must undergo after they have studied its basic principles.

⁴⁹ M. Ant. 3.11.

⁵⁰ For further discussion of this kind of physical description see esp. Hadot (1972), but note also Hadot (1992) 122-23, Gill (2013) xl-xliv.

⁵¹ The same point is made throughout Epictetus; see e.g. *Diss.* 2.19, 3.21.

⁵² See e.g. M. Ant. 4.2, 5.1, 6.16, 6.35, 7.68, and 11.5, with Sellars (2012) 453-54.

⁵³ The comparison with digestion can be found in Seneca (*Ep.* 2.2-4, 84.5-8) and Epictetus (*Diss.* 2.9.18, 3.21.1-4, *Ench.* 46) and is discussed in Sellars (2009) 121-22.

⁵⁴ See M. Ant. 5.16.

Thus spiritual exercises are the practical training that forms just one part of philosophy conceived as an art of living.⁵⁵

As a book of such exercises, it is important also to remember that, second, Marcus's *Meditations* is an idiosyncratic and partial book. It comprises a series of spiritual exercises about topics that were of particular importance to Marcus at the time he was writing. It does not pretend to offer a complete or comprehensive account of all the possible spiritual exercises a Stoic philosopher might deploy, much less the theoretical principles upon which those exercises are grounded. Insofar as these exercises are designed to put philosophy to work in order to overcome some of Marcus's personal problems, it inevitably focuses on a range of negative issues in his own life. These ought not to be taken as a complete account of either Marcus's outlook on life or his conception of Stoicism. Indeed, it would be a mistake for detractors or admirers to think that the *Meditations* straightforwardly presents us with Marcus's own version of Stoic philosophy. The philosophical precepts, doctrines, and arguments upon which Marcus's spiritual exercises depend remain on the whole unstated.⁵⁶ Of course it is possible to try to reconstruct Marcus's philosophical views from passing remarks, implicit assumptions, and the wider background of Stoic philosophy to which he seems clearly committed,⁵⁷ but the task of the *Meditations* is not to present us with Marcus's unique brand of Stoicism; instead it is to help the author transform himself in the light of the philosophy that, in this text, goes without saying.⁵⁸

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⁵⁵ For an extended discussion of the (primarily Stoic) conception of philosophy as an 'art of living' see Sellars (2009).

⁵⁶ A similar view is expressed in Brunt (2013) 447.

⁵⁷ For some doubts about Marcus's commitment to Stoicism see Rist (1982); for rejoinders see Gill (2007) and Sellars (2021).

⁵⁸ For a similar assessment see Roskam (2012) 94.

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