The Stoicism of Marcus Aurelius, the Philosopher King

To what extent was Marcus Aurelius a Stoic?

History

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**Introduction and Methodology**

According to the Oxford Dictionary, the word philosophy derives from the Greek word *philosophia*, which translates to “love of wisdom.” Philosophy is one of the most important practices that humans have taken up. The early philosophers from Greece were some of the most influential figures in modern Western philosophy; Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, to name a few. One of the most influential philosophical schools that sprouted from Greece was Stoicism. Stoicism was popular in the public eye until the late second century which housed the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius. Aurelius was emperor from 161 CE until his death in 180 CE (Holiday & Hanselman 136). He is regarded as the last major influential figure from the ancient Stoics. However, as will be explained later, Stoicism demands a lifestyle that is humble, honest and without superfluity; the kind of lifestyle that Roman emperors did not live. Considering that Marcus was one of these emperors, the question of “to what extent was Marcus Aurelius actually a Stoic?” arises. The aim of this essay is to answer this question through a comparison of Marcus Aurelius’s life decisions with Stoic doctrine. In terms of methodology, the essential concepts of Stoicism will be explored and used as a standard to judge Marcus Aurelius’s Stoicism.

**What is Stoicism?**

Stoicism is one of the most influential and popular schools of thought that emerged from Ancient Greece. It originated with a man named Zeno who was born on the island of Citium (Saunders). According to ancient biographies, Zeno went to Athens in his early twenties and incidentally became acquainted with the Cynic philosopher Crates (Sellars 4). Thus began his journey of philosophical education. While studying with the Cynics, Zeno adopted the idea of “living in accordance with nature” (Sellars 5). However, he did not become an orthodox Cynic. Instead, Zeno went on to study Plato’s philosophy with Polemo at Plato’s Academy (Sellars 5). Then, he is reported to have studied Megarian philosophy from Stilpo (Sellars 5). The study of logic conducted with the Megarians, the disregard for materialism learned from the Cynics and the ethics studied in Plato’s Academy would heavily influence the new school of philosophy he began teaching. After this journey, Zeno began teaching his own thoughts on the colonnades outside the Athenian Agora, in a place called the “Stoa Poikile” (Sellars 5). The students of Zeno were thus named, the Stoics, in reference to the Stoa at which they gathered.

Another important Stoic to consider is Chrysippus. He was the third leader of the school (Holiday & Hanselman 39) and is credited with systematizing the Stoic ideas of his predecessors and adding some of his own original material in order to create what “would become the basis for a Stoic orthodoxy” (Sellars 8).

The essential idea of Stoicism is that happiness cannot be obtained from the things which most people associate with happiness, such as wealth, health, or success. Accordingly, these are all temporary circumstances which only induce a psychological condition that we call happiness. The sole method of living a good life is to have virtue by being courageous, just, and temperate (“Stoicism”). The Stoics believed that human emotions are simply “the product of mistaken judgements” and can be eliminated through “cognitive psychotherapy” (Sellars 3).

One thing that Chrysippus teaches students of Stoicism is the analogy that philosophy is comparable to medicine. A detailed example of this idea is given in the third volume of Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations*. Cicero states that “there are more harmful disorders of the soul than of the body” and that “philosophy is certainly the medicine of the soul” (Cicero 139-140). Thus, according to Chrysippus, the philosopher is a physician of the soul.

However, unlike the physicians of the body, Stoics are more concerned with curing themselves of diseases rather than attempting to cure others of their diseases. In other words, the Stoics regarded philosophy as a practice that can only be done by a person on themself. Epictetus, a famous Stoic from Rome, has his teachings on this matter written in the book *Dissertationes (Discourses)*. When a man asks Epictetus how he can make his brother stop being angry with him, Epictetus replies, “Philosophy does not propose to secure for a man any external thing” (Epictetus 44). He makes the comparison that just as a carpenter’s material is wood, a philosopher’s material is his or her own life (Epictetus 44). Thus, according to the Stoics, the practice of philosophy is one that is meant to be used on one’s own soul.

This points out the extremely practical nature of Stoic philosophy. Epictetus had something to say about that as well. He emphasized to his students that the ability to recite teachings of Stoics and other doctrines is not sufficient for making a person Stoic. Rather, one must be able to manifest those same teachings and doctrines in each of the many actions they do throughout the day as well. Epictetus would tell his students, “the carpenter does not come and say, ‘Hear me talk about the carpenter’s art’; but having undertaken to build a house, he makes it, and proves that he knows [carpentry]” (Epictetus 244). This is a great analogy comparing a carpenter to a student of Stoicism and carpentry to the philosophy of Stoicism itself. It shows how Epictetus would rather have his students put his teachings into practice rather than simply memorize them. Interestingly, Epictetus is not the only Stoic philosopher to have expressed this sentiment.

Lucius Annaeus Seneca, also known as Seneca the Younger, voiced a similar opinion concerning the practice of philosophy in his collection, *Epistulae*, or *Letters* (Dudley). Specifically, in *Epistle XVI*, Seneca asks the receiver of his letter to consider whether she has made a progress in philosophy, or in life itself; in knowledge, or in practice (Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales* 105). He states that “philosophy is no trick to catch the public.” This asserts the notion that one can only claim to be virtuous when practicing philosophy for self-improvement and not for vane public display. Seneca, too, valued a philosopher who actually practiced their learned philosophy.

Concurrent to this view, Epictetus also believed that writing, reading, and analyzing philosophical discourse was not very important. To his students he is reported to have said, “So when you say: ‘Take the treatise on the active powers, and see how I have studied it.’ I reply, Slave, I am not inquiring about this, but how you exercise pursuit and avoidance” (Epictetus 13). This standard is one that must be applied when examining the extent to which a person is a true Stoic and will be used later in the assessment of Marcus Aurelius’s philosophy.

One common misconception about Stoicism is that Stoics must not show any emotions. However, the early Stoics made a distinction between emotions that are within our control and those that are natural and involuntary. Aulus Gellius takes an excerpt from the lost fifth installment of Epictetus’ *Discourses* which explains this idea. Epictetus states that the first perception the mind makes about certain situations and objects is involuntary, but the expressions of assent by which these perceptions are finalized are voluntary (Sellars 66). An example of this occurred on a journey that Gellius was taking across the sea. He was traveling on a ship and one of his companions was a well-known Stoic philosopher. When a violent storm placed them in danger, everyone on board was afraid, including the philosopher. However, the Stoic did not go on lamenting his situation like the others. Later, when Gellius asked the reason for his fear, the philosopher showed the previous passage from Epictetus (Gellius). The first perceptions that the Stoic had about the storm forced themselves onto his mind and caused him to exhibit fear for a moment. However, he was able to control them within a short period of time. Thus allowing him to stop himself from lamenting his situation as his shipmates were doing. In general terms, it is only natural to show emotion when encountering a surprising, unexpected, or strange situation. Virtue can be retained as long as one realizes that those emotions are products of faulty judgement and puts them out of their mind.

The Stoics also viewed virtue as a dichotomy - one is either wise or a fool, free or a slave, virtuous or held by vices. According to Chrysippus, “he who is not above a cubit under the superficies of the sea is no less drowned than he who is five hundred fathom deep” (Plutarch). This metaphor acts to point out that those who are *nearly* virtuous are still held by vices the same way as those who are nowhere near virtue. Thus the Stoic philosopher must work towards being wholly and absolutely virtuous, completely free from vice. Only then can they become a Stoic sage.

**The Stoic Sage**

While philosophy is analogous to medicine, as seen before, it can also be considered the art of living. In the same way that a sculptor transforms a block of marble into a desired shape, the philosopher’s goal, or at least the Stoic’s goal, is to transform their soul into a desired shape, one that is immune to external influences. This shape has been identified as the shape of the Stoic sage’s soul. The sage is a central figure in Stoicism. This individual is described to be someone “who is infallible, who is more powerful than everyone else, richer, stronger, free, happier and the only person truly deserving the title ‘king'” (Sellars 36). The sage is so “perfectly rational, emotionless” and “indifferent to his or her circumstances” that they would be “happy even when being tortured” (Sellars 3). Only Stoic sages would not be drowning, according to Chrysippus’s analogy from earlier.

The standard for the perfect Stoic then seems quite high. The critics of Stoicism thought so too. The question of whether a Stoic sage has ever existed or will ever exist has been articulated many times (Sellars 38). If the Stoic cannot indicate at least one example of a sage, then the opposing philosophers can easily point out the futility in practicing a philosophy that has an impossible end-goal. In order to avoid this, some individuals were suggested to be exemplars of sages. The most famous figure from Rome was Marcus Cato, also known as Cato the Younger (Sellars 39). Seneca wrote a small book in defense of the existence of the sage entitled *De Constantia Sapientis*, or *On the Constancy of the Sage*. In this book, Seneca states that Cato might even surpass the model of the Stoic sage (Seneca *On the Firmness of the Wise Man* 10).

In order to be a sage, one must be able to follow the Stoic idea of being virtuous by attaining courage, wisdom, justice and moderation. It also means being able to cure one’s own soul of diseases; or emotions. Furthermore, according to Epictetus, one must be happy regardless of the circumstances of his or her life. This includes sickness, danger, exile, disgrace or even imminent death (Epictetus 161). In addition to this, the Stoic sage would practice the philosophy which he or she preaches; instead of spending excess amounts of time writing about it, they would simply do it.

**Marcus Aurelius Antoninus**

Marcus was born on April 26, 121 with the name Marcus Catilius Severus Annius Verus. He would later become Marcus Aurelius Antoninus due to a long term adoption plan put in place by the emperor Hadrian. His plan’s purpose was to make sure he had a lineage after he passed away. Marcus lost his father when he was three years old, so he was raised by his grandfather and mother until Antoninus Pius, Hadrian’s adopted son, adopted Marcus, placing him in line for the throne (Holiday & Hanselman 132). One of the reasons for which Hadrian asked Antoninus to adopt Marcus was his honesty. Hadrian nicknamed him Verissimus, or, the truest one - a play on his name Verus (Magie 141). Another reason was Marcus’s predilection with philosophy, which he began to display at the early age of ten or eleven by dressing humbly and by living with restrained habits. Instead of donning the purple robes of the emperor, Marcus decided to wear ordinary clothes from his youth (Magie 137). Evidently, Marcus showed the traits of a Stoic from a young age.

He continued to show these traits throughout his life. For example, when he finally took the office of emperor in 161 AD, he had a *horror imperii*, a fear of the absolute power that his duty would grant him (Birley 116). In accordance with Stoic doctrine, he was hesitant to accept this power because of the substantial risk of corruption that it brought. So many emperors before him had succumbed to this vice. However, Marcus decided to share this power with his step-brother, Lucius Commodus, thinking that perhaps this would alleviate those risks and make his job easier (Magie 149-151).

Later on, Marcus started writing. He wrote a collection of texts that has become known as the *Meditations*. This may seem in contradiction with the standard mentioned earlier, that a Stoic sage would practice his philosophy rather than writing treatises on it. However, the *Meditations* were not essays or treatises. They were actually his own intimate thoughts which he wrote down as reminders to himself to remain humble and virtuous. In fact, the name “Meditations” has appeared out of English convention, while the Greek title is translated as “To Himself” (Sellars 17). Therefore, the fact that he wrote such a text does not lower the extent of his Stoicism.

In the *Meditations*, Marcus incessantly writes in accordance with Stoic doctrine. Possibly the most stark example of this is when he writes, “be content with little, be kind, be free; avoid all superfluity, all vain prattling; be magnanimous” (Aurelius 5.5). This shows how Marcus understood that external, worldly, material things do not provide happiness. Marcus acknowledges that righteousness, truth, temperance, and fortitude are the true ingredients of a good life. (Aurelius 3.7) He also acknowledges the analogy that Chrysippus made between medicine and philosophy. He tells himself that he has his philosophical dogmata just as physicians always have their instruments ready to cure sicknesses. (Aurelius 3.14) Marcus also tells himself to not spend his time “in thoughts and fancies concerning other men.” (Aurelius 3.4) This is in direct agreement with Epictetus’s previously discussed statement that philosophy is something for one to practice on themselves. Marcus also understood the idea that putting one’s philosophy into practice was the goal of studying it rather than simply talking about it. He writes, “no man can admire thee for thy sharp acute language.” (Aurelius 5.5) There are countless other occasions in the *Meditations* where Marcus shows that he is well-versed in Stoic philosophy.

Nonetheless, there is one possible exception to Marcus’s seemingly perfect record as a Stoic. His brother Lucius Verus died in 169 AD and it is rumoured that Marcus caused his death, directly or indirectly. For example, one account states that he poisoned some food and gave it to Verus to eat. Another states that Marcus employed the physician Posiddipus who made Verus bleed excessively. According to another story, his wife Faustina killed Lucius Verus (Magie 171). However, considering Marcus’ previous actions and his knowledge of philosophy and virtue, in addition to the fact that Marcus deified Verus after his death, bestowing great honour upon him, it seems that these were nothing but rumours.

In the first couple of years of their reign, Marcus and his brother were faced with a natural disaster; the Tiber flooded over its banks. Historians are not sure exactly which year this occurred in but one thing is certain: this was the most severe flood of their time. It “ruined many houses…, drowned a great number of animals, and caused a most severe famine” (Magie 153). To alleviate the damages, Marcus and Verus gave their personal attention. The fact that they did not pawn this work off onto lower-ranking officers shows that they were humble rulers.

Marcus’s modesty can also be seen in his hesitancy to accept honorary titles. The first title he refused was *Armeniacus*. This was granted to both emperors when a military campaign in Armenia, led by Statius Priscus, was successful (Magie 155). He did accept it later. Then, when the Parthian war had concluded, the emperors were offered the title *Parthicus*. While Marcus refused this at first, he accepted it afterwards (Magie 155). When Verus was in Syria, overseeing a military campaign, Marcus stayed in Rome to watch over the capital and make sure it did not fall into ruin. In Verus’s absence, Marcus was offered the title “Father of his Country,” which he deferred until his brother’s return when both emperors assumed this title (Magie 155). This pattern of reluctance to accept superfluous titles clearly demonstrates Marcus’s Stoicism.

Another example of Marcus’s Stoicism is his lack of regard for materialistic possessions. For example, when the treasury had been drained for war efforts in 169, Marcus held a public sale of the imperial furniture. He also sold large quantities of jewels that were found around the royal palaces. This sale lasted for two months and refilled the treasury (Magie 175). The alternative to this course of action would have been to impose heavy taxes on the provinces of the empire, which would have been unjust. In fact, with all the money he gathered from these sales, he was able to amass a large army to overwhelm the Marcomanni (Rome was at war with them at this time) which left the Romans with a lot of plunder. These bounties were restored to the provinces (Magie 185). His willingness to sell the royal artifacts and the fact that he gave the Marcomanni loot to the provinces further exhibit the extent of Marcus’s Stoicism.

In order to be virtuous, according to Stoic doctrine, one must also show courage, something Marcus Aurelius certainly does. After being defeated, the Marcomanni allied with the Varistae, Hermunduri and Quadi, the Subeians, Sarmatians, Lacringes, Buri and many others and attacked the Roman Empire. During this “War of Many Nations,” as it is penned in the *Historia Augusta*, Marcus’s friends often advised him to abandon the war. However, the philosopher king did not back down from this challenge. He stood his ground until the wars had concluded and Rome emerged victorious (Magie 187).

Along with modesty and courage, Marcus also showed much temperance. In 175, a man named Avidius Cassius raised a rebellion in Egypt by proclaiming himself as the emperor; he spread a rumour that Marcus Aurelius had died. An expected reaction by Marcus would have been anger and thirst for revenge. However, he was not disturbed by this revolt, nor did he prescribe harsh punishments upon Cassius’s dear ones. Then, when Cassius was slain and his head was brought before Marcus, he was not pleased. He gave orders for the head to be buried (Magie 195). This reaction is very atypical of a Roman Emperor. One would expect him to dishonour the revolutionary in an act of revenge. However, Marcus restrains his emotions and is able to view the situation in a Stoic manner.

Marcus Aurelius was also forgiving, or perhaps more *indifferent* to the actions of others. For example, his brother Verus is known to have been a man of vice (Magie 171). The fact that Marcus still honoured him after his death, however, shows that he respected him nonetheless. Another example of Marcus’s indifference to vice is found in the fact that his wife was unfaithful. She had many lovers, and this was well-known, but Marcus never gave them the violent retribution one expects from a Roman emperor. Instead, he appointed them to government offices, probably so that he could keep a closer eye on them. “The city-populace … talked a great deal about this … and found fault with Antoninus for his forbearance” (Magie 203). In other words, his citizens doubted his philosophy because of his forgiveness of vice. This tolerance for vice might seem inappropriate for a Stoic philosopher. However, if one views this more as an indifference towards other peoples’ philosophy, or lack thereof, this is in line with Epictetus’s notion that philosophy is something one must exercise only for themselves.

Marcus shows restrained emotions when faced with grief as well. Before leaving to resolve the issue with Avidius Cassius, his son Verus Caesar had an operation on a tumour under his ear. Unfortunately, Verus died due to the procedure. Marcus mourned him, but only for five days (Magie 185). He did not allow his anguish to get the better of him. Being able to control one’s emotions, even when faced with the tragedy of losing a child, is a magnificent Stoic feat.

Even on his own deathbed, Marcus thought of philosophy. As he lay dying, his companions wept and grieved for him. In turn, Marcus told them not to weep for him but instead to think “about the pestilence and about death which is the common lot of us all” (Magie 203). As we can see, even as he was facing the end of his life, Marcus was still giving his friends philosophical advice. He told them not to feel sorrow or grief about his death. After all, death is just another part of nature, and living in accordance with nature is truly virtuous.

**Conclusion**

All in all, it is evident that Marcus Aurelius was an avid philosopher. Moreover, considering the actions that he took throughout all of his life as a Roman emperor, being exposed to many opportunities to commit vice, Marcus Aurelius was most certainly a Stoic sage. According to Chrysippus’ analogy comparing those in vice to people drowning, Marcus Aurelius was always being pushed into the water, but he managed to resist. He did not drown in the water. Thus, to answer the question stated previously, Marcus Aurelius was, to a great extent, a Stoic.

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