The Meditations and the Ancient Art of Living

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1. Marcus' Project

In the *Meditations* Marcus Aurelius makes a number of oblique references to the idea that he is engaged in an activity that is an art or craft. At 4.2 he tells us not to undertake any action that is not in accord with the principles of the art. By art (*technê*) it seems reasonable to assume he means philosophy, if philosophy embodies those principles according to which one ought to act, and a recent translation expansively renders *technê* here as 'the art of life' (Hammond (2006), 23). At 5.1 Marcus draws a comparison between what he must do and what practitioners of other arts do, the implication perhaps being that he too is the practitioner of an art – one devoted to becoming a complete human being. At 6.16 we find a more explicit parallel between what Marcus is doing and what other craftsman do. Just as the horse trainer takes care of horses, for instance, making them fit for their task, so too Marcus must train himself to act or refrain from acting according to the appropriate principles. Like other arts and crafts, Marcus' task has a clear practical goal, and the reference to horse trainers and to taking care of oneself remind us of the *technê* analogy drawn by Socrates in the *Apology* (esp. 25a-b). We find a similar parallel with other examples of craftsmen at 6.35. At 7.68 Marcus says that his art, the art of humankind, is the exercise of rational and social virtue, while at 11.5 he responds to the question 'what is your art?' with the reply 'to be good', adding that it is only with the aid of a theoretical understanding of both Nature and humankind that he will be able to achieve this (cf. Farquharson (1944), 860).

These passages indicate that Marcus conceived his own activity as some sort of craft-like activity with a specific set of closely inter-related goals, including making correct judgements, choosing the right actions, becoming virtuous, and fulfilling his proper function as a rational human being. We never find an explicit formal definition of philosophy as an art or craft devoted to these goals but it would perhaps be unrealistic to expect one in this sort of text. Instead what we find are a series of reminders and 'notes to self' in which Marcus tries to keep in focus the nature of the task he has at hand.

Although Marcus may not be as explicit as we should like, his Stoic predecessor Epictetus is a little more forthcoming. Epictetus was of course an important influence on Marcus: there are over a dozen quotations from Epictetus in the *Meditations* (second only to Plato) and at 1.7 Marcus thanks his tutor Rusticus for having introduced him to Epictetus and lending him a copy of the *Discourses*. It is in the *Discourses* (presented to us by Arrian as his report of what went on in Epictetus' classroom) that we see Epictetus present philosophy as an art and, in particular, as an art concerned with how to live (*Discourses* 1.15.2):

> Philosophy does not promise to secure anything external for man, otherwise it would be admitting something that lies beyond its proper subject-matter (*hulê*). For just as wood is the material (*hulê*) of the carpenter, bronze that of the statue maker, so each individual's own life is the subject-matter/material (*hulê*) of the art of living.

This notion that philosophy be conceived as an art of living (*technê peri ton bion*) sounds as if it might be a very broad notion, potentially encompassing a wide variety of ancient philosophers, but almost all of the references to an art of living in ancient sources have some connection to the Stoics. Beyond

Epictetus there are references connected to Chrysippus, Posidonius, and Arius Didymus' epitome of Stoic ethics, while the only sustained analysis of this idea in antiquity is to be found in Sextus Empiricus, as part of his polemic against Stoic ethics. The most obvious Latin equivalents (*ars vitae* and *ars vivendi*) can be found in Cicero and Seneca, again in contexts connecting the idea with the Stoics (for a full list of references see Sellars (2003), 5). The idea that philosophy be conceived as a *technê*, then, and in particular as a *technê* devoted to transforming one's *bios*, was a Stoic idea and one that Marcus the Stoic seems likely to have held.

2. Socrates and the Stoic Art of Living

The Stoic conception of philosophy as an art of living combines two ideas: first that philosophy is fundamentally concerned with how one should live, and second that it ought to be conceived in analogy with arts and crafts. Both of these ideas were inherited from Socrates.

In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates makes clear that his philosophical mission is directed towards the transformation of his life: his divine mission is to *live* as a philosopher and this means subjecting his *life* to criticism because the unexamined *life* is not worth living (Plato, *Apology* 28e, 39c, 38a). In order to complete this divine mission Socrates goes in search of those with a reputation for knowledge and, given his own practical goal, focuses his attention on practitioners of arts and crafts. This, of course, becomes a central concern throughout the early Platonic dialogues, but the most sustained analysis of arts and crafts appears in the *Gorgias*, where Socrates draws a distinction between arts that take care of the body and arts that take care of the soul (Plato, *Gorgias* 463a-466a). This analysis lays the foundations for an analogy between medicine, the art that cures the body, and philosophy, the art that cures the soul. This analogy would prove to be an important influence on the Stoics and would gain a wider currency in

the subsequent history of philosophy via Cicero's account in the *Tusculan Disputations*.

It is worth noting at this point that for a Socratic or a Stoic this art that cures the soul is effectively the same thing as an art of living. This is due to the unified, monistic conception of the soul that both Socrates and the Stoics held. On this account of the soul, there is no room for weakness of will (*akrasia*) for the soul is a single rational faculty that is never impeded by other mental entities such as desires or emotions. Consequently, transformations in the soul will automatically result in transformations in action (see Sellars (2003), 167-9).

One of the central features of philosophy conceived as an art (of living or of curing the soul) is brought out well in the analogy with medicine. This analogy is highly appropriate because medicine is an art that is built upon a complex body of theoretical knowledge and yet is primarily concerned with delivering practical outcomes. Knowledge of medicine requires not only a grasp of the theoretical principles involved but also a period of training or exercise in which those principles can be digested or assimilated into oneself. When learning an art or craft like medicine it is necessary not only to study the formal principles underpinning the art but also to embark on a lengthy apprenticeship during which one learns how to apply those principles in practical situations. This applies to all those activities that are craft-like, as opposed to purely theoretical activities where understanding the key principles alone constitutes knowledge. Thus the shoemaker (to borrow a well-loved Platonic example of a craftsman) needs not only to grasp the principles behind his trade but must also train in order to master putting those principles into practice, during what we would naturally call his apprenticeship. The education of the shoemaker, or the doctor, or any other type of craftsman, will thus require two distinguishable stages: a theoretical education in the classroom followed by a period of practical

training or apprenticeship. Mastery of any art or craft requires these two stages.

Philosophy conceived as an art will also presumably require these two stages: first a period of learning or discovering philosophical ideas and then a second stage designed to digest those ideas so that, just like in other arts and crafts, those ideas can be put into practice. In the *Gorgias* Socrates himself hints at the need for some form of training or exercise (*askêsis*) that would form this second stage (Plato, *Gorgias* 514e, 527d).

These Socratic ideas were taken up and developed by the early Stoics (but, as I have noted, not by any other school of ancient philosophers). As is often the case, however, our knowledge of the early Stoic position is fragmentary and it is only in later texts that we find these ideas discussed in any detail. For example, later Stoics such as Seneca and Epictetus took up and developed the idea that philosophy be thought of as an art of living, while the only extended critical discussion of the idea came a little later still from Sextus Empiricus, repeated in both his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (3.25) and *Against the Professors* (Book 11, also referred to as *Against the Ethicists*). However, the idea was clearly in circulation much earlier as numerous references in the works of Cicero attest. Indeed, it is in Cicero that we find an account of the way in which the Stoics took up Socrates' analogy between philosophy and medicine (*Tusculan Disputations* 3.1-21) and it has been suggested that Cicero's discussion draws directly on the works of Chrysippus. We have further, explicit, evidence for the claim that Chrysippus took up the Socratic analogy in Galen's *On the Doctrines of Hippocrates and Plato* (5.1-2), who reports that for Chrysippus philosophy is an art concerned with curing the diseased soul and that the philosopher is the physician of the soul (5.2.22-3). The idea of taking care of one's soul is of course also a central theme in the *Meditations*, because 'those who fail to attend to the motions of their own soul are necessarily unhappy' (2.8).

For the Stoics too, then, philosophy was conceived as an art analogous to the art of medicine and, like medicine and other arts and crafts, mastery of philosophy conceived as an art will involve an education in two stages. While the first stage will be devoted to understanding the theoretical principles underpinning the art, the second stage will involve a period of training or exercise devoted to the assimilation and mastery of those principles. Thus, it will not be enough merely to grasp complex philosophical ideas in the classroom; one must also engage in a period of training in order to digest those principles so that one is ready to put them into practice. The point behind this is forcefully put by Epictetus when he laments that although many of his Stoic students will be able to express eloquently the central doctrines of the Stoic Chrysippus, few will be able to display those same doctrines in their behaviour (*Discourses* 2.19.20-25). He predicts that most will in fact turn out to be Epicureans, with perhaps a few feeble Peripatetics, but he doubts he will find any Stoics among these students who are nevertheless perfectly able to recite Stoic doctrine. Theoretical understanding on its own is not enough.

This issue had been discussed a few decades earlier by Seneca in a pair of letters (*Letters* 94-5) in which he considers the relationship between doctrines (*decreta*) and precepts (*praecepta*). Seneca argues that both of these are necessary for moral improvement, for guidance without the underpinning of rational understanding could not possibly lead to a genuine transformation, while rational understanding alone is not enough and must be supplemented with some form of practical training (see Sellars (2003), 75-8; Sellars (2007), 122-4). The upshot of holding what we might call this technical conception of philosophy (using technical in its etymological sense) is that a philosophical education will divide into these two stages. One might object to this as an account of how the Stoics conceived philosophy by noting that the Stoics were also followers of

Socratic intellectualism, embracing his monistic psychology and so his rejection of weakness of will. If that is so, then surely mastery of theoretical principles ought on its own to be enough. Why is this second stage needed as well? One might respond to this sort of objection by saying that it presupposes that mastery of theoretical principles alone constitutes knowledge, whereas according to the technical conception of philosophy held by the Stoics knowledge should be identified with complete practical mastery displayed in one's behaviour. Epictetus' students who have grasped Stoic doctrine do not yet have knowledge worthy of the name if those doctrines remain unexpressed in their actions. It is only when they act from those doctrines that they can be said to have properly mastered them and gained real knowledge conceived as craft-type knowledge. Once they have done this, weakness of will is indeed impossible. The implication here is that the ability to recite doctrine is not adequate evidence for a genuine transformation of one's soul; only the appropriate behaviour confirms that the soul has been cured in any meaningful sense.

3. Types of Philosophical Text

Epictetus' students read treatises by Chrysippus and presumably works by other canonical Stoic authors as well. These texts, so far as we can know, probably met many of our expectations about what a philosophical text should contain: the presentation of key doctrines supported by argument, perhaps responding to objections raised by others or responding to alternative views articulated in the works of earlier philosophers. In short, they might have looked something like the texts of Aristotle, Sextus Empiricus, or Galen that have come down to us.

The *Meditations* clearly do not fall into this genre of philosophical writing, a genre that for some might seem to be the only obvious form of

philosophical writing there could be. Indeed, at first glance the *Meditations* do not look much like what we usually think of as a philosophical text. What we encounter appears to be a notebook containing private thoughts and reflections, along with a few quotations copied from other authors, with no immediately obvious structure or chain of reasoning, often repeating similar ideas across its different books. Via the quotations and other passing references we do find mention of a number of earlier philosophers, including Heraclitus, Plato, and Epictetus, but their views are not subjected to any critical analysis or sustained commentary. It should not be too surprising, then, if on a first encounter many modern readers are unlikely to judge the *Meditations* a serious philosophical text.

The title *Meditations* is a modern one, used for the first time by Meric Casaubon in 1634. This English choice of title was not reflected in early translations into other modern European languages and did not even win universal adoption in England for quite some time (see Wickham Legg (1910)). Nevertheless, it has since caught on and has done so presumably because it seems appropriate to the contents. If what we find does not meet our expectations for a philosophical text then the meditative, reflective, and contemplative tone of the text may make it appear more at home alongside certain sorts of spiritual texts, such as perhaps Augustine's *Confessions*, Thomas a Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*, or François de Sales' *Introduction to the Devout Life*. It might seem to share even more in common with modern collections of moral maxims and aphorisms by writers such as Pascal, La Rochefoucauld, or even Nietzsche. The *Meditations* seem far more at home alongside texts from either of these two groups than they do alongside canonical philosophical works such as those of Aristotle or Leibniz or Kant.

Although the *Meditations* might not take the form of a philosophical treatise, whether by Chrysippus or Aristotle or some modern philosopher,

they may nevertheless deserve to be counted as a philosophical text. If those sorts of theoretical treatises correspond only to one half of a philosophical education as it is conceived within the context of a technical conception of philosophy then there may well be other forms of philosophical writing associated with the second half. The *Meditations* look like a good candidate for an example of a text devoted to this second stage.

4. Assimilation and Digestion

What exactly will this second stage of philosophical education involve? Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus himself all offer some helpful analogies. For Seneca and Epictetus the preferred analogy is with digestion. Seneca suggests (*Letters* 2.2-4) that in order to digest properly the ideas of an author one must read slowly and one ought not to jump too quickly from one author to another. If one is too greedy or has too varied or rich a diet one runs the risk of vomiting the whole lot up and failing to digest anything at all. Epictetus pursues this unsavoury image by comparing the hasty discourses of his students to vomit (*Discourses* 3.21.1-4), in which they throw up philosophical ideas out of their mouths before they have had the opportunity to digest them properly. If they had digested them properly then those same doctrines would not come back out of their mouths but rather would be expressed in their actions. Epictetus illustrates this with a more palatable example (*Handbook* 46):

> Do not, for the most part, talk among people about your philosophical principles, but do what follows from your principles [...] for sheep do not bring their fodder to the shepherds and show how much they have eaten, but they digest their food within them and on the outside produce wool and milk. And so you, therefore, make no display to people of your

> philosophical principles but let them see the results that come from the principles when digested.

Marcus himself takes up this theme, with a different analogy (though borrowed from Seneca; see Newman (1989), 1507). He suggests that we should dye our souls in a manner akin to the way in which we might dye a piece of cloth a new colour. Our aim is to become 'dyed to the core with justice' as he puts it in 3.4 and in order to produce such a complete transformation we shall need to repeat the process again and again. The more we think or reflect on a particular idea, the more that idea will become a permanent feature of our mind, just as a piece of cloth will permanently bear the colour of a dye the more it is exposed to it (5.16):

> Your mind will take on the character of your most frequent thoughts: souls are dyed by thoughts. So dye your own with a succession of thoughts like these. For example: where life can be lived, so can a good life; but life can be lived in a palace; therefore a good life can be lived in a palace. [...]

Here we have an explicit philosophical explanation for the repetition of certain key ideas again and again in the *Meditations*. While this feature of the text has often been explained away as an unfortunate consequence of this being a private text never properly edited or prepared for wider circulation, we can now see that far from being a structural fault this may well be an essential and necessary characteristic of the text. If what Marcus was trying to do when writing in his notebooks was dye his soul by repeatedly reflecting upon key ideas then it is inevitable that the text should be marked by repetition. Without the repetition Marcus would not be able to complete the task at hand. As Marcus' own physician Galen put it, when discussing the nature of the *askêsis* (exercise) involved in becoming a good human being, 'if a proposition is of great importance, there is no

harm in repeating it twice or even three times' (*De Affectuum Dignotione* 5 (15,16-18 de Boer)). And in his treatise on character (*Peri êthôn, De Moribus*), lost in Greek but preserved in the Arabic tradition, Galen writes 'a character is developed through being constantly accustomed to things that man sets up in his soul and to things that he does regularly every day' (Mattock (1972), 241).

5. Writing the Self

This notion that through a process of repetitive writing one might engage in a process of self-transformation is one that Michel Foucault addressed in a short piece entitled 'Writing the Self' (Foucault (1997)). In this brief essay Foucault explores the role of writing in what he calls 'arts of the self' and 'the art of living' (Foucault (1997), 234–5). He explicitly draws a parallel between Greco-Roman philosophy and what he calls 'professional skill', suggesting that, like any other professional skill, the art of living will require some form of *askêsis* (exercise), which he defines as 'a training of the self by the self' (Foucault (1997), 235). It is through writing, he suggests, that we find some traces of these sorts of self-fashioning practices. Although various forms of philosophical *askêsis* date back at least to the Cynics (see Goulet-Cazé (1986)), and perhaps back even further to the Pythagoreans (see Kahn (2001)), Foucault notes that it is only in the Imperial period that we find writing explicitly discussed as a form of philosophical training, most notably by late Stoics such as Seneca (e.g. *Letters* 84) and Epictetus (e.g. *Discourses* 3.24.103). Foucault goes on to examine two types of writing from this period – notebooks and correspondence – which seem to be potential candidates for precisely the sort of writing he has in mind, although he prefaces his discussion of these two forms of writing with the claim that they are different from the sort of transformative writing he has just introduced and which he labels 'ethopoetic' (Foucault (1997), 236). Nevertheless, his account of the role of

these texts is instructive when thinking about the *Meditations*. He suggests that notebooks contained 'quotations, fragments of works, examples, and actions of which one had been the witness or had read [...] they would offer them thus as treasures accumulated for later rereading and meditation' (Foucault (1997), 236). With correspondence, he suggests, we have texts that not only offer an opportunity for reflective meditation but also for constructing a narrative of oneself and, alongside examples from Seneca and Pliny, Foucault cites Marcus' correspondence with Fronto (Foucault (1997), 244).

In the *Meditations* we find examples of all of the features that Foucault attributes to these three different types of writing (ethopoetic, notebooks, correspondence). We have a text with a clear ethopoetic aim of self-transformation; we have occasional strings of quotations from other authors that we might expect to find in a notebook (concentrated in books 7 and 11); and we often find passages where Marcus seems engaged in a process of constructing a self identity akin to what Foucault sees at work in the correspondence of the period. This variety of activity need not concern us, however, for we are clearly dealing with an informal body of writing that makes no explicit claim to fit neatly into any particular genre. It is striking, though, that the *Meditations* display many of the features associated with this idea of a written philosophical *askêsis* (exercise). I suggest that what we read in the *Meditations* is the text resulting from Marcus engaging in a process of trying to digest philosophical ideas, to dye his soul so that he might become a good man. It is not merely a notebook in the sense of being a collection of material gathered together in order to be reflected upon or reread at a later date; nor is it a coherent attempt at a narrative construction of a self identity, even if it might display elements of both. Instead it is the philosophical equivalent of a schoolboy writing out his lines in order to embed an idea in his mind. It is the very process of

writing itself that constitutes the philosophical exercise and the text that has come down to us is simply the by-product of that activity.

This is the sense in which we might think of the *Meditations* as a text related to the second stage of an education directed towards cultivating philosophy conceived as an art of living. It is a product of the necessary process of digestion and assimilation of philosophical doctrine, which comes after the study of doctrine involving the reading of treatises. If we hold a technical conception of philosophy and acknowledge that this second stage is indeed necessary then we shall be able to see the philosophical significance of a text like the *Meditations*. It is not a text straightforwardly to be used by us, its readers, but, as a trace of a process of philosophical exercise, it stands as a record of that exercise and so a model for how we ourselves might proceed.

It is also worth noting that there are no doubt other types of text that we might associate with this second stage of a philosophical education. In particular we might note the *Handbook* of Epictetus. This short text was compiled by Arrian from the *Discourses* of Epictetus, which, we are told, Arrian compiled from his own recollections of conversations that took place in Epictetus' classroom. The *Handbook* is in effect, then, a brief summary of some of the key philosophical themes that run through the *Discourses*, but stripped of the latter's distinctive literary qualities and lacking much of the philosophical justification that the *Discourses* offer for the positions being advanced. Not surprisingly, some readers have dismissed it as merely a clumsy and uninteresting epitome of the larger work. At the same time a traditional view, drawing on the claims of the Neoplatonist Simplicius in his commentary on the *Handbook*, has held that this is a text for absolute beginners, to be read with little or no background knowledge before they move on to more substantial philosophical works (see Simplicius *in Ench.* Praef. 61-81 Hadot). Both of these judgements are

contestable, however. We might equally approach the *Handbook* not as a text for beginners but rather as a text for advanced students, for those engaged in the second stage of philosophical training (see Sellars (2007), 135-8): once the student leaves the classroom he is faced with the task of assimilating and digesting all that he has heard, to the point that he affects a transformation of his soul, which will in turn transform his behaviour. The *Handbook*, on this view, is not a text for beginners but rather an *aide mémoire* for the philosophical apprentice who has already left the classroom. It doesn't need to rehearse all of the arguments for the positions it summarises on the assumption that either the student will be able to recall them or at least feel confident that he has worked through them to his satisfaction during his time in class. Whether Arrian had this function for the text in mind when he composed it, either as a text to be used by others or perhaps simply for his own use, is of course a matter about which we can only speculate. Nevertheless, approaching the *Handbook* in this way enables us to offer a plausible account of its purpose. It also enables us to offer an explanation of its title, for the *encheiridion* is a hand-held weapon or tool of the sort used by craftsmen, and throughout the *Discourses* Epictetus reminds his students to keep their philosophical principles *procheiros*, or ready to hand, and what better way to do this than to carry with them a short, digestible summary of their master's key doctrines. The *Handbook*, then, stands as an example of another type of text, alongside the *Meditations*, relevant to the philosophical training that forms the second stage of philosophy conceived as an art or craft. One is a text to be used by a philosophical apprentice; the other is a text *produced* by such an apprentice. It is nice to think that Marcus had a copy of the *Handbook* close by when composing the *Meditations* on campaign, although there is alas no direct evidence that he possessed a copy. Nevertheless, these two texts stand together as examples of two different types of work devoted to the second stage of a Stoic philosophical education.

As we have seen, then, although the *Meditations* might appear somewhat anomalous at first glance, once we have a better sense of the nature of the philosophical project in which Marcus was engaged we are then able to appreciate their status and value as a properly philosophical text. The project in which he was engaged he inherited from Epictetus but it was one that ran through the entire Stoic school and drew on some central themes in Socrates. Epictetus reports that Socrates himself wrote texts (against the widely held assumption that Socrates wrote nothing), but characterizes these texts as attempts by Socrates to test and examine himself rather than anything intended for wider consumption (*Discourses* 2.1.29-33). The *Meditations* stand within this Socratic-Stoic tradition of written philosophical exercises contributing to an art of living.

Guide to Further Reading

The discussion of the Stoic art of living in this chapter draws upon material in Sellars (2003). The Socratic discussion of arts and crafts standing behind the Stoic idea has been discussed widely; one helpful account is Roochnik (1996). The claim that Marcus is engaged in a form of philosophical exercise in the *Meditations* is discussed in Newman (1989) and Hadot (1998), ch. 3, although neither explicitly places those exercises within a conception of philosophy as an art or craft. The idea of writing as a form of philosophical exercise is explored in Foucault (1997).

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