

ity, much like Kant's a priori intuitions, but in Plotinus' case matter is the condition of possibility for corporeal things, without itself being corporeal or having the qualities of the corporeal, such as size and extension. Matter, then, has all the ambiguities associated with every level in Plotinus' hierarchy, but with the further one of not actually being something in its own right. Thus, it always exists (as non-being!), but as the product of prior causes as always causing it. The evil of matter is thus its very nature as formless (iii 6.11,28-29), but despite its evil nature matter continues to desire the good present in the forms (11,32), providing them a place in which to appear. This is the paradox that Plotinus strains to express, pointing out also the limitations of language in talking about something absolutely without form that still shares somehow in the otherness of being. Paradox, however, is not ambiguity or confusion or inconsistency, but the attempt to explain the necessity of an impassible and incorporeal matter, given the existence of corporeal things capable of receiving and losing forms.

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Marcus Aurelius. A Guide for the Perplexed. By William O. Stephens. New York: Continuum, 2012. Pp. xiv + 191. \$24.95 (paperback). ISBN-13: 978-1221108104.

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Marcus Aurelius continues to fascinate. As a philosophically-minded Roman emperor, he is one of the few examples we have of something like a 'philosopher-king'. Marcus's *Meditations* are a source of inspiration and curiosity. Why did Marcus write the book? What is the context and history of its authorship and dissemination? What are the book's central themes? How are these themes related to Stoicism and to the rest of ancient Greek and Roman thought? And what is the lasting significance and impact of the text?

William O. Stephens's *Marcus Aurelius: A Guide for the Perplexed* does an admirable job of answering these questions. He details the historical context, shedding light on Marcus's life, times, and even geography (as maps are provided). He briefly discusses the reception of Marcus by subsequent philosophers. He relates Marcus's Stoic philosophy to the work of Heraclitus and Epictetus. And he analyzes the text from a variety of angles, including mereology, cosmology, philosophy of time, logic, and ethics. Stephens concludes the book with a brief appendix where he discusses Stoic and un-Stoic elements in the Hollywood film *Gladiator*. The appendix and the book's glossary would be useful for under-

graduate courses.

The primary gaps in the book's coverage are the lack of a more detailed discussion of the lasting impact of Stoicism and a more detailed exposition of the relationship between Marcus's Stoicism and Christian thought. We are left wondering how his Stoicism is related to the developing Christianity of the Empire; and even though there is a brief discussion of modern admirers of Marcus's work, these nuggets of information are left underdeveloped. But the book is intentionally concise. There is simply not much room in this short book for expanded discussion of these and other topics: views of slavery, views of women, etc. Among the book's virtues is the fact that it is not a rambling exercise in historical erudition or critique. It is primarily an exegesis of the *Meditations*. Its other primary virtue is found in Stephens's passionate prose, which effectively channels the spirit of Marcus and ancient Stoicism.

The book is part of a series of 'Guides for the Perplexed' published by Continuum (now Bloomsbury). The title of this series of books is especially apt for a book about Marcus Aurelius. Not only are many readers perplexed by the details of Stoicism and by Marcus's contribution—but his writings themselves can also be understood as something of a guide for the perplexed. They provide a guidebook, as it were, for those who are perplexed by the vicissitudes of life.

As many readers of this review will know, the specific audience for Marcus's writings is the emperor himself. He wrote the book as a series of reminders or guideposts marking the path of Stoic living. Stephens makes this clear in his choice of the word that he uses as the title for Marcus's writings. Stephens uses the title *Memoranda*, which he derives from the work of Gregory Hays, whose translation provides the basis for Stephens's own translations of Marcus's Latin.¹ While Hays remains committed to the traditional title, *Meditations*, Stephens bites the bullet in referring to the text throughout as the *Memoranda*. This may be a bit confusing at first, for readers who are accustomed to the traditional title. But the change in title works as a reminder to view Marcus's words with fresh eyes and think again about the import and impact of his writing.

One puzzle for readers interested in Marcus's writings is whether there is a deeper systematic unity at work in the text. Why are these musings and memoranda collected as they are and presented in this way? Stephens does not offer us much insight into the question of how the work was compiled or subsequently edited. Nor does he explain much about the early history of the text—how it was preserved and disseminated. But the question of system and style is answered, in part, by Stephens's explanation of Marcus's understanding of philosophy as a way of life, therapy, and cure (see, for example, 136-140). If the *Memoranda* represent a therapeutic exercise, then what we see in these writings is the residue of Marcus's exercise and practice in philosophizing. The *Memoranda* is not a systematic treatise. Rather, these writings are philosophy in action, caught on

¹ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations: A New Translation with an Introduction by Gregory Hays*. New York: Modern Library, 2002.

paper—a snapshot of the emperor’s mind at work.

It may be that the act or process of writing, thinking, and remembering is the central task of philosophical practice. One imagines the emperor retreating from the toils of ruling, sitting quietly in his study, thinking and writing. That act of retreat and reflection is the therapy or cure. These writings are thus not so much intended to be read, as they are the residue of active philosophizing. This interpretation has more in common with Pierre Hadot’s approach to Marcus and to ancient philosophy, with Hadot, for example, describing Marcus’s writings as ‘spiritual exercises’.² Although Stephens notes the therapeutic impact of philosophizing, he does not emphasize this active aspect of Marcus’s philosophizing in much detail. Nor does he deal very much with the Hadotian interpretation of ancient philosophy as therapy. This minor gap is made up for by the way that Stephens covers a range of other issues that arise in the *Memoranda*.

One of the novel approaches in Stephens’s book is the discussion of the connection between Marcus and Heraclitus. The connection with Epictetus and other Stoic authors is fairly well known. But the historical link between Stoicism and Heraclitus has faded in recent decades, as A.A. Long points out.³ It is not clear whether Stephens is responding to Long’s complaint and directly intending to resurrect the Heraclitean line of influence. But Stephens’s discussion of Heraclitus is a welcome reminder that Stoicism has deep roots in ancient Greek thought and that Marcus tapped into those roots. Stephens’s discussion of Epictetus concludes with a brief reminder that the idea of philosophizing to oneself as a spiritual exercise can also be found in Epictetus’ teachings.

Stephens’s analysis of the content of the *Memoranda* is divided into discussions of Marcus’s mereology, cosmology and metaphysics, and ethics. The focus on mereological analysis is intriguing. Marcus repeatedly returns to the distinction between the whole and its parts, ultimately focusing on what Stephens calls ‘cosmic holism’. Along the way, we get a discussion of how this relates to social and political life. One fascinating idea is the way that cosmic holism relates to cosmopolitanism and civic duty. Stephens concludes this chapter with a hint about the idea that civic duty is best understood from the standpoint of mereological analysis. He suggests that injustice and social discord result from ‘bad mereology’ (100).

The cosmos, as conceived by Marcus, is regulated by logos and organized as a harmonious whole. Within that larger cosmological point of view, one can imagine the organization and propriety of the various lives of human beings. The normative outfall is that we ought to find our place within the whole. As Stephens concludes, there is a kind of ‘psychological health’ found in the idea that we simply ought to find our place and learn to ‘embrace everything that happens’ (80).

² Pierre Hadot, *The Inner Citadel: The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998, esp. ch. 3; also see Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004.

³ A.A. Long, *Stoic Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, esp. ch. 2, ‘Heraclitus and Stoicism’.

Perhaps Stephens accepts this too easily—as providential fatalism and mereologically derived civic duty are not entirely satisfying to modern ears that value individual liberty, spontaneity, and the idea of progress through creativity and initiative. Nor is this cosmic holism entirely satisfying to those who—especially in light of Christian theology—are worried about the problem of evil. Stephens does a wonderful job of elucidating the Stoic mereology and cosmic/cosmopolitan holism. But the explanation and analysis points toward evaluative and critical questions that remain unanswered in Stephens’s exegesis. Of course, in his defense we should note again that the book is not intended as a critical essay: it is primarily exegetical, intended as an introduction to Marcus Aurelius.

Throughout Stephens’s book—as indeed, throughout the *Memoranda* itself—death is a constant companion. The discussion of Marcus’s philosophy of time is insightful. Stephens emphasizes that from the larger cosmic point of view, the past is no more and the future is not yet. Thus the present is the only moment that matters. Stephens argues that this focus on the present leads Marcus to emphasize the importance of action and effort. Become virtuous now, we ought to admonish ourselves, because this moment is the only moment we have. Not only is this true of the present *moment* (in the sense of this second of this hour) but it is also true of our *moment* in history (in the sense of this life). Stephens maintains that Marcus thinks that this life is the only one we get, the only chance to become excellent—so, seize the day and live well now.

In his reflection on Marcus’s cosmology and philosophy of time, the spirit of Heraclitus returns. Marcus’s idea is, on Stephens’s interpretation, that since all is change, the present moment provides a unique opportunity for right action. The present will soon be erased by the sands of time—so view it as a divine gift, as Stephens emphasizes (116). Again, one might hope for a bit of evaluation and criticism here: what sort of a gift is this—the gift of mortality, suffering, and loss? And are we sure that there is a benevolent divine giver here or could there be a Gnostic deceiver lurking? But Stephens’s lucid and straightforward exposition makes Stoic providentialism clear. And he articulates the imperative of action that ought to follow in a compelling way.

Stephens concludes with a discussion of ethics. Stephens is focused primarily on the Stoic theme of coming to ethics by seeing through the appearances of things toward what really matters and what is really in our control. Stephens emphasizes Marcus’s descriptions of the appearances of things under romanticized and idealized notions that conceal filth, garbage, and other disgusting realities. The body is a bag of guts. The food we eat is dead and decaying matter. Sex is a mere rubbing together of body parts accompanied by discharges of fluid. These re-descriptions of things show up throughout the *Memoranda*. It is powerful when Stephens extracts and gathers these together as a reminder of what Stephens sees as Marcus’s ‘deflationary strategy’ (132).

The deflationary strategy aims to describe things in their basic terms, without the accompaniment of idealized notions that stimulate the appetites and distract us from what is truly good and in our control. One can see that this is related to

the mereological analysis mentioned above. And one can also see that this has a connection with Marcus's obsession with death. Life itself can be viewed through the deflationary lens of philosophy. While this may tempt us toward nihilism, as Stephens notes, Marcus attempts to avoid nihilism by focusing on those things that are not so easily deflated: virtue, reason, duty, and love for humanity. But Stephens's effort to rescue Marcus from nihilism could use further work, in my opinion. The charge of nihilism could be levied by Christians who worry that Stoicism without a personal God who offers salvation is meaningless. And the charge of nihilism can be made from anti-Christians, Epicureans, and Nietzscheans who would argue that the deflationary strategy leaves us with nothing satisfactory, that Stoic duty and sacrifice become mere duty for duty's sake without further purpose. There is a deep issue here with psychological, spiritual, social, and ethical implications. Stephens broaches the issue but leaves it undeveloped. Again, this is not Stephens's fault, so much as it is a fault of any concise book of this sort. As an introduction, this is an excellent book, which would be especially useful for those who are new to Stoicism and to the writings of Marcus Aurelius.

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Pleasure in Ancient Greek Philosophy. By David Wolfsdorf. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. xi + 299. \$90.00 (hardcover), \$34.99 (paper). ISBN 978-0-521-76130-7.

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Pleasure in Ancient Greek Philosophy fills a gap in the scholarship on its topic and is a fine example of philosophical engagement with the history of philosophy. Moving from the pre-Socratics to the Old Stoics, and then from Ryle to the present, it is careful in its readings of primary texts and radical in its core methodological implication: ancients and contemporaries should be treated as equally historical interlocutors.

Wolfsdorf enters a field occupied by two worthy predecessors: Gosling and Taylor's *The Greeks on Pleasure* (1982) and Van Riel's *Pleasure and the Good Life* (2000). His work is more exegetical than the former, making it a better introduction. Compared to the latter, it covers different ground (i.e., the pre-Socratics, but not Neo-Platonism), while being equally lucid and concise. Two factors contribute to the work's pointedness. First, it is conceptually clear. Wolfsdorf keeps separate, for example, ancient accounts of *kinds* of pleasures from theories of its