

A Philosopher-Emperor's Approach to Conflict Management

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Marcus Aurelius Antoninus was one of the most interesting figures in the ancient world. For the historian, this is largely because he was the last of what were regarded as the five good emperors of the Roman empire and the man who presided over the first stirrings of the flood of troubles which would nearly destroy the empire in the next century. These emperors, Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius, ruled from CE 96 to 180, a period believed to be a happy, prosperous, golden age of antiquity. Marcus lived during nearly three-quarters of this period, from CE 121 to 180, and reigned from 161 to 180.

For the historian of philosophy, on the other hand, Marcus is of particular interest as the only full-blown philosopher ever to have been a king. The philosophy that Marcus sought to live his life in accordance with was Stoicism. For the last 19 years of his life, living by Stoic ideals also meant ruling as a Stoic should.

The Roman empire of Marcus' time was vast. It was populated by millions of people of many ethnicities and stretched from North Africa to the rivers Rhine and Danube, from northern England and Germany to Egypt, and from Morocco to eastern Turkey and Syria. Ruling an empire inevitably required Marcus, every day, to deal with many different kinds of conflict, both within the empire and with hostile tribes along its frontiers.

Because of his family's wealth and social prominence, he was educated by private tutors. He studied Greek, Latin, philology, literature, music, history, oratory and philosophy. Marcus writes that from his teachers he learned, among many other things, not to waste time on trivial matters, to tolerate outspokenness, to be both strong and gentle, and to be patient in instructing others. From an

early age, Marcus was a very serious boy. The emperor Hadrian was Marcus' uncle by adoption. Hadrian monitored Marcus' upbringing very closely and nicknamed him "Verissimus," meaning "truest." Marcus was also given significant administrative responsibilities at an unusually early age and demonstrated impressive ability at performing them.

The aging Hadrian adopted a man named Antoninus as his heir and directed him, in turn, to adopt Marcus. Marcus was deeply influenced by his adoptive father Antoninus who, because of his conscientious and dutiful character, was dubbed "Pius." As an adult, Marcus wrote a collection of reflections designed to remind himself of the philosophical ideas he had learned as a youth. These writings, which were something like a personal journal, were published after Marcus' death. They have come to be known as the *Meditations*.

In his *Meditations*, Marcus thanks his adoptive father, Antoninus Pius, for his compassion, unwavering resoluteness in judgments reached after thorough investigation, diligence, perseverance, his readiness to listen to any who could



A statue of Marcus Aurelius on Piazza del Campidoglio in Rome, Italy.

contribute to the public good, and his determination to treat everyone impartially. Marcus admired Pius' tact in social relations, his carefulness, constancy, equanimity, cheerfulness and foresight in planning. Pius was above all flattery, self-controlled, sober, deliberate, orderly, circumspect, affable, good humored, and never rude, mean, harsh or violent. Marcus praises Pius' respect for people sincere about philosophy, his lack of superstition and his respect for tradition. Marcus also praises Pius' conscientious management of the empire, effective stewardship of its resources and his readiness to be guided without ill will by experts in those fields in which he lacked experience, e.g. military and legal matters. Thus, Marcus learned many vital lessons on how to mediate conflicts from Pius. But Marcus also undoubtedly emulated Pius' virtues of character in order to become both a good person and an effective mediator.

One of Marcus' teachers was a highly esteemed orator named Marcus Cornelius Fronto. Marcus and Fronto became close friends and exchanged letters of correspondence over many years. In one of those letters, Fronto writes to Marcus: "But of all your virtues this is the most admirable: that you unite all your friends

in harmony. I cannot conceal my opinion that this is much more difficult than to tame wild beasts and lions with the lyre." Fronto was not alone among Marcus' friends and associates who admired his diplomatic balm in dealing with conflicts.

Quintus Junius Rusticus, and the Stoic philosophy he propounded, had the greatest influence on Marcus' philosophical development. In his *Meditations*, Marcus thanks Rusticus for showing him how to be ready to be reconciled to those who have angered or offended him when they want to make up, and how not to agree quickly with every garrulous talker. Another close friend of Marcus' was the philosopher Claudius Severus. Marcus thanks Severus for transmitting to him the idea of a constitution of equal laws, based on individual equality and freedom of speech, and of a monarchy which honors above all else the liberty of its subjects.

For knowing Claudius Maximus, another philosopher, Marcus expresses even greater gratitude. Marcus writes in his *Meditations* that Maximus inspired everyone's confidence that what he said was what he thought, and that what he did he did without any malice. Marcus praises his imperturbability and undaunted character and admires how he never hurried, hesitated or was at a loss. Maximus was neither downcast nor obsequious, neither irascible nor suspicious. Marcus thanks him for his generosity, forgiveness and honesty.

Emperor Pius died in March 161 CE and Marcus and his adoptive younger brother, Lucius, ascended as co-emperors to the throne. It was not an equal partnership. Marcus had the temperament, the education, the hands-on administrative experience and the dedication to rule, while Lucius was interested in hunting, wrestling and spectating at gladiatorial matches and games at the circus. Marcus was also 10 years older than Lucius, and for all these reasons carried greater authority than Lucius did. In January 169 CE, Lucius died, leaving Marcus as the sole emperor.

Professional jurists described Marcus as "a most prudent and conscientiously just emperor," "most skilled in the law." He prohibited libelous accusations, marking

false accusers for public disgrace. Marcus banned the practice of accusing wealthy, prominent citizens of treason in order to fill the coffers of the imperial treasury as several of the preceding emperors had. Throughout his reign, Marcus displayed an abiding concern for the welfare, safety and liberty of slaves, and a deep concern over trustees and guardians.

Marcus appointed hundreds of people to various civic and military offices. These appointments reflected how he valued men's merits over their background, wealth or status. One source records Marcus saying, "It is impossible to make men exactly as one wishes them to be, but it is our duty to use them, such as they are, for any service in which they may be useful to the state."

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philosophical ideal of cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitanism is the idea that all human beings are "citizens of the universe." We are all rational beings who belong to the same universal community. Since all rational people are equally members of this one cosmos, all human beings deserve equal respect. Our kinship in rationality far transcends all our outward differences in language, race, genealogy, social rank (which depended on wealth in Marcus' time), sex and gender. Moreover, Stoics believe that our rationality is the wellspring of our freedom.

Marcus was very sober, serious and reflective about his duties as the emperor of Rome. He repeatedly reminds himself of his responsibilities to others in his *Meditations*. A fairly clear picture of how Marcus tried to manage conflicts and resolve disputes emerges by looking at 11 duties he believed he owed to others:

1. Gratitude to those who embody virtues for us to model and who bless us with good lessons, that is, lessons in goodness and virtues of character.
2. Never to blame others.
3. To keep a watchful, friendly distance from those who have tried to injure us in the past.
4. Never to be suspicious of, angry with, or hate others.
5. Never to abandon others.
6. When others misbehave, to recall when we ourselves committed the same misdeeds that they did.
7. To remember that those who act badly act under compulsion; to understand the motives that compel them.
8. To try to instruct those who act badly and convince them to do better.
9. To tolerate others at all times, even when they don't learn to do better.
10. To wish everyone well as our closest kin and fellow cosmic citizens. This is what it means to be "cosmopolitan."
11. To sincerely love those who share our lives with us.

I suspect that these duties provide guidance in managing conflicts today that is as good as it must have been over 18 centuries ago for the Stoic philosopher and Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus.

About the author: Stephens is professor of philosophy and of classical and Near Eastern studies at Creighton. His primary area of research is Stoicism. His fourth book, *Marcus Aurelius: A Guide for the Perplexed*, was published by Continuum in January 2012.

