CHAPTER 10

The Relation of Politics and Philosophy under Marcus Aurelius

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1. Introduction

In ancient as well as in later times the emperor Marcus Aurelius, who ruled the Roman Empire from AD 161 to 180, has frequently been considered an excellent, well-educated, philosophically minded ruler, an emperor who led an exemplary life. In his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* Edward Gibbon says:

> The virtue of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus was of a severer and more laborious kind. It was the well-earned harvest of many a learned conference, of many a patient lecture, and many a midnight lucubration. At the age of twelve years he embraced the rigid system of the Stoics, which taught him to submit his body to his mind, his passions to his reason; to consider virtue as the only good, vice as the only evil, all things external as things indifferent. His *Meditations,* composed in the tumult of a camp, are still extant; and he even condescended to give lessons in philosophy, in a more public manner than was perhaps consistent with the modesty of a sage or the dignity of an emperor. But his life was the noblest commentary on the precepts of Zeno. He was severe to himself, indulgent to the imperfection of others, just and beneficent to all mankind . . . War he detested, as the disgrace and calamity of human nature, but when the necessity of a just defense called upon him to take up arms, he readily exposed his person to eight winter campaigns on the frozen banks of the Danube, the severity of which was at last fatal to the weakness of his constitution. His memory was revered by a grateful posterity, and above a century after his death many persons preserved the image of Marcus Aurelius among those of their household gods. (Gibbon (1998) 70–71)

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Marcus Aurelius has often been called a philosopher on the throne, and indeed he bequeathed to mankind his frequently quoted *Meditations*, an eclectic collection of thoughts that at least partly may have been written during the last decade of the emperor's life, between 170 and 180, and in which Stoic doctrines have pride of place (Rutherford (1989) 47). The influence of Epictetus is unmistakable, but Marcus' thoughts are also tributary to common popular philosophic tradition, which was part of a traditional literary and rhetorical education. Marcus' philosophical thoughts were, however, fairly individual and largely regarded ruling himself and his body, living under the shadow of death, and his soul's relation to 'The Whole', to a higher, more elevated 'City of God', in which all human beings participate.[1]

In the following paragraphs four questions will be treated: 1. Were Marcus' convictions perceptibly influenced by the upheavals that characterized his reign, such as the plague and the wars against the Parthians and Northern tribes? 2. What was this emperor's view of a good or even ideal ruler, and of good government? 3. Did Marcus' philosophical ideas have any noticeable influence on daily practice, at court and in Roman imperial society at large? 4. More specifically: did Marcus' philosophical ideas determine or heavily influence practical politics?

2. The Events of Marcus' Reign and Their Influence on His Philosophical Insights

To begin with, Marcus' own ideas do not seem to be heavily influenced by the many military activities that he had to undertake. The *Meditations* were at least partly written between 170 and 180, in a period of great wars at the northern frontiers of the Empire,[2] but do not contain much about warfare. In *Meditations* 10.10 Marcus even puts his own victories into perspective, saying:

> A spider is proud when he traps a fly, a man when he snares a leveret, another when he nets a sprat, another boars, another bears, another Sarmatian prisoners. If you test their sentiments, are they not bandits?

The last line of this short passage contains a commonplace about kings – or high magistrates – and robbers, which also occurs in Cassius Dio's story about the successful bandit Felix Bulla, who plundered Italian regions under Septimius Severus (Cassius Dio 76.10). Dio tells us that when Bulla had at last been captured, the praetorian prefect Papinian asked him: 'Why did you become a robber?' Bulla's answer was: 'Why are you a prefect?' The commonplace also occurs in the *Babylonian Talmud*, in which a discussion takes place about Ben Nasor, who may be identified with the Palmyrene prince

Odaenathus, the man who helped out the Romans after their calamitous defeat against the Persian king Sapor I in AD 260. In *Kethuboth* 51 B the issue is whether Ben Nasor is a king or a captain of bandits.

Meditations 10.10 is not the only chapter in which Marcus puts earthly pride and status or imperial grandeur into perspective. Ironically mentioning his most famous predecessor he says, in *Meditations* 8.31:

> Think of the court of Augustus: wife, daughter, children, grandsires, sister, Agrippa, kindred, connections, friends, Areius, Maecenas, medical attendants, priests – an entire court, all vanished. Turn to other records of eclipse; extinctions not of individuals but of whole stocks – the Pompeys, for example – and the inscriptions we see on memorials, 'the last of the house'. Think of all the pains taken by their predecessors to leave an heir after them; and yet in the end someone must be the last, and one more whole race has perished.[3]

3. How to Rule? Ideas about Kingship and Empire

Marcus' *Meditations* implicitly give us some information about the emperor's ideas on the ideal ruler. In 1.16, in a kind of obituary, Marcus discusses the many qualities of his 'father', i.e. his adoptive father Antoninus Pius, who governed the Empire from AD 138 to 161. This panegyric tells us something about Marcus' view of emperorship. Orations in which somebody is praised may reflect opinions that an author has, and prefers to render in an indirect way. This form of indirect speech is called *sermo coloratus* or *logos eschèmatismenos* (de Blois (1986) 282). In *Meditations* 1.16 Marcus tells us that the qualities he admired in his adoptive father Antoninus Pius were his lenience, his refusal to be diverted from any decision, his indifference to vainglorious honors, his industry, perseverance, and willingness to consider any scheme for the common good; his conviction that rewards should depend on merit, and his superb tact in tightening or relaxing the reins. In Marcus' view Antoninus was aware that social life must have its claims, and so never forced his friends to join him at his table or elsewhere, in spite of their social obligations. His friendships were enduring; they were not capricious, and they were not extravagant. In society he was affable, gracious, and cheerful. He was no friend of pederasty. Marcus writes that Antoninus – when administering the empire – thoroughly examined every issue or question, never dismissing them on a cursory first impression, but instead paying attention to every detail, and that he had an ever-watchful eye to the needs of the Empire, prudently conserving its resources and putting up with the criticisms that resulted. He was not superstitious and did not try to become popular by wooing the masses. He calmly and steadily pursued his way, avoiding anything that savored of the flashy or new-fangled, and readily accepted such material comforts as fortune had put at his disposal; when

they were not to hand he would not complain. Not a vestige of the casuist's quibbling, the lackey's pertness, the pedant's over-scrupulosity could be charged against Antoninus; all men recognized in him a mature and finished personality, that was impervious to flattery and entirely capable of ruling both himself and others. He respected genuine philosophers, but refrained from others who just paraded as wise men. Marcus tells us that Antoninus was not jealous of outstanding abilities showed by others, whether in public speaking, law, ethics, or any other department, and that he took pains to give each man the chance of earning a reputation in his own field. Though all his actions were guided by a respect for constitutional precedent, he never courted public recognition of this. His secret and confidential files were few and referred exclusively to matters of state. He showed good sense and restraint over the exhibition of spectacles, construction of public buildings, and distribution of handouts.

This laudatory speech gives us an image of a well-behaved, upper-class Roman gentleman, a common-sense ruler. There is not a trace of the philosophical ideal king. There is just one short remark about philosophy: Antoninus respected the wise men who indulged in it.

Did Marcus have any philosophical or ideological ideas about monarchy and empire? Anyone who reads Marcus' *Meditations* could be disappointed about the scarcity of really political views brought forward in this collection of essays. In this respect Marcus is not exceptional. In his *Hellenism and Empire* Simon Swain observes that the moralists and philosophers of the period from AD 50 to 250 – men like Seneca, Musonius, Plutarch, Dio, Epictetus, Fronto, Aristides, Marcus Aurelius, Galen – devoted much space in their surviving writing to the art of successfully ruling oneself and one's body ... According to Swain, this 'technology of the self' was practiced with an eye on the behavior and advice of others as a taking stock through observation and practice of the correct mode of living in and with society (Swain (1996) 128).

Marcus is not standing on his own. His thoughts have a place within the context of second-century AD Greek and Roman literature and philosophy. He certainly knew Epictetus' work, as we saw above, and he may have known the orations about kingship by Dio Chrysostom, who liked to compare rulers with fathers and shepherds of their people, or with the Sun God, or Hercules, and to ascribe to good monarchs such virtues as *karteria* (endurance), *philia ponou* (love of hard work), *philanthropia* (love of mankind), *pronoia* (forethought), accessibility, kindness, and righteousness (Dio Chrysostom, *Orations* 1–4). *Peri basileias* authors depict the opposite of the good king, the tyrant, in very dark colors, ascribing to him arbitrariness, high-handedness, and all thinkable and unthinkable vices. Greek Second Sophistic authors regarded the Roman Empire as a commonwealth more than as a kind of domination by a foreign power; a commonwealth that had to be governed by a sovereign who displayed

characteristics of the good king and cooperated with the flower of the nations who were living within his realm. Just like the cosmos and nature, the Empire had to be based on a fixed hierarchy of class and rank, each with their specific duties, and with appointed tasks for the individual nations. Romans were skilful administrators and fighters, Pannonians were none too bright but handsome and brave, and the Greeks embodied spirituality and ingenuity. In the works of such authors affairs of the mind ranked highest. True freedom is that of the mind; he who masters himself is stronger than he who masters his enemy in actual battle. In such theorizing Athenian power of the fifth century BC was, for example, but a weak foreshadowing of the truly great Athenian dominion, that of contemporary *paideia*.[4]

The idea of mastering oneself as the truly great task, bigger than ruling an empire or conquering enemies, is certainly an important issue in Marcus' thinking. In *Meditations* 3.4 the author calls someone who wants to control himself and to aspire to a better, more balanced life a 'competitor in the greatest of all contests, the struggle against passion's mastery', and there are more passages where Marcus pays attention to this human quality.[5]

Marcus considered the hierarchically built cosmos a more venerable counterpart of his own empire. In *Meditations* 5.30 he says:

> The Mind of the universe is social. At all events, it has created the lower forms to serve the higher, and then linked together the higher in a mutual dependence on each other. Observe how some are subjected, others are connected, each and all are given their just due, and the more eminent among them are combined in mutual accord.

In the *Meditations* there is a belief in a higher, more sacred commonwealth, a City of God, in which all mankind participates, and which is higher than the Empire, the earthly cosmos under the dominion of Rome and the emperor. Such ideas belong to contemporary convictions, and may have been of some consequence to the perception and acceptance of the Empire by educated opinion throughout all parts of the Empire. In several passages of his *Meditations* Marcus Aurelius emphasizes an over-all unity that is at the background of human law, ethics and society, a common reason that unites all human minds, the origins of which are lying in a more venerable 'city', a City of God, which embraces all, and is almost a Platonic Idea of all cities and societies. In *Meditations* 4.4, one of the most important paragraphs in this respect, Marcus observes that mind is common to us all, and so are reason and law. We are all citizens of a higher commonwealth, partakers in its constitution, and from this common City is derived our mind itself, our reason and our sense of law.

In *Meditations* 2.16 Marcus remarks that reasonable creatures should obey the rule and ordinance of the most venerable of all cities and governments; in

Meditations 3.11 he speaks about 'man, who is a citizen of the highest City, whereof all other cities are like households', and in *Meditations* 4.29 he says that a man who is lacking various virtues is 'a fragment cut off from the City, he who cuts off his own soul from the soul of reasonable creatures, which is one'. According to Marcus, this venerable all-encompassing City takes priority over individuals. In *Meditations* 10.6–7 he simply states that man is part of the Whole, but in *Meditations* 4.23 he more elaborately explains: 'Everything is fitting for me, my Universe, which fits thy purpose, dear City of God'. Not only the heavenly City takes priority over individuals and individual interests, the same seems to go for earthly communities. In *Meditations* 5.22 Marcus establishes that what is not injurious to the city does not injure the citizens either, and in *Meditations* 6.54 he briefly remarks that what does not benefit the hive is no benefit to the bee. In those two very short passages he may hint at the higher, more venerable City, but more probably he just meant human, earthly, imperial community.

Marcus was not alone in having such ideas. Cassius Dio, a near contemporary, a Roman senator of Greek descent from Bithynia in Asia Minor, who lived from about 155 to 235, saw the Empire as a world-polis, in which Rome was the *astu* and Italy plus the provinces the *chora* (de Blois (1998) 3405–15, esp. 3407). This world-polis differs from Marcus' common city, but it shows that ideas of such kinds of unity were not unique to Marcus' *Meditations*. Another indication is to be found in P. Giss. 40, col. 1, 1–12, the only direct evidence for the so-called *Constitutio Antoniniana* of AD 212. In this papyrus text we read:

> Imperator Caesar Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Pius [= Caracalla, LdB] proclaims:/... rather ... the causes and the reasons ... that I render thanks to the immortal gods for preserving me [when that conspiracy occurred],/in that way I believe that I should be able [magnificently and reverently]/to appropriately respond to their majesty, [if] I were able to lead [all/who are now my people] with all others who should join my people [to/the temples of the gods. I give to all of those [who are under my rule/throughout] my whole empire, Roman citizenship, [though the just/claims of communities] should remain, with the exception of the/[*ded*]*iticii*. Because it is suitable that the [whole populace] ought not/only ... already to share in the victory ... my edict will expand the/majesty of the Roman [people ...].

The conspiracy mentioned in this papyrus text has to do with the quarrel between the two emperors who had succeeded Septimius Severus in AD 211, his sons Caracalla and Geta. After Caracalla's victory and Geta's death, the latter was of course depicted as a conspiring usurper, who deserved *damnatio memoriae*. As a matter of fact this *damnatio* was carried into effect in a meticulous way; even in private papyrus texts the name of Geta was deleted (De Jong (2006) 141–59).

A notion of empire-wide unity is also to be found in Herodian's work. Herodian was a Greek writer who may have been an equestrian from Asia Minor who was also acquainted with Rome and lived from the last quarter of the second century until after AD 250.[6] In 1.4.8 the author tells us:

> When the report of his [i.e. Marcus Aurelius', LdB] death was known the whole army that was with him and the common people alike mourned for him. There was not a single subject throughout the Roman Empire that did not grieve at the news and join together with one voice to proclaim his praise. Some praised his kindness as a father, some his goodness as an emperor, others his noble qualities as a general, still others his moderation and discipline as a ruler.

Of course this is a highly rhetorical, exaggerated passage, but nonetheless it contains a notion of empire-wide unity.

4. Effects of Marcus' Philosophizing in Daily Practice

Did Marcus' philosophical ideas have any noticeable influence in daily practice? This is the third issue to be treated in this article. First of all, Marcus established four chairs of philosophy at Athens, for Platonic, Peripatetic, Stoic, and Epicurean philosophy. He may have done this when he visited Athens, in AD 176, between two rounds of warfare in the North. This visit, the four chairs, and some subsidies to pupils of Athenian philosophical schools seem to have enhanced the status of philosophy for many years to come (Hahn (1989) 119f., 127; Rutherford (1989) 82).

There may have been another tangible, direct consequence of Marcus' philosophical inclinations. According to Herodian, philosophy became more popular because of Marcus' own philosophical inclinations. In 1.2.4 this author says:

> As an emperor he [= Marcus Aurelius, LdB] was merciful and fair to his subjects by receiving petitioners and not allowing his bodyguard to drive away people that approached him. He was the only emperor who gave proof of his philosophy by his dignified, sober manner rather than by words and a knowledge of doctrine. The product of the age of Marcus was a large number of scholars, since subjects always model their lives on the ideals of their ruler.

There is an interesting parallel phenomenon from about the same period. In his *Alexander* Lucian tells us about the career of Alexander of Abonuteichos, a fraud in Lucian's view. This Alexander somehow obtained a huge tamed snake, probably somewhere in Thrace, and gave it a human face by putting a mask on its head. Using the snake as an oracle, he founded a new cult in his home town,

and made a handsome profit by selling oracles and amulets. He even organized mysteries (Jones (1986) 133–48). A few of those amulets, which may have been used to ward off the plague, have been found, not only in Asia Minor, but also as far as Athens, Dacia, Antioch in Syria, and Egypt. In one of his articles Louis Robert paid attention to them (Robert (1989) 747–69, esp. 747–49). Why was Alexander that successful? One of the reasons was that a Roman senator called Rutilianus, and even people at the imperial court became interested in this new cult (Lucian, *Alexander* 30–49). Their high status made this new cult more important and popular. If such people were interested, it had to be a serious matter. In a similar way Marcus Aurelius' inclination toward philosophy must have made it a more important matter in circles around the emperor, and thus at top levels in society.

5. The Influence of Marcus' Philosophical Convictions on Practical Politics

What about the influence of Marcus' philosophical ideas on politics? Very soon after his death Marcus was praised by all writers we know of, and was even made into a paradigm but literary sources that discuss his reign do not make mention of any political effect of the emperor's philosophical convictions.

Cassius Dio tells us in his *Roman History* 71.34.2 that in addition to possessing all the other virtues Marcus ruled better than any others who had ever been in any position of power. In 71.35.1 Dio adds that Marcus' education was of great assistance to him, because he had been trained both in rhetoric and philosophical disputation. Dio does not mention, however, any political action that could be traced back to Marcus' political convictions. Nor does he make mention, for that matter, of military qualities, of which Marcus was very much in need during the many warlike years of his reign. In Dio's view a good ruler should be a well-educated, well-behaved, virtuous person, who respected traditional social hierarchies, and not a soldiers' hero, a popular, efficient, tough military leader (de Blois (1998) 3405–15). Dio did not have high opinions about the qualities of most of Marcus' successors. In 71.36.4, he regretfully remarks that after Marcus' death in AD 180 history descended from a kingdom of gold to one of iron and rust, as affairs did for the Romans of that day.

Herodian starts his work with a eulogy on Marcus Aurelius, who is portrayed as the example of a good emperor. Not only did he possess all the traditional qualities and virtues of Greek 'mirrors of princes', like a good family background, an excellent education, interest in culture and philosophy, moderation, zeal, courage, and charity, but he also excelled in military prowess and competence in legal matters. Herodian thinks that Marcus also knew how to select good assistants and sons-in-law (Herodian 1.2–4; de Blois (1998) 3416).

Like Cassius Dio, Herodian does not trace back any political action of Marcus to his philosophical insights.

In the fourth century AD, Marcus was considered a very good or even the best ruler the Empire had ever had. In the *Caesares* of Julian the Apostate, who ruled the Roman Empire from 361 to 363, Marcus Aurelius gets the first prize. In 312 AB Julian remarks that Marcus' only error was to select his son Commodus as his successor. Obviously Julian, a kind of neo-platonist himself, liked Marcus' philosophical attitude, and was glad to see it as the cause of Marcus' good behavior and his sound and wise government.

In Aurelius Victor's *Caesares* 16 Marcus is praised because of his successful wars and the sensible practical measures he took, but in this short work there is not a word about any influence on politics of Marcus' philosophical preferences.

At the very beginning of his biography of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, as he calls him, which was written at the end of the fourth century AD, the author of the *Historia Augusta* says that Marcus was devoted to philosophy as long as he lived and that he received an excellent education (*HA Marcus Antoninus* 1–2), but he does not give us a description of Marcus' way of thinking and its consequences to his policies. In the following chapters the author of the *Historia Augusta* ascribes all kinds of human and imperial virtues to this emperor, but he never explicitly speaks about any tangible influence of Marcus' philosophical insights on his practical policies. These insights just contributed to shaping his personal character and virtue, which in its turn determined Marcus' public behavior.

According to Johannes Hahn, Marcus considered himself a philosopher, as is shown by quite a few passages in the *Meditations* (Hahn (1989) 186, referring to Brunt (1974)). As Hahn indicates, the author of the *Historia Augusta* tells us that one saying of Plato's was constantly on Marcus' lips, that is that those states prospered where philosophers were kings or the kings philosophers (Plato, *Res publica* 473de). However, the influence of philosophy on practical politics is not traceable. Marcus was a very active ruler, in every respect, but he did not try to reform society along philosophical lines. There is not much philosophy in his warfare, his financial and fiscal strategies or his appointment policies, nor in his rescripts and legal decisions. Marcus had a particular interest in family law – guardianships, inheritances, and Trajan's *alimenta*-system included – and in rulings about slavery and manumission (Grimal (1991) 252–66; McLynn (2009) 181–84). In his verdicts and rescripts Marcus shows himself to be a pragmatist and an experienced connoisseur of Roman law. The traditional Roman virtue of *aequitas* characterized his many judicial decisions, more so than Stoic doctrine. More than anyone else Pierre Grimal tried to discover Stoic influences in Marcus' rescripts, and in the sixth chapter of his *Marc Aurèle* (Grimal (1991)) he cites quite a few passages from the *Digesta*,

but all those texts are standing in sound Roman traditions, and do not reflect any philosophical theorizing.[7]

6. Conclusion

The conclusion must be that Marcus' philosophical inclinations were of some consequence to daily practice, but did not much influence practical politics in a systematic way, through philosophically oriented political reform. Nor did the emperor have very original ideas about monarchy and empire. His ideal ruler looked like a decent Roman gentleman who would govern according to tradition and law. Marcus' philosophical convictions were not very much influenced by the epidemics and wars that besought the Empire during his reign. Through philosophy the emperor tried to improve his individual, personal qualities, which in turn would enable him to be a better ruler. The upheavals of his times, especially of the years AD 170–80, the decade during which much of the *Meditations* may have been written, did not exert much influence on Marcus' *Thoughts*. Even in the midst of such turmoil he concentrated on the art of successfully ruling himself and his body, and on adapting himself to higher rulings, those of nature and the City of God.

NOTES

1. See Birley (1987) 102f.; Rutherford (1989) 21–6 and 225–31 (comparison of Marcus and Epictetus); Fündling (2008) 40–55 and 115–29; McLynn (2009) 204–55. In his *Meditations* Marcus explicitly mentions Epictetus and his work, for example in 1.7, 4.41, 11.34, and 12.34. On 'The Whole' or 'World-Nature' or the 'Universe' to which we all belong and relate see *Meditations* 2.3, 2.9, 8.52, 9.7, and 12.23. On Marcus' idea of a 'City of God' see one of the other paragraphs in this article. It is explicitly mentioned in *Meditations* 4.23.
2. On the date of writing of the *Meditations* see Birley (1987) 211–23. Rutherford (1989) 45–47 and Fündling (2008) 116 are more careful. Rightly so, for it is extremely difficult to say anything about the date and order of writing of the essays, which together constitute the *Meditations*. On themes, character, and composition of the *Meditations* see Rutherford (1989) 126–55.
3. Cf. *Meditations* 3.10, 4.3, 4.19, 4.32, and 12.27.
4. See de Blois (1984) 362. On the Athenian Empire see Aelius Aristides, *Panathenaikos* 225ff. On the primacy of the mind and self-control see Epictetus, *Dissertationes* 1.29.9, 4.3.9f.; Philostratus, *Vita Apollonii* 3.10 and 26ff., where he discusses the primacy of Indian wise men over their king; Arrianus, *Anabasis Alexandrou* 4.8f.; Dio Chrysostom, *Oration* 4 and *Oration* 44.11f.; Ps.-Aelius Aristides, *Eis basilea* 29.

5. See for example *Meditations* 1.15, 2.5, 2.8, 3.6, and 4.3.
6. On Herodian see Alföldy (1989), and de Blois (2003).
7. In footnotes 40–73 (pp. 404f.) to chapter 6, Grimal mentions among others *Digesta* 26.5.24, 27.1.1.4, 27.1.7, 27.1.15.2 (on aspects of family law); 5.2.17.1, 11.4.3, 18.7.10, 28.4.3, 40.1.4.pr and 5.pr, 40.3.1, 40.8.3, 40.9.17.pr, 48.10.7, 48.19.33 (on aspects of slavery and manumission); 1.8.6.1, 48.18.1–2, and 48.18.16.pr (on slavery and torture); he mentions also *Codex Justinianus* 5.62.17, 6.27.2, 7.11.3, and 7.12.1.

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