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Contemplation in Action

The *Meditations* as Performance

Abstract

This essay considers the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius as a kind of philosophical performance manual. It argues that an appraisal of this text in terms of performance is one key way in which to understand the originality of the *Meditations*. Throughout much of the *Meditations*, Marcus surveys his own experience and the things occurring around him and attempts to create a kind of mental space (an "inner citadel") from which to "correctly" perceive these experiences and events. But it is also clear that this "inner citadel" is a space that can only exist inasmuch as it is enacted, moment by moment. This essay follow's Pierre Hadot's claim that the *Meditations* offer a window into a set of "spiritual exercises" which would later be developed within a Christian context by Ignatius of Loyola. However, this essay argues that the *Meditations* differs considerably from the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises conceived thirteen centuries later, which envisions an ongoing dialogical relationship with a personal God rather than an inner dialogue set against the impersonal governance of Nature. It is this performative construction of the self, set in adversarial relation to the self-experiences of that self, that separates the Stoic spiritual experience from the Christian tradition that would eventually supplant it. In a contemporary secular context, however, it is very much this performative approach to aligning one's identity with an all-encompassing world view, without encumbrance from organised religious structures, which ensures the continuing currency of the *Meditations* today.

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This essay considers Marcus Aurelius's text known as the *Meditations* as a kind of philosophical performance manual. It has fascinated readers since the first printed edition appeared in the mid-sixteenth century, as it is a text not just about philosophy but one which attempts to read life and lived experience in relation to an overarching philosophical system. As such, the heirs of Marcus Aurelius can be seen in contemporary philosophy and theory from Michel Foucault to Sara Ahmed on the one hand, to the raft of self-help guidebooks which take up much of the popular non-fiction market today on the other.[1] The text that comprises what became known as the *Meditations* was composed by Marcus Aurelius at different periods in the second half of the second century. Most scholars agree that the text was not intended for publication but was rather a collection of thoughts and aphorisms designed to keep Marcus's daily experiences in line with Stoic philosophical principles. These Stoic principles include the cultivation of rational attitudes or states of mind in relation to one's experience, and the attempt to see all experience as part of a greater scheme underpinned by an impersonal but generative force. Nonetheless, as classical scholars such as Pierre Hadot (1998) and John Sellars (2006) argue, the *Meditations* represents a coherent set of ideas and prompts that can be understood against an overarching and compelling vision of life. In this essay, I argue that understanding contemplation as a form of performance is one key way in which to understand the originality of the *Meditations*. The word contemplation has a dual Latin root as both a place for observation (*templum*) and the practice of looking and observing (*contemplari*). Throughout much of the *Meditations*, Marcus surveys his own experience and the things occurring around him and attempts to create a kind of mental space (an "inner citadel") from which to "correctly" perceive these experiences and events. But it is also clear that this "inner citadel" is a space that can only exist inasmuch as it is enacted, moment by moment. At the same time, the enactment of this form of contemplation is curiously lonely, and the text has often struck readers as lacking a certain human warmth. As I will argue later in this essay, the *Meditations* differs considerably from the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises conceived thirteen centuries later, which envisions an ongoing dialogical relationship with a personal God rather than an inner dialogue set against the impersonal governance of Nature. It is this performative construction of the self, set in adversarial relation to the self-experiences of that self, that separates the Stoic spiritual experience from the Christian tradition that would eventually supplant it. In a contemporary secular context, however, it is very much this performative approach to aligning one's identity with an all-encompassing world view, without encumbrance from organised religious structures, which ensures the continuing currency of the *Meditations* today.

Aside from having the unique distinction of being an existent philosophical work written by a Roman Emperor, the *Meditations* is a singularly intriguing text. The extent to which the text was written for a wider audience, or to which it contains a systematic philosophical statement, as opposed to a fragmented set of ideas and aphorisms, and the extent to which it offers any original contributions to philosophy, are all areas of debate.[2] What is clear is that the text known as the *Meditations* is an important component of the Stoic philosophical canon. As a young man, Marcus Aurelius seems to have been heavily influenced by the most famous philosopher in the Roman world in the second century, Epictetus (See Hadot 1998). Epictetus, himself a former slave, set up a Stoic school of philosophy in Rome and was known by the emperor Hadrian, during whose reign Marcus Aurelius was born. Stoicism was a Greek import, the original Stoic school being founded in Athens around 300 BCE,

drawing its name from the Stoa Poikile which was a large public portico that surrounded the busy agora in the city, where the Cypriot philosopher Zeno first defined and established this new philosophical school. Hundreds of texts were produced in this initial period (of the early Stoa), though these texts are only now available in fragmentary second-hand form. Stoicism continued to flourish in the Roman imperial period, and important works still extant, or largely extant, were produced by Epictetus, Seneca, Musonius Rufus, and Marcus Aurelius.[3] Roman Stoics took a great interest in how the philosophy could be used to inform ethics and "the art of living" while the earlier Greek exponents seem to have explored in more depth areas such as logic and physics.[4]

In an often-paraphrased analogy attributed to Zeno, the founder of the original Stoic school, the Stoic system can be likened to a walled garden (see Inwood 2003). "Logic" is represented by the wall itself. As with a wall, correctly ordered thoughts organised in accordance with Stoic operations of logic, will guard against incorrect and damaging thoughts and feelings that might disrupt the well-ordered tranquillity of the garden within. The soil within the garden represents "physics," which for Stoics represents the totality of the world and all that can be experienced. Unlike Platonists or the early Christian communities that were active in Marcus Aurelius' time, there is no transcendent dimension or realm beyond the physical within the Stoic system. The soil then, the ground of experience, must be surrounded and protected by a wall of logic, or correct thinking. The fruit trees within the garden represents "ethics," the way one lives one's life. The world of experience – physics - must be carefully and systematically examined in order that it can be correctly ordered, controlled and cultivated (logic) so that a totalising approach to living a Stoic life may be achieved (ethics). Four and a half centuries after Zeno, we find Marcus Aurelius weaving together these three aspects of Stoic philosophy. To illustrate, in Book II we find this observation:

> Always remember these things, what the nature of the Whole is, what my own nature is, the relation of this nature to that, what kind of part it is of what kind of Whole, and that there is no one who can prevent you keeping all that you say and do in accordance with that nature, of which you are a part. (Meditations II.9).

Here "the Whole" (physics), the consideration of "what my own nature is [and] the relation of this nature to that" (logic), and "keeping all that you say and do in accordance with that nature" (ethics) are brought together in this one statement. From this statement and others like it, we can see that Stoicism consists in an all-encompassing "worldview" which connects to the practice of living. Philosophy, from a Stoic perspective, finally comes down to actions rather than speculative thoughts and reasonings. Here we may begin to note the performative nature of Stoicism generally, and of the *Meditations* in particular. Note how the sentence above hinges upon the use of two transitive verb constructions "Always remember" and "do in accordance with" which point to the idea that Stoic practice involves a set of performative tasks; that is, Stoicism is a philosophy that one must *carry out*.

Further than this, we can begin to see that there are deeper and more intriguing ways in which the text carries certain performative qualities. The self-exhortation "Always remember" is one which appears in similar ways throughout the *Meditations*. Stoicism is not a philosophy that once understood, simply rests in the mind of the adherent. Rather, Stoic ideas and thought constructions must be continually recalled and acted upon. In the thickness of day-to-day life experience, one must "always remember" to "do in accordance with" the

nature of the Whole. Stoicism is performative in the sense that the adherent is being (re)called to enact this philosophy in the form of a practice of living. The Stoic life thus becomes a conscious series of repetitions (“Always remember … do in accordance with”) which may recall readers of this journal to Richard Schechner’s well-known definition of performance as “restored behaviour” (Schechner 1981). Not only then is Marcus Aurelius’s Stoicism performative in the sense of requiring the adherent to enact its precepts, but furthermore these enactments are consciously chosen repetitions of action.

However, the *Meditations* is not content simply to set out a series of more or less “static” self-reminders to engage in Stoic forms of thinking and acting, but aims at nothing less than a totalising transformation of perceptions and actions. By way of example, I offer the following passage:

> You will think little of the entertainment of a song or dance or all-in wrestling if you deconstruct the line of a song into its individual notes and ask yourself of each of them: ‘Is this something that overpowers me?’ You will recoil from that admission. So too with a comparable analysis of dance by each movement and each pose, and the same again with wrestling … remember to go straight for the component parts of anything, and through that analysis come to despise the thing itself. And the same method should be applied to the whole of life (*Meditations* XI. 2).

This passage is of special interest for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is striking that Marcus Aurelius makes a very specific link between the spectatorship of performance and the analysis of perceptions “applied to the whole of life.” Performance spectatorship here becomes proposed as a kind of training ground for the perceptions. Marcus recognises that a performer such as a dancer, may seek to create an overall affective experience for the viewer which is constituted as a kind of seduction. The affective power of the performance owes much to its sequential arrangement, in much the way that a melody only strikes us as emotionally affective because it is experienced within a particular temporal structure. To oppose the danger of being “overpowered” by the overarching effect, Marcus Aurelius proposes that the Stoic should practice a special method of perceptual analysis. This methodology amounts to a perceptual estrangement through an imaginative deconstruction of performance, that the Stoic can potentially apply to all experience.

If Marcus Aurelius’s refusal to be entertained strikes readers as being redolent of a “killjoy” attitude or even to carry traces of a certain anti-theatrical prejudice, then consider Marcus’s sentiments beside those of Bertolt Brecht. Marcus’s call to resist the emotive and affective power of performance mirrors Brecht’s call for an “art of spectatorship that must be trained, learned and then regularly practiced” (Brecht 1978, 161). This art of spectatorship that requires “training” and “practice” might itself be seen as a form of askēsis, which, as Michel Foucault realised, was key means by which the ancient Stoic philosophers might guide a modern subjectivity towards being resistant to hidden forms of power (McGushin 2007) Moreover, one could certainly find plenty of evidence that the Stoics would have agreed with the general point Brecht makes when he says “Everything that aims to induce hypnosis or is bound to produce undignified intoxication, or make people feel befuddled, must be

abandoned" (1978, 78). Compare this statement from Brecht with a remarkably similar thought from the *Meditations*: "Sober up, recall yourself, shake off sleep once more: realize they were mere dreams that troubled you, and now that you are awake again look on these things as you would have looked on a dream" (*Meditations* VI. 31). As with Brecht, a developed rational/critical capacity, "sober" rather than "intoxicated," is a precondition for perceiving reality as it ought to be perceived. As Fredric Jameson notes in his study of Brecht: "To make something look strange, to make us look at it with new eyes, implies the antecedents of a general familiarity, of a habit which prevents us from really looking at things, a kind of perceptual numbness" (Jameson 2011, 39). As Jameson suggests, habits of perception create the conditions in which perception itself becomes subject to a kind of numbness. This is an idea that we certainly find echoes of in the Stoics, and in the *Meditations* we find Marcus trying to instantiate, practice and repeat new habits of thought that will facilitate "a true perception of how things lie" (*Meditations* VIII.1).

The method through which Brecht sought to counteract theatre's potential hypnotic effects had at its centre the notion of a "radical separation of elements." Brecht contrasted this aesthetic concept to that of Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk through which all artistic elements are unified to produce a totalising aesthetic effect. David Barnett summarises the contrasting Brechtian idea:

> The separation of elements of a performance fulfils Brecht's call to activate the audience. The stage offers material that cannot be easily assimilated without reflection on the part of the spectator, and so the difference between the sign-systems helps complicate the reception process and disrupts the process of empathy. The audience is invited to question what is seen and heard because the material on stage is not being presented in a way that allows for passive reception. However, there is an additional aspect to this practice: it poses the question as to why, for Brecht, the material on stage should not be easily consumable. (Barnett 2015, 73).

This notion of "really looking at things" in a way that dispels certain unthinking value-based assumptions attendant in everyday perception, was a core aspect of the Stoic approach to philosophy. What in Brechtian parlance is termed the "separation of elements" has its corollary in what Pierre Hadot named as the "the method of physical definition" in Stoic practice. This method is designed, according to Hadot, as a way of:

> avoiding the false and conventional value judgements which people tend to emit about objects. This method, says Marcus must be applied to all objects which present themselves to us in life, so that we may see everything that happens in life with exactness and from the perspective of Nature. (Hadot 1998, 164)

It would be wrong to draw easy equivalences between Brecht and Marcus Aurelius as though the former were seen to be offering simply restatement of what the Stoics had argued. One of the important differences between the "method of physical definition" and the "separation of elements" implicit in Hadot's statement, is the Stoics sought to align perceptual experience to an understanding of "Nature" as a whole, as opposed to a (Marxist) understanding of social relations. The Stoic approach is therefore cosmological rather than socio-political.

Indeed, where Brecht's commitment to a reordering of perception through theatrical innovation is first and foremost a political venture, Hadot argues that Marcus Aurelius's project is best seen as a "spiritual" enterprise. Hadot defines the core of the *Meditations* as spiritual because it attempts to:

> transform our vision of the world, and a metamorphosis of our personality. The word spiritual is quite apt to make us understand that these exercises are the result, not merely of thought, but of the individual's entire psychism. Above all, the word spiritual reveals the true dimensions of these exercises. By means of them, the individual raises himself up to the life of the objective Spirit; that is to say, he re-places himself with the perspective of the Whole (Hadot 1995, 82).

As we see here, Hadot's definition of the spiritual is relatively loose and perhaps even a little forced in its appeal to the "life of the objective Spirit," the language of which sounds more akin to Hegel that to the Stoics. That said, Hadot is attempting to get across the idea that in antiquity there did not exist the contemporary divide between the philosophical and the spiritual or religious that became concretised during the Enlightenment with the rise of epistemologies such as "rationalism" and "empiricism." For Stoics, an animating spirit lies at the basis of an ordered universe. This animating spirit, far from being ethereal or mysterious, was understood instead as being nothing other than universal reason itself operating at a cosmic level. As we see for example in this passage from Book 7:

> All things are meshed together, and a sacred bond unites them. Hardly a single thing is alien to the rest: ordered together in their places they together make up the one order of the universe. There is one universe out of all things, one god pervading all things, one substance, one law, one common reason in all intelligent beings, and one truth – if indeed there is one perfection of all cognate being sharing in the same reason. (*Meditations* VII. 9)

The philosophical and the spiritual find their most pointed meeting points in the *Meditations* within two extreme modes of enquiry. The mode of "zooming in" on specific material conditions of the human experience, and the mode of "zooming out" to see human life, as it were, from afar. Of the former mode of "zooming in," we find examples such as:

> How good it is when you have roast meat or suchlike foods about you, to impress on your mind that this is the dead body of a fish, this is the dead body of a bird or pig; and again, that the Falernian wine is the mere juice of grapes, and your purple-edged robe simply the hair of a sheet soaked in shell-fish blood! And in sexual intercourse that it is no more that the friction of a membrane and a spurt of mucus ejected (*Meditations* VI. 13).

Here we find Marcus Aurelius focusing on sensual experiences which produce an automatic pleasure in the perceiving. Like the performance of song, dance or wrestling in the preceding example, sensually attractive objects of experience become differentiated from their background amidst the mundane and the everyday, drawing one into an orbit of pleasure and desire. The response once again is to de-reify the experience by breaking it down into its constituent parts. Literal description replaces conventional recognition ("dead body" as opposed to "roast meat," and so forth). The point is not that pleasure-producing experiences

are bad or to be avoided at all costs; let us recall that Marcus was not a Christian ascetic. He is not talking about avoiding sex, fine dining, the best wines and the wearing of the imperial toga, but rather how to approach the having and experiencing of those things. As Marcus Aurelius says, “when you have” roast meats, fine wines, ornate robes and sexual intercourse then you must “impress upon your mind” certain thoughts which serve to de-reify these experiences. We might be reminded here of David Barnett’s summary of Brecht’s “separation of elements” cited above, in which “the material on stage should not be easily consumable.” Within the stage of Marcus Aurelius’s perceptual field, we find that things can be made less “easily consumable” when they are seen in terms of a literal description.

We might say that the performative dimension of this de-reification of experience lies in the doing, while the spiritual dimension lies in the effect of the doing. In terms of the performative dimension of the text, there are three main points to note. Firstly, we see Marcus actively constructing his experience in this and other passages of the *Meditations*, as distinct from merely describing the quality of his experiences. Therefore, Marcus Aurelius is engaged in generating “performative utterances,” in the sense that the propositions he makes in order to reformulate how he receives these experiences are *the means by which* these experiences are transformed. In other words, Marcus is not simply describing how he thinks about things – his attitude to fine dining, sex and so forth – he is rather *enacting* a new way of thinking about those things. Secondly, the text we are left with, perhaps analogously to a Jackson Pollock painting, is left to us as a record of that enactment. Just as a Pollock “action painting” is both in some sense a finished artwork as well as a kind of recording of Pollock’s visceral encounter and engagement with paint and canvas, so too Marcus Aurelius’s text stands both as a completed work published in various editions and given the title of the *Meditations*, while at the same time it serves as a record of Marcus’s actual moment-by-moment attempts to transform experience through performative utterance. Finally, we have the practice of what we would today call “journaling.” It seems that for Stoics, the practice not only of making performative utterances to oneself but of actually writing down those performatives, was an important element of the practice. The text then, is not just a diary of thoughts, let alone a philosophical treatise for a public readership, but a self-recording or psychological mirror by which the writer engages with an external representation of their inner life through which to pursue Stoic practices.

If Marcus Aurelius’s de-reification of experience is performative in its doing/enacting then it is spiritual in terms of its effects. What are these effects? If we go by this above passage once again, we might assume that the effects of Marcus’s sentiments would be a very gloomy assessment of many of life’s familiar pleasures. Perhaps we might even feel pity for a man who apparently could not find simple enjoyment in such fundamental things as food, wine and sex. Hadot argues that the point of such statements is not so much to inculcate a negative attitude, but is rather to offset andcounterbalance the mind’s (and body’s) tendency to move towards and esteem certain objects of experience over others:

> Generally speaking, we can say that Marcus’ seemingly pessimistic declarations are not expressions of his disgust or disillusion at the spectacle of life; rather, they are a means he employs in order to change his way of evaluating the events and objects which go to make up human existence (Hadot 1998, 186).

The aim then, is to resist easy value judgments which tend to either attract or repel us; we are drawn towards one object or experience and at the same time we refuse or draw away from another.

This aspect of Marcus Aurelius' practice, whereby individual elements of experience are dissected and found to be less alluring than initially supposed, can appear to be overly concerned with minute elements of experience within the mode of "fussiness," even if the overarching aim is more spiritually liberating. However, against this tendency to "zoom in" on particular features of experience, John Sellars puts forward the concept of "Cosmic Stoicism," which he finds most readily in Marcus Aurelius. In contrast to what Sellars terms "Human Stoicism," Cosmic Stoicism seeks a position from which boundaries between the individual and the rest of the cosmos dissolve: "The philosophical task is to try – so far as it is possible – to attain a cosmic perspective from which the boundary between oneself and Nature is overcome" (Sellars 2006, 164). This more "cosmic" vision corresponds to what Marcus calls the "view from above":

> Further, when your talk is about mankind, view earthly things as if looking down on them from some height above – flocks, armies, arms, weddings, divorces, births, deaths, the hubbub of the law-courts, desert places, various foreign nations, festivals, funerals, markets; all the medley of the world and the ordered conjunction of opposites (*Meditations* VII. 48).

This paradigmatic Stoic viewpoint is not so much to about luxuriating in images of the cosmos in order to attain a state of repose, but aims to create sharp oscillations between the macro view and the more particularising viewpoints that constitute the minutia of day to day experience. To take another example, consider Seneca's suggestion: "As the mind wanders among the very stars it delights in laughing at the mosaic floors of the rich and at the whole earth with its gold" (*Natural Questions* 1.7). Here again we see that the Stoic "view from above" operates in direct contrast to the perceptions of individual reified things such as "mosaic floors" and the like. It is these reified experiences from which the Stoic seeks a kind of philosophical liberation. Sellars further develops this notion of freedom in relation to his concept of Cosmic Stoicism:

> Only the Cosmos as a whole has complete freedom. It always acts according to its own nature, never hindered by an external cause. From the perspective of the Cosmos, then, the distinction between internal and external causes falls away. This distinction is thus always only *relative* to the perspective of a particular finite mode of being. The philosophical task is to try – so far as it is possible – to attain a cosmic perspective from which the boundary between oneself and Nature is overcome (Sellars 2006, 164).

This combination of experiences which must be subject to constant questioning, and which at the same time are not easily absorbed into a consumable, desire-based consciousness, captures both parts of Marcus Aurelius's viewpoint shifts, revealing these parts to be interconnected. The process of taking a view from above, zooming out and adopting a perspective on the world that takes in cosmic, rather than human, time, is not simply about taking a detached view of the beauty and wonder of the universe. Here another quote from the *Meditations*: "All that happens is as habitual as roses in spring and fruit in the summer.

True too of diseases, death, defamation and conspiracy – and all that delights or gives pain to fools" (*Meditations* IV. 44). From the viewpoint of habitual subjectivity, the world consists of the beautiful and the delightful, and painful and the abhorrent – this is the viewpoint Marcus seeks to shift.

Having placed Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* into the context of a performative schema and summarised Pierre Hadot's understanding of the spiritual directionality of the *Meditations*, let us now turn to the question of how the *Meditations* brings together the spiritual and performative dimensions into a coherent relation. The spiritual and performative elements of Stoic practice come together in the need for continuous practice. We might compare this to Saint Paul's injunction to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Paul's injunction within its Christian context seems like a tall order, especially if what Paul had in mind was akin to formal prayer. However, if we take the guiding principle in Paul and transpose it to the *Meditations*, we can see that Stoicism offers a similar idea, in the sense that for the practice to be authentic it must infuse one's everyday life, the practice must be all encompassing. It cannot be compartmentalised; it has to be totalising. We find numerous examples of this all-embracing effect in the *Meditations*, such that we find Marcus considering all manner of experiences from regarding very concrete things, such as a loaf of bread, to very abstract things such as the vastness of the cosmos. Moreover, the effect of the *Meditations* as a whole is to create a sense of continuous reflection across the panoply of experiences that fall within the ambit of the author's life.

Stoicism must be performed as a continual practice, because the practitioner always has a limited capacity to be Stoic. All the main Stoic writers whose texts survive attested to their own limitations in attempting to reach for the ultimate goal of complete sagehood (see Brower 2014). In the *Meditations* we find Marcus, despite a lifetime of Stoic study and practice, reminding himself to "keep constant watch" for any potential "corruptions of the directing mind" (*Meditations* XI 19). More pointedly, Marcus reminds himself to "Take care not to be Caesarified, or dyed in purple: it happens. So keep yourself simple, good, pure, serious, unpretentious, a friend of justice, god-fearing, kind, full of affection, strong for your proper work" (*Meditations* VI 30). The implication of such notes-to-self is that the writer is naturally prone to habitual dispositions which take him away from the Stoic conceptual space. There is then a gap between who Marcus is, or at least who he perceives himself to be, and who he wants to be. This is essentially a performative subjective space. Within the gap between who Marcus is and who he wishes to make himself to be, exists a space in which he must play his part. Not surprisingly, there are frequent allusions in the *Meditations* to the metaphor of the theatre and to drama to describe the Stoic practitioner as though an actor on a worldly stage. But as Marcus notes, a theatrical performance has a prescribed time for its enactment, whereas the Stoic's practice must be continuous and ongoing: "Unlike a ballet or a play or suchlike, where any interruption aborts the whole performance, in every scene and whenever it is cut off the rational soul has its own programme complete and entirely fulfilled, so it can say: "I am in possession of my own" (*Meditations* XI. 1).

If Stoic practice is likened to a performance, then as a form of performance Marcus seems to be performing in a solo show more than a drama in which his fate is bound to the fate of other *dramatis personae*. As Marcus Aurelius puts it: "You must compose your life

action by action, and be satisfied if each action achieves its end as best can be: and no one can prevent you from that achievement" (*Meditations*: VIII. 32). At other times, we find Marcus presenting us with a more overt internal dialogue. In Book V, for example, we find Marcus at perhaps his most relatable as he tries to convince himself to rise from his bed against a host of questioning voices which invite Marcus to "wrap myself in blankets and keep warm." His thought process unfolds as follows:

> Were you then born for pleasure – all for feeling, not for action? Can you not see plants, birds, ants, spiders, bees all doing their own work, each helping in their own way to order the world? And then you do not want to do the work of a human being – you do not hurry to the demands of your own nature. 'But one needs rest, too.' One does indeed: I agree. But nature has set its limits to this too, just as it has to eating and drinking, and yet you go beyond these limits, beyond what you need. Not in your actions, though, not any longer: here you stay below your capability. The point is that you do not love yourself – otherwise you would love both your own nature and her purpose for you (*Meditations* V. 1-3).

Marcus here gives himself a kind of "pep talk" by adopting the role of the Stoic sage, from whose vantage point Marcus attempts to coax himself towards more virtuous habits which accord with Stoic conceptions of right reason. But it is also quite a lonely space. Here is the sense in which the commonly used adjective "stoic" (with a small "s") does have a genuine connection to the basis of Stoicism as a school of philosophy. Marcus, as a "stoic" Stoic, must face the harsh challenges of world on his own terms. Marcus Aurelius cuts, if not a lonely figure, then certainly a figure who embraced a certain solitude. "Withdraw into yourself," Marcus tells himself, "It is in the nature of the rational directing mind to be self-content with acting rightly and the calm it thereby enjoys" (*Meditations* VII.28). A sense of calmness and contentment, then, is found, and for Marcus is *only* found, in the isolation of his own rationally directed introspections.

Hadot chooses the term "spiritual exercises" carefully. The term deliberately alludes to the better known "Spiritual Exercises" devised by Saint Ignatius of Loyola in the 16th Century. Although the term was coined by Ignatius, as Hadot points out, the roots of the practices associated with Ignatius can be traced back to antiquity and are given to us with exceptional clarity in the *Mediations* of Marcus Aurelius. The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola were not so much a theological or doctrinal project but were more concerned with inculcating a certain practice of living through forms of self-examination, reflective meditation and prayer. The famous "Examen," for example, takes the practitioner through a series of steps through which to reflect upon the conclusion of a day. The Ignatian practitioner recounts her experiences, reflecting on the ways in which God was present in the events and experiences of the day, while the practitioner also critically reflects upon her responses to God's presence (Gallagher 2005) While Ignatius developed the Spiritual Exercises in a very different (Christian) context to that of the *Meditations*, Hadot goes as far as to suggest that "Ignatius' *Excercitia spiritualia* are nothing but a Christian version of the Greco-Roman tradition" (Hadot 1995, 82).

A performative perspective, however, suggests certain limitations to such direct comparisons. While Ignatian spiritual exercises were indebted to practices developed in antiquity, there are also significant differences both spiritually and performatively. In the Ignatian approach, one is essentially in a continual dialogue with (the Judeo-Christian) God. In

the Examen, one does not merely look inward, in the manner of the Stoics, but outward as one asks for God's guidance in reflecting on past experience. Perhaps the most striking example of this notion of dialogic spirituality is the practice that Ignatius terms the "Colloquy." Ignatius explains this concept in the following terms:

> Imagine Christ our Lord present before you upon the cross, and begin to speak with him, asking how it is that though He is the Creator, He has stooped to become man, and to pass from eternal life to death here in time, that thus He might die for our sins. I shall also reflect upon myself and ask: 'What have I done for Christ?' 'What am I doing for Christ?' 'What ought I to do for Christ?' As I behold Christ in this plight, nailed to the cross, I shall ponder upon what presents itself to my mind (Mullan trans. 1914, 23).

While the theological and philosophical differences between Ignatian spirituality and Stoicism are indeed vast, the point here is to illustrate the distinct performative modes of spirituality we find in Ignatius when compared to Marcus Aurelius. It is apparent that Ignatius directs his attention outwards rather than inward, towards a divine interlocutor. Ignatius further clarifies that "The colloquy is made by speaking exactly as one friend speaks to another." Not only then, is the Ignatian approach characterised by a dialogical structure, it is one partaken between "friends" – intimates who seek one another's good.

This dialogical dynamic offers a sharp contrast to what we find in the *Meditations*. Compared with Ignatius, Marcus Aurelius cuts a lonely figure striving to maintain a rational equilibrium within an impersonal cosmos. When Marcus looks upon the world it appears to have a certain cold anonymity, a sentiment that is captured in aphorisms such as: "Change: nothing inherently bad in the process, nothing inherently good in the result" (*Meditations* IV.42) The universe in its unfolding is indifferent to notions of value; it is not, as it were, providentially ordered towards "the good" in the way the Medieval Scholastics conceived it. And surely nothing could be much further from a Christian outlook than Marcus's reflections on the temporary nature of all things whereby even "Your children are no more than 'leaves'" (*Meditations* X.34). Seen in light of Hadot's reading of Marcus Aurelius, we could see this reflection not as advocating a refusal to love one's child, but as a corrective to the temptation to see any entity as good in and of itself. The only good is the rationally ordered way of perceiving this or that thing in relation to the Whole. Goodness therefore, is not found to be objectively present in the world, but rather inside oneself: "Dig inside yourself," Marcus enjoins, "Inside there is a spring of goodness ready to gush at any moment, if you keep digging" (*Meditations* VII. 59). On these terms, the world becomes a stage on which one performs as best one can. As Marcus' philosophical hero Epictetus puts in the *Enchiridion*: "Remember that you are an actor in a drama, of such a kind as the author please to make it. If short, of a short one; if long, of a long one … your business is to act well the character assigned you" (*Enchiridion* 17). This is not the dialogical drama of the Christian lived out through prayer and communal worship, but, as with the text of the *Meditations*, comprises instead an extended soliloquy in which a continual internal dialogue forms the basis of practice and identity.

In the contemporary landscape of the increasingly secularised Global North, a monological spiritual approach seems more readily accessible than one premised on a dialogue with a transcendent Other. We do not have to look hard to find the evidence of this.

As of the time of writing (December 2024) Jason Hemlock's primer *Stoicism: How to Use Stoic Philosophy for Inner Peace and Happiness* (2020) is currently in sixth place in Amazon.co.uk's top 100 "Best Sellers in Self Help." Neo-Stoic Ryan Holiday is one of the current bestselling authors with Penguin Random House. As to the *Meditations*, it sits at number 11 out of a list of 195 in Goodreads.com's list of "Self Help 2024" titles, while in a UK Guardian article entitled "Top Ten Books About Self Improvement" published in December 2021, the number one on the list was … the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius (Schaffner 2021).

In an age of precarity and secularism, Marcus Aurelius continues to guide the contemporary performance of the self. The tranquillity that for some may be found in a church can, it seems, be found in that Stoic walled garden, in which self-introspection guided by philosophical principles can lead to a spiritual equilibrium, even in the face of a tumultuous world.[5] Marcus Aurelius's seemingly private and very deliberative performance of self in *The Meditations* is itself re-performed across dozens of "self-help" texts, websites and podcasts. And perhaps Stoicism, with its Brechtian-like emphasis on recalibrating our perceptions, offers the contemporary seeker something of what Christians find through faith, which for the Gospel of Matthew is a transformed way of perceiving the world: "eyes to see and ears to hear." (Matthew 11:15).

Notes

1. That is to say, both Foucault and Ahmed are interested in bringing together philosophy and personal experience, and both refer to the Stoics. Ahmed is more critical of the Stoic tradition than Foucault, referring to what she sees as the problematic claim that "happiness can be achieved through the renunciation of desire" (Ahmed 2010, 244).

2. For an argument in favour of the *Meditations*' originality, see Giavatto (2012).3. Musonius Rufus has left us various *Discourses*, writings collated rather than directly produced by Musonius. From Seneca we have various letters and essays. From Epictetus we have *Discourses*, the *Enchiridion* as well as *Fragments* compiled by his pupil Arrian. Marcus Aurelius has left us his remarkable work which has become known as *Meditations*.

4. See Gill (2003) for a discussion on the distinctions between Hellenistic Stoicism and Roman Stoicism

5. As biographer Frank McLynn somewhat acerbically notes: "Yet those who can find no consolation in organised religion are deeply attracted to Marcus' oracular utterances, of which dozens have attained popularity" (McLynn 2009, XIII).

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