

*ἀνέχου καὶ ἀπέχου.<sup>1</sup>*

## Classical Thought



### The Roman Empire and Classical Thought: Stoicism (3) – Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius<sup>2</sup>

#### **Epictetus (c. 55 – 135 AD)**

Epictetus was a stoic who lived in the mid first century AD. He was born in Phrygia where there was a thriving Christian community and he was influenced by the Christians with whom he had contact. Epictetus was a slave in Rome under Nero. He gained his freedom and taught in Rome until 98AD. He was expelled from the city when Domitian expelled all philosophers from Rome. He died at Nicopolis where he had a circle of pupils and admirers around him.

Epictetus did not write anything himself but his students wrote down his teachings and circulated his discourses. He taught that men would live better if they grasped that there is a divine providence that rules the world. He also thought that the gods had made man akin to themselves and there was a portion of god in each man and therefore there was a higher nature in man. This, he thought, gave man a duty to live up to the divine nature within, and to passively accept whatever God gives us. He emphasised that men exist in communities and so should sacrifice themselves for the good of the wider society. A good summary of his teaching is the quotation that heads this page, “bear and forebear” and he explained that if everyone lived according to this motto life would be peaceful. We should, he thought, accept our outward circumstance and fit in with our fellow men.



<sup>1</sup> “Bear and forebear” or “endure and be patient.” Epictetus. Often quoted as a summary of Stoicism.

<sup>2</sup> Marcus Aurelius is pictured above.

### **Marcus Aurelius (121AD-180AD)**

We see the political usefulness of stoicism in the Roman Empire in Marcus Aurelius the Roman Emperor. He was not from the imperial family but won the favour of the Emperor Hadrian who adopted a son and then got his adopted son to adopt Marcus Aurelius. He came to the imperial throne in 161AD.

Marcus Aurelius would have spent more time philosophising but, as emperor, he had to deal with invasions and revolts. His writings take the form of his “Mediations,” a private diary not intended for the instruction of others and which contains random notes. Over all, these notes depict a Stoic approach to life.

According to Marcus Aurelius, nature is a cosmos in flux but although everything is changing, the change is regular and orderly. This implies that nature itself is an intelligent being with a *λόγος* a *logos* or reason about it. “The universe is one living being possessed of a single soul. It does all things by a single impulse and all existing things are joint causes of all things that come into existence. How inter-twined in the fabric is the thread and how interwoven is the web!” he wrote. He thought that man shares in divinity but for him this was an immanent divinity not transcendent divinity like that of the Christian Jehovah, the creator God. In this way Marcus Aurelius thought that man shares in the reason or *λόγος* of the universe. Man, he thought, was a “morsel of the divine.”

This is the Pantheistic<sup>3</sup> face of stoicism. All Stoics were pantheistic but not usually so explicitly as this. Marcus Aurelius believed that man has a rational nature and a civic nature and this ties in with his rôle as emperor. He put an emphasis on the duty to submit to state, which he thought was the *rational* thing to do and so in line with the *reason* of the universe. “As long as I remember that I am a part of such a whole I shall be well pleased with all that happens” he wrote. Here Stoic philosophy is taken and turned into a great instrument for lording it over your subjects! True reason and true virtue are tied in with a duty to the world community to be happy not to assert personal independence. Rather, according to Marcus Aurelius, one must fit in with the law and order of empire. Stoics all allowed for suicide and did not consider it wrong. However, Marcus Aurelius taught that only when you had played out all your civic duties were you free to commit suicide. For him the state, the Roman Empire, was entitled to every last drop of your contribution before you were allowed even to seek death!

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3 Pantheism – the idea that the universe *is* God.