

Episode 234 - Cicero's OTNOTG - 09 - Dealing With Marcus Aurelius And The Canonical Basis For the Epicurean View Of Divinity

Post by “Cassius” of June 19, 2024 at 1:59 PM

As to Marcus Aurelius, [this post by the traditionalist Stoic Chris Fisher](#) summarizes some key points:

As Mark Forstater wrote in his insightful book *The Spiritual Teachings of Marcus Aurelius*:

Quote

Until the time of Neoplatonism, Stoicism was the most highly spiritualised form of philosophy in ancient Greece and Rome. It was so spiritualised that it is as accurate to call it a religion as a philosophy.^[5]

As Henry Sedgewick points out in his biography of Marcus Aurelius, the traditional religions did not provide what he was looking for,

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Marcus was seeking a religion, as I have said, but there was none at hand that he could accept. The old Roman religion was a mere series of ceremonies, with nothing sacred except lingering patriotic sentiment, and withal marred by superstitions, such as those at Lanuvium. Foreign religions were no better. Syrian priests, like mountebanks, trundled images of the Magna Mater about the countryside, hoping to wheedle peasants out of their pennies; the worshippers of the Egyptian gods offered sensuous exaltation, and mysteries that disregarded reason. Christianity, as we understand it, was utterly unknown to him. He was compelled to look for religion in philosophy; for there only, as he thought, and perhaps thought truly, could a man, without doing wrong to his reason, find spiritual help to enable him to do his duty and keep his soul pure.^[6]

Marcus did not find consolation in the rituals of traditional religions or the mediation of priests. He was looking for psychological strength and consolation which could allow him to keep his mind pure in trying times and under troublesome circumstances. Marcus discovered the personal religious practice he was looking for within the deeply spiritual philosophy of Stoicism.^[7] As a result, his life became an example of the power of Stoicism in a person's inner life. Sedgewick argues,

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<http://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/3915-episode-234-cicero-s-otnotg-09-dealing-with-marcus-aurelius-and-the-canonical-ba/?postID=31033#post31033>

Marcus Aurelius is not a prodigy among men, unheralded by what has come before; on the contrary he is the ripe product of the spiritual movement that expressed itself in the Stoic philosophy, or rather, as it had then become, the Stoic religion.^[8]

As can be seen in his *Meditations*, Marcus followed the Stoic path and became his own priest, in service to the gods,

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For such a man, who no longer postpones his endeavour to take his place among the best, is indeed a priest and servant of the gods, behaving rightly towards the deity stationed within him, so ensuring that the mortal being remains unpolluted by pleasures, invulnerable to every pain, untouched by any wrong, unconscious of any evil, a wrestler in the greatest contest of all... (Meditations 3.4.3)

In *Meditations* 3.16, Marcus draws upon the importance of the divine while discussing four models of human behavior.

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Body, soul, intellect: for the body, sense-impressions; for the soul, impulses; for the intellect, judgements. To receive impressions by means of images is something that we share even with cattle; and to be drawn this way and that by the puppet-strings of impulse, we share with wild beasts, with catamites, and with a Phalaris or a Nero; and to have the intellect as a guide towards what appear to be duties is something that we share with those who do not believe in the gods, with those who betray their country, with those who will do anything whatever behind locked doors. If you share everything else with those whom I have just mentioned, there remains the special characteristic of a good person, namely, to love and welcome all that happens to him and is spun for him as his fate, and not to defile the guardian-spirit seated within his breast, nor to trouble it with a host of fancies, but to preserve it in cheerful serenity, following God in an orderly fashion, never uttering a word that is contrary to the truth nor performing an action that is contrary to justice.

...

[i]n *Meditations* 2.12-13, Marcus juxtaposes the persons who “hold fast to the guardian-spirit within” with those whose sole focus is on intellectual pursuits:

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Consider too how a human being makes contact with God, and through what part of himself, and how that part of him must be disposed if he is to do so. There is nothing

more pitiable than the person who makes the circuit of everything and, as the poet says, 'searches into the depths of the earth', and tries to read the secrets of his neighbour's soul, yet fails to perceive that it is enough to hold fast to the guardian-spirit within him and serve it single-mindedly; and this service is to keep it pure from passion and irresponsibility and dissatisfaction with anything that comes from gods or human beings. For what comes from the gods is worthy of reverence because of their goodness, and what comes from human beings should be dear to us because we share a common nature...

...

Providence or Atoms

Quote

But perhaps you are discontented with what is allotted to you from the whole? Then call to mind the alternative, 'either providence or atoms' and all the proofs that the universe should be regarded as a kind of constitutional state. (Meditations 4.3.5)

Marcus Aurelius understood and accepted the Stoic worldview, which includes a rationally ordered and providential cosmos. Additionally, Marcus relied on the Stoic theory of psychology, which asserts that our emotions are connected to our value judgments. Therefore, he understood how one's accepted worldview could affect their judgments of events in the world. In his *Meditations*, Marcus links acceptance of a providential worldview to a 'cheerful mind' (2.3) and sees a call to action within it (2.4). Again, in *Meditations* 4.3.5, he suggests our resentment of the circumstance of our lives is the result of denying providence.^[11] As Dragona-Monachou makes clear,

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Divine providence is a firm belief of Marcus Aurelius's. He declares: "The gods exist and have concern for human affairs" (2, 11, 3). The "whole divine economy is pervaded by providence" (2, 3, 1). He considers "life not worth living unless there exist providential gods" (2, 11, 2), and believes that the existence of providential gods is a by far more plausible and acceptable alternative to atoms, chance or confusion (4, 3, 3; 4, 27; 9, 9; 7, 19, etc.).^[12]

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Even though the meaning of some of Marcus' "providence or atoms" passages appear unclear when considered individually, few scholars doubt Marcus' commitment to providence. As Pierre Hadot writes,

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Whatever modern historians may claim, the dilemma “either providence or chance,” when used by Seneca or by Marcus Aurelius, does not signify either the renunciation of Stoic physical theories or an eclectic attitude which refuses to decide between Epicureanism and Stoicism. In fact, we can see that Marcus has already made his choice between Epicureanism and Stoicism, by the very way in which he describes the Epicurean model with a variety of pejorative terms...[\[14\]](#)

While addressing a common question, “How much of a Stoic is Marcus Aurelius in the *Meditations*?” Christopher Gill writes,

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*On the one hand, apart from his explicit allegiance to Stoicism (e.g., I 7- 8), the dominating themes are strongly Stoic and there are clear signs of the influence of Epictetus’ ethical programme. On the other hand, the style is idiosyncratic, with strong Heraclitean, Cynic, and Platonic colouring... Most puzzling of all, despite his frequent adoption of a cosmic perspective on ethical life, he sometimes expresses indifference about which worldview is correct: the Stoic providential one or the Epicurean view that the universe is a fortuitous collection of atoms...The ‘providence or atoms’ theme is more puzzling, though in some passages the question seems more open than in others. But it may be important that Marcus acknowledges, in *Meditations* I 17, that he has not himself actually completed the three-part Stoic curriculum (including logic and physics) that would yield the cosmic understanding he seeks to apply to his own life. Hence, the Stoic worldview has to be, in this respect, taken on trust (though Marcus overwhelmingly does take it on trust) - a fact perhaps acknowledged in his use of the ‘providence or atoms’ theme.[\[15\]](#)*

...

After pointing out that Marcus leaves the competing hypotheses of several “unresolved issues in Stoic physics” open, David Sedley writes:

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His unexpected openness to Epicurean physics as an alternative to the Stoic model reads as if it were an extension of this same policy, despite the obvious difference that he is palpably committed to the truth of Stoicism and hence the falsity of Epicureanism.[\[20\]](#)

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As David Sedley notes in his chapter titled *Marcus Aurelius on Physics*, in *A Companion to Marcus Aurelius*:

Quote

In reminding himself to apply physical thinking to every idea he entertains, Marcus captures a vital aspect of his meditations. The question what part physics plays in Stoic ethics has been a frequent subject of modern debate. In Marcus we may find no theoretical answer to that question, but we get to see, worked out in practice, his recognition that reflection on how the cosmos functions is an absolutely integral part of the Stoic moral life. Throughout his reflections on human values, he can be seen constantly turning to the cosmos as a concept to think with.

Marcus' cosmos or world is recognizably and indeed technically Stoic. It is a single, finite, cohesive organism, surrounded by void. Partly as a consequence, it is entirely self-contained and cohesive in its functioning, internally governed by the inexorable sequence of causes known as 'fate'. So far as its underlying constitution is concerned, it is composed out of two ultimate items, of which one is a pliable material substrate, and the other, acting upon this, a single intelligent divine causal power, sometimes identified with its 'seminal reason' (spermatikos logos).^[22]

Many moderns question the necessity of providence for the practice of Stoicism. To do so, they must modify Stoicism in ways that remove one of its most potent psychological tools—a trust that all events in nature, even those we would typically judge as bad, have a purpose and serve the good of the whole. This trust and the attitude of gratitude that springs from it are expressed beautifully by Marcus in one of my favorite passages.

Quote

Everything suits me that suits your designs, O my universe. Nothing is too early or too late for me that is in your own good time. All is fruit for me that your seasons bring, O nature. All proceeds from you, all subsists in you, and to you all things return. (Meditations 4.23)

It is simply not possible to make sense of passages like this apart from Marcus' absolute and unequivocal trust in the providential nature of the cosmos. These are not the words of a begrudging acceptance of life's events. Marcus exhibits something far more perceptive than a bear and forbear attitude toward events that were not up to him. No, he is expressing a profound trust that every event in Nature has a purpose. Marcus didn't need to remind himself about the detailed, technical, philosophical arguments for providence in his journal; he lived it every day of his life, and that was proof enough for him.