

Aurelius, Marcus. *Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, The Emperor, To Himself.* Translated and edited by C. R. Haines. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003.

Marcus Aurelius, (121-180), ruled the Roman Empire from 161-180 A.D, and was an important exponent of Stoicism. Aurelius profited from a Roman education at the hand of Greek tutors, and has been deemed the last of the Five Good Emperors of the Roman Empire. Aurelius's famous little book was written for the Emperor's own edification and direction, purportedly with no thought to publication. Its heartfelt, if occasionally grim, admonitions have rung true to millions over centuries.

The text was written in chapters that correspond to periods of Aurelius's rule, though he does not present them chronologically. Book I was probably written last. As is the case with other aphoristic works I have epitomized, I shall condense this work by its themes, rather than by the author's own choice of structure. I make exception for Book I, which appears to have been constructed as an introduction. The existence of an introduction leads one to suspect that Aurelius acknowledged that his admonitions to himself would be preserved and published *post mortem*.

Book I. Aurelius recites lessons he received from persons who deeply influenced him.

Aurelius recalls his grandfather Verus's kind sweetness, and his father's modesty. Aurelius's mother feared God and lived simply. He thanks his great grandfather for removing him from public schools, and teaching the family to spend money on private education at home.

His Tutor taught Aurelius to be diligent in labor, to suppress desires, and to ignore slander.

Diognetus encouraged Aurelius to ignore supernatural ranters (some of whom were Christians), to value those who speak plainly, and to practice Greek philosophical austerities.

Rusticus taught the emperor to know he needed correction and character training, to avoid fine argument and talking for applause. Rusticus also urged Aurelius to be reconciled to anyone who has given offense but has repented honestly.

Apollonius taught self-reliance and planning, to cherish equanimity, and to instruct others patiently.

Sextus showed Aurelius kindness, simple dignity, true friendship, and patience for ignorant and impulsive men. Sextus set Aurelius to discover life's fundamental axioms. Sextus instructed Aurelius in inhibiting all emotions, except affection.

Alexander the Grammarian made young Aurelius avoid ridiculing those who speak poorly and work to correct them with tact.

Fronto admonished Aurelius to avoid the jealousy and lying typical of tyrants.

Alexander the Platonist taught Aurelius not to make the excuse that he is too busy when called to care for friends.

Catulus instructed Aurelius to accept friends' errors graciously and to have genuine affection for one's children.

Severus taught Aurelius to value a government that is fair to its citizens, with freedom of speech and equality, and creates liberty. Severus urged Aurelius to cherish philosophy, and to be ready to do kindnesses for others. He also taught assurance in friends' love and openness to their correction.

Maximus taught Aurelius to be constant of intention, to be cheerful when sick, and to do what needs doing. Maximus also emphasized integrity, doing what one promises, and doing only what is right.

Aurelius's father was mild, but persevered in his well-deliberated decisions. He was open to all thoughts that might promote the common good. He also urged Aurelius to avoid pederasty. His father taught Aurelius to investigate thoroughly, to plan, and to avoid heroics. He also avoided theological superstitions, pandering to mobs, novelties, and vulgarity. He taught Aurelius maturity necessary to rule. He loved philosophy without becoming infatuated with ideas. He supported gifted people. He avoided vacillation and ostentation. He lived a measured life.

The Gods gave Aurelius good family and friends and teachers, and instructed him never to offend them. Gods kept Aurelius from sexual encounters too soon in life, and gave him a brother whose life warned Aurelius of errors to avoid. Gods taught Aurelius to live according to Nature. Gods gave him a good wife. And the Gods kept Aurelius from falling into sophistic philosophy. They also preserved him from becoming an author or logician or scientist.

- Of equanimity, Aurelius said to himself:* Some, unable to distinguish good from evil, annoy. They cannot, however, cause one to behave badly. One does that himself. We exist to cooperate. We violate Nature when we resent one another. Do not be discouraged when you fall short of doing right. Return to right action and be glad. When upset, find equanimity rapidly. Practice increases one's self-command. Show charity to liars and the unjust; they test your mettle. Seek serenity; Nature made the world as it is. Your rage makes no idiot reasonable. When someone fails, correct him. If that does not work, blame no one. When annoyed with others, look to yourself. Cross-examine yourself first.
- Of man, Aurelius said to himself:* Man is breath, body, and Reason. The body rots. The breath is but air. A man's life is soon ended. Find your meaning in the prosperity of others. Nothing of man endures. Men who depart from Nature please neither the Universe nor themselves. For rational men, what is natural is reasonable, what is reasonable is civic. View the world from above--its wars, marriages and divorces, births and deaths, the rattle of law and the solitude of deserts, all juxtaposed, balancing. Man has three critical relationships: to his own body, to the Universal Cause, and to his friends.
- Of gods, Aurelius said to himself:* Zeus put a bit of himself in every man to guide mankind. So be rational and prosper. If you pray, pray in frank simplicity. Thinking of god, move from one social act to the next. The Everlasting constructed for you whatever happens to you. You are part of the whole; be satisfied with whatever occurs.
- Of Nature, Aurelius said to himself:* Providence guides the universe to well-being. Man is part of that journey. Though one often forgets, he nevertheless derives from the Universal Controller. One well-governs oneself when one keeps the Universe in mind--its parts, their relations, and one's role in Nature. Everything, other than Nature herself, is ephemeral. Things are born and die; what has passed is reabsorbed into Nature. Everything that happens to you is your portion from the Universe. The Universe is a single sentient creature; all its acts are one, a tightly-woven fabric--one Universe, one God, one Substance, one Law, one Reason, one Truth. The Universe is mysterious, and none remains without error in perceiving it. What Nature brings to a man he is able to bear. The Universe itself is essentially social. The Universe has no ill purposes. Nature is ever in flux; man is a passing moment. Seen from the perspective of the Universe, the earth and its denizens are a point upon an infinite canvas. The Universe is consistent; there is nothing new. If one knows something now, he knows it for all time. All things are interdependent due to their common motions and substance. Man is a limb of the body of rationality. Welcome change; it is Nature at work. A man's intelligence flows from God, and that all men share in it unites them into a community.
- Of decisions, Aurelius said to himself:* Do every act as though it were your last. It helps you avoid getting off-track. Consider yourself old; let no impulse or misfortune derail you. At every decision, think you are about to die. Then decide. When faced with decision, choose a simple, modest, and cheerful life. Ignore those who scoff at your choices. When life threatens your equanimity, retreat into solitude. Regenerate yourself. Cling to your axioms of life. When choosing, remember you belong to yourself, you are a man, and you are mortal. Nothing outside you compels you. All things change; seize what is rational for yourself. Always be ready to be corrected. Always do what is good for mankind. Ninety percent of what a man does is superfluous. Always ask yourself, Is this necessary? Keep your life simple and just. Give without expectation of return. Have I been kind to every creature--gods, men, animals, family, tutors, householders? Many decisions are inconsequential. Failing in them is no harm, but anguishing over them is a bad habit. In deliberating, take care to be beautiful to yourself. Each day may be your last--live in that light. It is good to change one's mind when corrected. Blame is pointless. Correct one who errs. Failing that, correct the outcome. One builds his life one decision at a time. Be satisfied if little decision fulfills its purpose. Use your skills wisely.
- Of character, Aurelius said to himself:* Choose acts that are just, worthy, modest, reasonable, deliberate, transparent, hard-working, deaf to slander, unhurried, forgiving, patient, loyal to friends, frugal, sincere, persevering, moderate, kind, affectionate, dutiful, pious, and helpful. Character takes the color of a man's persistent thoughts. So think on living well. Learn yourself; nurture your special capabilities. See things for what they are--transient ephemera,

not earth-shattering events. Praise is but tongues clapping. Avoid fame. Seek correction, make amends, and be thankful to be rid of error. Duties consist in linear bits; perform each in its time. I must remember my adoptive father, Antoninus, who was a fount of good character. One can change one's character, but only by seeing things as they are in Nature. Do not worry. The good man is more a wrestler than dancer, for he endures assaults. Even the most perfect of men may never be recognized by others. Avoid praise; the deed itself is sufficient reward. Weigh your perceptions against physics, ethics, and logic. If your mind subdues passions, you are truly safe. Think with clarity. Take great care to avoid corruption of your mind. Devote yourself to civic good. Build harmony among men. Never worry what others think of you. Listen intently to those who criticize, and be kind. Accept what Nature gives you, and what she takes from you. Live as a citizen of the Cosmic City. Spend little time talking of being a good man, and much being one. A rational person knows himself, examines himself minutely, reshapes himself into the person he wishes to be, and enjoys what benefits attend this work. Such a person coordinates with the Universal Reason, and so sees all things as they are. Such a person loves his neighbors, and dwells in truth, modesty, and right evaluation of all things. Your anger is a greater wrong than that which angered you. If you wish to be irresistible, then be kind. Before you instruct others, heed your instructions. Always, you possess the ability to choose; none can steal that from you. Forget the past; leave the future in divine hands; steer the present to just outcomes. Select a great man, now long dead, whom you admire. Imitate his virtues.

Of books, Aurelius said to himself: Avoid books. They are a snare. One may write them, but in the end none remembers the author or his words.

Of envy, Aurelius said to himself: Happy men do not weigh other men's souls. Attend oneself. Work with others for common good, or do not think of them at all. Men are not the same. Some can do what you cannot. Others cannot do what you do with ease. Neither congratulate nor castigate yourself. Do not let things that do not matter matter. Before one can fairly evaluate others, one must know a great many things.

Of evil, Aurelius said to himself: What men regard as evil is not. Men hate death, pain, poverty, and other misfortunes. These fall on all, and so are neither good nor evil. Death merely sets free the elements of which one is composed. Nothing of Nature is evil. All things, set in their context, are part of Nature's goodness, though, considered alone, they appear a misfortune. Practice kind neighborliness to those who do evil; they are ignorant of their role in Nature. Do not think as the violent think; those thoughts will make you violent. Do not judge things evil. You know neither their spring nor their end. Evil is craving what is impossible. The Soul is self-directing; evils cannot deflect it. What does not damage the community, cannot damage the individual. If a man injures the community, do not condemn him, but rather inquire after his motives. To avenge well, do not avenge. Men do evil, thinking it a good. Teach them. All men work toward the universal good. Some know it; others don't. Since I am a Roman, I am a member of the world, but locally a Roman; citizenship, cosmic and Roman, are what is good for me. Loving men who do evil is a privilege. They, in their ignorance, believe their evil to be good. But evil men make Reason no worse. Be humane to the inhuman. Care for the ingrate and sociopath. My neighbor's evil does not affect me. My reason is master within me, if I so order my life. Injustice offends the gods; so too, deceit and hedonism and dread of pain. Hold a neutral attitude toward what does not offend Nature. One may do wrong by omission as well as commission. Leave an evil-doer's evil with him. When noting another's evil, look to yourself. You might be the one erring. Every man seeks his own benefit, which is understandable. People who are confused do wrong. Think how confused you are to expect otherwise. Whatever happens, happens well. To wish otherwise makes you ludicrous. Do nothing without a purpose. Know the world is more deeply spiritual than physical. Recognize that most of what mankind does is mere vanity. The worst conceit is the conviction that one is free from conceit. Let good deeds so crowd your life that there is no space between them for anything else to intervene.

Of happiness, Aurelius said to himself: One finds happiness performing the task Nature has set him. Happiness founders when one grows distracted by passion or non-purposive activity or frustration with human or divine acts. Lives, long and short, are identical from the Universe's perspective; only the present matters. One's thoughts make a thing good or evil. When one

believes himself harmed, he is harmed. When he denies he is harmed, the harm vanishes. Never grumble; you do not know what Nature intends. Never anger; you do not know why men behave so. Never surrender to pain or pleasure; you will be distracted from your task. Never lie or dissemble; you violate Nature. Never act aimlessly; Reason is in you to guide you to worthy ends. The purpose of life is to live reasonably in the Universe. One must welcome whatever comes; Nature brings it. Even as one grows very old, press on. All one's thoughts should be simple, kind, social, and dedicated to high purposes. Speak sparingly; act sparingly. Be restrained in all things. Avoid adulating crowds, high office, wealth, and pleasurable indulgences. Never whine. We are rational creatures in a society of rational creatures. Live so, even when the rationality is scarcely apparent. Live wholly in the present; the past is gone, and the future may never be. One grows happy doing the task one has been given with his whole heart. Choose the short path; that is Nature's path. Know that, generally, what makes one man happy does the same for others as well. Love mankind. Do what tasks God sets before you. Submit willingly to what Nature brings you.

Of philosophy, Aurelius said to himself: Philosophy helps a man in his task. If one finds something better than justice, truth, self-restraint, social feelings, or manliness, then pursue that thing. Otherwise, hold fast. One's ability to opine is sacred; it is Reason speaking in you. What harms the hive, kills bees. Pursue your own interior life; you will find peace. Do not dream up perfect societies. Be satisfied if things move forward just a bit. We cannot compel people to be better. You just end up with a man pretending to be better, but chafing at your coercion. Philosophers can become pompous and proud; avoid this. Choose your principles carefully; you will become their slave.

Of death, Aurelius said to himself: All die. Death may be Elysium; death may be non-existence. We neither know nor does our ignorance matter. If you anger, know both you and your opponent will soon be dead and your names forgotten. You are part of Reason. When you die, you are absorbed again into Reason. Never act as though you will live 10,000 years. If you keep your eye on mortality, you might become good. Life is short. Stay focused. Consider the greatest of Roman emperors. Like them, all will be forgotten. Those less famous among us suffer the like, only sooner. Time is a gushing torrent. All things pass quickly. Today we are mucus, tomorrow ash. Receive death with grace. Living long is no grand benefit; all come to the same end. You will soon be dry bones, and all your life will appear as puppies yapping. Death is one of life's tasks assigned to you; learn to do it well. Death releases a man from mutable sensations and slavery to impulses and wanderings of the mind. Welcome it. When death comes, one leaves behind only his good character and good deeds. Death visits all men of all countries in all times. Our actions and dreams are nothing. Time hides them all soon enough. First, we forget; then, we are forgotten. Nature makes of the same stuff a horse, then a man, then something else. We are wax to Nature--made, dead, re-made. Remember—you are mortal. Wait for death; it is natural. Everything is made to die.

Of friends, Aurelius said to himself: Take as friends only those who live according to Nature. People have value to the extent they work toward useful purposes. For a man, what is good is friendship. We are constituted for fellowship. Be generous toward animals and circumstances, but treat men as fellow creatures. Fit in and love your companions heartily. Cheer yourself by noting the excellent qualities of your friends. Take care to listen carefully to others, and, if possible, enter their souls. Accept help freely. We are made for one another. When frustrated, instruct or endure. There are no alternatives. Our friends are part of us organically. When one friend is cut off from another by hatred or rejection, each loses all of humanity in the dispute. Be of one life with friends, but nurture your own view of things. Beware friends of artificial simplicity; their friendship is deadly.

Of laziness, Aurelius said to himself: Get out of bed. Do your work. Consider the birds, ants, spiders, bees. Do your part. Be a good man today, rather than plan to be a good one tomorrow. Do not dither.

Of public speaking, Aurelius said to himself: Speak plainly. Use beautiful words and natural talk.

Of natural connections, Aurelius said to himself: Elements attract themselves—fire to fire, air to air, earth to earth. Higher forms create connections among things that are naturally separate. A man who notes with care the changes around him develops greatness of mind.

Of leisure, Aurelius said to himself: Make time for some.