

# Marcus Aurelius

Marcus Aurelius (121-180 CE) is one of the most famous of the Roman Emperors. Some of his renown is related to the many representations of the Emperor that have persisted to the present day: the Aurelian Column documenting the Marcomannic Wars he waged on the Northern frontiers of the Empire; the bas-reliefs that were initially mounted on a triumphal arch in Rome, and later preserved when the arch was destroyed; and the equestrian statue that, from the Renaissance, was displayed in Rome's Piazza de Campidoglio on a pedestal designed by Michelangelo. Most of Marcus' fame, however, derives from the book that he wrote during the many years when he campaigned against the Germanic Tribes who threatened to cross the Danube and invade the Empire. This book, which has come to be known as the *Meditations*, presents a philosophy that derives from Greek Stoicism: to live each day as if it were one's last, to act in accord with nature, not to become upset by whatever happens, and to help others as best one can.

## The Life of Marcus Aurelius

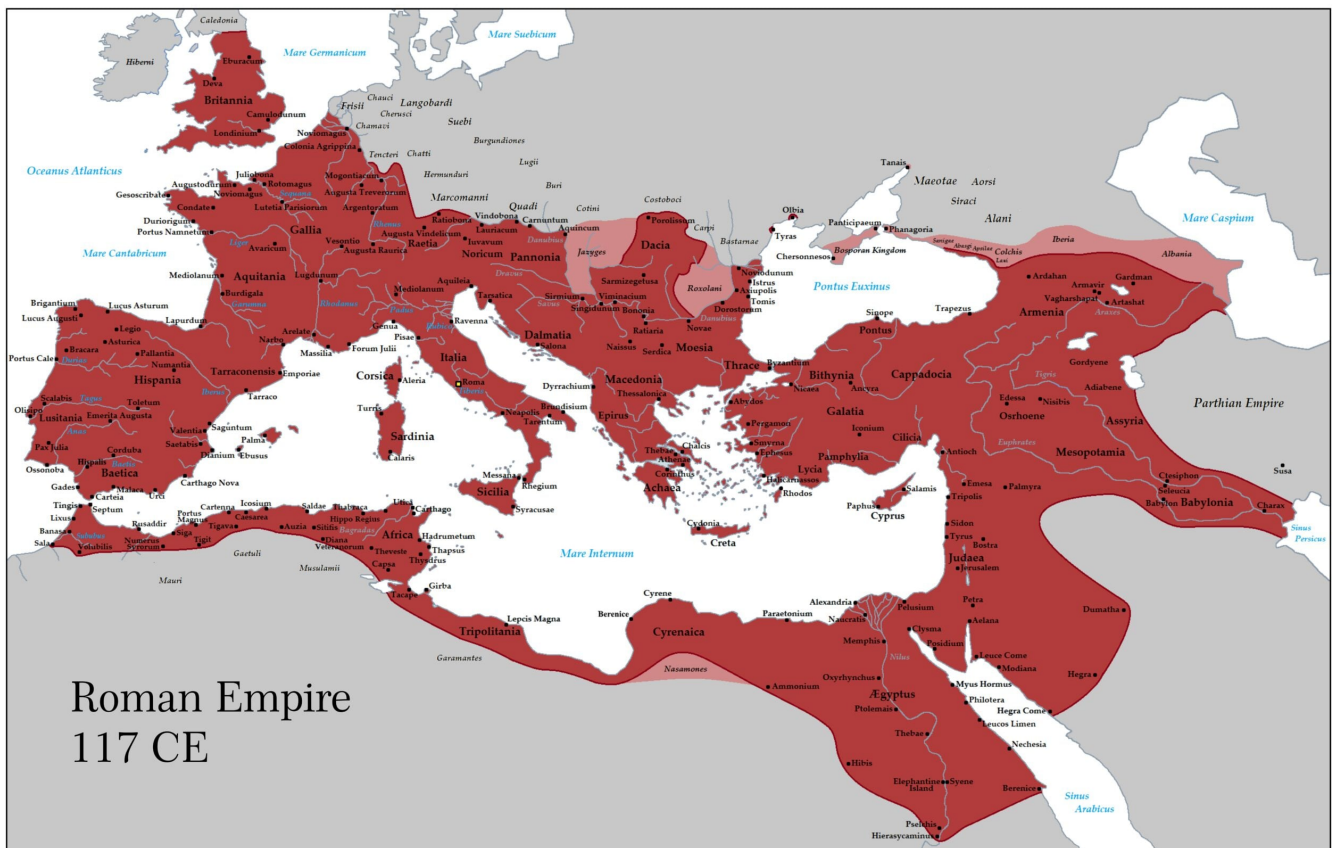
Marcus was born in 121CE, the son of Emperor Hadrian's nephew. After his father's death in 124 CE, Marcus was adopted by his grandfather Marcus Annus Verus.

Marcus was educated by a series of prominent tutors, whom he thanks in the first section of the *Meditations*. From Diogenes, he learned "about not getting carried away by empty enthusiasm;" from Rusticus "understanding the importance of correction and treatment of one's character;" from Apollonius "self-reliance and indisputable immunity to the dice-rolls of fortune;" from Sextus "the true meaning of living in accord with nature;" and from Fronto "understanding the nature of despotic malice and hypocrisy."

In 138 CE Marcus was adopted by his uncle, the Emperor

Antoninus Pius, as his heir, and assumed the name Marcus Aurelius (“golden”) Antoninus. From his adoptive father, he learned “calmness and an unshakeable adherence to deliberately made decisions” (this and preceding quotations from the Waterfield translation, 2021). In 145 CE Marcus married Faustina, the daughter of Antoninus.

With the death of Antoninus Pius in 161 CE, Marcus became joint Emperor with Lucius Verus, whom Antoninus had also adopted. Together they assumed rule over the huge Roman Empire, which, since the days of the Emperor Trajan (53 -117 CE), extended from Portugal in the West to Syria in the East, and from Britain in the North to North Africa in the South:

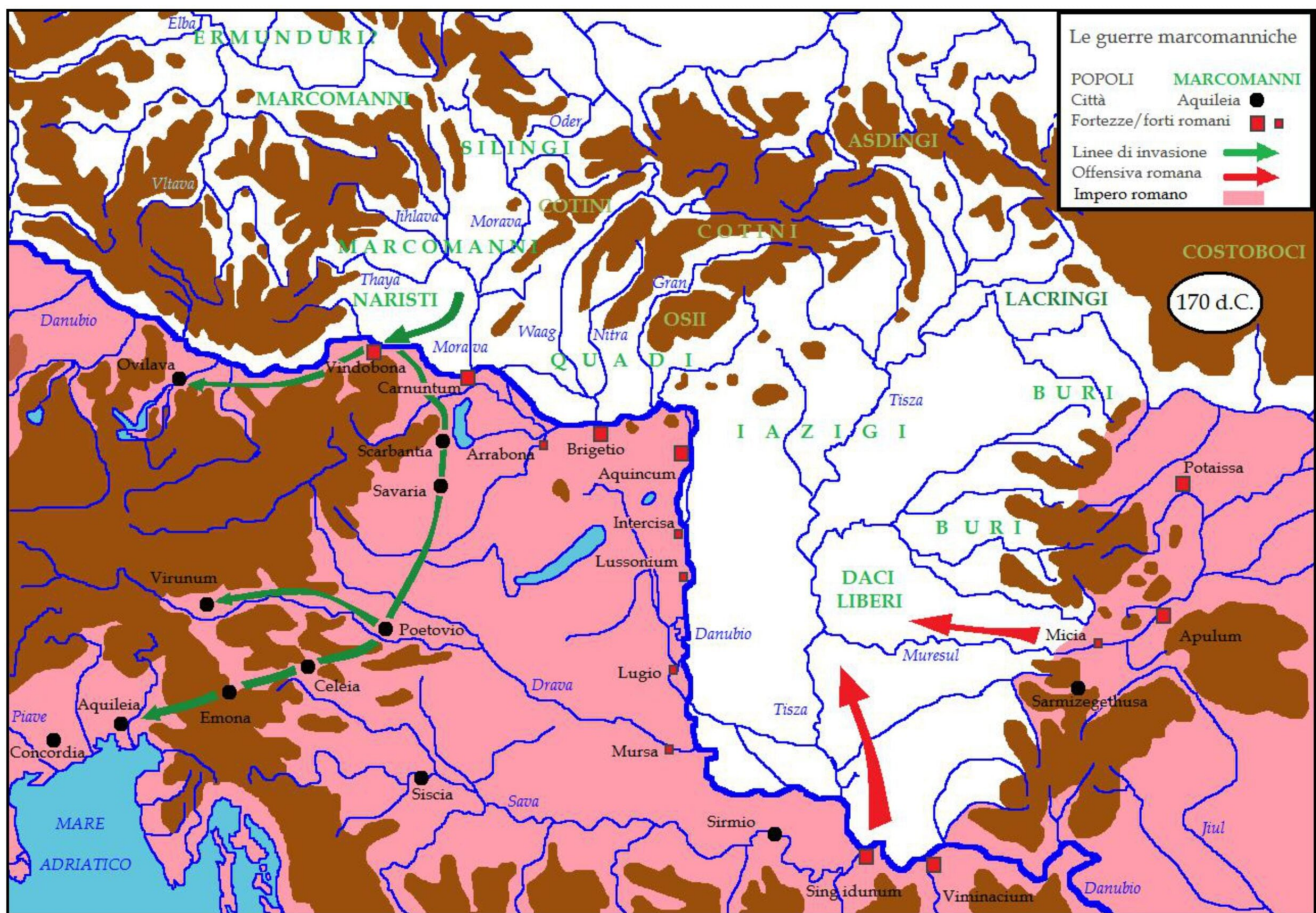


At the accession of Marcus and Lucius, the empire was in turmoil. Rebellions were breaking out in Britain, and the Germanic tribes were harassing the Empire’s frontier on the Danube. Most importantly, the Parthian king, Vologases III, had invaded the Eastern province of Armenia, and threatened to enter Syria. Marcus dispatched generals to Britain and the

Danube, and Lucius led an army against the Parthians. The Northern troubles were quickly subdued, and after some initial defeats, the Roman legions finally repulsed the Parthians and invaded Mesopotamia. By 165 CE the empire was once again secure. Lucius returned home to Roma, and Avidius Cassius, one of the most successful of the Roman generals in the East, was made governor of Syria.

However, soldiers returning from the Eastern wars brought with them the Antonine Plague which spread throughout the Roman Empire from 165 to 180 CE, killing about 10% of the population. No one is absolutely sure of the nature of the disease. Most believe that it was a virulent strain of smallpox (*Variola*).

In 166 CE the Marcomanni (derived from proto-Germanic “men of the border”) crossed the Danube and invaded the province of Pannonia (present-day Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia and Hungary) – see map below. Marcus and Lucius led the Roman legions against the invaders, but the Marcomannic Wars dragged on until Marcus’ death. In 168 CE, Lucius Verus succumbed to the Antonine Plague on the way home from one of the Northern campaigns, leaving Marcus as sole Emperor.



In 175 CE Avidius Cassius, by then the Supreme Commander in the East, having been misinformed that Marcus Aurelius was near death, declared himself Emperor. Marcus Aurelius and the Roman Senate planned an expedition to the East to put down the usurper. However, there was no need. One of Cassius' centurions murdered him, and sent his head to Rome. Marcus refused to see it and had it properly buried.

For the last decade of his life, Marcus was primarily involved in the Marcomannic Wars. He spent little time in Rome, apparently preferring the rigor and solitude of the campaigns to the pleasures of the capital. Slowly, he brought peace to the Empire's Northern frontier. The Aurelian Column in Rome (planned in the late 170s and finally constructed just after Marcus' death) portrays various episodes from the wars (Beckmann 2011). The scenes illustrated below show (in counter-clockwise order from the lower left): the legions crossing the Danube River on a bridge of boats; the "Rain

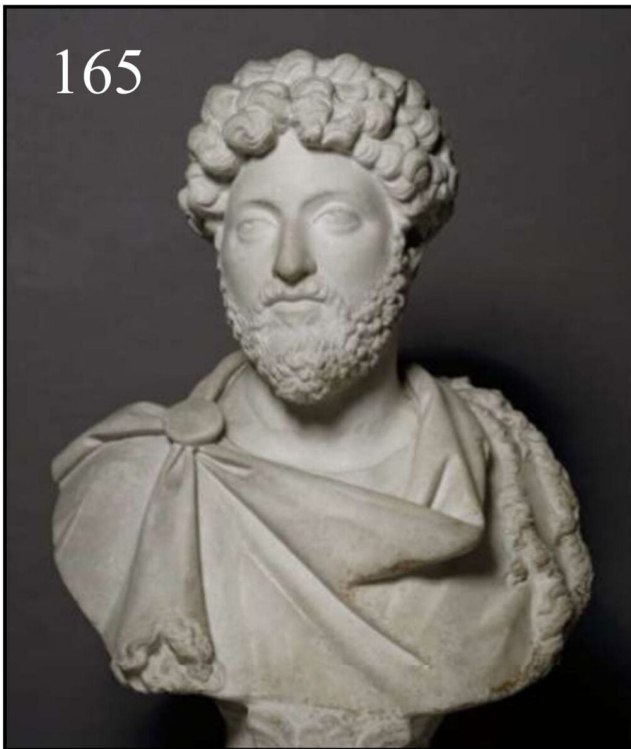
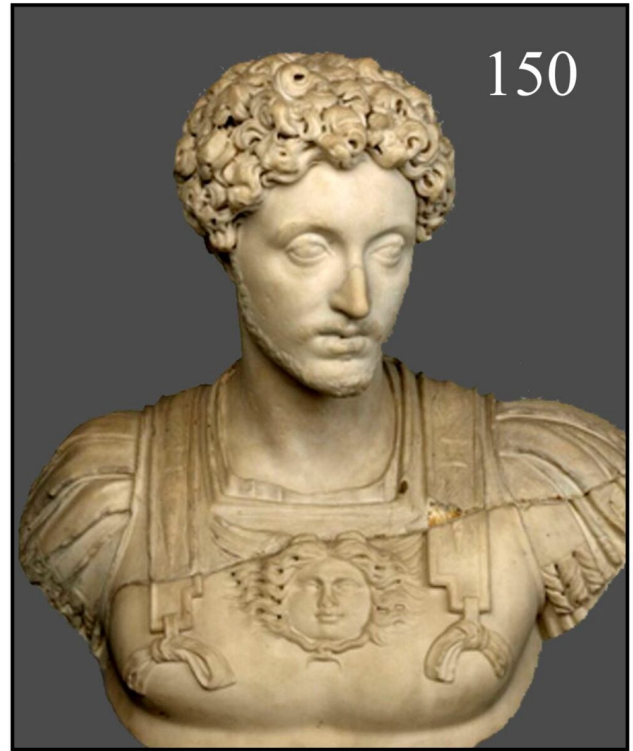
Miracle” when the surrounded Roman soldiers, lacking food and water, were rescued by a tremendous downpour represented by the Rain God; the siege of a Barbarian fort using the *testudo* (turtle), wherein the Roman soldiers attacked under cover of their interlocked shields; and Marcus (at the center, perhaps with his son Commodus on the left and a Roman General on the right) accepting the surrender of two Barbarian chieftains, one of whom who offers the Emperor his mantle.



Marcus died in 180 CE in Sirmium, (presently Sremska Mitrovica in Serbia) a Roman settlement about 25 km south of the Danube. Sirmium was later to become a major capital in the Eastern Empire, but at the time of Marcus' death it was likely only a small fortified settlement. Marcus had been spitting up blood, and may have suffered from tuberculosis. It is also possible that he was another victim of the Antonine Plague. Some rumors suggested that his doctors had hastened his death in order to curry favor with his son and heir, Commodus, but there is no

clear evidence for this.

Many portrait busts were made of Marcus Aurelius (Boschung 2012a). Below are a selection of these busts with approximate dates. The upper busts are from the Capitoline Museum in Rome and Farnborough Hall in Warwickshire, UK; the lower busts are from the British Museum and from the Metropolitan Museum in New York.



The reign of Commodus, the son and successor of Marcus Aurelius, marked the end of the greatest years of the Roman Empire. In his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776), Gibbon describes the 84 years between the death of Domitian in 96 to the death of Marcus in 180 CE as the time when the Roman Empire truly flourished. The Emperors of this

time (Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, and Marcus Aurelius – often considered the “Good Emperors,” a term originating with Machiavelli) tempered their power with virtue. However, this could not last when all that stopped an Emperor from abusing his absolute power was his own sense of what was good:

The labors of these monarchs were overpaid by the immense reward that inseparably waited on their success; by the honest pride of virtue, and by the exquisite delight of beholding the general happiness of which they were the authors. A just but melancholy reflection imbittered, however, the noblest of human enjoyments. They must often have recollected the instability of a happiness which depended on the character of single man. The fatal moment was perhaps approaching, when some licentious youth, or some jealous tyrant, would abuse, to the destruction, that absolute power, which they had exerted for the benefit of their people. The ideal restraints of the senate and the laws might serve to display the virtues, but could never correct the vices, of the emperor. The military force was a blind and irresistible instrument of oppression; and the corruption of Roman manners would always supply flatterers eager to applaud, and ministers prepared to serve, the fear or the avarice, the lust or the cruelty, of their master. (Gibbon, 1776, Chapter III)

Commodus was just such a cruel master.

## **The Arch of Triumph**



Towards the end of the reign of Marcus Aurelius, a monumental arch was erected in Rome to commemorate his triumph over the Barbarians (Boschung, 2012b). No one is sure where the arch was constructed or when it was taken down. Of the eleven known bas-reliefs on the arch, eight were re-used on the Arch of Constantine which was built in 315 CE. Three other reliefs are now in the Capitoline Museum in Rome. One of these (on the right) shows Marcus offering mercy to the conquered Barbarians. The other two (below) show Marcus in his triumphal chariot with a Nike of Victory on his shoulders, and Marcus making a sacrifice to the Gods in gratitude for his success.



## The Equestrian Statue

The equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius was likely cast at about the same time as the monumental arch (Stewart, 2012). The statue is made of gilded bronze, as befits the name "Aurelius." Its survival through the late Roman years and medieval period has been attributed to its being mistakenly considered a representation of Constantine the Great (272-337 CE), the Emperor who made Christianity the religion of the Empire.



Joseph Brodsky provided a marvelous description of the statue in his *Homage to Marcus Aurelius* (1995):

The Romans, superstitious like all Italians, maintain that when the bronze Marcus hits the ground, the end of the world will occur. Whatever the origin of this superstition, it stands to reason if one bears in mind that Marcus' motto was *Equanimity*. The word suggests balance, composure under pressure, evenness of mental disposition; literally: equation of the animus, i.e., keeping the soul—and thus the world—in check. Give this formula of the Stoic posture a possible mis-spelling and you'll get the monument's definition: *Equinimity*. The horseman tilts, though, somewhat, as if leaning toward his subjects, and his hand is stretched out in a gesture that is a cross between a greeting and a blessing. So much so that for a while some insisted that this was not Marcus Aurelius but Constantine, who converted Rome to Christianity. For that, however, the horseman's face is too serene, too free of zeal or ardor, too uninvolved. It is the face of detachment, not of love—and detachment is precisely what Christianity never could manage. No, this is no Constantine, and no Christian. The face is devoid of any sentiment; it is a postscript to passions, and the lowered corners of the mouth bespeak the lack of illusion. Had there been a smile, you could think perhaps of the Buddha; but the Stoics knew too much about physics to toy with the finality of human existence in any fashion. The face shines with the bronze's original gold, but the hair and the beard have oxidized and turned green, the way one turns gray. All thought aspires to the condition of metal; and the bronze denies you any entry, including interpretation or touch. What you've got here, then, is detachment per se. And out of this detachment the Emperor leans toward you slightly, extending his right hand either to greet you or to bless you—which is to say, acknowledge your presence. For where he is, there is no you, and vice versa. The left hand theoretically holds the reins, which

are either missing now or were never there in the first place: a horse would obey this rider no matter what. Especially it it represented Nature. For he represents Reason.

Brodsky notes that the fact that Marcus Aurelius has been so long remembered on horseback plays counterpoint to what the Emperor wrote about the transience of life, and quotes his own translation of Book VII Chapter 23 of *The Meditations*.

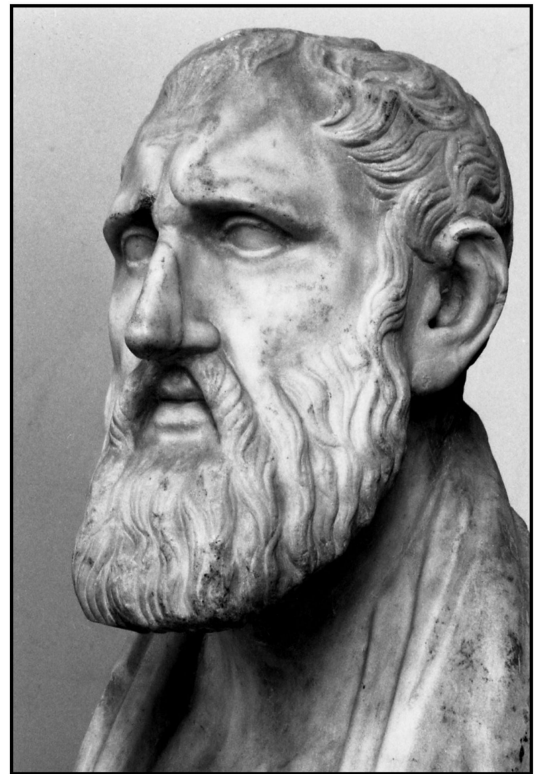
The universal nature out of the universal substance, as if it were wax, now molds the figure of a horse, then melting this down uses the material for a tree, next for a man, next for something else; and each of these things subsists for a very short time. Yet it is no hard-ship for a box to be broken up, as it was none for it to be nailed together.

## **Stoicism**

The success of Marcus Aurelius as an Emperor owed much to his Stoicism. Gibbon (1776, Chapter III) remarked

At the age of twelve years he embraced the rigid system of the Stoics, which taught him to submit his body to his mind, his passions to his reason; to consider virtue as the only good, vice as the only evil, all things external as things indifferent. His meditations, composed in the tumult of the camp, are still extant; and he even condescended to give lessons of philosophy, in a more public manner than was perhaps consistent with the modesty of sage, or the dignity of an emperor. But his life was the noblest commentary on the precepts of Zeno. He was severe to himself, indulgent to the imperfections of others, just and beneficent to all mankind. ... War he detested, as the disgrace and calamity of human nature; but when the necessity of a just defence called upon him to take up arms, he readily exposed his person to eight winter campaigns, on the frozen banks of the Danube, the severity of which was at last fatal to the

weakness of his constitution.



Any understanding of the Emperor's philosophy and writings will require at least some brief acquaintance with Stoicism, the philosophical system initially proposed by philosophers in Athens, most importantly by Zeno of Citium (344-262 BCE). The illustration on the right shows a Roman copy of an Hellenic portrait bust of Zeno, now in the National Archaeological Museum of Naples.

The name derives from the *Stoa poikile* (painted porch) on the Northern edge of the *Agora* (gathering place) in the center of Athens, where Zeno and his followers met to discuss philosophy. Stoicism was one of several schools of philosophy Hellenistic Athens. Epicureanism and Skepticism were others.

Stoicism was mainly concerned with three areas of knowledge: logic, physics and ethics. According to Diogenes Laertius' *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* (3<sup>rd</sup> Century CE, quoted in Inwood & Gerson, p 110)

They compare philosophy to an animal, likening logic to the bones and sinews, ethics to the fleshier parts and physics to the soul. ... Or to a productive field, of which logic is the wall surrounding it, ethics the fruit and physics is the land and trees.

### **a) logic**

The Stoics, particularly Chrysippus of Soli (279-206 BCE) made significant advances in formalizing our logic. Aristotle had given us term (or predicate) logic of the form

All men are mortal  
Socrates is a man  
Therefore Socrates is mortal

The Stoics described the principles of propositional (or statement) logic of which the following syllogisms are examples

If p then q	If p
then q	
Given p	Given
Not q	
Therefore q	
Therefore Not p	
(modus ponens)	(modus
tollens)	

Term logic deals with what things are; propositional logic deals with how things are related. Term logic provides us with classifications and definitions; propositional logic gives us causes and their effects.

### **b) physics**

Stoic studies of logic had shown how the parts of the world were closely connected, and how reason could organize events according to cause and effect. The Stoics then proposed that

the whole universe is pervaded by an intelligence, called *logos* (word, thought, discourse, reason), that arranges everything to ensure the maximum benefit for all its components. The idea of a universe directed toward the good by Providence (from *pro+videre* to foresee) clearly differentiated the Stoics from the Epicureans, who proposed a universe composed of atoms that interact without purpose.

The ideas of the Stoics were later taken up by the early Christians, who proposed that Christ was the physical representation of the *logos*. The Apostle Paul gave a sermon in Athens to an assembly of philosophers, many of them Stoics, relating the new religion to their ideas:

God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands;

Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things;

And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation;

That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us:

For in him we live, and move, and have our being (Acts 17: 24-28)

### **c) ethics**

Ethics was the essence of stoicism. Philosophy should be considered as a way of life rather than a body of knowledge. Stoics proposed that we should act in "accord" with Nature – living our lives the way that the *logos* intended us to live, and thereby fulfilling our own human nature. Their goal was not the happiness sought by the Epicureans but the virtue attained by doing good. Nevertheless, virtue brings happiness

(or tranquility) through the knowledge that we are acting our part in the divine purpose of the universe.

The Stoics believed that things of themselves do not cause pain or happiness. These effects occur only if we allow our governing soul to be affected by them. The true stoic would not allow his or her inner self to be upset by pain or carried away by lust. Many have therefore concluded that the Stoic suppresses all emotion, but this is not true. As pointed out by Waterfield (2021, p lii) Stoics can experience three good feelings (*eupatheia*):

Volition (the rational pursuit of something), caution (the rational avoidance of something) and joy (rational elation).

Acting in accord with Nature means that we must do what we can to benefit our fellows. Stoics were drawn to formal public service. In this they once again distinguished themselves from the Epicureans who eschewed politics.

#### **d) Roman Stoicism**

The Romans took to Greek philosophy with enthusiasm. Although the poets were more likely to side with the Epicureans and live only for the moment, those in government found more comfort in Stoicism. They followed the ethics of Stoicism but cared little for the physics. It mattered not whether the universe was purposeful or random, one must still aspire to virtue. Seneca the Younger (4 BCE – 65 CE) wrote

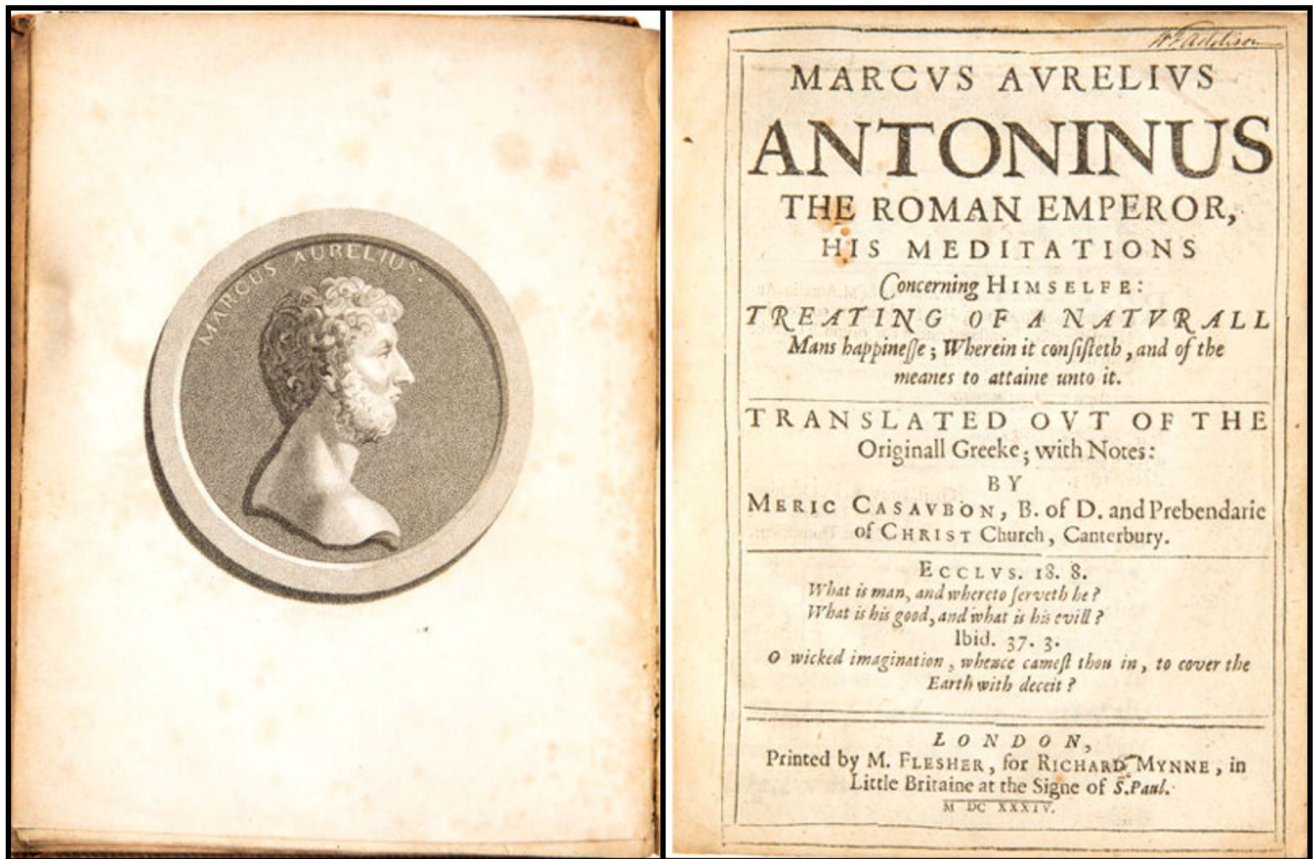
Someone will say, "What use is philosophy to me if there is fate? What use is it if God is in charge? What use, if chance has the mastery? For what is certain cannot be changed, and against what is uncertain there is no way to prepare oneself. Either God has pre-empted my planning and decreed what I should do, or fortune has left nothing for my planning to achieve." No matter which is true, Lucilius, or even if they all are, we must still practice philosophy. Perhaps the inexorable law of fate constrains us; perhaps

God, the universal arbiter, governs all events; perhaps it is chance that drives human affairs, and disrupts them: all the same, it is philosophy that must preserve us. Philosophy will urge us to give willing obedience to God, and but a grudging obedience to fortune. It will teach you to follow God; to cope with chance. (*Letters to Lucilius* 16: 4-5)

### **The *Meditations***

During the last years of his life, Marcus would retire by himself in his army tent near the Danube to contemplate and to write about what he was thinking. As befitting their philosophical nature, these thoughts were written in Greek, even though Marcus was not completely fluent in this language. After his death Marcus' notes were compiled by his secretaries into a book called *Tὰ εἰς ἑαυτόν* (*Ta Eis Heauton*, "Things to oneself"). Meric Casaubon entitled his translation of the book *Meditations* (1634), and this title has become widely accepted in English German uses *Selbstbetrachtungen*, self-examinations, and French uses the simple *Pensées*, thoughts. The illustration below shows the title page of Casaubon's translation. He uses as an epigraph a quotation from *Ecclesiasticus* 18:8

What is man, and whereto serveth he? What is his good, and what is his evil?



In the first section (Book I) Marcus thanks those who helped him during his life. The next sections (Books II to XII) contain a variety of thoughts, questions, quotations, aphorisms, and longer discussions. Each of these sections is a combination of a diary of his thoughts and a “commonplace book” – a trove of ideas to be evaluated and remembered. The writing has no overall organizing principle, is very repetitious and occasionally contradicts itself. The ideas are easier to read intermittently and randomly rather than in sequence.

The book is not easy to translate. Marcus’ Greek “is not noted for its elegance; it can be crabbed and awkward” (Hard, 2011). His “writing is often concise, occasionally even to the point of being no more than notes and jottings” (Waterfield, 2021). The “expressions are often obscure and he uses awkward and unusual construction” (Staniforth 1964). As an example of the difficulties, we can look at the various translations of the famous first sentence of Book II Chapter 11:

Ὡς ἤδη δυνατοῦ ὄντος ἐξιέναι τοῦ βίου, οὕτως ἕκαστα ποιεῖν καὶ λέγειν καὶ διανοεῖσθαι.

However/by

now/mighty/truly/sum/any/life,/therefore/each/action/and/word/and/be minded.

Casaubon (1634): Whatsoever thou dost affect, whatsoever thou dost project, so do, and so project all, as one who, for aught thou knowest, may at this very present depart out of this life.

Long (1862): Since it is possible that you may depart from life this very moment, regulate every act and thought accordingly.

Haines (1916): Let thine every deed and word and thought be those of a man who can depart from life this moment.

Staniforth (1964): In all you do or say or think, recollect that at any time the power of withdrawal from life is in your own hands.

Hard (2011): Let your every action, word and thought be those of one who could depart from life at any moment.

Dewinetz (2019): You could die right now, so act like it.

Waterfield (2021): Everything you do and say and think should be predicated on the possibility of your imminent departure from life.

Other than this famous exhortation to live as if one were about to die, the following are some of the main ideas proposed in *The Meditations*:

### **(i) assent**

The universe is proceeding as it must. The mind must live in accord with the universe, accepting its ends and not worrying

about its means.

Always think of the universe as one living organism, with a single substance and a single soul: and observe how all things are submitted to the single perceptivity of this one whole, all are moved by its single impulse, and all play their part in the causation of every event that happens. Remark the intricacy of the skein, the complexity of the web. (IV: 40, Staniforth)

There are thus two reasons why you should be contented with whatever happens to you. Firstly, that it was for you that it came about, and it was prescribed for you and stands in a special relationship to you as something that was woven into your destiny from the beginning ...and secondly that, for the power which governs the whole that which comes to each of us individually contributes to its own well-being and perfection. (V: 48, Hard)

We are all working together to one end, some with knowledge and design, and others without knowing what they do. (VI: 42, Long)

### **(ii) tranquility**

The person has three parts – the body, the spirit and the mind (or ruling center). The impressions from the world affect the body and activate the spirit. Yet one must not let the mind be ruled by these reflex activations. One must keep oneself beyond the reach of the passions by retreating into the mind and acting only according to reason:

Be like a headland: the waves beat against it continuously, but it stands fast and around it the boiling water dies down. (IV: 49, Waterfield)

An intelligence free of passions is a mighty citadel, for man has no stronghold more secure to which he can retreat. (VIII: 48, Hard)

### **(iii) benevolence**

One should help others as best one can.

That which is not in the interests of the hive cannot be in the interests of the bee (VI: 53, Haines)

Men exist for the sake of one another. Teach them or bear with them. (VIII: 59, Long).

Precisely because you personally are part of the whole that is the body politic, every one of your actions should contribute to a life the purpose of which is to improve society (IX: 23, Waterfield)

First, never act without plan and purpose. Second, set your sights on no other goal but the common good. (XII: 20, Waterfield)

### **Epilogue**

Throughout *The Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius insists that his own life was but a tiny moment in the life of the universe and that he would not be remembered beyond his death:

Soon you will have forgotten the world, and soon the world will have forgotten you (VII;21, Staniforth).

Keep all time and all being constantly before your mind, and see that, in terms of being, every individual thing is no more than a fig seed, and in terms of time no more than a twist of a drill (X: 17, Waterfield)

Despite these comments, Marcus Aurelius has been remembered and revered for almost two millennia. I shall complete the post with a longer quotation from *The Meditations* about the passage of time, and with a photograph of the one of his best-preserved portrait busts, now in the Musée Saint-Raymond in Toulouse.



A person's lifetime is a moment, his existence a flowing

stream, his perception dull, the entire fabric of his body readily subject to decay, his soul an aimless wanderer, his fortune erratic, his fame uncertain. In short: the body is nothing but a river; the soul is dream and delusion; life is war and a sojourn in a strange land; and oblivion is all there is to posthumous fame. What, then, can escort us safely on our way? Only one thing: philosophy. This consists in keeping the guardian spirit within us safe from assault and harm, never swayed by pleasure or pain, purposeful when it acts, free from dishonesty or dissemblance, and never dependent on action or inaction from anyone else. It also consists in accepting what happens, the lot one has been assigned, as coming from the same source as oneself, and in always awaiting death with a serene mind, understanding that it's no more than the disintegration of the elements of which every living creature is a compound. If there's nothing unusual in the elements themselves changing moment by moment one into another, why should the alteration and disintegration of them all be a cause for anxiety? It's in accord with nature, and nothing that's in accord with nature is bad. Book II:17 (Waterfield, 2021)

### **Translations of the *Meditations***

The original Greek is available at the Perseus Website.

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# “Death is Nothing to Us”

Death is inevitable. What it entails is largely unknown. Some believe that it permanently ends an individual's existence; others that it simply provides a transition to another form of life. Most people fear it, but some consider it with equanimity. Among the latter are the followers of Epicurus, who claimed

Death is nothing to us. For what has been dissolved has no sense-experience, and what has no sense-experience is nothing to us.

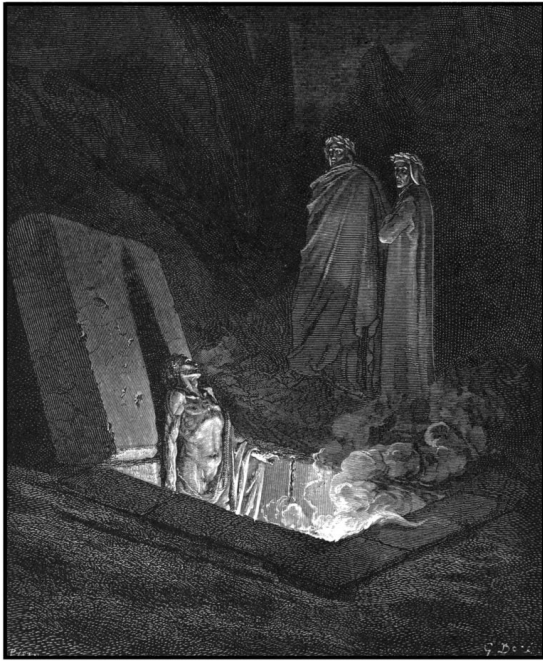
(Epicurus, reported by Diogenes Laertius, translated by Inwood and Gerson, 1997, p 32; another translation is by Yonge, 1983, p. 474).

Epicurus proposed that human beings are made of complex compounds of atoms. At death these compounds dissolve, releasing the atoms to form other things. The body decays and the soul evaporates. Once we are dead, we are no more. We cannot feel what it is like to be dead. And the dead certainly cannot experience pain. Death should therefore not be feared.

Epicureanism was popular during the Roman period. A common Latin epitaph summarized the life of the Epicurean as a brief interlude between the nothingness preceding birth and the nothingness following death:

*Non fui, fui, non sum, non curo*

(I was not; I was; I am not; I do not care).



Gustav Doré's illustration (1857) of Dante's Sixth Circle.

As Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, Epicureanism faded into obscurity. Dante placed the Epicureans in the Sixth Circle of his *Inferno* (1320, Canto X). Those who did not believe in the afterlife were forced to spend eternity in graves that were completely closed just as in life their tenants' obstinacy kept them from the truth. The graves were filled with fire just as in life the Epicureans were consumed by their heresy.

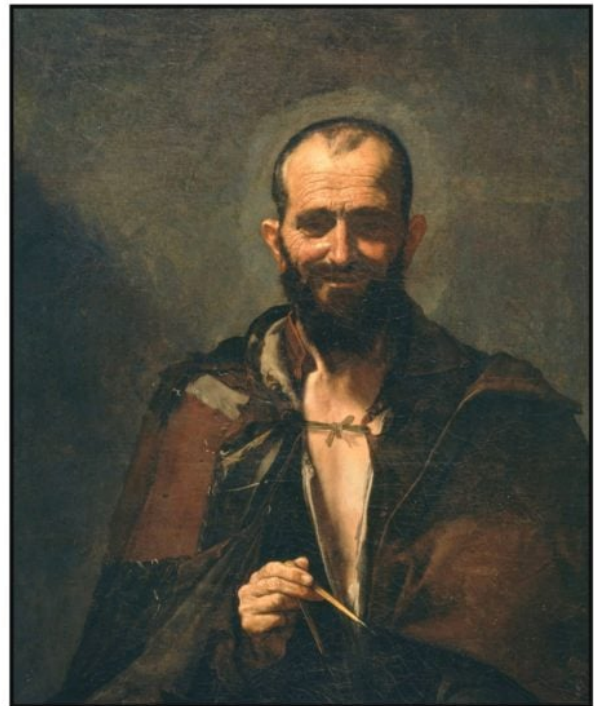
As the Western world moved away from the dogmatism of the Middle Ages, the idea that man was not immortal was once again considered. Those who now reject any belief in an afterlife sometimes adopt the bravado of the Epicurean epitaph. But more often than not they care deeply about death as the defining event in a life. It is not nothing.

### **Atoms and the Void**

The philosophy of Epicurus derives from the atomism of Democritus (460-370 BCE).

Democritus was born and lived in Abdera, a city in Northern Greece, at about the same time as Socrates was active in Athens. Democritus maintained that everything was made of tiny indestructible atoms (Berryman, 2016). He claimed to have learned this from Leucippus, about whom little is known, and who may be more mythical than real.

Democritus was called the “laughing philosopher” to distinguish him from Heraclitus (535-475 BCE), the “crying philosopher,” who believed that nothing was indestructible and that everything is forever changing. The cheerful and the tearful.



Jusepe de Ribera’s imagined portraits of Heraclitus (1615) and of Democritus (1630), both now in the Prado Museum

Of the many writings of Democritus, we now have only fragments, the most famous of which

is

By convention sweet is sweet, bitter is bitter, hot is hot, cold is cold, color is color; but in truth there are only atoms and the void (translation by Will Durant, 1939, p 393).

The concepts of the atom and the void were derived from a combination of observation and logic.

Everyone perceives that the world contains objects and that these objects move:

matter and motion. Objects can be broken down into smaller pieces, and these

pieces can themselves be broken down into even tinier particles. But this

breaking down can only proceed so far, or all objects would by now have been

broken down to nothing. There must therefore be some indivisible particle

beyond which matter cannot be further broken. These atoms (from the Greek *atomos*,

uncuttable) are so tiny that they are cannot be seen by the eye: invisible and indivisible.

The void is necessary to explain how things move. How could something change

its location unless there were empty space for it to move into?

Atoms are infinite

in number but of a finite number of types. Moving atoms collide with one

another and join to form compounds. These compounds interact with each other to

create all that exists in the world. Combining atoms is like forming words with

the letters of the alphabet. From a few letters come a myriad words.

Though atoms are eternal, the compounds that they form are transient. Rock erodes to sand, which under pressure becomes stone again. Water evaporates and then condenses. Living things develop, become mature and then die. At death, the components of the body break apart, releasing its atoms for making other compounds.

Imperious Caesar, dead and turn'd to clay,  
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away (*Hamlet*,  
V:1)

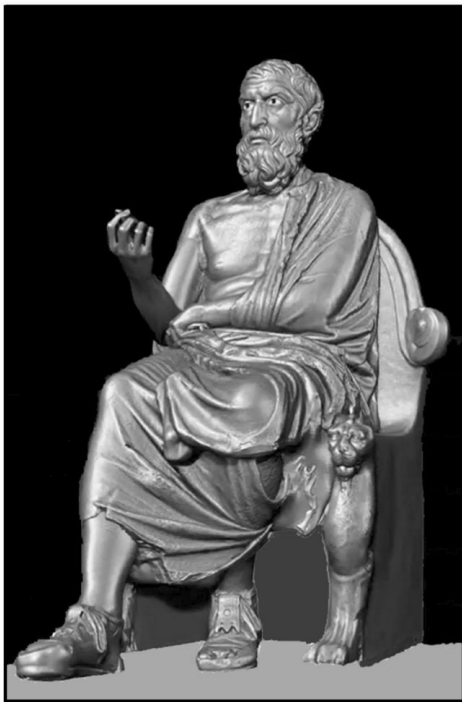
The soul is composed of atoms just like everything else. The atoms of the soul are extremely fine, perhaps similar to the atoms of fire. They permeate the body, giving it a conscious spirit. When the body dies, the atoms of the soul dissolve back into the void like all the other atoms of the body. The soul does not persist beyond death. There is no afterlife. We are transient like everything else, mortal like all other living things.

Democritus' absolute materialism differed from the philosophy of Plato, who proposed the primacy of ideas. Indeed, Plato was so upset with his rival's teachings that he reportedly urged that all the books of Democritus should be burned (Diogenes Laertius, p 393). So much for freedom of thought in a republic governed by philosophers.

### **The Garden of Epicurus**

The ideas of Democritus were extended by Epicurus (341-270 BCE), who was

born on the Greek island of Samos off the west coast of Turkey. In 306 BCE Epicurus established a school of philosophy in Athens that met in a garden below the Acropolis (Jones, 1989; Konstan, 2018; O'Keefe, 2010; Wilson, 2015).



Epicurus (a digital reconstruction by Bernard Frischer that combines a head from Naples with a body from Florence)

He wrote extensively though none of his books survived the anti-heretical campaigns of the Christian Church. Most of what we know about Epicurus is preserved in the biography written by Diogenes Laertius (3<sup>rd</sup> Century CE), which includes some of the letters written by the philosopher to his colleagues, and a listing of his Principle Doctrines (*Kyriai Doxai*). The philosophy of Epicurus was popular in the Roman Empire, and several statues of Epicurus have survived in Roman copies (see right).

Among the lost books of Epicurus was the *Kanon* (Rule, Criterion) which discussed how true knowledge could be obtained. Epicurus proposed that sensation is the

most dependable  
criterion of truth – the world is what we perceive. Ideas  
derive from rather  
than precede the analysis of sensory information. This seems  
to have differed  
from the ideas of Democritus, who believed that our  
perceptions were as much  
convention as reality.

In the lost *Peri  
Physis* (On Nature) Epicurus presented and extended the atomism  
of  
Democritus. He acknowledged that there are only atoms and the  
void. The body  
and the soul are made of atoms that fall apart when the  
corporeal body dies and  
the conscious soul ceases. We do not live forever.

Epicurus appears to have deviated from the fixed determinism  
of Democritus by proposing the idea of the *clinamen* (swerve).  
Atoms falling through the void would never collide to form  
compounds unless some atoms at some time swerved from their  
predetermined path. Democritus also suggested that this  
unpredictable random movement was the basis of our free will,  
when we act according to what is desired of the future rather  
than what has been ordained by the past. In recent years  
similar ideas based on the uncertain behavior of atoms in the  
brain have been used to explain free will. Unfortunately,  
these ideas have little explanatory value. My actions are no  
more free when determined by random events in the present than  
when determined by the fixed events of the past.

Free will was  
important to Epicurus because he wished us to choose the good  
life. This depended  
on maximizing our happiness. Although maligned by Christian  
polemicists as a decadent  
libertine, Epicurus actually practiced an ascetic hedonism. He

valued most the simple sensory pleasures of his garden and the friendship of his colleagues. He eschewed any participation in politics as causing too much anxiety. His goal was *ataraxia* (tranquility, peace of mind, from *a-* not and *tarasso*, disturb).

Although he was described as an atheist, Epicurus thought that the gods were real because our ideas of them were just too clear to be ignored. However, he argued that the gods were not in any way concerned with human affairs. Like true Epicurean, the gods enjoy themselves and refuse to be bothered by human politics.

Epicurus proposed that we should not be frightened of death. Since our consciousness ceases when we die, death is not painful. Since the gods are not concerned with human beings, they have not provided an afterlife of punishment for all that we have done wrong. If we attain a life of *ataraxia*, it matters not how long we live (Lesses, 2002; Mitsis, 2002). Death is the natural and inevitable end to life. The following is from the *Letter to Menoeceus*:

Get used to believing that death is nothing to us. For all good and bad consists in sense-experience, and death is the privation of sense-experience. Hence, a correct knowledge of the fact that death is nothing to us

makes the mortality  
of life a matter for contentment, not by adding a limitless  
time to life but by  
removing the longing for immortality. For there is nothing  
fearful in life for  
one who has grasped that there is nothing fearful in the  
absence of life. Thus,  
he is a fool who says that he fears death not because it will  
be painful when  
present but because it is painful when it is still to come.  
For that which  
while present causes no distress causes unnecessary pain when  
merely  
anticipated. So death, the most frightening of bad things, is  
nothing to us;  
since when we exist, death is not yet present, and when death  
is present, then  
we do not exist. (Inwood & Gerson, 1997, p 29)

Epicurus practiced  
what he preached. He died from an attack of kidney stones.  
Despite severe and  
prolonged pain, he maintained his *ataraxia*. His cheerfulness  
of mind and  
his memory of philosophy counterbalanced his afflictions.

### ***De Rerum Natura***

In about 50 BCE  
Titus Lucretius Carus published a long Latin poem about the  
*Nature of Things*.  
The poem probably derives from the *Peri Physis* of Epicurus.  
Little is  
known about the poet. In his *Chronicon* (circa 380 CE), written  
some 400  
years later, Saint Jerome included an entry for the year 94  
BCE:

Titus Lucretius,  
poet, is born. After a love-philtre had turned him mad, and he  
had written, in  
the intervals of his insanity, several books which Cicero  
revised, he killed  
himself by his own hand in the forty-fourth year of his age.  
(translation by  
Santayana, 1910, p 19)

Saint Jerome was a  
devout Christian, completely opposed to the beliefs of  
Epicurus, who claimed  
that the gods had nothing to do with human life, and who  
denied the immortality  
of the soul. Most critics feel that Jerome was simply trying  
to belittle the  
poet and to cast his work as nonsense: be not seduced by  
Epicureanism, since madness  
and suicide follow from such heresies (e.g., Sedley, 2018, and  
Smith, 1992 in  
his introduction to the Loeb edition of *De Rerum Natura*).  
However, the  
biography may contain some threads of truth:

The love-philtre in this report sounds apocryphal; and the  
story of the madness and suicide attributes too edifying an  
end to an atheist and Epicurean not to be suspected. If  
anything lends colour to the story it is a certain consonance  
which we may feel between its tragic incidents and the genius  
of the poet as revealed in his work, where we find a strange  
scorn of love, a strange vehemence, and a high melancholy. It  
is by no means incredible that the author of such a poem  
should have been at some time the slave of a pathological  
passion, that his vehemence and inspiration should have passed  
into mania, and that he should have taken his own life.  
(Santayana, 1910, pp 19-20).

*De Rerum*

*Natura* is like no other poem: a scientific treatise expressed in verse. The poetry is characterized by brilliant language and intense imagery. Most impressive is the ongoing energy of the argument as Lucretius moves from atoms to death, from the soul to the cosmos, from the weather to the plague.

The poem begins with a beautiful invocation of Venus as the mother of Aeneas, founder of Rome, as the patron of all the creative forces in the world, and as the personification of Epicurean pleasure:

Life-stirring Venus, Mother of Aeneas and of Rome,  
Pleasure of men and gods, you make all things beneath the  
dome  
Of sliding constellations teem, you throng the fruited  
earth  
And the ship-freighted sea – for every species comes to  
birth  
Conceived through you, and rises forth and gazes on the  
light.  
The winds flee from you, Goddess, your arrival puts to  
flight  
The clouds of heaven. For you, the crafty earth contrives  
sweet flowers,  
For you, the oceans laugh, the skies grow peaceful after  
showers,  
Awash with light. (I: 1-10 Stalling translation)



On the right is the first page of a 1483 manuscript copy of the poem made for Pope Sixtus IV by Girolamo di Matteo de Tauris. The Latin text begins

Aeneadum genatrix, hominum divomque voluptas,  
Alma Venus, caeli subter labentia signa  
Quae mare navigerum, quae terras frugiferentis

The beginning of the poem immediately questions the Epicurean view that the gods are not involved with the human world. Why should Lucretius invoke Venus as a partner in his poetry? The gods are a problem for Epicureanism: if they are real, they must be made of atoms and, if so, they cannot be immortal; yet, if they are mortal, they are not gods. Lucretius probably considered the gods more as metaphors than as real beings. Later in the poem (II: 646-660)

he remarks that it is customary to call the sea Neptune, the corn Ceres and the wine Bacchus without actually meaning that these things are divine.



Lucretius quickly indicates that superstitious belief in the gods can lead to terrible wrongs by recounting the story of Iphigenia, daughter of Agamemnon, who was sacrificed at Aulis to propitiate the anger of the goddess Artemis, and obtain fair winds to send the Greek ships to Troy. The illustration at the left shows a fresco in the House of Tragic Poet in Pompeii from about the same time as Lucretius. Iphigenia is carried by Achilles and Ulysses to be sacrificed by Calchas the priest, while her father on the left refuses to observe her death. Above, the goddess Artemis arranges for a stag to be substituted for Iphigenia, who will be spirited away. However, this will be done without any of the Greeks realizing that Iphigenia was not actually sacrificed. Human sacrifice is also part of the Hebrew Bible, which recounts the attempted sacrifice of Isaac in *Genesis 22* and the actual sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter in *Judges 11*. As Lucretius clearly states, Iphigenia was

An innocent girl betrayed to a sort of incest  
To be struck down by the piety of her father

Who hoped in that way to get a good start for his fleet.

That is the sort of horror religion produces.  
(I: 98-101, Sisson translation).

### *De Rerum*

*Natura* recounts the principles of atomism espoused by Epicurus. Lucretius describes the *clinamen* or swerve, and notes its importance for free will. We are not completely determined by our past:

Again, if all motion is always one long chain, and new motion arises out of the old in order in-variable, and if the first-beginnings do not make by swerving a beginning of motion such as to break the decrees of fate, that cause may not follow cause from infinity, whence comes this free will in living creatures all over the earth, whence I say is this will wrested from the fates by which we proceed whither pleasure leads each, swerving also our motions not at fixed times and fixed places, but just where our mind has taken us? (II: 252-260, Rouse translation).

Lucretius considers death in many ways. The following passage provides the principal Epicurean argument:

So death is nothing, and matters nothing to us  
Once it is clear that the mind is mortal stuff.

...

So when we are dead and when our body and soul  
Which together make us one, have come apart,  
Nothing can happen to us, we shall not be there,  
Nothing whatever will have the power to move us,  
Not even if earth and sea got mixed into one.  
(III: 830-1, 838-842, Sisson translation)

Lucretius also

adds the analogy of the mirror to the Epicurean comparison of the time before birth to the time after death. If we are not concerned with what occurred before we are born, why should we be afraid of its mirror-image: the time after we have died and once again do not exist:

Now look back: all the time that ever existed  
Before we were born, was nothing at all to us.  
It is a mirror which nature holds up for us  
To show us what it will be like after our death.  
Is it very horrible? Is there anything sad in it?  
Is it any different from sleep? It is more  
untroubled.

(III: 972-977, Sisson translation)

The poem goes on to consider many natural phenomena. Some of the explanations that Lucretius offers are good, and some are similar to those proposed in modern science. However, most of the explanations are wrong. Science and poetry are not well suited: poetry attempts to say things that will last forever, whereas science is always changing.

At the end of the VI Book of *De Rerum Natura* Lucretius vividly describes the great Plague of Athens that began in 430 BCE during the Peloponnesian War. There is great debate about the nature of the plague, which was perhaps caused by an Ebola-like hemorrhagic fever.

The symptom first to strike was fiery fever in the head,

And both eyes, burning hectic bright, were all shot through with red.

The throat as well would sweat with blood, all black within. And stung

With sores, the pathway of the voice would clog and choke. The tongue,

Interpreter of the mind, oozed pus, and, made limp with the smart,

Was too heavy to move, and rough. Thence the disease would start,

Passing the gullet, to fill the chest, and flood the heavy heart

Of the afflicted, and then, indeed, all of the gates of Life

Began to give. From the open mouth, there would exhale a rife

Stink, like the stench of rank unburied corpses left to rot.

And then all of the powers of the mind and body, brought

To the very brink of doom, began to flicker. Mental strain

Ever danced attendance on intolerable pain;

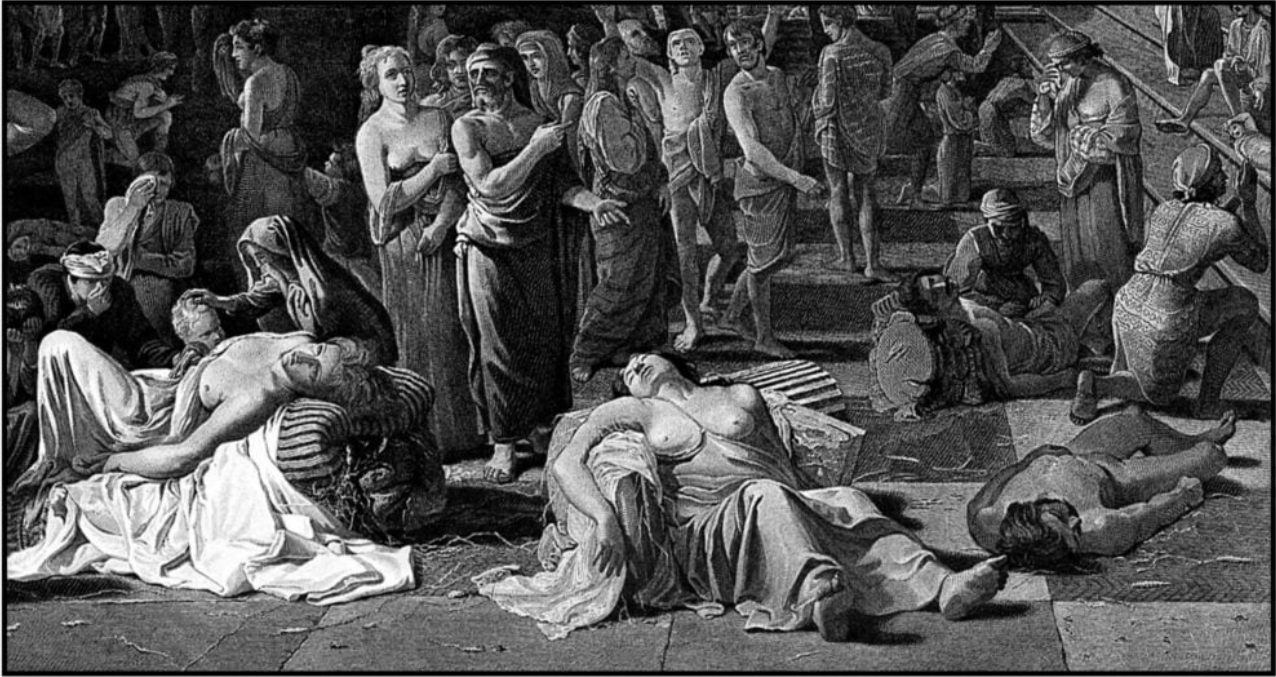
Pleas mingled with moans. Ceaseless retching, lasting day

And night, was ever causing seizure and cramp, and wasting away

The strength of men already racked with suffering and worn out.

(VI: 1145-1161, Stallings translation)

Death was everywhere. Below is a detail of an engraving (from the Wellcome Library) from a 1654 painting by Michael Sweerts, once thought to represent the plague of Athens:



## The Plague of Athens

The prevalence of death tore at the moral fabric of the city:

The present grief was overwhelming. No one any more observed the rites of burial they had observed before, for the whole populace was thrown in disarray and cowed. Each mourner buried his dead just as the time and means allowed.

Squalid Poverty and Sudden Disaster would conspire to drive men on to desperate deeds – so they'd place on a pyre

Constructed by another their own loved-ones, and set fire to it with wails and lamentation. And often they would shed

Much blood in the struggle rather than desert their dead.  
(VI: 1278-1286, Stallings translation)

### *De Rerum*

*Natura* ends here. Most critics feel that Lucretius died before he could finish his poem, and that he probably intended to explain how philosophy could help one

face the horrors of such a plague with equanimity. But he did not. And one wonders if he could not.

## **Stoicism**

At the time of Epicurus, Athens was home to several other schools of philosophy. The most important of these were the Sceptics who refused to believe in anything, and the Stoics who differed from the Epicureans mainly in their promotions of virtue rather than pleasure as the goal of human life (Baltzly, 2019; Long, 1986). The Stoics proposed that the universe proceeded according to its own *Logos*, and that human benefit was not necessarily part of this determined path. One had to accept one's fate and do the best that one could. The Stoical idea of the *Logos* goes back to Heraclitus. Indeed, Stoics and Epicureans can trace their emotional origins to tearful Heraclitus and cheerful Democritus.



## Marcus Aurelius

The Stoics also differed from the Epicureans in their approach to death. While the Epicureans tried to ignore death, the Stoics paid it constant attention. Death brings one's life to an end, and therefore settles the sum of one's virtues and achievements. Life should therefore be lived as if death were imminent. The Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, the 175 CE statue of whom is illustrated on the left, voiced these Stoical precepts in his *Meditations*:

Every moment think steadily as a Roman and a man, to do what thou hast in hand with perfect and simple dignity, and feeling of affection, and freedom, and justice; and to give thy self relief from all other thoughts. And thou wilt give thyself relief, if thou doest every act of thy life as if it were the last, laying aside all carelessness and passionate aversion from the commands of reason, and all hypocrisy, and self-love, and discontent with the portion which has been given to thee.

Do not act as if thou wert going to live ten thousand years. Death hangs over thee. While thou livest, while it is in thy power, be good.

(Marcus Aurelius, 180 CE, II: 5 and III: 17, translation by Long)

Stoicism became more popular with the Romans than Epicureanism. And Stoicism fitted more easily to the doctrines of Christianity, which accepted and transformed the Stoic idea of *Logos*, making Christ its personification.

### **Epicurus and Modernity**

The works of Democritus and Epicurus did not survive beyond Roman times. However, a manuscript of *De Rerum Natura* by Lucretius was diligently copied and re-copied by Christian monks, and finally discovered in a German monastery in 1417 by Poggio Bracciolini (Greenblatt, 2011). The first printed publication of *De Rerum Natura* was in 1473.

The rediscovered book brought the atomism of Democritus and Epicurus to the attention of the philosophers and scientists of Europe. Pierre Gassendi (1592-1665) in France and Robert Boyle (1627-1691) in England were attracted to the explanatory power of atoms and developed a “corpuscular philosophy” (Wilson, 2008). They tried but failed to reconcile this atomism with Christian beliefs in the immortal soul and a beneficent God.



### Motion of Gas Molecules

As science progressed, corpuscular philosophy developed into modern chemistry. Atoms of different types combine to form

molecules of various chemical compounds. The pressure of a gas depends on the force exerted by the continual movement of its molecules. This is illustrated on the right, in which five of the molecules are colored red to make their motion easier to follow. The molecules move like the motes of dust in the sunlight that were described in *De Rerum Natura* (Book II:62-79). Science now knows that atoms are not indivisible, but modern science owes much to Lucretius.

As the Enlightenment progressed, some thinkers decided to reject God and immortality and to accept Epicurus' views of death. Of these perhaps the most famous is David Hume (1711-1776) who, when dying of cancer, was interviewed by James Boswell (1740-1795). Boswell was disconcerted by Hume's refusal to believe in the afterlife, and by his cheerfulness in the face of death (Miller, 1995):

I asked him if the thought of annihilation never gave him any uneasiness. He said not the least; no more than the thought that he had not been, as Lucretius observes. (Boswell, 1776).

## **Fear of Death**

Despite the cheerfulness with which Epicurus and Hume faced death, Epicurean logic fails to convince most human beings not to fear death. Since death before maturity prevents us from reproducing, evolution must clearly have given preference to those whose fear of death made them avoid potentially fatal situations.

Epicurus promoted pleasure as the goal of life, but had difficulty handling its relation to time.

Common sense definitely presumes that pleasure is greater when it lasts longer.

A death that shortens a potentially pleasurable life should therefore be

feared. Epicurus proposed that *ataraxia* is the same regardless of the

duration, but his argument is unconvincing:

Epicurus holds that pleasure is the supreme good, and yet claims that there is no greater pleasure to be had in an infinite period than in a brief and limited one. Now one who regards good as entirely a matter of virtue is entitled to say that one has a completely happy life when completely virtuous. Here it is denied that time adds anything to the supreme good. But if one believes that the happy life is constituted by pleasure, then one cannot consistently maintain that pleasure does not increase with duration, or else the same will apply to pain. Or are we to say that the longer one is in pain the more miserable one is, but deny that duration has any bearing on the desirability of pleasure. (Cicero, 45 BCE, II: 88)

Nagel (1990) makes a similar point:

Observed from without, human beings obviously have a natural lifespan and cannot live much longer than a hundred years. A man's sense of his own experience, on the other hand, does not embody this idea of a natural limit. His existence defines for him an essentially open-ended possible future, containing the usual mixture of goods and evils that he has found so tolerable in the past. Having been gratuitously introduced to the world by a collection of natural, historical, and social accidents, he finds himself the subject of a life, with an indeterminate and not essentially limited future. Viewed in this way, death, no matter how inevitable, is an abrupt

cancellation of indefinitely extensive possible goods. Normality seems to have nothing to do with it, for the fact that we will all inevitably die in a few score years cannot by itself imply that it would not be good to live longer.

Most people feel that death comes before their lives have been properly completed. Some things have not yet been experienced, others have not yet been atoned for; their achievement is not enough, their legacy not sufficient. As Cicero (44 BCE) remarked "No one is so old that he does not expect to live a year longer."

### **The Makropulos Case**

How much longer should one then wish to live? Forever may be as frightening as tomorrow. This idea was considered in an important paper by Bernard Williams (1973) that took as its point of origin a play by Karel Capek that premiered in Prague in 1922 – *The Makropulos Case*. Leos Janacek's operatic version of the play was produced in Brno in 1925.

In the play Emilia Marty, a beautiful and successful opera singer, turns out to be Elina Makropulos, a young Greek woman who was given an elixir of longevity by her physician-father in 1601. Having lived over 300 years without aging she has returned to Prague to find the elixir's formula so that she can further prolong her youth. The following photograph from the San Francisco

Opera (2016) shows  
Nadja Michael in the role of Emilia in the first act of the  
opera (which takes  
place in a law office):



In the end Emilia  
decides that she does not want to live longer. She explains to  
the others:

Oh, life should not last so long!  
If you only realized how easy life is for you!  
You are so close to everything!  
For you, everything makes sense!  
For you, everything has value!  
– for the trivial chance reason  
that you are going to die soon.  
... It's all in vain  
whether you sing or keep silent –  
no pleasure in being good  
no pleasure in being bad.  
No pleasure on earth,

No pleasure in heaven.  
And one comes to learn  
that the soul has died inside one.  
(Janacek version)

Williams (1973) agrees with Emilia. After a while immortality will become tedious. Human desires are designed for shorter periods. Evolution has made us long to live longer. Yet the usual span of human life gives us about the right amount of time to experience what we can, and to accomplish what we should.

### **Aubade**

Another aspect of death not considered in Epicurean philosophy is that it is the end of the "person." Each individual spends a lifetime developing a collection of experiences and achievements, out of which are derived a set of values and an accumulated knowledge. Warren (2004, chapter 4) considers these as the personal "narrative." At death the story ends. The person vanishes. Some traces will be preserved in the memories of others but these are but faint copies of the original.

This is the reason why Lucretius' analogy of the mirror does not work. We are not concerned with the time before we were born because we did not exist then. However, this is not the mirror image of the time after our death when we again do not exist.

Because in the meantime we have existed. Time only goes one way.

Personal annihilation is perhaps the most frightening part of death. On December 23, 1977, Philip Larkin published a poem about death in the *Times Literary Supplement*. (The full text is available at [this link](#)). In a letter to a friend he called it “a real infusion of Christmas cheer” (Larkin, Burnett, 2012, p 495). Fletcher (2007) provides some discussion of the poem and its relation to one of John Betjeman’s. An aubade is typically the dawn song of a lover as he leaves his mistress. Larkin’s poem is a death song about leaving his life. He is intensely afraid:

The mind blanks at the glare. Not in remorse  
–The good not done, the love not given, time  
Torn off unused–nor wretchedly because  
An only life can take so long to climb  
Clear of its wrong beginnings, and may never;  
But at the total emptiness for ever,  
The sure extinction that we travel to  
And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,  
Not to be anywhere,  
And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.

He laments the inability of religious faith or philosophical reason to provide any comfort:

Religion used to try,  
That vast moth-eaten musical brocade  
Created to pretend we never die,  
And specious stuff that says *No rational being  
Can fear a thing it will not feel*, not seeing  
That this is what we fear–no sight, no sound,  
No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,  
Nothing to love or link with,  
The anaesthetic from which none come round.

Larkin provides us with no resolution of this fear. In the final lines of the poem he watches as the dawn breaks and people get ready for work. Phones will ring and letters will be delivered. Communication is perhaps our only comfort. The following is Larkin's recitation of the poem.

## Endings

So we come to the end of this essay on endings. Though death is not desired, it is inevitable.

Epicurus was right about there being nothing after death, but death itself is

not nothing. It marks the transition of a life from the individual

consciousness to the memory of others. Henry James noted in 1916 when his final

stroke began, "So here it is, the distinguished thing" (Edel, 1968, Callahan, 2005).

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## Vanity of Vanity

The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity.

(Ecclesiastes 2:1-2)

Thus begins *Ecclesiastes*, the most unusual book in the Judeo-Christian Bible. Unlike the rest of the Bible, this book claims that the nature of the world is neither revealed to us nor accessible to reason. The universe and its Creator pay us no particular regard. Man is not special. Heretical though these thoughts might be, *Ecclesiastes* contains some of the world's most widely quoted verses of scripture. The words of the Preacher resonate through the seasons of our lives. This post comments on several selections from the book.

## Qohelet

The author of the book is called *Qohelet* (קוהלת in Hebrew). This word derives from a root meaning to “assemble” or “bring people together.” The name suggests a sage who teaches a group of disciples. The translators have taken it to mean someone who preaches in a church (Latin, *ecclesia*). Yet Qohelet was clearly neither priest nor preacher. He was a rich man, a master of estates and an owner of palaces. The title *Ecclesiastes* is inappropriate. As pointed out by Lessing (1998),

thus do the living springs of knowledge, of wisdom, become captured by institutions, and by churches of various kinds.

According to the first line of the book, its author was Solomon, the son of David and Bathsheba. However, although Qohelet may have been a descendant of David, linguistic evidence (reviewed in Bundvad, 2015, pp 5-9) indicates that he wrote in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE during the Hellenistic period (323-63 BCE), some seven hundred years after Solomon. Other scholars have suggested that the author may have written several centuries earlier during the Persian period (539-323 BCE), but this would still be long after Solomon (10<sup>th</sup> Century BCE).

The first line of the book may have been added by a later editor who wished this scripture to partake of Solomon's fame.

More likely, it is original, indicating that *Ecclesiastes* is a fictional testament: an imagined description of what Solomon might have thought (see discussion in Bartholomew, 2009, pp 43-54). However, the book is ambiguous in terms of its narration. As the book progresses Qohelet becomes clearly distinguished from Solomon. And even Qohelet vacillates between two minds: that of a Jewish believer and that of a Greek philosopher (Bartholomew, 2009, p. 78).



Ben Shahn (1971) imagines Qohelet as a simple teacher. Though once rich and powerful, his thoughts have led him to withdraw from high society. Although dismayed that he has not been able to understand its meaning, he still enjoys the life he has been granted.

## Vanity



Qohelet's summary of his philosophy is that "All is vanity." Shahn (1971) presents the beginning of the second verse in calligraphy:

The full verse and its transliteration follows. Note that the Hebrew goes from right to left whereas the transliteration goes from left to right (As Qohelet later says, "The wind goeth toward the south and turneth about unto the north"):

הבלים אמר קהלת הבלים הכול הבל

havel havalim amar kohelet, havel havalim hakkol havel.

The sound of the Hebrew follows (just in case you wish to denounce the world's latest frivolity out loud):

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ecclesiastes-1-2.mp3>

The key Hebrew word is *havel* (הבל). This

indicates the flimsy vapor that is exhaled in breathing, invisible except on a cold winter day and in any case immediately dissipating in the air (Alter, 2010, p 340)

The word can be directly translated as “vapor” or “breath.” Alter translates *havel havelim* as “mere breath.” It denotes something without material substance or temporal persistence. Many translators have characterized it in abstract terms: meaningless, transient, empty, useless, absurd, futile, enigmatic, illusory.

The word *havel* has the same letters as the name of Abel, the second son of Adam, slain by his brother Cain. Qohelet was likely aware of this association (Bundvad, 2015, pp 79-80). Abel was the first man to die. His life was fleeting and uncertain, his death unjust, his person only faintly remembered.

The King James Version of the Bible (1611) translates *havel* as “vanity.” This word comes from the Latin *vanus* meaning empty. The translators used “vanity” to denote a lack of meaning, value or purpose. The secondary, now more common, meaning for the word – self-admiration, excessive pride (the opposite of humility) – may have come about as a particular example of worthless activity.

At the time of the King James Version, the term *vanitas* was also used to denote a type of painting became popular in Flanders and the Netherlands in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. The example below is by Pieter Claesz (1628). These paintings arrange objects to show the transience of life, the limits of understanding and the inevitability of death. Despite their meaning, the paintings are imbued with sensual beauty:

The appeal of the *vanitas* painting tradition lies in its successful capture of the subtle balance between transient and joyful modes of living, so vociferously endorsed by Qoheleth. (Christianson, 2007, p 122).



## Benefit

After introducing himself and summarizing his message, Qohelet poses the main question of the book:

What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun? (Ecclesiastes, 1:3)

The word translated as “profit” is *yitron* (יִטְרוֹן). This word is only found in the Bible in *Ecclesiastes*. Perhaps “benefit” might be a better translation (Bartholomew, 2009, pp 107-108). The “labour” involves both physical and mental work. The idea is how best we should lead our lives.

The answer begins with the glorious poem

One generation passeth away,  
and another generation cometh:  
but the earth abideth for ever.

The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down,  
and hasteth to his place where he arose.

The wind goeth toward the south,  
and turneth about unto the north;  
it whirleth about continually,  
and the wind returneth again

according to his circuits.

All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full;  
unto the place from whence the rivers come,  
thither they return again.

All things are full of labour; man cannot utter it:  
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,  
nor the ear filled with hearing.

The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be;  
and that which is done is that which shall be done:  
and there is no new thing under the sun.

(Ecclesiastes 1: 3-9).

The poetry is beautiful but there is no profit in it. Human beings come and go. The human mind cannot gain sufficient knowledge of the world to understand its workings or to change it in any significant way. The world is as frustrating as it is beautiful. The more one knows, the more one is convinced of one's transience:

For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow. (Ecclesiastes 1: 18)

Qohelet realizes that life can nevertheless be enjoyable.

There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God. (Ecclesiastes 2: 24)

This is the old man's version of the Andrew Marvel's "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may." The sentiment is perhaps as old as poetry. The Roman poet Catullus in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century BCE also wrote how the sun arises after it goes down but man does not:

*soles occidere et redire possunt;*

*nobis, cum semel occidit brevis lux  
nox est perpetua una dormienda.  
da mi basia mille, deinde centum*

Walter Raleigh in his *History of the World* (1614) translated this as

The Sunne may set and rise  
But we contrariwise  
Sleepe after our short light  
One everlasting night.

Raleigh does not translate the continuation of the poem wherein Catullus goes on to request a compensatory thousand kisses from his lover Lesbia.

## **Time**

Qohelet has been considering the passage of time. The word used for time in Ecclesiastes – *eth* (עֵת) – generally refers to a moment of time. The other Hebrew word for time is *olam* (עוֹלָם) which takes all of time into account and is usually translated as “for ever” (as in Ecclesiastes 1:4). In the first chapter Qohelet contrasted world time with human time.

In Chapter 3, he considers a different aspect of time. God has ensured that events occur at their appropriate time. Eternity has been arranged in its proper sequence.

To every thing there is a season,  
and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

A time to be born, and a time to die;  
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up  
that which is planted;

A time to kill, and a time to heal;  
a time to break down, and a time to build up;

A time to weep, and a time to laugh;

a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

A time to cast away stones,  
and a time to gather stones together;  
a time to embrace,  
and a time to refrain from embracing;

A time to get, and a time to lose;  
a time to keep, and a time to cast away;

A time to rend, and a time to sew;  
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

A time to love, and a time to hate;  
a time of war, and a time of peace.

(Ecclesiastes 3:1-8)



Ben Shahn (1971) portrays the essence of these lines with a wheat field at harvest time:

These verses can be interpreted in two main ways. The first proposes that time has been pre-ordained to work out the purposes of God, that we cannot change these things, and that we should be resigned to what happens. Everything is for the best. The other interpretation uses these words to justify one's actions. Martin Luther quoted these verses when the time had come to speak out against the Catholic Church (Christianson, 2007, p 166). Thus are human actions divinely justified. Luther believed in predestination. He spoke out not by choice but because he had no choice: he could not do otherwise.

These verses were set to music by the folksinger Pete Seeger in the late 1950s. His lyrics directly quote the King James Version using the first verse with the addition of "Turn! Turn! Turn!" as the refrain. After "a time of peace" Seeger added "I swear it's not too late." The song became an anthem of the peace movement. The following is an excerpt:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/seeger-second-half.mp3>

Qohelet recognizes the beauty of God's time. Yet he is frustrated that he can never understand it:

I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever: nothing can be put to it, nor any thing taken from it: and God doeth it, that men should fear before him.

That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been; and God requireth that which is past.

(Ecclesiastes 3: 14-15)

This idea of time as divinely ordered but incomprehensible to the human mind pervades T. S. Eliots' *Burnt Norton* (1935) which begins:

Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future,  
And time future contained in time past.

If all time is eternally present  
All time is unredeemable.  
What might have been is an abstraction  
Remaining a perpetual possibility  
Only in a world of speculation.  
What might have been and what has been  
Point to one end, which is always present.

Qohelet goes on to state that since we cannot understand we are no different from other animals. We live, we die.

For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts;  
even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth  
the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath  
no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity.  
All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to  
dust again.  
(Ecclesiastes 3:19-20)

These statements go against all previous Jewish teachings.  
Qohelet's book

amounts to a denial of divine revelation, and of the belief  
that man was created as an almost divine being, to care for  
and exercise dominion over the other creatures and all the  
works of God's hands. ... In the final analysis man is like  
the animals rather than superior to them (Scott, 1965, p.  
205)

Johannes Brahms was devastated when his friend Clara Schumann  
suffered a stroke in 1895 and was close to death. During this  
time, he composed his *Four Serious Songs Opus 121*. The first  
song is uses Luther's translation of *Ecclesiastes 3: 19-22*.  
The following is the beginning (up to *wird wieder zu Staub*  
"turn to dust again") as sung by Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/brahms-4-serious-songs-1-fischer-dieskau.mp3>

Denn es gehet dem Menschen wie dem Vieh; wie dies stirbt, so stirbt er auch; und haben alle einerlei Odem; und der Mensch hat nichts mehr denn das Vieh: denn es ist alles eitel. Es fährt alles an einen Ort; es ist alles von Staub gemacht, und wird wieder zu Staub.

This first song is desolate – we die like beasts, our life is empty, we are made of dust. The later songs in the series progress from deep sadness to quiet resignation. The final song sets verses from the New Testament, among them

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. (I Corinthians 13:12)

Brahms called his songs “serious” (*ernst*) rather than “sacred.” This is a fitting description of the book *Ecclesiastes*.

## **Justice**

After considering the inevitability of death, Qohelet turns to evaluate the course of human life. He finds that success does not necessarily reward those who most deserve it:

I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.

(Ecclesiastes 9:11)

A brief adaptation of this verse was included in the posthumously published *Last Poems* of D. H. Lawrence (1932). The poem *Race and Battle* is notable for its image of the “streaked pansy of the heart” which recalls the title of his earlier book *Pansies*, itself a pun on Pascal’s *Pensées*. Lawrence attempts to explain how to accept that life may be unfair and preserve a personal sense of justice.

The race is not to the swift  
but to those that can sit still  
and let the waves go over them.

The battle is not to the strong  
but to the frail, who know best  
how to efface themselves  
to save the streaked pansy of the heart from  
being trampled to mud.

Lawrence's poem adds to Qohelet's resignation some of the later teachings of Jesus – Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth... Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God (Matthew 5: 5,8).

### **Instruction**

Qohelet's search for wisdom has led him to dismay. Death is inevitable and unpredictable. Life is without justice. Nevertheless, Qohelet urges us to enjoy our life:

Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God now accepteth thy works.

Let thy garments be always white; and let thy head lack no ointment.

Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity: for that is thy portion in this life, and in thy labour which thou takest under the sun.

Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.

(Ecclesiastes 9:7-10)

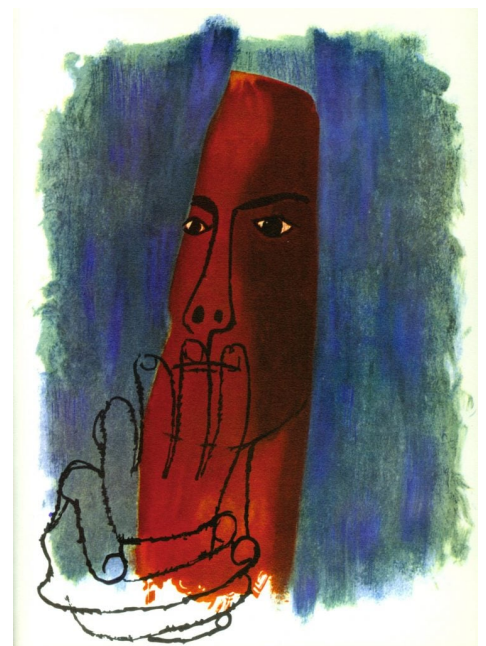
White clothes are worn for festive occasions. Their whiteness contrasts with the black of mourning. Anointing one's hair with oil is another sign of gladness. Yet the most important of Qohelet's injunctions is to work at whatever needs to be

done.

Qohelet's advice is related to the philosophies of Epicurus (341-270 BCE) in its enjoyment of life and of the stoic Zeno (334-262 BCE) in its promotion of right action. If, as most scholars now believe, Qohelet wrote in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BCE, he could have been influenced by such Greek philosophies. He certainly based his search for truth on reason rather than on revelation. Yet his philosophy is his own. It is religious rather than materialist.

Scott (1965, p 206) summarizes Qohelet's reasoning:

Thus the good of life is in the living of it. The profit of work is in the doing of it, not in any profit or residue which a man can exhibit as his achievement or pass on to his descendants. The fruit of wisdom is not the accumulation of all knowledge and the understanding of all mysteries. It lies rather in recognizing the limitations of human knowledge and power. Man is not the measure of all things. He is the master neither of life nor of death. He can find serenity only in coming to terms with the unalterable conditions of his existence, and in enjoying its real but limited satisfactions.



Ben Shahn presents the thoughts of Qohelet as balanced between his inability to understand and his realization that life can nevertheless be enjoyed:

Qohelet has much in common with the existentialism of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Albert Camus remarks in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942):

*Je ne sais pas si ce monde a un sens qui le dépasse. Mais je sais que je ne connais pas ce sens et qu'il m'est impossible pour le moment de le connaître. [I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I cannot grasp that meaning and that it is impossible now for me to grasp it.]*

Camus is much more tentative than Qohelet in his conclusion that we should nevertheless enjoy our life. He retells the myth of Sisyphus who was condemned by the Gods because he had tried to cheat death. He was made to roll an immense boulder up to the summit of a mountain, but every time he reached the top, the rock would roll back down and Sisyphus would have to begin his task again.

*La lutte elle-même vers les sommets suffit à remplir un cœur d'homme; il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux. [The very struggle toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy. ]*

## **Bread upon the Waters**

Qohelet presents us with multiple proverbial injunctions about

how one should live one's life. Perhaps the most quoted of these is:

Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days.

Give a portion to seven, and also to eight; for thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the earth.

(Ecclesiastes 11: 1-2)

The verses have been interpreted in many ways. Merchants have considered them in terms of overseas trade. Christians have proposed that it means to spread the teachings of Christ throughout the world. This idea derives from Christ's statement that he was the "bread of life" (John 6:35). Qohelet had neither of these ideas in mind. He was encouraging us to be generous, to provide for our fellows. He was suggesting that such human charity could compensate for life's injustice.

In his own old age, the wise Richard Wilbur (2010) wrote a poem about these verses

We must *cast our bread*  
*Upon the waters*, as the  
Ancient preacher said,

Trusting that it may  
Amplify be restored to us  
*After many a day*.

That old metaphor,  
Drawn from rice farming on the  
River's flooded shore,

Helps us to believe  
That it's no great sin to give,  
Hoping to receive.

Therefore I shall throw  
Broken bread, this sullen day,

Out across the snow,

Betting crust and crumb

That birds will gather, and that

One more spring will come.



## Light and Dark

Qohelet reminds us that life brings both enjoyment and dismay. The verses are illustrated by Ben Shahn on the left.

Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun:

But if a man live many years, and rejoice in them all; yet let him remember the days of darkness; for they shall be many.

(Ecclesiastes 11: 7-8)

## Remember Now

The last chapter of *Ecclesiastes* contains its most famous poetry. Qohelet, who has become old and wise, advises his youthful followers. He tells them to rejoice in their youth for life is beautiful. Yet they must always bear in mind that they must grow old and die:

Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth,  
while the evil days come not,  
nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say,  
I have no pleasure in them;

While the sun, or the light, or the moon,  
or the stars, be not darkened,  
nor the clouds return after the rain:

In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble,  
and the strong men shall bow themselves,  
and the grinders cease because they are few,  
and those that look out of the windows be darkened,

And the doors shall be shut in the streets,  
when the sound of the grinding is low,  
and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird,  
and all the daughters of musick shall be brought low;

Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high,  
and fears shall be in the way,  
and the almond tree shall flourish,  
and the grasshopper shall be a burden,  
and desire shall fail:  
because man goeth to his long home,  
and the mourners go about the streets:

Or ever the silver cord be loosed,  
or the golden bowl be broken,  
or the pitcher be broken at the fountain,  
or the wheel broken at the cistern.

Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was:

and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.

Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; all is vanity.

(Ecclesiastes 12: 1-8)

Qohelet refers to God as the Creator (*borador*, בוראדור). This is the only time he uses this term; elsewhere he uses *Elohim* (אלהים). Qohelet is here invoking Genesis: we must view the end of an individual life in relation to the beginning of all life. Some commentators (Rashi; Scott, 1965, p. 255) have remarked on the relations of this word to *bor* (בור) which occurs in the 7<sup>th</sup> verse. This means “pit,” in the sense of either a “grave” or a “cistern.” This verbal association also brings the end of life back to its source.

The poem is as enigmatic as it is beautiful. The initial verse of the poem clearly states that it is concerned with human mortality. Yet how the images relate to old age and death is as uncertain as the breath that ceases. And the poem ends on the words that began the book – all is vanity, merest breath.

A literal interpretation is that the poem describes a village or estate in mourning for a once-great person lately fallen on hard times. Perhaps Qohelet is foreseeing his own death. The windows of the house are darkened, the mill is quiet as the workers remember their late master, the mourners go about the streets, and finally dust is scattered over the body as it is buried.

A long tradition has provided allegorical interpretations of the images, relating them to the physical and mental decline that attends old age. The underlying idea is that the aging body is like a house in decay. For example, the commentary of the 11<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish rabbi Rashi suggests

the keepers of the house: *These are the ribs and the flanks,*  
*which protect* *the entire*

*body cavity*

the mighty men: *These are the legs, upon which the body supports itself*

and the grinders cease: *These are the teeth*

since they have become few: *In old age, most of his teeth fall out*

and those who look out of the windows: *These are the eyes.*

And the doors shall be shut: *These are his orifices.*

when the sound of the mill is low: *the sound of the mill grinding the food in his intestines, and that is the stomach*

The problem with such specific allegories is that different commentators provide different meanings. Do the doors that shut denote the eyelids or the lips?

Other interpretations are more abstract. Does the pitcher broken at the fountain represent the bladder or the loss of the life force? Is the silver cord the spinal column or the genealogical tree that ends at the death of a person with no heirs?

Some Hebrew interpretations consider these verses as representing the desolation of Israel following the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians in 587 BCE. The image of the golden bowl might then represent the broken lamp that no longer lit the sanctuary.

Some Christian interpretations see the imagery as a vision of the end times that will precede the final judgment. This fits with the epilogue that follows the poem.

No single interpretation conveys the sense of the poem. All meanings overlap. The poem is better listened to than imagined. The following is by the YouTube reader who goes by the name of Tom O'Bedlam

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/tom-o-bedlam-ecclesiastes-12.mp3>

## Judgment

The book concludes with an epilogue that many take to be the words of a later editor. However, it rings true to Qohelet:

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.

For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.

(Ecclesiastes 12: 13-14)

Why else should one remember one's Creator? Why else should one bear in mind one's ultimate old age and death? The sentiment is similar to Marcus Aurelius (167 CE):

Do not act as if thou wert going to live ten thousand years. Death hangs over thee. While thou livest, while it is in thy power, be good.

(Meditations IV:17)

Qohelet is also proposing that to be good is to be truly human – “the whole duty of man.” Any judgment of us as human beings must rest on whether we have done good or ill. Qohelet's instruction derives from man as much as from God.

The following presents the Hebrew (in Ben Shahn's calligraphy) together with its transliteration and an audio version of Ecclesiastes 12:13

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.

סֵף דְּבַר הַכֹּל נִשְׁמַע אֶת הָאֱלֹהִים  
וְרָא וְאֵת מִצְוֹתָיו שָׁמֹר כִּי זֶה כָּל הָאֵמֶן:

sovf dabar hakkol nishma eth ha'elohim yera eth mitzvotav  
shemovr ki zeh kol ha'adam.

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ecclesiastes-12-13.mp3>

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