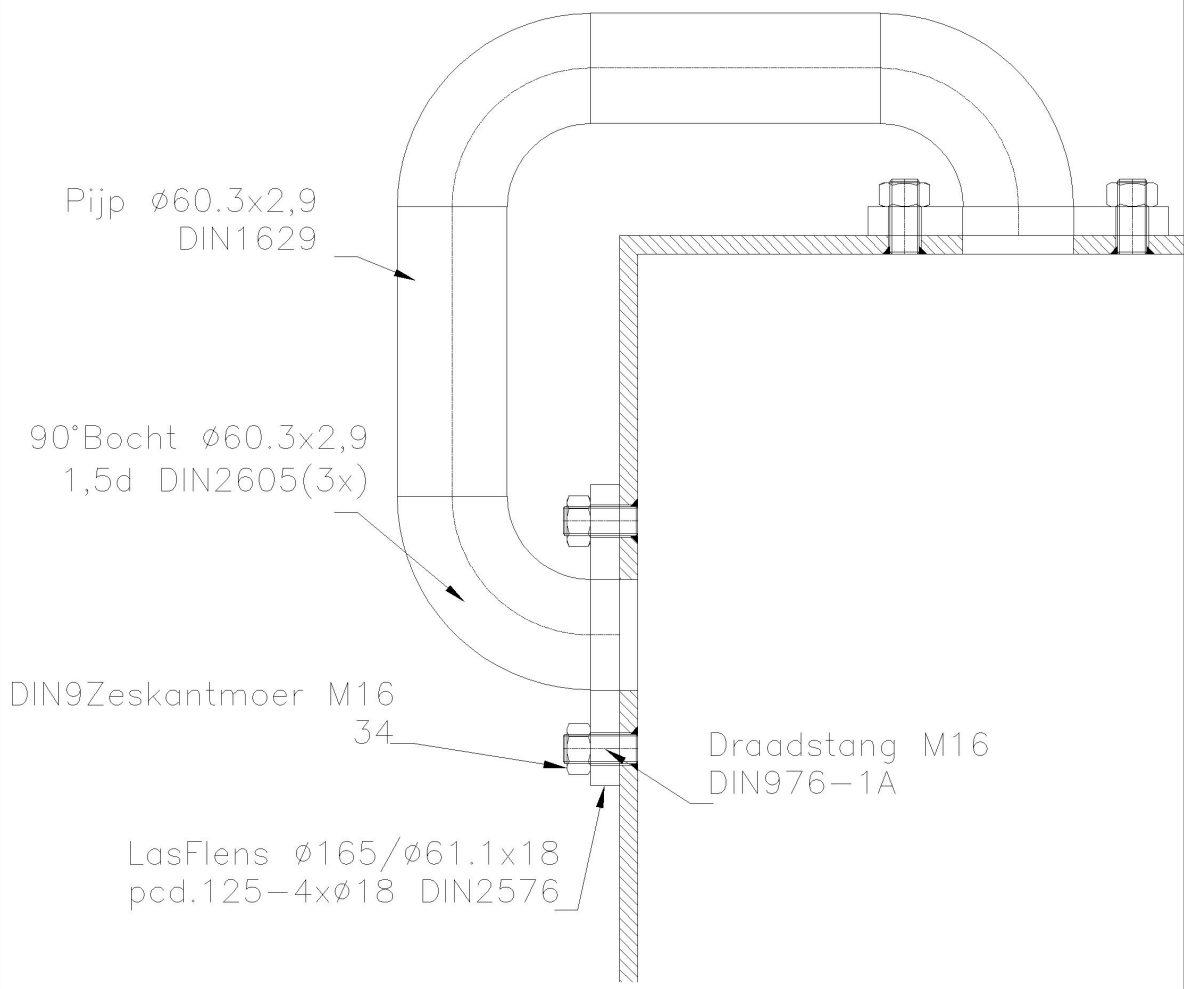


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| The limits of Stoicism in Marcus Aurelius | | | EUR#324488 | | |
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To pursue the unattainable is insanity.¹

¹ Marcus Aurelius (1964): 52 (Subsequent references to Marcus Aurelius will be made as follows: MA BOOK.paragraph, references to other literature will be made in footnotes)

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Just a thought...

Has anyone ever told you 'to figure it out for yourself'? 'It' may have been any subject matter. I mean; it could have been about your career choices, relationships or even love. But it must have involved a really personal issue, something touching the core of 'you'. Did you actually manage to 'figure it out for yourself'? Be honest, did you manage to formulate an answer without the help of others, on your own. Did you really manage to make a decision solely based on your very own judgements, without interference from others? Did you? Or did you, before making your decision, ask someone for advice on the issue? Is that actually possible, to make a decision based solely on what you yourself think that matters?

Let's see, shall we...?

Introduction

From the last decades of the second century AD, two remarkable stories about the Roman Empire have survived. One of them is the steady stream of reports about the last great emperor who reigned with dignity and wisdom. The other is a collection of sayings and notes, which seem to be meant to encourage someone in the performance of his duty towards the common wealth. Both of these stories originate within the same person: Marcus Aurelius (121-180 AD).

As an emperor, Marcus Aurelius was the mouthpiece of Roman culture. He embodied the political and religious structure of Roman society. He protected the rules and rights of its religions. But most of all he provided stability within the cities of the Roman Empire and along its borders. If needed, Marcus had to resort to the use of force and the application of punishment. He may have given praise to his soldiers, but the reports of such events are almost non-existent. Marcus Aurelius was aware of the duties of an emperor and lived his life accordingly.

On the other hand, as a person, Marcus Aurelius seems to have had a lifelong struggle with his duties. Few reliable comments by his contemporaries remain. Only once has he been reported to have smiled.² Marcus mainly appears to us as a flat character whose personality was fixed when he reached about the age of fourteen. This age marks a turning point in Marcus' personal life. He abandoned the study of Rhetorics and converted to the study of stoicism. In a much later part of his life, this stoicism is reflected in the collection of aphorisms and notes which bears the title *Ta eis heauton*.

If you had a stepmother at the same time as a mother, you would do your duty by the former, but would still turn continually to your mother. Here you have both: the court and philosophy. Time and again turn back to philosophy for

² Van Hooff (2012): 141

refreshment; then even the court life, and yourself in it will seem bearable.
(MA VI.12)

Philosophy had been important for Marcus Aurelius. Stoicism as described in *Ta eis heauton* provided him with the tools for dealing with the world. But at the same time, *Ta eis heauton* also provided him with the means of venting his frustrations about the world and its inhabitants. In this way, *Ta eis heauton* provides us with a rare insight into the mind of a troubled man. We read about Marcus' doubts, his moments of stress and his sense of insufficiency in dealing with other people. At the same time we read about the task of putting the standards for human performance at a high level.

This duality in *Ta eis heauton* is likely to lend its author the reputation of being a tragic personality. Marcus is caught in what I propose to call a "*condition Aurélienne*": a never ending striving for goodness, while at the same time experiencing a profound sense of failure. This tragedy seems to originate from the discrepancy between theory and practice. Marcus then would be trapped in the gap between the way the world is and the way he thinks the world should be.

Most present-day histories of pagan stoicism end with Marcus Aurelius.³ Subsequent chapters are usually either a resumé of other pagan philosophical schools or a description of the advent of Christian philosophy. Was Marcus Aurelius then the last pagan stoic after whom the stoic tradition became a casualty on the philosophical battlefield that was eventually (bound to be) won by Christianity? It seems so. Christianity was rapidly becoming a political force of its own.⁴ During the course of time it had assimilated many other philosophical schools. Stoicism was just one more of its victims.⁵

On the other hand, one may ask whether the *condition Aurélienne* might indicate that something more is at hand. Stoic philosophy was a philosophy that tried to unify various area's of interest: physics, logic and ethics. In this fashion it managed to create an all-encompassing philosophy capable of explaining human behaviour as well as physical phenomena. The aim was to give an individual the means to maintain himself within the expanding worlds of the Hellenistic and later the Roman

³ See for example: Russell (1946, 2008): 299, Störig (1959, 1988): 186 or Copleston (1946): 438.

⁴ Van Hooff (2012): 194

⁵ Kenny (2004): 110

periods.⁶ Stoicism was at once both self-centred as well as cosmopolitan. But even with this philosophy for guidance, Marcus has a hard time maintaining himself. Could it be that the *condition Aurélienne* indicates that stoicism has a limit?

I will try to analyse *Ta eis heauton* on two different levels:

- At a personal level: If Marcus was falling short in attaining his goals, then these goals may indeed be beyond human effort. In that case, the *condition Aurélienne* would only be the *condition humaine*, an human problem with personal impact;
- At a philosophical level: What problems are encapsulated, hidden so deep within stoic philosophy, as pursued by Marcus Aurelius, that he could not have been aware of them? If it is true that stoicism is incapable of contributing to a unity of inward and outward successes, then the *condition Aurélienne* is a *condition stoïque*. In that case stoicism contains a fundamental flaw and human shortcomings with respect to stoic doctrines need not be ascribed to any human insufficiencies.

The analysis will follow three questions:

1. What did Marcus expect to gain from his philosophy?
2. Did he get it?
3. If not, why not?

My analysis will not only show that stoicism is incapable of solving certain problems, but also that these very problems have consequences with effects in present day situations.

A few notes on the translation of *Ta eis heauton* need to be made beforehand:

Marcus had an affinity with Greek culture. He showed this in his appearance. He wore a beard, which was very un-typical for Romans. Likewise, he wrote *Ta eis heauton* in Greek. Contemporary translators have struggled to translate this title into modern languages. Maxwell Staniforth (the translator of my English edition) uses 'Meditations'. This translation however seems misguided. Most of Marcus' writings are too short and aphoristic to count as the type of thing that is as carefully worked out as one would expect a 'meditation' to be. Simone Mooij-Valk (the translator of my Dutch edition) uses 'Personal Notes' (*Persoonlijke notities*). This comes a lot closer

⁶ Long (1971, 1996): 176

to the literal meaning of *Ta eis heauton*: 'Things to myself'. A similar translation: 'To myself' (*Tot mijzelf*) is suggested by Marcus' Dutch biographer Anton van Hooff. Even though I tend to interpret the title *Ta eis heauton* along the lines of Van Hooff's translation, I will use its original name: *Ta eis heauton*. In this way, I hope to avoid most ambiguities arising from the inevitable additions of meanings by subsequent translators.

While I was preparing my notes for this text, I noticed another interesting difference (though of minor importance for my purposes) between my English and Dutch translations. Staniforth's translation of 1964 paints a much more optimistic picture of Marcus Aurelius than Mooij-Valk's of 1994. An interesting study might be made as to whether this is due to the time span of 30 years between both translations, or whether this may be due to cultural differences between the Dutch and the English audiences or Dutch and English ways of expression. In any case, it remains remarkable that Mooij-Valk adds much more tragic overtones to her translation than Staniforth does. Being neither in the possession of an original Greek text, nor able to read and understand Greek, I have to assume that the original Greek text can support both interpretations. In presenting quotes from *Ta eis heauton* I will use Staniforth's edition, while leaning more towards Mooij-Valk's interpretation. This will be most evident in my treatment of the *hegemonikon* as mentioned later in this text.

One more remark about *Ta eis heauton* and its author needs to be made. Philosophers tend to rank Marcus Aurelius among the later stoics, together with Seneca and Epictetus. However, they seem to prefer not to treat him in-depth. This is reasonable since *Ta eis heauton* is too fragmented in set up and often ambiguous, if not at times contradictory. I do not pretend to be able to solve any ambiguities in the text. Marcus may have been in a hurry or extremely occupied with state affairs when he wrote his lines. Careful consideration might have prevented him from being inconsistent, but he does not seem to have taken his time for doing so. I intend to use these ambiguities for my purposes as much as possible. In doing so I may be criticized for perspectivism or even eclecticism. But... well let me quote Marcus here:

There are obvious objections to the Cynic Monimus's statement that 'things are determined by the view taken of them'; but the value of his aphorism is equally obvious, if we admit the substance of it so far as it contains a truth.
(MA II.15)

Chapter 1: What does Marcus expect from his philosophy?

One can easily imagine it. The 'good' emperor sitting down on his bed. It's been a busy day, his head is spinning, his ears are buzzing, his brain is frying, he needs a bit of rest.

Men seek seclusion in the wilderness, by the seashore, or in the mountains – a dream you have cherished only too fondly yourself. But such fancies are wholly unworthy of a philosopher, since at any moment you choose you can retire within yourself. Nowhere can man find a quieter or more untroubled retreat than in his own soul; above all, he who possesses resources in himself, which he need only contemplate to secure immediate ease of mind – the ease that is but another word for a well-ordered spirit. Avail yourself often, then, of this retirement, and so continually renew yourself. Make your rules of life brief, yet so as to embrace the fundamentals; recurrence to them will then suffice to remove all vexation, and send you back without fretting to the duties to which you must return...

It could have been a painting by Caspar David Friedrich: the lone wanderer seeking refuge in the confrontation with nature in the wilderness of the mountains. But Marcus cannot afford himself to go all the way into the mountains, and withdraw himself from his duties. It is better, and more convenient to enter the realm of philosophical thought. No attributes are needed. Total independence awaits in the quiet contemplation of a well ordered and peaceful life. A few simple rules are all that is required.

...After all, what is it that frets you? The vices of humanity? Remember the doctrine that all rational beings are created for one another; that toleration is a

part of justice; and that men are not intentional evildoers. Think of the enmities, suspicions, animosities, and conflicts that are now vanished with the dust and ashes of the men who knew them; and fret no more...

Merely remembering the thought that human actions and their effects are limited to a short period of time does a lot to lessen the pain caused by such actions.

...Or is it your allotted portion in the universe that chafes you? Recall once again the dilemma, 'if not a wise Providence, then a mere jumble of atoms', and consider the profusion of evidence that this world is as it were a city. Do the ills of the body afflict you? Reflect that the mind has but to detach itself and apprehend its own powers, to be no longer involved with the movements of the breath, whether they be smooth or rough. In short, recollect all you have learnt and accepted regarding pain and pleasure...

When it is accepted that the universe is providing only good things and events for her parts, it will be much easier to bear anything that seems to be an evil. This will make it possible to withdraw from bad experiences and remain at a distance from outward influences.

...Or does the bubble reputation distract you? Keep before your eyes the swift onset of oblivion, and the abysses of eternity before us and behind; mark how hollow are the echoes of applause, how fickle and undiscerning the judgements of professed admirers, and how puny the arena of human fame. For the entire earth is but a point, and the place of our own habitation but a minute corner in it; and how many are therein who will praise you, and what sort of men are they?...

After all, how big can your pain be when it is compared to the expanse of the universe? Reflect on that and only humility will remain as the proper attitude. Anyone who aims for the praise of others, does not realize how small his place in the universe is. He cannot understand that there is a bigger scheme of things.

...Remember then to withdraw into the little field of self. Above all, never struggle or strain; but be master of yourself, and view life as a man, as a human being, as a citizen, and as a mortal. Among the truths you will do well to contemplate most frequently are these two: first, that things can never touch the soul, but stand inert outside it, so that disquiet can arise only from fancies within; and secondly, that all visible objects change in a moment and will be no more. Think of the countless changes in which you yourself have had a part. The whole universe is change, and life is but what you deem it. (MA III.3)

Freedom lies in the art of self-mastery. Self-mastery, according to Epictetus, Marcus' philosophical inspiration, is the ability of deciding what is and what is not under your control.⁷ Only in the disregard of other people's opinions about yourself can you find deliverance of their habits and expectations. Such disregard is the result of the knowledge of two simple truths:

- Anything that is not of the same matter as the soul, cannot touch or harm it;
- Objects are not even capable of avoiding change, therefore they can be disregarded as objects of lasting importance for the soul.

Marcus is turning towards philosophy to give him peace of mind. Philosophy provides the knowledge and tools needed to take personal matters into one's own hands. Peace of mind is utterly personal and therefore closely connected to self-control.

But there is more that Marcus hopes to achieve by practicing philosophy:

In the life of a man, his time is but a moment, his being an incessant flux, his senses a dim rushlight, his body a prey of worms, his soul an unquiet eddy, his fortune dark and his fame doubtful. In short, all that is of the body is as coursing waters, all that is of the soul as dreams and vapours; life a warfare, a brief sojourning in an alien land; and after repute, oblivion...

Within a world of change, Marcus has to find a secure point to orientate himself, to give him a bearing for his thoughts and actions.

⁷ Epictetus: I.1

...Where, then, can man find the power to guide and guard his steps? In one thing and one alone: Philosophy. To be a philosopher is to keep unsullied and unscathed the divine spirit within him, so that it may transcend all pleasure and all pain, take nothing in hand without purpose and nothing falsely or with dissimulation, depend not on another's actions or inactions, accept each and every dispensation as coming from the same Source as itself – and last and chief, wait with a good grace for death, as no more than a simple dissolving of the elements whereof each living thing is composed...

Philosophy gives him the security of knowing what he has to do. It gives him a moral purpose in life other than advantageously seeking pleasure. It also provides him with the means of accepting his fate. Fate is nothing more than anything that may befall anyone by chance.⁸ There is no personal grudge of the gods against his actions or intentions, just the workings of Nature:

...If those elements themselves take no harm from their ceaseless forming and reforming, why look with distrust upon the change and dissolution of the whole? It is but Nature's way; and in the ways of Nature there is no evil to be found. (MA II.17)

Philosophical analysis of Nature reveals that there is nothing to fear but ourselves and our judgements. Knowing what to do helps to provide peace of mind as well. But knowing what to do, requires doing it in order to obtain this peace of mind:

If you do the task before you always adhering to strict reason with zeal and energy and yet with humanity, disregarding all lesser ends and keeping the divinity within you pure and upright, as though you were even now faced with its recall – if you hold steadily to this, staying for nothing, only seeking in each passing action a conformity with nature and in each word and utterance a fearless truthfulness, then shall the good life be yours. And from this course no man has the power to hold you back. (MA III.12)

⁸ de Mul (2007): 30.

There it is: the good life. Within a world of turmoil, obligations, change and annoyance, one can live a good life of peace and self-mastery. But the good life does not come easy, it has to be achieved. Hard work and observation of Nature's workings will eventually lead Marcus there.

A man's true delight is to do the things he was made for. He was made to show goodwill to his kind, to rise above the promptings of his senses, to distinguish appearances from realities, and to pursue the study of universal Nature and her works. (MA VIII.26)

There are three expectations Marcus keeps repeating throughout *Ta eis heauton*:

- Peace of mind, tranquility even. The Greek word is *ataraxia*;
- Satisfaction of dealing well with the events of life. In Greek this is called *eudaimonia*;
- Self-mastery, taking matters into his own hands, having control over his life: *autarkeia*.

Chapter 2: Instruments of philosophy

If philosophy would be able to provide *ataraxia*, *eudaimonia* and *autarkeia*, what are the tools or instruments she provides to obtain them? After all, philosophy is of little use when she cannot provide the means to obtain what she promises. Marcus explains:

If mortal life can offer you anything better than justice and truth, self-control and courage – that is, peace of mind in the evident conformity of your actions to the laws of reason, and peace of mind under the visitations of a destiny you cannot control – if, I say, you can discern any higher ideal, why, turn to it with your whole soul, and rejoice in the prize you have found...

Here is the prize to be obtained in life: self-control (*autarkeia*), peace of mind due to rational actions (*eudaimonia*) and peace of mind due to the distance between the events of life and the judgements about them (*ataraxia*).

...But if nothing seems to you better than the deity which dwells within you, directing each impulse, weighing each impression, abjuring (in the Socratic phrase) the temptations of the flesh, and avowing allegiance to the gods and compassion for mankind;...

This is one instrument: cultivating the ability to decide between what seems important to the body and what is really important with respect to humanity and the gods.

...if you find all else to be mean and worthless in comparison, then leave yourself no room for any rival pursuits. For if you once falter and turn aside,

you will no longer be able to give unswerving loyalty to this ideal you have chosen for your own. No ambitions of a different nature can contest the title to goodness which belongs to reason and civic duty; not the world's applause, nor power, nor wealth, nor the enjoyment of pleasure. For a while there may seem to be no incongruity in these things, but very quickly they get the upper hand and sweep a man off his balance. Do you then, I would say, simply and spontaneously make your choice of the highest, and cleave to that...

Here is another instrument, or rather: here are some more instruments. Living the good life can be obtained by adhering to a set of simple rules and sticking to them.

'But what is the best for myself is the highest,' you say? If it is best for you as a reasonable being, hold fast to it; but if as an animal merely, then say so outright, and maintain your view with becoming humility – only be very sure that you have probed the matter aright. (MA III.6)

This is the last instrument: rationality and the correct use of it.

All in all, Marcus has provided us with three instruments for obtaining the good life:

- The ability to decide between what seems important to the body and what is really important. This ability resides in the *hegemonikon*, a stoic term for the highest form of rationality, unique to humans;⁹
- Living life according to a set of simple rules or maxims;
- Following the laws of reason.

The *hegemonikon*, maxims and rationality are mentioned time and again throughout *Ta eis heauton*. However, Marcus is not always entirely clear about what each term is supposed to mean.

Chapter 2.1: Hegemonikon

The *hegemonikon* plays a key role in Marcus' model of the human constitution. Unfortunately, there is no single word in modern day languages that covers the same content. Staniforth uses several translations, Master-spirit or Master-faculty being the most common. Sometimes he uses Reason, Ruler or Helmsman. His translations are meant to suit the context of the text as much as possible. Simone Mooij-Valk

always translates *hegemonikon* with 'inner compass' (*innerlijk kompas*). This way she tries to maintain the guiding character of the *hegemonikon*. In treating the *hegemonikon* I have decided to stay with Staniforth's translations, adding the word *hegemonikon* between brackets where Mooij-Valk uses *innerlijk kompas* in her translation.

In order to know how Marcus would define the *hegemonikon*, we would have to know how Marcus would define anything:

See what things consist of; resolve them into their matter, form, and purpose.
(MA XII.10)

Staniforth translates the second element as form, this makes it seem that Marcus follows a peripatetic division. Mooij-Valk however translates it as *oorzaak*, cause, this would be much closer to a stoic point of view. I will have to assume that both translations can be supported by the original Greek. Whatever the matter, the stoic method of analysis that Marcus uses is division and classification. Marcus divides and classifies every thing into three elements: matter, form / cause and purpose. This includes himself:

A little flesh, a little breath and a Reason (*hegemonikon*) to rule all – that is myself. (Forget your books; no more hankering for them; they were no part of your equipment.) As one already on the threshold of death, think nothing of the first – of its viscid blood, its bones, its web of nerves and veins and arteries. The breath, too; what is that? A whiff of wind; and not even the same wind, but every moment puffed out and drawn in anew. But the third, the Reason (*hegemonikon*), the master – on this you must concentrate. Now that your hairs are grey, let it play the part of a slave no more, twitching puppetwise at every pull of self-interest; and cease to fume at destiny by ever grumbling at today or lamenting over tomorrow. (MA II.2)

Marcus dissects himself in three parts:

- Flesh, the body, matter;

⁹ Mooij-Valk (1995): 31

-
- Breath, within ancient stoic terminology compatible with the soul¹⁰, the body's causal element¹¹;
 - The *hegemonikon* as a kind of independent rational faculty apparently meant to give purpose to body and soul.

This tripartite division is a typical stoic element in Marcus' philosophy. The body and the soul were material entities, which interacted almost mechanically with each other. The *hegemonikon* was the rational faculty, which directed the body and mind towards the right decisions. For a better understanding of the *hegemonikon* it is therefore important to analyse the stoic understanding of the interaction between body and mind as described by Marcus.

Chapter 2.2: Body, soul, mind

Body soul and mind: the body for sensation, the soul for the springs of action, the mind for principles...

The body is the part that receives the sensory impact from the world. But it is inert in itself. It requires the soul to react to this impact and put it in motion. The mind is the faculty that possesses or obeys principles. Mooij-Valk translates these principles with: rational convictions (*overtuigingen*).

...Yet the capacity for sensation belongs also to the stalled ox; there is no wild beast, homosexual, Nero or Phalaris but obeys the twitchings of impulse; and even men who deny the gods, or betray their country, or perpetrate all manner of villainy behind the locked doors, have minds to guide them to the clear path of duty....

However, even though all men have a mind of some sort, it does not mean that they all obey the same principles in guiding their lives. Body and soul will react to impulses in a similar fashion whether they belong to a wild beast or to an emperor. The difference lies in the obedience to the mind's principles.

¹⁰ Rist (1971, 1996): 52

¹¹ Mooij-Valk, (1995)

...Seeing, then, that all else is the common heritage of such types, the good man's only singularity lies in his approving welcome to every experience the looms of fate may weave for him, his refusal to soil the divinity seated in his breast or perturb it with disorderly impressions, and his resolve to keep it in serenity and decorous obedience to God, admitting no disloyalty to truth in his speech or to justice in his actions...

Morality enters Marcus' personality in the form of the mind. It is the good man's acceptance of Fate's dispensations that distinguishes him as a moral human being. But this means he will have to keep his body in check, exercise control over its impulsive reactions to the world. The outward appearance of the good man's acceptance of Fate shows him to be a virtuous person regardless of the outcome of his actions or other people's appraisals of his actions.

...Though all the world mistrust him because he lives in simple, self-respecting happiness, he takes offence at none, but unswervingly treads the road onward to life's close, where duty bids him arrive in purity and peace, unreluctant to depart, in perfect and unforced unison with fate's appointment.
(MA III.16)

Obviously, such a man will not be liked much by his fellow humans. But even though he may be reproached for being aloof, that is still an external factor, only applying to his body and soul. There is no reason to react to it, since any reaction will cause a disturbance of the inner peace.

This raises questions as to how there can be such a difference in people's behaviour. If all people have, at least in principle, the same composition, how can it be that there are so many people who do not behave properly?

You are composed of three parts: body, breath and mind. The first two merely belong to you in the sense that you are responsible for their care; the last alone is truly yours....

Once again, the triplet body, breath and mind make their appearance. Within stoic philosophy, breath was equal to the soul.¹² So Marcus repeats the elements of what he thinks he is composed of. This time with the addition that only the mind is truly personal. The body and mind are composed of matter, which is shared with the rest of the universe.

...If, then, you put away from this real self – from your understanding, that is – everything that others do or say and everything you yourself did or said in the past, together with every anxiety about the future, and everything affecting the body or its partner breath that is outside your own control, as well as everything that swirls about you in the eddy of outward circumstance, so the powers of your mind, kept thus aloof from all that destiny can do, may live their own life in independence, doing what is just, consenting to what befalls, and speaking what is true – ...

The real self, the understanding or consciousness of the personal circumstances should be kept separated from these circumstances. The mind functions best when it is isolated from external influences. The essence of being rational therefore is to keep external circumstances away from the mind. Those who do so, will be rational. Those who don't will not be rational. The scale from wise to stupid is determined by the way people allow personal, outward circumstances determine their thoughts.

...if, I say, you put away from the master-faculty (*hegemonikon*) of yours every such clinging attachment, and whatever lies in the years ahead or the years behind, teaching yourself to become what Empedocles calls a 'totally rounded orb, in its own rotundity joying',...

The orb was the ancient symbol of perfection.¹³ It is the only shape that has total equilibrium between all the forces it contains. Any disturbance of this equilibrium will change the shape of the surface and show it to be out of balance.

¹² Mooij-Valk (1995): 31

¹³ Mooij-Valk (1995): 223

...and to be concerned solely with the life which you are now living, the life of the present moment, then until death comes you will be able to pass the rest of your days in freedom from all anxiety, and in kindness and good favour with the deity within you. (MA XII.3)

The *hegemonikon* has already made a passing appearance on our stage. It is located somewhere in the mind according to Marcus. But is it separate from the body or not?

Nature has not blended mind so inextricably with body as to prevent it from establishing its own frontiers and controlling its own domain. It is perfectly possible to be godlike, even though unrecognized as such. Always keep that in mind; and also remember that the needs of a happy life are few. Mastery of dialectics or physics may have eluded you, but that is no reason to despair of achieving freedom, self-respect, unselfishness, and obedience to the will of God. (MA VII.67)

Mind and body are somehow linked, but there is also a certain amount of independence between both. The mind can establish its own working sphere and keep itself in order. It must do so by removing all bodily influences from its workings (cf. MA XII.3). This leads Marcus to conclude that his mind should make itself superior to the body in order to establish its independence. In a more poetic sense:

Childish squabbles, childish games, 'petty breaths supporting corpses' – why, the ghosts in Homer have more evident reality! (MA IX.24)

This observation is based on Marcus' knowledge of the human constitution. Such knowledge is reserved to stoics, other people are blind to the deceptive nature of bodily desires. Marcus recognizes the bond between his mind and his body as one of three relationships:

We have three relationships: one to this bodily shell which envelops us, one to the divine Cause which is the source of everything in all things, and one to our fellow-mortals around us. (MA VIII.27)

The working sphere of the mind is shaped by these three relationships. But the relationship between the mind and its body does not differ much from the relationship it has with other people or even god. Within a materialistic worldview they are all on the same level. But this also means that there is no incorporeal 'evil'. Evil is borne by something in this world.

For you, evil comes not from the mind of another; nor yet from any of the phases and changes of your own bodily frame. Then whence? From that part of yourself which acts as your assessor of what is evil. Refuse its assessment, and all is well. Though the poor body, so closely neighbouring it, be gashed and burned, fester or mortify, let the voice of this assessor remain silent; let it pronounce nothing to be bad or good if it can happen to evil men and good men alike – for anything that comes impartially upon men, whether they observe the rules of Nature or not, can neither be hindering her purposes nor advancing them. (MA IV.39)

According to Mooij-Valk's translation, Marcus does not mention the *hegemonikon* here, but he clearly recognizes within his constitution something more than body, soul and mind. The proper functioning of this assessor is different from the functioning of the body. Yet it also brings with it a set of rules that allow it to decide between good and evil. Morality within Marcus' philosophy is something personal. At the same time it is performed by a faculty, which every human being possesses, even though it does not always function at the top of its performance.

Chapter 2.3: The hegemonikon once more

Even though we have seen that, according to Marcus, the *hegemonikon* is seated somewhere in the mind, this does not mean that its functioning and content are clearly defined. Marcus nowhere manages to give a precise description. From the descriptions of this constantly shifting *hegemonikon* I hope to be able to distill at least an assumption of what it may have meant to Marcus.

If the inward power (*hegemonikon*) that rules us be true to Nature, it will always adjust itself readily to the possibilities and opportunities offered by circumstance...

Here we already have one indication about the *hegemonikon*: its proper functioning is measured by its conformity with the laws of Nature.

...It asks for no predeterminate material; in the pursuance of its aims it is willing to compromise;...

'It is willing to compromise' might make it seem as if the *hegemonikon* is flexible in its application of the laws of Nature. However, Mooij-Valk gives a translation that shows the *hegemonikon* to be flexible in its applicability according to the circumstances, not flexible in its application of the rules.

...hindrances to its progress are merely converted into matter for its own use. It is like a bonfire mastering a heap of rubbish, which would have quenched a feeble glow; but its fiery blaze quickly assimilates the load, consumes it, and flames the higher for it. (MA IV.1)

Fire was an important element within stoic physics. It was not only the consuming fire in the hearth, it was also the principle responsible for all the material changes in the universe.¹⁴ Marcus uses this analogy to illustrate the ability of the *hegemonikon* to convert for example some 'bad' into a 'good'.

The *hegemonikon* is the principle that guides Marcus towards the acquisition of an attitude that conforms to Nature. It allows him to choose the right option according to the circumstances. The result is a happy life (*eudaimonia*) regardless of one's situation.

Happiness, by derivation, means 'a good god within' (*eudaimonia*); that is, a good master reason (*hegemonikon*). Then what, vain fancy, are you doing here? Be off, in heaven's name, as you came; I want none of you. I know it is

¹⁴ Mooij-Valk (2013): 28

long habit that brings you here, and I bear no ill-will; but get you gone. (MA VII.17)

The proper functioning of the *hegemonikon* is closely linked to the happiness it produces. The trouble comes from fancies from without. 'Fancies' could also be translated with 'impressions' or 'appearances'.¹⁵ Whatever the correct translation might be, it disturbs the proper functioning of the *hegemonikon*. A faulty *hegemonikon* is an obstruction to happiness. The trick to lead a happy life then, is to guard against fouling of the *hegemonikon*.

Treat with respect the power you have to form an opinion. By it alone can the helmsman within you (*hegemonikon*) avoid forming opinions that are at a variance with nature and with the constitution of a reasonable being. From it you may look to attain circumspection, good relations with your fellow-men, and conformity with the will of heaven. (MA III.9)

The *hegemonikon* is the faculty that forms opinions. A proper functioning *hegemonikon* will form opinions according to Nature and only then does it belong to a truly rational being. Since Nature had bestowed humans with a drive for the common welfare, understanding of Nature also entailed the understanding of human interaction. Only with an understanding of the workings of Nature will a human be able to live in harmony with other people.

According to paragraph MA III.9 the *hegemonikon* is a mental entity that depends on the information passed on to it through the body and filtered by the mind. Only respectful treatment of the *hegemonikon* will allow it to function properly. But who or what treats the *hegemonikon* with respect? Isn't the Master-reason the highest form of rationality, capable of judging all opinions? Within Marcus, there isn't anything else than breath, flesh and the *hegemonikon*.

What would it be? Is it possible to subject the *hegemonikon* to corrective action or not? Marcus is not very clear on the issue. In summary, the most we may conclude about the *hegemonikon* is, among others:

- It is an inherent power or faculty;
- Its proper functioning is measured by its conformity with the laws of Nature;

¹⁵ F.H. Sandbach (1971,1996): 10

-
- It's directions should be applicable to many different situations;
 - It can be misguided by (wrong) impressions;
 - In that case, happiness comes to be out of reach;
 - A proper functioning *hegemonikon* will provide Marcus with proper opinions;
 - Proper opinions are rational opinions.

Rationality and the *hegemonikon* are closely connected in Marcus' psychology. The *hegemonikon* needs to be shielded from outward influences in order to function optimally. Its functioning is then purely rational. But what is 'rational'?

Chapter 2.4: Rationality

It may seem a ridiculous question, but what is rationality? Surely it is reasonable to ask, but can there be a simple answer? Marcus stresses the importance of rationality, but his definition of rationality is scattered throughout the text of *Ta eis heauton*. Let's see what we can find...

What is the very best that can be said or done with the materials at your disposal? Be it what it may, you have the power to say it or do it; let there be no pretence that you are not a free agent. These repinings of yours will be endless until such time as the doing of a man's natural duty with whatever materials come to hand means as much as his pleasures mean to the voluptuary. (Indeed, every exercise of our proper natural instincts ought to be esteemed a form of pleasure; and the opportunities for this are everywhere present.) A roller, to be sure, has not always the privilege of moving at will,...

Here Marcus applies a much-used Stoic analogy. The roller rolling down a slope. The analogy was meant to illustrate an important point about free will within stoic thought. It is part of the roller's properties that it does maintain a rolling motion once it has been pushed. But it is not part of a roller's properties that it stops its motion by itself.¹⁶

...nor has the water, nor fire, nor anything else that is under the governance of its own nature or of a soul without reason;...

So anything material follows the same rules as the roller: it moves after being pushed. Obviously, this applies on different levels between a brick and a lion, but for them, there is only the action-reaction effect.

...for there are many factors which intervene to prevent it. But a mind and a reason can make their way through any obstacles, as their nature enables them and their will prompts them to do...

Rational agents on the other hand have the capacity to refuse, or accept the impulses from the senses. Rationality is part of men's equipment. Therefore, it is natural to use your reason. You are bound to do so, like the cylinder is bound to roll once pushed.

...Figure to yourself how reason finds a way past every barrier as effortlessly as fire mounts upward, or a stone falls, or a roller descends a slope; and be content to ask no more. Interferences, in any case, must either affect the body alone – which is but an inanimate thing – or else be impotent to crush or injure us unless assisted by our own preconceptions and the surrender of reason itself....

Rationality allows humans to gain a certain measure of freedom. It is not bound to arbitrary external influences. Therefore rationality has a universal claim. However, even though life may require certain decisions to be taken, they need not always be the same. Different preconceptions and the surrender of reason to emotions are pollutions of something that is pure by itself. The proper use of reason can be achieved by a process of purification.

...If it were otherwise, their effects on the subject would be harmful; and though we know that throughout the rest of creation the occurrence of any mishap involves some worsening of its victim, yet in the case of a man we may even say that he becomes better and more praiseworthy by the right uses which he makes of adversity...

¹⁶ See for example A.A.Long (1971, 1996): 182

Rationality, then, is a self-learning faculty. A man becomes stronger, the more mishaps he manages to overcome. Whatever happens to the body may improve the rational mind. The compound of body, soul and human mind may, as a whole, be improved even though the body suffers. This means that the history of the body is reflected in the achievements of the mind.

...In short, never forget that nothing can injure the true citizen if it does not injure the city itself, and nothing can injure the city unless it injures the law. What we call mischances do no injury to law, and therefore cannot harm either city or citizen. (MA X.33)

Reason is an impregnable fortress within the body. It cannot be harmed by outward appearances so long as reason remains true to the dictums of the rational law. The correct use of the rational faculty will enhance the human bestowed with it. What, then, is a human supposed to do in order to use it correctly?

Every nature finds its satisfaction in the smooth pursuance of its own road. To a nature endowed with reason, this means assenting to no impression that is misleading or obscure, giving rein to no impulse towards actions that are not social, limiting all desires or rejections to things that lie within its own power, and greeting every dispensation with an equal welcome...

Hold on a moment. That is a lot to take in in one go. 'Every nature finds its satisfaction in the smooth pursuance of its own road.' So the roller, endowed with its faculty of rolling will be glad to roll on. Man, endowed with reason will be glad to use his rationality. There is a point to be taken. There is no way you can stop thinking. Or at least, it will take extreme effort to do so.

Then: 'a rational being uses its rationality by withholding assent to misleading impressions.' Rationality performs epistemological functions in order to discern between right and wrong impressions. It decides 'what is the case' in the present circumstances. But rationality also 'refuses to act on unsocial impulses'. Thus, rationality as a faculty of moral choice decides 'what must be done'. Rationality ties knowledge to morality. Moreover: the most rational choice is the social choice. Social choices are choices that go above and beyond individual desires:

...For these dispensations are truly a part of her as a leaf's nature is part of a plant's; save that the leaf's is part of a nature which has no feelings or reason, and is capable of being frustrated, while man's nature is part of one which not only cannot be frustrated, but also is endowed with both intelligence and justice, since it assigns to all men equally their proper share of time, being, causation, activity, and experiences...

Aha, a leaf is part of a plant. But the plant can be frustrated, let's say hindered in its growth. Humans are part of something else, something bigger because they are endowed with reason. That gives them the ability to take position on a higher level, beyond frustration.

...(Do not look to find this equality, though, in any exact correspondence between one man and another in every particular, but rather in a general comparison of them both in their entirety.) (MA VIII.7)

Here is a tricky one. So every man is endowed with rationality. But this fact cannot be established by looking at two people and saying 'They both have reason'. Rather, this fact has to be established by observing: 'This man is more rational than the other.' But those who prove to be less rational apparently are compensated for their lack in other ways. Marcus unfortunately does not specify in what ways this compensation comes.

It is odd however that all humans share in Reason, but not all people are equally wise. Due to the tight relationship Marcus establishes between rationality and social behaviour, this must be important for Marcus' moral viewpoints. As a consequence, social behaviour must also be an indication of rationality. Someone's rational capability can therefore be estimated by someone's outward behaviour.

If the power of thought is universal among mankind, so likewise is the possession of reason, making us rational creatures...

We know that by now. Humans are the 'rational animals'.

...It follows, therefore, that this reason speaks no less universally to us all with its 'thou shalt' or 'thou shalt not'...

That is correct. MA VIII.7 had shown that rationality is indeed a social faculty. The universality of reason then implies that there must be a universal moral law.

...So then there is a world-law; which in turn means that we are fellow-citizens and share a common citizenship, and that the world is a single city. Is there any other common citizenship that can be claimed by all humanity? And it is from this world-polity that mind, reason, and law themselves derive....

So, thanks to reason, the world is a 'Global Village'. But this places rational humans under a social demand.

...If not, whence else? As the earthy portion of me has its origin from earth, the watery from a different element, my breath from one source and my hot and fiery parts from another of their own elsewhere (for nothing comes from nothing, or can return to nothing), so too there must be an origin for the mind.
(MA IV.4)

The arrow goes in both directions. Mankind can be a community due to the fact that we share in reason and we share in reason because we can be part of a community. Anything unsocial is therefore unrational. But how are we to know what is and what is not either social or rational?

The properties of a rational soul are these. She can contemplate herself, analyse herself, make of herself what she will, herself enjoy the fruit she bears (whereas the fruit produced by trees, like its counterpart produced by animals, is enjoyed by others), and always have her work perfectly complete at whatever moment of our life reaches its appointed limit...

Rationality is self-contained.

...For unlike dances or plays or such like, where if they are suddenly cut short the performance as a whole is left imperfect, the soul, no matter at what stage arrested, will have her task complete to her own satisfaction, and be able to say, 'I am in the fullest possession of mine own.'...

A fully rational soul has no attachments or responsibilities to the past or the future. This leads it to make only the correct choices based on whatever is applicable to the present circumstances.

...Moreover, she can encompass the whole universe at will, both its own structure and the void surrounding it, and can reach out into eternity, embracing and comprehending the great cyclic renewals of creation,...

The mind is more rational, the bigger the picture it can understand. Rationality, being a social faculty, requires that a view beyond the individual is taken. Transcending the individual means: having as big an understanding of the universe as possible including the individual's position in it.

...and thereby perceiving that future generations will have nothing new to witness, even as our forefathers beheld nothing more than we of today, but that if a man comes to his fortieth year, and has any understanding at all, he has virtually seen – thanks to their similarity – all possible happenings, both past and to come...

The 'now' contains all the information one needs to know about what needs to be done. Marcus uses the present as a pinhole in the curtain of time through which he can see how everything has evolved and will evolve in the future.

...Finally, the qualities of the rational soul include love of neighbours, truthfulness, modesty, and a reverence for herself before all else; and since this last one is one of the qualities of law also, it follows that the principle of rationality is one and the same as the principle of justice. (MA XI.1)

Again, Marcus lays the emphasis on the social aspects of Reason. This time accompanied by the remark that Reason is social and hence is also just.

One last remark:

To a reasoning being, an act that accords with nature is an act that accords with reason. (MA VII.11)

Like reason, Nature is universal. Stoicism always postulated a close relationship between rationality and Nature, Marcus is no exception. But even though Reason and Nature are universal, this does not mean that it is always clear what needs to be done. Rationality needs a focus for its proper functioning (MA III.16). This focus is provided by the *hegemonikon*. The *hegemonikon* is a social faculty, directing the individual towards the common interest. Without such a rational focal point, peace and quietness are unattainable.

From this, it can be concluded that reason is above all a social and therefore a moral faculty. In addition, a few more conclusions about rationality can be drawn. Based on what we have highlighted in *Ta eis heauton*:

- It passes judgements;
- It passes judgement on the basis of the individual's knowledge of the universe;
- Reason is therefore relative among people since they do not all have the same amount of knowledge;
- This knowledge is first and foremost self-knowledge.
- Reason follows the laws of nature;
- Reason's concept of justice is a natural concept.

A reasonable being is free to accept or reject whatever might disturb its inner peace. The choice is yours:

Happy the soul which, at whatever moment the call comes for release from the body, is equally ready to face extinction, dispersion, or survival. Such preparedness, however, must be the outcome of its own decision not prompted by mere contumacy, as with the Christians, but formed with

deliberation and gravity and, if it is to be convincing to others, with an absence of all heroics. (MA XI.3)

This paragraph has presented many interpreters with a dilemma. It is the only one in which Christians are mentioned. It has often been used to argue that Marcus was convinced of the need for a holocaust on the Christians. It would have given an excuse for the massacre in Lyon in AD 177.¹⁷ Van Hooff however finds little historical evidence for a deeply ingrained personal hatred against Christians. Staniforth notes that the original Greek text in which the Christians appear is grammatically inconsistent with the rest of the paragraph.¹⁸ Generally, nowadays it is accepted to regard this part as a later gloss over the original.¹⁹

What can be established from this paragraph is the fact that Marcus is convinced of the power of the individual to direct his own life. Whatever the author of the 'Christian-phrase' had in mind, it was stubbornness or even pig-headedness that he opposed to self-control (*autarkeia*). For Marcus as an emperor, self-control stretched out towards control over the community.

In your actions let there be a willing promptitude, yet a regard for the common interest; due deliberation, yet no irresolution; and in your sentiments not pretentious over-refinement. Avoid talkativeness, avoid officiousness. The god within you should preside over a being who is virile and mature, a statesman, a Roman and a ruler; one who has held his ground, like a soldier waiting for the signal to retire from life's battlefield and ready to welcome his relief; a man whose credit need neither be sworn to by himself nor avouched by others. Therein is the secret of cheerfulness, of depending on no help from without and needing to crave from no man the boon of tranquility. We have to stand upright ourselves, not be set up. (MA III.5)

Marcus, as an emperor, had no one above him he could obey. This meant that he had to find and follow his moral guidance within himself. Stoicism provided him with the tools to locate the sources of this guidance: the *hegemonikon* and rationality. Furthermore it also gave him the impetus to pursue the moral end. According to

¹⁷ van Hooff (2012): 183

¹⁸ Staniforth (1964): 139 note.

¹⁹ Mooij-Valk (1995): 40

Marcus, the moral backbone comes from a 'male fortitude' and results in a sense of independence and liberation.

The *hegemonikon* and rationality are the instruments Marcus proposes for attaining whatever he expects from philosophy. The *hegemonikon* is a natural part of every human being, and so is rationality. Every human is endowed with these, even though not all of men use them wisely. So far, Marcus is justified in his expectations of philosophy. Philosophy provides him with the right instruments to achieve his goals of *ataraxia*, *eudaimonia* and *autarkeia*. It remains to be seen however whether he actually succeeds in doing so. Theory and practice are separated by a vast expanse of different situations. This needs to be bridged somehow. Between the theoretical concepts and reality, Marcus posits practical implications of his stoicism.

Chapter 3: Practical implications for the good life

The laws of justice follow from the laws of reason (MA XI.1). The laws of justice provide security to the community. Whatever is good for the community has to be good for the individual (MA X.33). The common interest is therefore linked to self-interest. The rational law of justice is also the law of rational Nature (MA VII.11). Accepting Fate (the workings of Nature), is accepting the just state of affairs. Rejecting Fate is a sign that you are willing to go against the grain of Nature. This will cause a disturbance of the inner peace, and then the good life will be out of reach. *Apatheia* and *eudaimonia* will vanish in an instant.

Rationality itself is a very broad concept. Since in theory it encompasses everything that happens in the universe, its full application is far too complicated for humans. Marcus gives himself a few shortcuts around this problem. Close to the end of *Ta eis heauton* we find some maxims Marcus can use to find his way through life. The maxims are given as guidelines following from the functions of the *hegemonikon* and rationality. They are also given as feedback mechanisms for judging whether the *hegemonikon* and rationality are functioning properly.

The first maxims I will indicate is a set of 'counsels' in case Marcus feels offended (Mooij-Valk however does not mention the notion of offence). Since the section (MA XI.18) is too long for reproduction, I will give a condensed version of its contents:

1. Remember that you are part of a social group with social rules;
2. Think of peoples' characters before judging their behaviour;
3. Remember that there is a difference between wrongdoing out of ignorance and intentional evil;
4. Judge yourself before judging other people;
5. Are you absolutely sure about other people's intentions?
6. Whatever it is, it won't last long. Life, after all, is short;
7. 'Wrong' or 'evil' are judgements we pass over acts.

8. You are only hurting yourself by being angry;

9. Kindness is only effective when it is genuine.

There is a tenth counsel, almost as an afterthought:

10. 'To expect bad men never to do bad things is insensate; it is hoping for the impossible.'

Marcus introduces these counsels as a gift from the nine muses and their leader Apollo.²⁰ Most of these counsels involve judgements, either wrong judgements or premature judgements (2, 3, 4, 5, 7 and 10). Another common streak is the self-referential judgement (1, 2, 4 and 8).

These counsels or maxims concern the situation in which Marcus feels offended. There are other maxims, of a more general nature, given in *Ta eis heauton*. In the next paragraph, for example, Marcus gives a set of maxims for judging the proper functioning of the *hegemonikon*.

There are four aberrations of your soul's helmsman (*hegemonikon*) which you must constantly guard against, and suppress whenever detected....

The *hegemonikon* is either a completely separate faculty, or it is somehow linked to Marcus' mind. In both cases, it is difficult to see whether it is functioning correctly. Misgivings could be caused by wrong impressions, or by the wrong understanding of the feedback information coming from the *hegemonikon* itself. Anyway, there are a few simple rules we can use to see whether we can rely on the *hegemonikon* and its information.

...Say to them one by one, 'This is a thought which is not necessary,' 'This is one which would undermine fellowship,' This is not the voice of my true self' (for to speak anything but your true sentiments, remember, is of all things the most misplaced), and, fourthly, when you are tempted into reproach, 'This would prove the divine element in me to have been discomfited and forced to its knees by the ignoble and perishable flesh with its gross conceptions.' (MA XI.19)

²⁰ Mooij-Valk (1995): 230

This paragraph contains four maxims:

- Discard unnecessary thoughts, only use the bare essentials;
- Discard any anti-social thoughts;
- Only allow thoughts that can originate from within you, devoid of outward influences;
- Discard any thoughts that originate from the desires of your body.

These rules are somewhat interrelated. Rationality is the application of the mind to the knowledge of the individual within a social context. Unnecessary thoughts are the thoughts that contain external influences. These unnecessary thoughts are mostly caused by wrong appearances and by desires arising from the body. Thus the most pure knowledge is self-knowledge, since this is devoid of any outward appearances. Only the purest, self-critical thoughts can have social or moral content.

There are more maxims Marcus provides. It is not feasible, nor necessary with respect to a more general point that can be made, to treat every maxim in-depth, but the maxims all have something in common. In another book of *Ta eis heauton* we find the following:

Day by day the buffoonery, quarelling, timidity, slothfulness, and servility that surround you will conspire to efface from your mind those hallowed maxims it apprehends so unphilosophically and dismisses so carelessly...

Not all of the maxims Marcus gives have the same content as the ones mentioned before. But there is something interesting about all the maxims he gives: it is the fact that they are easily apprehended by the mind. It is almost as if they come natural.

...What duty requires of you is to observe each single thing and perform each action in such manner that, while the practical demands of a situation are fully met, the powers of thought are at the same time fully exercised; and also to maintain (in reserve, but never lost to sight) the self-confidence of one who has mastered every relevant detail...

What is needed in addition, is what can almost be considered another maxim: research. Researching maxims is yet another maxim.

...Are you never going to attain to the happiness of a real integrity and dignity? Of an understanding which comprehends the inmost being of each thing, its place in the world-order, the terms of its natural existence, the structure of its composition, and to whom it belongs or who has the power of bestowing or withdrawing it? (MA X.9)

Close scrutiny of the circumstances will improve knowledge and therefore enhance the rational faculties. Marcus indicates here that this should be observed as a duty. The benefit will be self-confidence and a happier life.

So there is a reward: following the natural maxims will improve the quality of life. Marcus had indicated in MA II.17 that this is exactly what philosophy will produce if used correctly.

...To be a philosopher is to keep unsullied and unscathed the divine spirit within him, so that it may transcend all pleasure and all pain, take nothing in hand without purpose and nothing falsely or with dissimulation, depend not on another's actions or inactions, accept each and every dispensation as coming from the same Source as itself – and last and chief, wait with a good grace for death, as no more than a simple dissolving of the elements whereof each living thing is composed... (MA II.17)

These guidelines are not introduced as maxims. Marcus will not use the concept of maxims until much later in *Ta eis heauton*. However, in this paragraph he is giving precise instructions as to how a clean divine spirit should function:

- Do nothing without purpose;
- Do nothing that is without genuine intentions;
- Be self-supporting in your actions;
- Accept life as it comes and for as long as it lasts.

Any actions that do not comply with these instructions indicate an improper divine spirit. Marcus does not tell us whether we can identify this divine spirit as the *hegemonikon*. However, its appearance is very similar to it. Nothing seems to be lost in translation here, since neither Staniforth nor Mooij-Valk mention it as such. Whatever the matter, proper human behaviour has the above-mentioned properties.

The maxims are short-cuts around fully worked out rationalizations of every individual situation. Throughout *Ta eis heauton*, Marcus has given a variety of these maxims. However they do have a few streaks in common:

- A strong emphasis on social behaviour;
- Self-referential considerations;
- Actions should only be based on proper judgements;
- Accept fate;
- Above all: be rational.

Chapter 4: Does it work?

It is all there, the tools (rationality and the *hegemonikon*), the goals (*ataraxia*, *eudaimonia* and *autarkeia*) as well as the drive to reach these goals. Even the maxims as intermediaries between theory and practice are there to guarantee success. Yet, throughout *Ta eis heauton* there is the sense of failure displayed in many parts of the text.

Part of what I call the *condition Aurélienne* is the frustration about achieving nothing while trying hard. It is of course likely that Marcus had a hard time achieving such high goals as *ataraxia*, *eudaimonia* and *autarkeia*. Still it is surprising that the text of *Ta eis heauton* in fact emphasises his failures to achieve them as well as his personal frustration with this fact.

Chapter 4.1: Ataraxia

Ataraxia is the absence of all passions, good or bad, resulting in a state of bliss. Marcus would love to reach such a state of bliss but he quite often mentions his struggle with his passions.

The woes you have had to bear are numberless because you were not content to let Reason (*hegemonikon*), your guide and master, do its natural work. Come on now, no more of this! (MA IX.26)

Woes are states of distress, certainly not a state of *ataraxia*. An insufficient obedience to the *hegemonikon* is the cause.

To a man with jaundice, honey seems bitter; to one bitten by a mad dog, water is a thing of horror; to little children, a ball is a treasure of great price. Why then do I give way to anger? For can it be supposed that a man's erroneous thinking has any less effect on him than the bile in jaundice, or the virus in hydrophobia? (MA VI.57)

Anger is a passion, that obstructs *ataraxia*. But according to Marcus, there is no good reason for being angry: other people's disobedience to their *hegemonikon* should not be a reason to react in such a way.

Many of the anxieties that harass you are superfluous: being but creatures of your own fancy, you can rid yourself of them and expand into an ampler region, letting your thought sweep over the universe, contemplating the illimitable tracts of eternity, marking the swiftness of change in each created thing, and contrasting the brief span between birth and dissolution with the endless aeons that precede the one and the infinity that follows the other. (MA IX.32)

Marcus recognizes within himself a tendency towards anxiety. And in combination with his sense of shortcoming in effort, there is a realisation of shortcoming in time.

Marcus is full of pent-up passions:

You will never be remarkable for quick-wittedness. Be it so, then; yet there are still a host of other qualities whereof you cannot say, 'I have no bent for them.' Cultivate these, then, for they are wholly within your power: sincerity, for example, and dignity; industriousness, and sobriety. Avoid grumbling; be frugal, considerate, and frank; be temperate in manner and in speech; carry yourself with authority. See how many qualities there are which could be yours at this moment. You can allege no native incapacity or inaptitude for them; and yet you choose to linger still on a less lofty plane. Furthermore, is it any lack of natural endowments that necessitates those fits of querulousness and parsimony and fulsome flattery, of railing at your ill-health, of cringing and bragging and continually veering from one mood to another? Most assuredly not; you could have rid yourself of all these long ago, and remained

chargeable with nothing worse than a certain slowness and dulness of comprehension – and even this you can correct with practice, so long as you do not make light of it or take pleasure in your own obtuseness. (MA V.5)

Grumbling, intemperateness, laziness, querulousness, parsimony, flattery, cringing, bragging, mood swings, thickness, in short:

A black heart! A womanish, wilful heart; the heart of a brute, a beast of the field; childish, stupid, and false; a huckster's heart, a tyrant's heart. (MA IV.28)

There is a lot one can say about Marcus Aurelius, but you can only admire his honesty with regard to his passions about his passions!

Even with his philosophical instruments at hand, Marcus fails to attain *ataraxia*.

O the consolation of being able to thrust aside and cast into oblivion every tiresome intrusive impression and in a trice be utterly at peace! (MA V.2)

Chapter 4.2: Eudaimonia

Eudaimonia means: having a good divinity (*Daimon*) within (MA VII.17). Within Marcus' psychology, the *Daimon* is a similarly suspicious figure as the *hegemonikon*. Marcus claims to have some sort of personal relationship with it. This relationship seems to have a lot in common with Socrates' relationship with his *Daimon* as described in Plato's *Apology*. *Eudaimonia* indicates a mental state wherein the mental household is in proper order. Having a good divinity within, means that there is no disturbance and whatever might be disturbing, can be countered effectively. *Eudaimonia* is a state in which all personal tensions are recognized and balanced.²¹ In that case, the mind is a 'totally rounded orb in its rotundity joying' (MA XII.3).

Such joy does not seem to be Marcus' fate:

O soul of mine, will you never be good and sincere, all one, all open, visible to the beholder more clearly than even your encompassing body of flesh? Will you never taste the sweetness of a loving and affectionate heart? Will you

never be filled full and unwanted; craving nothing, yearning for no creatures or thing to minister to your pleasures, no prolongation of days to enjoy them, no place or country or pleasant clime or sweet human company? When will you be content with your present state, happy in all about you, persuaded that all things are yours, that all comes from the gods, and that all is and shall be well with you, so long as it is their good pleasure and ordained by them for the safety and welfare of that perfect living Whole – so good, so just, so beautiful – which gives life to all things, upholding and enfolding them, and at their dissolution gathering them into Itself so that yet others of their kind may spring forth? Will you never be fit for such fellowship with gods and men as to have no syllable of complaint against them, and no syllable of reproach from them?
(MA X.1)

Marcus' mind is missing the basic elements of *eudaimonia*. There is a lack of goodness, sincerity and love. There is too much unsatisfied wanting, craving and yearning. It is impossible for Marcus to be content with anything in this life, which he thinks is too short anyway. Marcus is far removed from reaching a state of *eudaimonia*.

All the blessings which you pray to obtain hereafter could be yours today, if you did not deny them to yourself...

It is, after all, his own fault.

...You have only to have done with the past altogether, commit the future to providence, and simply seek to direct the present hour aright into the paths of holiness and justice: holiness, by a loving acceptance of your apportioned lot, since Nature produced it for you and you for it: justice, in your speech by a frank and straightforward truthfulness, and in your acts by a respect for law and for every man's rights...

²¹ Bunnin, Yu (2004): 231

Part of the problem lies in him expecting too much from his time in life. Apparently he frets over the past and fears or hopes for the future. In the meantime, he forgets to take life as it comes.

...Allow yourself, too, no hindrance from the malice, misconceptions or slanders of others, nor yet from any sensations this fleshly frame may feel; its afflicted part will look to itself...

There is also too much concern for his body and other people's opinions.

...The hour for your departure draws near; if you will but forget all else and pay sole regard to the helmsman (*hegemonikon*) of your soul and the divine spark within you – if you will but exchange your fear of having to end your life some day for a fear of failing even to begin it on nature's true principles...

He is totally missing the point of life! The result is a festering fear for the future and a clinging to whatever he thinks his life may be worth.

... – you can yet become a man, worthy of the universe that gave you birth, instead of a stranger in your own homeland, bewildered by each day's happenings as though by wonders unlooked for, and ever hanging upon this one or the next. (MA XII.1)

It is, however, not too late. There is hope, but Marcus will need to get his act together. It is not very difficult:

For a life that is sound and secure, cultivate a thorough insight into things and discover their essence, matter, and cause; put your whole heart into doing what is just, and speaking what is true; and for the rest, know the joy of life by piling good deed on good deed until no rift or cranny appears between them. (MA XII.29)

All he needs is a better understanding of the world and its workings. From this understanding will follow a continuous stream of good deeds, truth and joy in life. But

that is easier said than done. Marcus must apply his abilities to the fullest, in order to reach a state of *eudaimonia*.

Chapter 4.3: Autarkeia

Autarkeia, self-mastery or self-control, is the ability to act contrary to desires. There is however one desire, which Marcus feels every day:

At day's first light have in readiness, against disinclination to leave your bed, the thought that 'I am rising for the work of man'...

Marcus' body would rather laze the day away in bed. He has to revolt against its will.

...Must I grumble at setting out to do what I was born for, and for the sake of which I have been brought into this world? Is this the purpose of my creation, to lie here under the blankets and keep myself warm? 'Ah, but it is a great deal more pleasant!' Was it for the pleasure, then that you were born, and not for work, not for effort?

Pleasure is a lure awaiting the body everywhere. Marcus has to counter this as well.

...Look at the plants, the sparrows, ants, spiders, bees, all busy at their own task, each doing his part towards a coherent world-order; and will you refuse man's share of the work, instead of being prompt to carry out Nature's bidding?...

Man has the ability to see beyond the horizon of his own tiny existence. Man's work within the greater scheme of things is to cooperate with Nature towards 'Peace, Love and Understanding'.

...'Yes, but one must have some repose as well.' Granted; but repose has its limits set by nature, in the same way as food and drink have; and you overstep these limits, you go far beyond the point of sufficiency; while on the other

hand, when action is in question, you stop short of what you could well achieve...

The body is there, only to support the soul and mind. It should be kept on a minimum subsistence level.

...You have no real love for yourself; if you had, you would love your nature, and your nature's will. Craftsmen who love their trade will spend themselves to the utmost in labouring at it, even going unwashed and unfed; but you hold your nature in less regard than the engraver does his engraving, the dancer his dancing, the miser his heap of silver, or the vainglorious man his moment of glory. These men, when their heart is in it, are ready to sacrifice food and sleep to the advancement of their pursuit...

Craftsmen may wonder whether Marcus really knows what he is talking about here. But one may indeed gain a certain satisfaction of doing what one is good at.

...Is the service of the community of less worth in your eyes, and does it merit less devotion? (MA V.1)

Marcus, as an emperor, has no specific trade other than putting himself in the service of the community. Forgetting himself, and putting the interests of the community first is a hard thing to do, but:

Because a thing is difficult for you, do not therefore suppose it to be beyond mortal power. On the contrary, if anything is possible and proper for man to do, assume that it must fall within your own capacity. (MA VI.19)

Autarkeia is a power, which must be exercised continuously. The mind must impose its sovereignty over bodily experiences by proving its independence of the sensory information and the inevitable fouling with desires. Apparently, there is no end to this battle. Marcus has had to fight it all his life as is attested throughout *Ta eis heauton*.

There is a lot that can be said about Marcus' strife with his body. The daily battle to get up must have been an annoyance to him. Unbeknown to him, he did have an

excuse. His court-physician Galenus had prescribed a much-used medicine against his many illnesses: *Teriac*.²² The main ingredient of *Teriac* was opium, even nowadays a known medicine to many ailments, but with the added disadvantage of making people drowsy. Marcus was unaware of this but nonetheless had to put himself under constant pressure to perform his duties. This is reflected in *Ta eis heauton* in the recurring reprimands to do his duty.

Marcus' laziness may have been due to an opium addiction. His struggle may have found its way into his philosophy. But does this mean that his philosophy is best suited for drug addicts? I would say, not necessarily. Marcus failed to assert complete sovereignty over his body. The main objective which Marcus laid down in the pages of *Ta eis heauton* is: full control. Full control is only further out of reach for a drug addict than it is for a teetotaler. As a stoic, Marcus would always have had to try to achieve full control. But he did not reach that. Neither did he reach the states of *eudaimonia* and *ataraxia*. Even his appeals to philosophy did not help him progress. He remained stuck in the morass of his body and its desires.

²² Van Hooff (2012):

Chapter 5: Obstructing factors

Marcus feels he is a failure. Philosophy should have helped him attain his goals, but he does not manage to do so. Apart from his shortcomings in effort, he encounters two more problems in his life. One of these is everywhere on the surface of *Ta eis heauton*: other people and their awkward behaviour. The other problem is hidden within Stoic philosophy itself: its notion of time. First, I will highlight the 'problem of the other' within the context of *Ta eis heauton*.

Chapter 5.1: The Others

There is something annoying about other people:

You may break your heart, but men will still go on as before. (MA VIII.4)

No matter how much philosophy is applied to other people's behaviour, it will not help you to make them understand that you don't like what they do if they don't want to understand that you don't like it.

Do unsavoury armpits and bad breath make you angry? What good will it do to you? Given the mouth and armpits the man has got, that condition is bound to produce these odours. 'After all, though, the fellow is endowed with reason, and he is perfectly able to understand what is offensive if he gives any thought to it.'...

Humans are rational animals. If you are not rational, alas, you fail to be human. But if you are human, you have to be reasonable to a certain degree. The natural ability for cultivating rationality is universal among all people.

...Well and good: but you yourself are also endowed with reason; so apply your reasonableness to move him to a like reasonableness; expound, admonish...

It is through reason one can reach out towards other people and produce a common understanding among humans.

...If he pays attention, you will have worked a cure, and there will be no need for passion; leave that to actors and streetwalkers. (MA V.28)

Rational people will demonstrate their rationality by acknowledging their passions and will not act upon them. Passionate outbursts belong to the theatre. People who get paid to portray passions are the only ones who can do so rationally.

Marcus is above passionate reactions:

When anyone offends against you, let your first thought be, under what conception of good and ill was this committed?...

People usually have valid reasons to commit offences. These reasons are contained within the concepts of good and evil they maintain.

...Once you know that, astonishment and anger will give place to pity...

Anger should be replaced by pity because of the relativity of whatever people consider good and bad.

...For either your own ideas of what is good are no more than his, or at least bear some likeness to them, in which case it is clearly your duty to pardon him; or else, on the other hand, you have grown beyond supposing such actions to be either good or bad, and therefore it will be so much the easier to be tolerant of another's blindness. (MA VII.26)

Rationality is a relative concept. Some people are more rational than others (MA VIII.7). Applying reason to a situation will result in a judgement. Judgements are based on relative notions of what is good and evil. People's behaviour therefore is relative in a double sense. There is however a baseline:

Without an understanding of the nature of the universe, a man cannot know where he is; without an understanding of its purpose, he cannot know what he is, nor what the universe itself is. Let either of these discoveries be hid from him, and he will not be able so much as to give a reason for his own existence. So what are we to think of anyone who cares to seek or shun the applause of the shouting multitudes, when they know neither where they are nor what they are? (MA VIII.52)

Without proper knowledge of the universe, people will think that the popular acclaim is something to strive for. A striving with degenerative effects:

Eating, sleeping, copulating, excreting, and the like; what a crew they are! How pompous in their arrogance, how overbearing and tyrannical, how superciliously censorious of others! A moment ago, how many feet they were licking – and for such ends! – a moment more and they will be doing the same again. (MA X.19)

Without proper understanding, people will return to a state of near-bestiality, thereby foregoing their human rights as rational beings. It is just downright repulsive to behold!

An emperor's favour is of course a thing to strive for. No wonder people were licking Marcus' heels. Unfortunately, he could not get away from this. Being an emperor was something Fate had bestowed upon him, so he had to put up with the state of affairs. The only thing he could do was to try to penetrate people's motivations and find out whether their actions came from honest intentions or not.

Is one doing me wrong? Let himself look to that; his humours and his actions are his own. As for me, I am only receiving what the World-Nature wills me to receive, and acting as my own nature wills me to act. (MA V.25)

Marcus has to put up a wall of individuality between himself and other people. This is the only way he can guard himself against being drawn into the mealstrom of the world. But even then, there is a sense of doubt:

No man is so fortunate but that some who stand beside his death-bed will be hailing the coming loss with delight. He was virtuous, let us say, and wise; even so, will there not be one at the end who murmurs under his breath, 'At last we can breath freely again, without our master! To be sure he was never harsh with any of us; but I always felt that he had a silent contempt for us'?

Acting as a wise and just man may not be enough for some people's expectations of you. Marcus is aware that he may not have been able to completely please everyone around him. But is there anything he can do about that?

...Such is the fate of the virtuous; as for the rest of us, what a host of other good reasons there are to make not a few of our friends glad to be rid of us! Think of this when you come to die; it will ease your passing to reflect, 'I am leaving a world in which the very companions I have so toiled for, prayed for and thought for, themselves wish me gone, and hope to win some relief thereby; then how can any man cling to a lengthening of his days therein?'...

There is a comforting thought: thinking of life as a period of discomfort will make death come as a relief.

...Yet do not on that account leave with any diminished kindness for them; maintain your own accustomed friendliness, good-will, and charity; and do not feel the departure to be a wrench, but let your leavetaking be like those painless deaths in which the soul glides easily forth from the body...

In the meantime Marcus has to act nicely to everyone and withhold them his true judgement.

...Before, Nature had joined you to these men and made you one of them; now she looses the tie. I am loosed, then, as from my own kinsfolk; yet all unresisting, and all unforced; it is simply one more of Nature's ways. (MA X.36)

Death is merely a confirmation of the status quo: Marcus is the individual he has made himself to be.

There is a sense of irony in this: Marcus feels lonely in his stoic pursuit of *apatheia*, *eudaimonia* and *autarkeia*. Yet, once he is confronted with other people, he forces himself into the uncomfortable seclusion of his individuality, estranging him even further from other people. His very concept of stoicism prevents him from attaining his goals of companionship as he sets forth in the lament of MA X.1. Try hard as he may, he remains the victim of the other's influence on him. *Autarkeia* is out of reach precisely because he strives to be independent of others.

Chapter 5.2: Time pressure

The other obstructing factor that regularly comes to surface within *Ta eis heauton* is: time, or rather time pressure.

Were you to live three thousand years, or even thirty thousand, remember that the sole life which a man can lose is that which he is living at the moment; and furthermore, that he can have no other life except the one he loses...

You only live once. So live life to the fullest. But there is a catch:

...This means that the longest life and the shortest amount to the same thing. For the passing minute is every man's equal possession, but what has once gone by is not ours...

All the life anyone can have is concentrated in the one single moment of 'now'.

...Our loss, therefore, is limited to that one fleeting instant, since no one can lose what is already past, nor yet what is still to come - for how can he be deprived of what he does not possess?

There is no future and there is no past. These are figments of the imagination.

...So two things should be borne in mind. First, that all the cycles of creation since the beginning of time exhibit the same recurring pattern, so that it can make no difference whether you watch the identical spectacle for a hundred years, or two hundred, or for ever...

This is a bit of ancient Stoic physics: the recurring conflagration of the cosmos. In short, it comes down to this: no matter how the cosmos starts again after each conflagration, a recurrent 'Big Bang'-like event, the laws of nature will cause the sequences of all events to be the same, time after time.

...Secondly, that when the longest- and the shortest-lived of us come to die, their loss is precisely equal. For the sole thing of which any man can be deprived is the present; since this is all he owns, and nobody can lose what is not his. (MA II.14)

More important, at least for now, is this: in the face of time, everyone becomes equal. We all have to die, and we all have to die at the very moment we were chosen to do so by Fate. Without a future and without a past, life becomes brief indeed. It can end any moment when we least expect it.

The sixth of Marcus' counsels when offended puts it thus:

Tell yourself, when you feel exasperated and out of all patience, that this mortal life endures but a moment; it will not be long before we shall one and all have been laid to rest. (MA XI.18)

It is pointless to rush things. You will not gain any time in doing so. It's also pointless to be angry about a slow progress, that will only make the progress seem even slower. Once again, there is an advice against such passionate reactions:

Do away with all fancies. Cease to be passion's puppet. Limit time to the present. Learn to recognize every experience for what it is, whether it be your own or another's. Divide and classify the objects of sense into cause and matter. Meditate upon your last hour. Leave your neighbour's wrongdoing to rest with him who initiated it. (MA VII.29)

That is a piece of good advice. When things become too large to handle as a whole, break the problem down and deal with each sub-problem individually. When something is not your problem, it certainly is not a cause for you to worry about it.

Never confuse yourself by visions of an entire lifetime at once. That is, do not let your thoughts range over the whole multitude and variety of the misfortunes that may befall you, but rather, as you encounter each one, ask yourself, 'What is there unendurable, so insupportable, in this?'...

What happens to be your problem after such an analysis will be mitigated by proper analysis into matter, cause and effect (MA IX.25).

...You will find that you are ashamed to admit defeat. Again, remember that it is not the weight of the future or the past that is pressing upon you, but ever that of the present alone. Even this burden, too, can be lessened if you confine it strictly to its own limits, and are severe enough with your mind's inability to bear such a trifle. (MA VIII.36)

Proper analysis and disregard for emotional responses will stop you worrying. All you have to do is live the moment as it comes, according to this simple advice:

In the management of your principles, take example by the pugilist, not the swordsman. One puts down his blade and has to pick it up again; the other is never without his hand, and so needs only to clench it. (MA XII.9)

An emperor is a busy man with a lot of things on his mind. Marcus would have loved to live a quiet life somewhere in the mountains, but it wasn't meant to be. He just had

to live his life as well as he could. But would the same problems have existed for someone who actually did live a quiet life somewhere in the mountains? For such a person there would not have been any boot-licking followers and no busy agenda. For him, there would also not have been a reason to turn to stoicism to counter such problems. In other words, so far, the *condition Aurélienne* is merely Marcus' *condition Aurélienne*.

There is a double irony hidden in *Ta eis heauton*. Marcus does recognize his troubled relationship with others and his restlessness in life.

Wrong, wrong thou art doing to thyself, O my soul; and all too soon thou shalt have no more to do thyself right. Man has but one life; already thine is nearing its close, yet still thou hast no eye to thine own honour, but art staking thy happiness on the souls of other men. (MA II.6)

His stoic solutions to the problems with other people cause Marcus to get messed up even further in those problems. But at the same time he does feel that his time is running out. The harder he tries, the more he thinks he will run out of time, yet he must try even harder. The *condition Aurélienne* is not just a deadlock, it is a vicious circle.

Chapter 6: Duty and Fate

Marcus is not trapped in the gap between the way the world is and the way he thinks it should be. He is trapped in the downward spiral of trying to get square with his fellow human beings while being convinced that he will not have enough time to achieve his goal. Yet he forces himself to continue on this path. He prevents himself from finding a way out of the *condition Aurélienne*. But why would he?

Being a Roman emperor in itself does not at all entail that he should be nice to everyone. Neither does he have to allow offensive people in his vicinity. If you are as powerful as an emperor, then there are many ways to get rid of annoying people. After all, Nero knew how to get rid of Seneca.²³ Marcus' son Commodus even had his own wife and sister executed when he was emperor himself. It could therefore not have been his social position as an emperor that made Marcus willing to bear his fate. Something else must have prevented him from escaping the *condition Aurélienne*.

Fate and the *condition Aurélienne* appear to have close ties with each other. In the introduction I proposed to call the "*condition Aurélienne*" a never ending striving for goodness, while at the same time experiencing a profound sense of failure. But when Fate becomes a part of this condition, it becomes bigger, larger than the individual. Whatever Fate bestows on Marcus, it must be dealt with, even when he is not up to the task. In the *condition Aurélienne* also the individual's way of dealing with Fate is involved. The *condition Aurélienne* is therefore not merely failing to meet one's own targets, it is also failing to deal with one's fate.

Marcus Aurelius was one of the last Roman emperors to die in his own bed. Subsequent emperors mostly followed Ceasar's example and were murdered while battling for internal rulership. No death scene of Marcus remains. It was not heroic for that matter. It was much like Marcus' way of living had been during his entire life:

²³ Kenny (2004): 106

a private affair. When he sensed that his end was near, he abstained from eating and effectively died from starvation in the seclusion of his bedroom.²⁴

In a mind that is disciplined and purified there is no taint of corruption, no unclean spot nor festering sore. Such a man's life fate can never snatch away unfulfilled, as it were an actor walking off in mid-performance before the play is finished. There is nothing of the lackey in him, yet nothing of the coxcomb; he neither leans on others nor holds aloof from them; and he remains answerable to no man, yet guiltless of all evasion. (MA III.8)

It is a demonstration of independence and of discipline of the mind to stop eating and to let the body die. It may have been the fulfilment of Marcus' dream of *ataraxia*, *eudaimonia* and *autarkeia*. Yet, why would he have furnished his life with all his prohibitions, self-analyses and personal struggles if they only gave him so much guilt and pain? Where does this sense of duty come from?

There is only one thing that could have had such a strong influence on Marcus: philosophy, or rather: his version of stoic philosophy. Marcus' philosophy gave every part of the universe its duty.

Everything – a horse, a vine – is created for some duty. This is nothing to wonder at: even the sun-god himself will tell you, 'There is a work that I am here to do,' and so will all the other sky-dwellers. For what task, then, were you yourself created? For pleasure? Can such a thought be tolerated? (MA VIII.19)

Even if everything is created for some duty, this does not necessarily mean that duty needs to be followed. Marcus' life was full of people who did not follow their duty and nonetheless led a fulfilling life according to their own standards. Marcus voluntarily placed himself under the rule of duty for some reason. What was the gain he hoped for?

A branch severed from an adjoining branch necessarily becomes severed from the whole tree. A man, likewise, who has been divided from any of his

²⁴ Van Hooff (2012): 232

fellows has thereby fallen away from the whole community. But whereas the branch is lopped by some other hand, the man, by his feelings of hatred or aversion, brings about his own estrangement from his neighbour, and does not see that at the same time he has cut himself off from the whole framework of society...

To be honest, this is exactly what happened to Marcus. If he had been able to live his life the way he wanted, he would have lost touch with the community. It was the community that pressed itself onto him that prevented Marcus from becoming a hermit somewhere in the mountains. Marcus failed to see that because his philosophy was supposed to prevent him from becoming detached, but it didn't.

...Nevertheless it is in our power by grace of Zeus the author of all fellowship, to grow back and become one with our neighbours again, so playing our part once more in the integration of the whole. Yet if such acts of secession are repeated frequently, they make it difficult for the recussant to achieve this union and restitution. A branch which has been partner of the tree's growth since the beginning, and has never ceased to share its life, is a different thing from one that has been grafted in again after severance. As the gardeners say, it is of the same tree, but not of the same mind. (MA XI.8)

Hidden within the lines of this paragraph lies a very strong motive for living life under the rule of duty. Here Marcus explains that there was an original situation of unity between the individual and the community. This unity would have provided peace for both, a state of bliss. Individual preferences however, create a schism between the community and the individual. This schism is the cause of a sense of loss or estrangement. In the same instant, the individual also becomes separated from *ataraxia*, and *eudaimonia*. Only by living life according to the dictates of duty can whatever might be left of the original unity and its accompanying peaceful state be restored. That is the benefit of following one's duties: peace of mind.

But peace of mind, or even peace in general, were not within reach for Marcus. Military campaigns were part and parcel of an emperor's station. Marcus did not have a choice in the matter. His role in Roman politics was the result of intricately

political engineering. Even his marriage had been arranged so he could become the emperor. Being an emperor was far removed from his desired life of peace and quiet somewhere in the mountains or even philosophical distraction (MA IV.3). He was bound by duty to the life he lived. It was Fate that had it so ordained. Whether he liked it or not, he had to take his life as it came.

There is however, a distance between accepting the rule of duty and accepting fate. The dictates of duty are palatable once it is accepted that one will be the better for it. Marcus could accept his duty because he had come to the insight that it was always beneficial to him in the end. Accepting his duty was his own decision and therefore an act of self-control. Fate on the other hand is something different. Fate is neither something within your control, nor is it always beneficial to the individual.

...Seeing, then, that all else is the common heritage of such types, the good man's only singularity lies in his approving welcome to every experience the looms of fate may weave for him, his refusal to soil the divinity seated in his breast or perturb it with disorderly impressions, and his resolve to keep it in serenity and decorous obedience to God, admitting no disloyalty to truth in his speech or to justice in his actions... (MA III.16)

People can either accept Fate, or reject it. But it will overcome them nonetheless. Rejecting Fate is resisting the course of Nature. A proper functioning *hegemonikon* should warn people against that. The rational, and therefore good, man will accept Fate because it is beneficial to follow the dictates of the *hegemonikon*. But ordinary humans must impose restraints and prohibitions upon themselves. People who are aspiring to become rational willingly place themselves under the rule of duty. Such a man accepts his duty in order to accept his fate. Marcus ended up in the cul-de-sac of the *condition Aurélienne* because he made duty and Fate interchangeable. It was his duty to bear his fate and it was his fate to follow his duty.

Chapter 7: The condition Aurélienne a condition Stoïque?

It may be wise to retrace our steps through *Ta eis heauton*. It will help to plot Marcus' position within the stoic landscape. Establishing that position will show whether the *condition Aurélienne* is his own condition or whether it is an effect of or the result of stoic philosophy. In the former case it would indicate a personal dilemma that makes Marcus a truly tragic person. In the latter case the *condition Aurélienne* will have wider implications than just an individual's misery.

Anyone who reads *Ta eis heauton* is struck by the profoundness of Marcus' sayings and the intensity of his self-encouragement. But at the same time, there is an undercurrent of despair running through its lines. As we have seen, Marcus is looking within stoic philosophy for certain instruments to find happiness, peace of mind and self-control. These instruments are the *hegemonikon* (a guiding psychological faculty), the laws of rationality and a set of rules for living life according to Nature.

Unfortunately, Marcus does not reach any of his goals. It was shown that this was due to the disturbing presence of other people and the failure to live life in the present. Marcus' attempts to reach happiness, peace of mind and self-control make him feel even more at a loss. But due to his sense of duty, which promises a 'happy end', he must try even harder. Marcus' fate was to live his life while enduring his own failures. Marcus had to live with himself.

Stoic philosophy was centered around the individual who had to maintain himself within a turbulent world.²⁵ The standard stoic dictum thereby was "to live according to nature". Nature was more than the present day notion of the secluded area wherein men have not interfered. Nature (*φύσις*) comprised all the material workings within the cosmos. A modern opposition between Nature and Culture was not part of

²⁵ Long (1971, 1996): 6

ancient thought. But in order to give an individual agent room to act, he would somehow have to learn what Nature's workings are. Logic described how Nature worked and how Nature's workings were experienced.²⁶ The *hegemonikon* played a central role within stoic epistemology in the process of becoming acquainted with Nature. It was both the screen onto which the world was presented as well as the faculty that provided the grounds for assenting or rejecting the opinions one formed about the external world.²⁷

The exact location and functioning of the *hegemonikon* remains obscure within Marcus' psychology. The best one can do is to treat the combination of *hegemonikon* and rationality within Marcus' philosophy as the moral nucleus.

Marcus is keen to use the epistemological functions (regarding the acquisition and processing of knowledge) of the *hegemonikon* and rationality for moral ends. He needs them to find his moral bearing. This is not far removed from the traditional stoic doctrines. Older stoics treated ethics in much the same way as physics or logic. It was one of the three sides of the same coin. This means that any ethical statement had to be supported by physical explanations. Anything that happens, or is, has a place within a materialistic universe.

See what things consist of; resolve them into their matter, form, and purpose.
(MA XII.10)

Marcus follows traditional stoic techniques of division and classification to approach a problem. But one obvious difference between Marcus' stoicism and older versions of the school is that Marcus does not treat physics in-depth. Physics only makes a passing appearance as a part of his wider frame of reference, not as an independent subject matter. Expositions of logic are almost non-existent within *Ta eis heauton*. His focus is first and foremost on ethics. In order to be a true stoic, Marcus has to maintain a materialistic view on ethics, but how do Marcus' ethics actually fit within the wider stoic framework?

Traditional stoic ethics assumed that humans tended towards communal welfare.²⁸

²⁶ Mooij-Valk (2013): 28

²⁷ Long (1971): 12

²⁸ Pembroke (1971): 120

...Neither can I be angry with my brother or fall foul of him; for he and I were born to work together, like a man's two hands, feet, or eyelids, or like the upper and lower rows of this teeth. To obstruct each other is against Nature's law – and what is irritation or aversion but a form of obstruction. (MA II.1)

Marcus assumes the same thing: humans were meant to support each other. But no matter how hard Marcus may try, others may not necessarily work towards that same end. That much was already established in the previous pages. There may be a lot of reasons why people forego their human right as communal animals, but often they just do. It can be established that Marcus remains uncertain whether he should or should not adjust their behaviour. Take for example:

...'After all, though the fellow is endowed with reason, and he is perfectly able to understand what is offensive if he gives any thought to it.' Well and good: but you yourself are also endowed with reason; so apply your reasonableness to move him to a like reasonableness; expound admonish. If he pays attention, you will have worked a cure, and there will be no need for passion; leave that to actors and streetwalkers. (MA V.28)

Marcus can and must use his rational powers to make another understand the common objective of mutual tolerance. But on the other hand:

He who ignores what his neighbour is saying or doing or thinking, and cares only that his own actions should be just and godly, is greatly the gainer in time and ease. A good man does not spy around for the black spots in others, but presses unswervingly on towards his mark. (MA IV.18)

The 'virtuous' and the 'rational' man coincide in stoicism.²⁹ But the virtuous man does not meddle with other people's business, no matter how offensive they may be.

'To adjust or not to adjust', that remains the question. The above statements are the opposite consequences of basic stoic assumptions and thus remain within the same stoic framework of philosophy. This indicates that there must be something

²⁹ Annas (2008): 11

paradoxical within stoicism. Anyone who follows stoicism will have to confront this particular paradox one way or the other, but how did Marcus counter it?

Maybe we should first try to indicate the origin of this paradox. It originates from two propositions that are part of the stoic set of axioms:

- Because humans have a share in the divine reason, they share in the divine zeal for unity (MA IX.9);
- Humans as individuals have only the control over their own affairs (MA V.25).

These axioms are consistent with a third: The universe is beneficent to itself as a whole and to its parts (MA II.3). Of course these axioms will create a tension between the interests of the individual and the interests of the commonwealth: should a man forego his own interests for the benefit of others? Are an individual's actions towards, or against the benefit of the commonwealth at all possible? Can he, given the fact that the universe is predetermined to run its course? And if it is possible, what should his attitude towards such actions be? On the other hand, the opposite is equally true: if the universe is benevolent or beneficial to itself and its parts, why does it make the individual suffer? Consequently, does the individual have the powers and the right to use anything beneficial for his own purposes? Marcus finds himself on the crossroads of these questions.

Anyone who wants to accuse stoicism of paradoxicality will find a helpful ally in Plutarch. In his essay: *Contradictions of the Stoics*, he points out that:

Now who can imagine any assertions more repugnant to one another than that of Chrysippus concerning the gods and that concerning men; when he says, that the gods do in the best manner possible provide for men, and yet men are in the worst condition imaginable?³⁰

Plutarch is not always fair to stoicism, nor to any other philosophical school for that matter.³¹ But he does have a point here that is a recurring theme in *Ta eis heauton*. There is the benevolence of Nature, the gods, Zeus - what have you, and there is the wretched state Marcus is in because of his offensive neighbours.

³⁰ Plutarch V.15

³¹ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plutarch/#Inf>

It should be noted that Plutarch is passing by an important distinction within stoicism. There are the physical events, happening everywhere to anyone. These events are determined to happen by the laws of physics. No deviation is possible from the course of nature. Stoicism maintained a strict determinism throughout its history.³² Marcus also maintains this deterministic viewpoint.

Facts stand wholly outside of our gates; they are what they are, and no more; they know nothing about themselves, and they pass no judgement upon themselves. What is it then that pronounces the judgement? Our own guide and ruler, Reason. (*hegemonikon*, MA IX.15)

The fact that his neighbours are offensive to him is widely acknowledged throughout *Ta eis heauton*. Marcus therefore reverts to a typically stoic solution: his control is limited to his self-control. He cannot prevent his neighbours from having an effect upon him (i.e. being regarded as offensive). Neither can he prevent his body from being offended by his neighbours. But there is one thing he can control:

Everything is what your own opinion makes it; and that opinion lies within yourself. Renounce it when you will, and at once you have rounded the foreland and all is calm; a tranquil sea, a tideless haven. (MA XII.22)

Traditionally, stoicism separated judgements from the events that gave rise to these judgements. That is what liberation meant for the stoics. The benevolent gods had given men a share in their divine rationality so they could face the evils of the world on a rational level.³³

Epictetus, of all stoics Marcus' main philosophical influence, developed this idea to the fullest.³⁴ As a slave, he had to do his master's bidding. His opinions on the other hand were entirely under his own control. This allowed him to form his notion of freedom while being physically bound to certain restraints. Such restraints did not apply to the emperor Marcus, but he was physically influenced by his neighbours' demands. For Marcus escape from such influences or restraints meant escape into the philosophical realm.

³² Long (1971, 1996): 173

³³ Boter (2011): 13

³⁴ Boter (2011): 16

What then, does the stoic precept 'Living according to Nature' mean to Marcus? There is the stream of causes acting on matter. These causes may also affect his body. His mind forms opinions about these affectations. True opinions are opinions that take the affectations for what they are. True opinions can only be formed when the information of the senses has been filtered through the knowledge of the universe. Therefore, one needs one's knowledge of the universe as an instrument in order to form true opinions. True opinions are free from exterior interferences and lead one to recognize one's position within the natural state of affairs. Hard work is needed to attain this level of knowledge. But the pay-off for this hard work is the attainment of freedom, a freedom from the immediate demands of the physical world. Achieving freedom therefore requires hard work: that is the bottom line of stoicism. There are no shortcuts within philosophical contemplation. One must follow the road of reasoning completely in order to attain philosophical liberation. Complete understanding of an event comes from complete reasoning.

Only actions based on a complete understanding of Nature can be in accord with the laws of Nature. But the laws of Nature give Marcus two different imperatives: to adjust *and* not to adjust the other. If paradoxes are an indication of true stoic reasoning, then Marcus is indeed a true stoic. But does this help him in leading his life as a stoic?

Let's first rephrase this question slightly: is Marcus the only stoic suffering from this paradox? Marcus acknowledges that he is depressed because he is continuously confronted with other people and their offensive behaviour. But neither Epictetus, nor the slightly earlier stoic philosopher Seneca, seem to suffer from a similar depression. That is odd. Marcus remains largely true to the same stoic doctrines, but he finds himself facing a disturbing paradox that does not disturb Seneca or Epictetus.

Marcus must be doing something the other two stoics do not do.

Treat with respect the power you have to form an opinion. By it alone can the helmsman (*hegemonikon*) within you avoid forming opinions that are at a variance with nature and with the constitution of a reasonable being. From it you may look to attain circumspection, good relations with your fellow-men, and conformity with the will of heaven. (MA III.9)

There are the workings of Nature. That is where 'good relations with your fellow-men' should happen in 'conformity with the will of heaven'. The helmsman within you can form his opinions based on the workings of Nature that should not be at 'a variance with the constitution of a reasonable being'. So Marcus describes the two levels of stoicism here:

- The natural events, the level of causes acting on matter;
- Opinions about these natural events, the level of reflection.

So far, there is nothing new, this is all stoic thinking. But Marcus is adding another level: respect for his ability to form opinions. This is something new, something that cannot be found with Seneca or Epictetus or any of the earlier stoics.

Seneca was writing his *Epistola Morales* to Lucilius. Epictetus was teaching his students. They were in an external position with respect to their audience. Marcus encourages himself to take this same position:

Look down from above on the numberless herds of mankind, with their mysterious ceremonies, their divers voyagings in storm and calm, and all the chequered pattern of their comings and gatherings and goings... (MA IX.30)

Looking at the behaviour of others is possible within the stoic framework. It is a matter of describing the events of Nature. But what happens if someone looks at himself as if he were another? What happens if the judge judges his own judgements?

To each his own felicity. For me, soundness of my sovereign faculty (*hegemonikon*), reason; no shrinking from mankind and its vicissitudes; the ability to survey and accept all things with a kindly eye, and to deal with them according to their deserts. (MA VIII.43)

Here something happens that is particularly noteworthy. Marcus passes a moral judgement on his *hegemonikon*. Traditional stoic doctrine allowed for only two levels: natural events and judgements of natural events. The *hegemonikon* was the judging faculty as well as the epistemological stage where judgements were made. In MA III.9, VIII.43, IX.30 and most prominently in XI.19 Marcus is adding another level of reflection: judgements of the performance of the judging faculty of natural events.

But what happens if the judgements of the performance of the judging faculty prove to be unreliable? In that case another level of reflection is required. Marcus cannot prevent that additional levels of reflection will be necessary. This should not be possible within stoicism, but it is the direct result of the kind of goals that Marcus sets himself because of his stoicism. The *condition Aurélienne* is not only a deadlock and a vicious circle, it displays a paradox within stoicism.

It is no wonder Marcus cannot find a definitive location of the *hegemonikon* within his psychology. He is trying to remain within the sphere of two levels while he actually has three and possibly more. Marcus is following the traditional line of stoic reasoning, but he applies it onto himself and his own behaviour. The result of this is that whatever he may think about his behaviour, he is bound by his duty to act upon it accordingly. There are two ways in which this might develop further:

- An infinite regress: adding an infinity of levels of judgements over judgements;
- Ending the regress by positing some conceptual basis, an archimedean point of leverage.

Marcus cannot escape the consequences of his own reflective judgements. It was his fate to be haunted by his *condition Aurélienne*. But in fact, this fate did not come from without, it was produced by his stoic philosophy. A philosophy he had deliberately chosen himself. The same philosophy that should have given him comfort in a life of turmoil.

O man, citizenship of this great world-city has been yours. Whether for five years or fivescore, what is that to you? Whatever the law of that city decrees is fair to one and all alike. Wherein, then is your grievance? You are not ejected from the city by an unjust judge or tyrant, but by the selfsame Nature which brought you into it; just as when an actor is dismissed by the manager who engaged him. 'But I have played no more than three of the five acts.' Just so; in your drama of life, three acts are all the play. Its point of completeness is determined by him who formerly sanctioned your creation, and today sanctions your dissolution. Neither of those decisions lay within yourself. Pass on your way, then with a smiling face, under the smile of him who bids you go. (MA XII.36)

These are the last words we learn from Marcus himself. They are the concluding aphorism of *Ta eis heauton*. Marcus speaks of accepting his fate and not resisting when Death beckons. Death could have been acceptable if he knew his life had been complete. But it never could have been. His life would always remain incomplete because there was no way he could fulfill the demands he put onto himself thanks to stoicism.

Marcus Aurelius; was he the man who created a philosophy, or was it his philosophy that created the man? Most of his private life, Marcus spent on applying his philosophy onto himself. The depressed state of the *condition Aurélienne* seems to be the main result. But does everyone who wants to be a stoic have to fall into this trap? Seneca did not; at least he did not become depressed from being a stoic philosopher. Even in the lectures of Epictetus, the former slave, we find traces of light-heartedness. Of course, in their writings Seneca and Epictetus are addressing others rather than themselves. But still, they did not become depressed like Marcus did from being stoic philosophers. They did not become entrapped in their own *condition Aurélienne*, but why?

What is the *condition Aurélienne* anyway? In the introduction, it was said that this condition results from the discrepancy between the way Marcus thinks the world should be and the way the world actually is. It was Marcus' duty to bridge this gap between theory and practice. The result was that he experienced a profound sense of failure while trying very hard to strive for goodness. Marcus was certain that it was Fate that had ordained it so.

But this can no longer be maintained in such simple terms. The *condition Aurélienne* proves to originate from the discrepancy between what Marcus thinks he should strive for and what he actually achieves. Marcus' particular motivations, his actions and his shortcomings are exposed to him because he sets his goals according to his particular stoic philosophy. The *condition Aurélienne* proves to have deep roots within the stoic philosophical framework. There is a discrepancy, but it is more than a mere discrepancy between *is* and *ought*. Theory and practice, in Marcus' experience, are separated indeed. But they are separated by the way Marcus' theory shapes the practice.

Seneca was known for a completely different discrepancy between theory and practice: the way he taught one should live and the way he actually lived himself. He

was immensely rich, yet he professed a life of moderation.³⁵ Of all stoics of whom we have more or less complete writings, Seneca was known to have been the most hypocritical.³⁶

Plutarch does not comment on Seneca, but he does point out that especially stoic philosophers were prone to such hypocrisy.

Since, then, there are in their discourses many things written by Zeno himself, many by Cleanthes, and most of all by Chrysippus, concerning policy, governing and being governed, concerning judging and pleading, and yet there is not to be found in any of their lives either leading of armies, making laws, going to parliament, pleading before the judges, fighting for their country, travelling on embassies, or making gifts, but they have all, feeding (if I may say so) on rest as on the lotus, led their whole lives, and those not short but very long ones, in foreign countries, amongst disputations, books, and walkings; it is manifest that they have lived rather according to the writings and sayings of others than their own professions, having spent all their days in that repose which Epicurus and Hieronymus so much commend.³⁷

Seneca did exactly so. He demonstrated that it is possible to teach one thing and do another without a personal moral dilemma. But Seneca managed to do so only by keeping stoicism within relative boundaries. Marcus did not limit stoicism to his judgements of others. He ventured deep into the heart of stoicism and tried to judge himself according to the strictest stoic principles, making stoicism an absolute philosophy. But this very move brought him to the point of breakdown of stoicism.

Epictetus, the other stoic from the same era would not have been surprised to hear that :

...Show me then a stoic if you know one. Where is he, where do I find him? Yes, of course you will show me countless people who speak stoic principles; but will they not be equally capable and willing to expound epicurean dogmas? Shall they not recite peripatetic dogmas? Who, then is a stoic?... By Zeus, I would like to see a true stoic with my own eyes. But if you cannot

³⁵ Russell (1946): 289

³⁶ Copleston (1946): 429

³⁷ Plutarch, *Contradictions of the Stoics*: 1

show me someone worthy of the name stoic, show me someone in the process of becoming one, someone who is going in the right direction. Do me this favour, humour an old man with the sight he has never seen...Why, then, do you fool yourselves, do you throw dust in other peoples' eyes? Why do you walk in other peoples' clothes, like robbers and thieves of names and characters unbecoming of yourselves? ³⁸

There are no stoics! Epictetus knew it. Seneca showed it. But Marcus Aurelius demonstrated that it is impossible to *actually* be a stoic because in his over-reflective stoicism the paradoxes of stoicism amount to the *condition Aurélienne*. Marcus found the limits of stoicism within himself. A true stoic cannot be a stoic. That may have been the greatest stoic paradox of all.

³⁸ Epictetus II,19: 21 (my translation from the dutch translation by Boter and Brouwer.)

Chapter 8: The condition Aurélienne, the hard problem of stoicism

If the diagnosis of *Ta eis heauton* is that it fosters the *condition Aurélienne*, then what exactly are the symptoms? During the foregoing analysis many of these symptoms have already come to our attention. Once more I will go step by step through the *condition Aurélienne* and pinpoint how its paradoxes surface in Marcus' *Ta eis heauton*.

In the introduction the *condition Aurélienne* was introduced as a 'never ending striving for goodness, while at the same time experiencing a profound sense of failure'. But a thorough reading of *Ta eis heauton* showed that this condition could not be reduced to the discrepancy between theory and practice per se. Within the *condition Aurélienne*, theory and practice are bound together by the way the one shapes the other. This means that there is neither a theoretical nor a practical way out of the *condition Aurélienne*.

Hemmed-in between these boundaries, Marcus generates a peculiar dynamic of self-control based on self-analysis, self-criticism and self-correction. Self-analysis is the practice of gathering information about personal actions and their motivations. Sensory information, rational justification and effective action are offered for criticism by himself. Self-correction is the feedback mechanism for adjusting the effectivity of his self-control mechanism.

Time and again, Marcus stresses the importance of the *hegemonikon* for this process. Stoicism assumed that the *hegemonikon* was capable of discerning right opinions based on sensory input from wrong opinions based on either false or misunderstood sensory input. Since stoicism also assumed that morality was contained in the structure of the universe, the *hegemonikon* was supposed to fulfill

both an epistemological as well as a moral function.³⁹ It should decide about ‘what is the case?’ at the same time as ‘what should I do?’

They do not know all that is signified by such words as ‘stealing’, ‘sowing’, ‘purchasing’, ‘being at peace’, ‘seeing what one’s duty is’: this needs a different vision from the eye’s. (MA III.15)

Marcus’ stoicism deviates significantly from traditional stoicism when he applies the epistemological function of the *hegemonikon* to the functioning of the *hegemonikon* itself. Every action becomes the material for analysis. But every analysis becomes the material for analysis as well, causing a massive amount of information to be analysed. Marcus’ *hegemonikon* becomes flooded with self-produced information and overloaded with analytical processes. This very move causes him to lose touch with the world at large because all the information that is not in line with the assumptions of a benevolent universe, good will among all men etc. is discarded. Marcus mistrusted his senses, but he should have mistrusted his introspection.

Are you distracted by outward cares? Then allow yourself a space of quiet, wherein you can add to your knowledge of the Good and learn to curb your restlessness. Guard also against another kind of error: the folly of those who weary their days on much business, but lack any aim on which their whole effort, nay their whole thought is focused. (MA II.7)

In *Ta eis heauton*, there are no outward cares. There are just the products of introspection. But there is also no internal space of quiet since all of that space is taken up by self-analysis. And because self-analysis questions every outcome, Marcus invests a lot of effort without, in the end, having a fixed aim for his thought. Marcus thought that stoicism provided him with a solid footing. But it only gave him water to tread.

The above quoted passage is from Book Two, written in the trenches of the battlefield in the land of the Qadi. Marcus still seems to be enthusiastic about stoicism. But later books do not show such enthusiasm anymore. More and more, the pages of *Ta eis heauton* express doubt, insecurity and circularity in thinking.

³⁹ Long (1971, 1996): 104

Marcus' primary response is the addition of an extra level of reflection to the stoic framework, but it does not help him much. Another response could have been of benefit to him: stepping outside of his system of self-analysis and allowing other people to comment on him and his behaviour.

A common comment on stoics is their hypocrisy. But that is merely a statement of facts, not a philosophical exposition of a fundamental stoic deficiency. A stoic accused of hypocrisy can always claim to be incapable of fulfilling the strict demands of stoicism, yet still claim to be in the position to offer helpful advice to others. The real stoic problem is the dutiful self-correction like Marcus' that it entails, but which is impossible to perform without an external point of reference. Stoicism, if taken too seriously, suffers in the end from the *condition Aurélienne*.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

Even though people living in a post-modern world will not be impressed by the idea of a benevolent world order, they can still regard stoicism as an ideal instrument for managing complex situations and processes. Stoicism did not, like platonism for example, separate the world into two distinct realms. It separated events from the judgements over events. This allowed stoics to take a distance from the world but still judge the state of affairs according to general principles. The tools ancient stoicism provided for decision processes may seem familiar:

- Rationality;
- Knowledge;
- Reliance on factual information.

When these tools are incorporated within a process of division and classification, the whole management process becomes capable of handling virtually any situation with any kind of complexity. Internal management reviews are momentary snapshots when the process itself is made subject to its own criticism. At the same time when the process is reviewed and adjusted, factual information is selected for its suitability within the process. Practice, in that case, becomes distorted by the theory used for the management process. That is when the process is made *to figure things out for itself*.

Marcus tried to *'figure it out for himself'* and found himself confronting a discrepancy between the world and his philosophy. While he assumed that all people are created for their mutual welfare, he found himself surrounded by obnoxious people. Instead of limiting his motivations for his actions to the present and to the present circumstances, he found that he took all sorts of hidden motives into account, motives he'd rather not have found within himself. His attempts to correct himself pressed these deficiencies even more upon him.

My analysis of Marcus' book *Ta eis heauton* has shown that *'to figure things out for yourself'* contains paradoxical elements that cannot be solved by the individual on

his own, nor by a self-centered philosophy like stoicism. Any statement one makes about oneself is by necessity true when the self is both the judge as well as the grounds for the judgement. An external point of reference can be posited, but no matter how clean and simple this is formulated in theory, it will never be matched in messy and complex practice. The discrepancies that show up are a result of the conceptual framework, the theory, that is applied to practical reality.

The analysis has also shown that '*to figure it out for yourself*' is more than an isolated remark. It is part of a larger conceptual framework that has its own internal consistency. But this consistency comes with the price of a paradoxical flaw. The casual remark '*Figure it out for yourself*', contains these same traces of paradoxicality even though they may not be obvious at the surface. Self-criticism leads to self-deflation and depression. '*Figure it out for yourself*' is helpful advice but it should never be given at the end of a discussion, rather should it be the beginning of one.

This may seem a good reason to get rid of stoicism. But stoicism has enormous benefits. Within the practice of social and political life, stoicism provides people with the conceptual tools to talk about the world in shades of grey. On the one hand it posits the absolutely bad, the vice that should be avoided at all times. On the other hand, it posits the absolutely good that should be strived for at all times. No one is capable of reaching either one of those. All people are engaged on the middle ground in between: the indifferents or *adiaphora*. Within stoicism *adiaphora* are things that are neither bad nor good in themselves, even though some are more preferable than others with respect to personal benefits.⁴⁰ Everyday dealings are nudges for reflection upon the moral content of one's motivations with respect to others.

Ancient stoicism made room for real human beings within the rigidity of absolutes. Hellenistic Greece could dispense with the Draconian laws and the fickle whims of the popular vote based on rhetorics. Stoicism gave individuals tools of comparison and decision. It really was a philosophy fit for people who had to find their bearings in a turbulent world. In addition, stoicism gave tools for describing how people develop through their dealings with this world. People are not fixed when they are born. They

⁴⁰ Boter, Brouwer (2011): 12

have potentials that can be developed. Education, training and, if you like, disciplining were tools that were developed furthest within stoicism.⁴¹

Stoic philosophy also allows for a relative comparison between individuals. This works, so long as there are at least two distinct individuals involved. When the individuals overlap completely, as was the case in Marcus, relativity becomes absolute. That means that whatever one thinks about oneself must by definition be accepted as true. Without the other as a reference point, stoic guidelines for behaviour lose their effectiveness. This makes stoicism a very powerful tool for reflection on the behaviour of others, but not of the self. Whether there is, or is not, a 'self' is a completely different subject matter that I cannot treat here. But when self-analysis produces semantic gibberish, self-government and self-control contain an inherent instability that cannot be solved within stoicism, if at all.

Should we then dismiss contemporary stoicism as another one of philosophy's failures? I wouldn't say so. But we must recognize the limit of stoicism (that is: the self) as the ultimate terminus of its descriptive power. Stoicism cannot be used as a guide from within, *Ta eis heauton* bears testimony to that. When management systems with a likeness to stoicism become self-reflective, circular in their reasoning and 'in their rotundity enjoying', they should 'approvingly welcome' the sting of the socratic gadfly, questioning their most firmly held beliefs. Other people, cultures, habits, opinions and events deserve to be given a more prominent position to provide the external point of reference. In that respect, Marcus Aurelius, as an external adviser, has a lot to offer about life and the beauty of it. *Ta eis heauton* really should be recommended for reading, especially on the bedside where it originated. But it should also be accompanied by a sign:

Warning:
Not for internal use.

⁴¹ See for example: Foucault's '*The hermeneutics of the subject.*'

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