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Meditations: A New Translation (Modern Library)



Synopsis

Few ancient works have been as influential as the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius, philosopher and emperor of Rome (A.D. 161–180). A series of spiritual exercises filled with wisdom, practical guidance, and profound understanding of human behavior, it remains one of the greatest works of spiritual and ethical reflection ever written. Marcus's insights and advice on everything from living in the world to coping with adversity and interacting with others have made the *Meditations* required reading for statesmen and philosophers alike, while generations of ordinary readers have responded to the straightforward intimacy of his style. For anyone who struggles to reconcile the demands of leadership with a concern for personal integrity and spiritual well-being, the *Meditations* remains as relevant now as it was two thousand years ago. In Gregory Hays's new translation—the first in thirty-five years—Marcus's thoughts speak with a new immediacy. In fresh and unencumbered English, Hays vividly conveys the spareness and compression of the original Greek text. Never before have Marcus's insights been so directly and powerfully presented. With an Introduction that outlines Marcus's life and career, the essentials of Stoic doctrine, the style and construction of the *Meditations*, and the work's ongoing influence, this edition makes it possible to fully rediscover the thoughts of one of the most enlightened and intelligent leaders of any era.

Book Information

File Size: 3554 KB

Print Length: 240 pages

Page Numbers Source ISBN: 0679642609

Publisher: Modern Library (May 14, 2002)

Publication Date: May 14, 2002

Sold by: Random House LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B000FC1JAI

Text-to-Speech: Not enabled

X-Ray: Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #16,887 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #7 in Kindle

Store > Kindle eBooks > Nonfiction > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Ethics & Morality
#7 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Nonfiction > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Greek
& Roman #9 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Religious

Customer Reviews

One should have more than one translation for *Meditations*. Note this difference between Maxwell Staniforth's translation in 1964 (Penguin Classics) and Hay's 2002 translation in these two passages.

1964: When force of circumstance upsets your equanimity, lose no time in recovering your self-control, and do not remain out-of-tune longer than you can help. Habitual recurrence to the harmony will increase your mastery of it.

2002: When jarred, unavoidably, by circumstances, revert at once to yourself, and don't lose the rhythm more than you can help. You'll have a better grasp of the harmony if you keep going back to it.

1964: Adapt yourself to the environment in which your life has been cast, and show true love to the fellow-mortals with whom destiny has surrounded you.

2002: The things ordained for you - teach yourself to be at one with those. And the people who share them with you - treat them with love. With real love.

The 1964 version is regal, while the 2002 (Hays') version is Aurelius writing, quickly, in a spiral notebook while on horseback, the equivalent of "memo to myself." Reading this book is like taking a cold shower, or visiting a favorite bartender, who insists on serving you coffee, not drink. Hays has brought us a Marcus Aurelius who puts his hand on your shoulder, looks you in the eye, and tells you like it is: Get over yourself. You can't change the world. Do your best and realize you are of this earth. Human experience is muddy, so what? This book is best read in tough times, when you could use a little steel in your spine.

I don't know who did the translation for this one but I found it very difficult to follow. This prompted me to look around and I found another translation by George Long (Thoughts of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus 1862). Even though it's not a recent translation, Long's version is often easier to understand. Compare the translations of the first paragraph for example:

This version: Of my grandfather Verus I have learned to be gentle and meek, and to refrain from all anger and passion. From the fame and memory of him that begot me I have learned both shamefastness and manlike behaviour. Of my mother I have learned to be religious, and bountiful; and to forbear, not only to do, but to intend any evil; to content myself with a spare diet, and to fly all such excess as is incidental to great wealth. Of my great-grandfather, both to frequent public schools and auditories, and to get me good and able teachers at home; and that I ought not to think much, if upon such occasions, I

were at excessive charges. George Long's version: From my grandfather Verus I learned good morals and the government of my temper. From the reputation and remembrance of my father, modesty and a manly character. From my mother, piety and beneficence, and abstinence, not only from evil deeds, but even from evil thoughts; and further, simplicity in my way of living, far removed from the habits of the rich. From my great-grandfather, not to have frequented public schools, and to have had good teachers at home, and to know that on such things a man should spend liberally. Having said this however, it's still worth comparing both translations which are free on the Kindle.

Other reviewers here have commented about the work itself, so I would just add a note about this specific translation. One of the most difficult tasks for a reader interested in non-English language work (and works from classical times in particular) is to choose an appropriate translation. Of course, what counts as 'appropriate' is somewhat subjective. What I was looking for was a translation that is clear and accurate; one that manages to convey something of a feeling for the both the person who wrote, and the times they wrote in. In this Staniforth excels. Unlike say, the Benjamin Jowett translation of Plato which (at least to my ears) has a distinctly Victorian ring, or the popular new age paraphrases of many of the Stoics (and in truth they are paraphrases or adaptations rather than translations), to me Staniforth (whose translation dates from 1964) strikes just the right balance. The words of Marcus Aurelius are rendered intelligibly and with a dignity and awareness of the historical context. The reader is neither forced to re-read and ponder (i.e., speculatively re-translate), nor wince at inappropriate colloquialisms of 21st century English. Better still, one can immediately perceive and appreciate the times in which the work was written. No mean accomplishment, to say the least. Of course, each reader needs to make this judgment for themselves. provides an excellent (and free) way of doing this with its 'search inside this book' feature, which is enormously useful for anyone making this decision.

The style is direct and unpretentious. The message is simple but extraordinarily powerful: life is short, the past and the future are inaccessible, pain and pleasure have no meaning, but inside each one of us there is a ruling faculty that is touched only by itself. Only that which makes us better capable of confronting our condition with resolution and courage can be said to be good, and only that which makes us worse and more unsatisfied can be said to be bad. The only thing that is of any importance is our own private quest for perfection, which no external power can ever destroy. Marcus Aurelius delivers many insightful and inspirational observations about human nature and the

human condition, and he makes an excellent rational argument for seeking the good and for acting modestly and contentedly. I cannot think of a more satisfying and moving work, and it is all the more poignant because it was written by a man who wielded almost absolute power and lived surrounded by the luxury, yet managed to keep things in perspective and to occupy himself only with what truly matters. One sentence captures perfectly the spirit of his writings: "Where a man can live, there he can also live well." An extraordinary testimony of wisdom and fortitude.

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