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and Marco Zingano (eds.)

What is Up to Us?

Studies on Agency and Responsibility
in Ancient Philosophy

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Volume 1
Present time and indifferents: making room for ‘what depends on us’ in Marcus Aurelius*

Marcelo D. Boeri

1. Marcus Aurelius and to eph’ hēmin

From Plato onwards it has been more or less usual that in a philosophical discussion the logos – understood in terms of ‘theses’ or ‘dialogical arguments’ – play a decisive role: one of the speakers – generally Socrates – draws conclusions from what another speaker has admitted or agreed on as the starting point of the debate. If these conclusions agree with the starting logos, such logos were really sound and the beliefs that they described can continue to be held. If not, the dialogue – and along with it the refutation of the initial thesis – allows one to display the weakness of the belief (expressed in the logos) and to modify one’s belief in addition to the eventual mistake implied in it (this explains why it is so important to keep the coherence – homologia – of one’s argument, a suggestion present in several passages of Plato’s dialogues). The question-answer discourse allows for error correction: when posing a logos, a philosophical speaker must commit to what follows from his or her logos, which entails the necessity of being well disposed to gently accept a better logos, at least whenever another logos is really better. So the philosophical dialogue coincides with what Plato takes to be thinking: a discourse one’s soul has with itself regarding the matters under consideration by asking itself questions and answering them, asserting and denying (Theaetetus 189e-190a).

If philosophy is regarded as a discourse understood in terms of argument, one might wonder to what extent Marcus Aurelius Meditations are philosophical. As it is usually pointed out by Aurelian scholars Marcus’ typical aphoristic style seems to indicate that he is not arguing in order to persuade an interlocutor of a particular thesis. His Meditations express matters which he addresses only to himself (ta etis heauton), as the title of his book clearly indicates. This is nearly a truism and is

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1 See Crvto 42a8; 52a8, d2; Gorgias 461b; 468e; 482d; 487a. Theaetetus 154e-e; 171a5. Philebus 11d.

2 The title ta etis heauton is rather an abridged form of Markou Antonimou antikratereor (ön eis heauton biblion) such as the book was entitled in the manuscript used by Xylander for the first printed 1559 edition (see Brent 1974: 1). On the title of Marcus’ work see Rutherford 1989: 9 ff.
something frequently remarked by scholars when they have to describe what kind
of work the *Meditations* is. But unless one has to account for a peculiar notion in
Marcus, such as that of *to eph’ hēmin*, one does not clearly realize what scholars
mean when they state that Marcus is not arguing for the purpose of persuasion. In
any case, to some extent it is possible to isolate some of his sayings and present
them as theses supported by arguments since they can be translated into assertions
and theoretical arguments of some sort. For instance, when talking to himself,
Marcus uses the imperative form often. Yet, certainly one can interpret such impera-
tives as the posing of a claim insofar as one can reformulate the phrase as an
assertion.

One of the most important issues in moral Greek philosophy is the question of
how we ought to live. Plato took this matter to be of utmost seriousness (Gorgias
500c1-4; Republic 352d2-6). Marcus Aurelius, probably inspired by the Platonic
approach, regarded philosophy as a way of life. In a well-known passage of his
*Meditations* he argues that philosophy is the only thing able to direct one’s life, and
this is so, he contends, because philosophy keeps one’s inner daemon free from
insult and damage (2.17). For Marcus doing philosophy means practicing how to
live, i.e. how to live rightly, which in his view is tantamount to ‘how to live freely’ –
that is, giving up desiring that which does not depend on you and is beyond your
control. If philosophy is a way of life which guarantees that one will be able to
refrain from desiring what does not depend upon oneself and is beyond one’s con-
trol, then ‘what depends on us’ should play a relevant role in Marcus Aurelius.

When looking at Marcus’ *Meditations* one finds many interesting issues with
regard to the way in which he incorporates the domain of *to eph’ hēmin* into his
theory of value. It should be taken into consideration that Marcus presents a de-
tailed account of what the agent should be concerned with; indeed in that account

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3 Notably, P. Hadot has argued that Marcus’ *Meditations* are ‘spiritual exercises’ of meditation that
were not conceived of as purely intellectual, but as closely linked to the practical life (see Hadot 1987:
221-222). The purpose of such exercises would be to realize an effective transformation of the agent’s
view of the world and the place he or she occupies in such a world (see Hadot 1995: chapter 6; 1997:
chapter 5). At this point Hadot’s view is closely followed by Cooper 2004: 335-336, even though Cooper
thinks (2004: 336, n.5), unlike Hadot, that Marcus was an amateur philosopher. Hadot is particularly
interested in noting that Marcus (like other Ancient philosophers) consider himself a philosopher
because he is able to live philosophically, emphasizing the practical side of philosophy. More
recently, in a similar line of thought and partially accepting Hadot’s approach, Christopher Gill has
observed that the *Meditations* ”represent a self-addressed version of the programme of practical ethics”
(cf. Gill 2007: 190), and that Marcus’ concern is mainly with practical ethics (195). Sorabji also shares
Hadot’s view, and considers that the *Meditations* are “a book of exercises designed to shape his whole
life” (Sorabji 2006: 179).

4 Cf. *Meditations* 12.31; see also Chrysippos (from a letter of Frontio to Marcus Aurelius, “On elo-
cuence” 1, 9; SFP 3.3196) who argues that a wise person “must not covet (concupsicere) or desire (al-
pece) anything which it may be he would covet in vain” (transl. C.R. Haines). Regarding the issue of
giving up desiring what is beyond one’s control, though, Marcus is probably drawing on an Epicurean
approach (Handbook chap. 2 and 8). All the translations of Marcus’ *Meditations* are J. Long’s 1890
(sometimes slightly modified); for the Greek text I have used Ditten 1987. Where appropriate, in the
quotation of the Stoic passages I refer to von Armin 1901-1905 (abbreviated SFP, as usual, the first
number indicates the volume and the second one the text number). I shall also indicate the section and
number text of the cited passage in Long & Sedley 1987 (abbreviated LS and followed by the section
number); sometimes I refer to Hellen 1987-1988 (abbreviated FLS followed by the text number).
the present is crucial for determining what depends on the agent. Marcus’ assertions that one lives only in the present (to paron), which is just a ‘fleeting instant’ (akairias), and that all which is beyond the present is an indifferent are almost common place in his work. In this paper I would like to argue that the link between the present and what is indifferent turns out to be crucial for figuring out what depends on us according to Marcus. My proposal in this essay is quite simple: (i) First, I shall present some key passages where the notion of to eph’ hemin is addressed. (ii) Second, I will briefly discuss the connections among what depends on us, what is indifferent, and the role the present plays in determining what really is in our power. (iii) Finally, I will close by discussing the way Marcus deals with emotions and the place they should occupy in one’s life. In addition to that, I intend to argue that Marcus depicts a certain Stoic ‘orthodoxy’ when dealing with what depends on us, as it is quite manifest in his writings not only that he takes for granted some basic distinctions, present in the Older Stoics (such as the difference between external and internal causes, the view that the present is the only temporal instance which is ‘real’, or even some basic points regarding the psychology of action), but also that he regards such distinctions as part of his technical devices for explaining several issues. One might object that this fact is, once again, self-evident given that Marcus is a Stoic philosopher; however, scholars sometimes consider him as an eclectic thinker who, even within his Stoicism, is willing to combine Platonic, Epicurean, and Stoic ingredients. On occasion this has led some people to reasonably believe that Marcus’ Stoicism is quite different from the Older and Middle Stoics. To be sure, there are many details in Marcus that are his own ideas and developments, but there are reasons to suspect that such developments are inspired by or strongly dependent on Ancient Stoicism. In recent years Professor John Cooper has stated that ‘Marcus is a novice at philosophy’ and that he displays a ‘greater distance from, and reduced interest in, technical philosophical terminology’. The Meditations as a whole, with its aphoristic and sometimes enigmatic style, seems to confirm Cooper’s view, insofar as, for the most part, Marcus does not seem to give much attention to theoretical discussion and argumentation. Moreover, Marcus himself declares his lack of interest for theoretical matters. However, there are some passages where Marcus’ discussion reveals

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5 For the idea that human life is ‘fleeting’ or ephemeral see Marcus 2.6; 2.14; 4.48; 6.47; 11.18. On the present as ‘fleeting’ see 3.10; 4.48; 5.24 et passim. In a polemic context against the dogmatists and the notion of time, Sextus Empiricus reminds us of the Stoic thesis that the present is fleeting (Outlines of Skepticism 3.141-142; in the context Sextus is probably thinking of Plato and the Stoics). I return to this point later in section 3.

6 Indeed it is hard to say to what extent Marcus was an ‘orthodox’ Stoic; for different assessments on the issue see Rutherford 1989: 21-26; 143-147; 225 ff. See also Long 2002 (quoted infra, n.16), Gill 2003: 56, and Gill 2007.

7 On the issue of the apparent eclecticism present in the Meditations see Cooper 2004: 346, who persuasively argues that, in spite of Marcus’ citing of Epicurus, there is no reason to think that the principles of Stoicism have undergone any weakening in the Meditations.

8 Cooper 2004: 336.

9 See 1.7, where he claims that not writing on theoretical matters was one of the teachings he received from Rusticus. Unlike Brunt, who states that in the Meditations some “chapters are obscure or
some knowledge of Stoic technical terminology, which appears to suggest that he was not completely amateur or new to the philosophical field with which he deals.

2. **External causes and the power of one’s own judgment or belief**

I would like to begin by commenting on some passages where Marcus establishes what is the proper domain of that which depends on us. In many places in his work he is particularly interested in distinguishing the external from the internal cause, the former not being dependent on oneself and the latter depending on oneself. This is a distinction that goes back to Chrysippus who, according to Cicero and other sources, was interested in making this discrimination in order to preserve what depends on us.10 In a remarkable passage of his *Meditations* (4.3) Marcus says to himself (i) that people seek retreats for themselves, such as houses in the country, in the mountains and so on. However (ii) this is just a mark of the most ordinary (*idiathomatoi*) kind of people, as it is possible to retire into oneself (meaning that one is able to leave aside those external things that do not contribute to one’s peace of mind). One’s own soul is, according to Marcus, ‘a place’ of greater quietness and calmness (especially if one has such things within him, these things presumably being one’s own reflections), and by looking into one’s own soul, one is immediately in a state of complete calmness (*eunormia*). And (iii) this is so because calmness is a sort of good order (*tukosmia*), namely of one’s own mind. This being so (iv), one should allow oneself this kind of retreat (*anachoreiosis*). As we learn later, this sort of retreat is linked with the internal cause, the only type of cause with which a real rational agent should be concerned. In fact, with his recommendation that one rid oneself of corporeal things in order that such corporeal things not touch or have an influence on oneself, Marcus maintains that one’s mind (*dianoia*) is not mixed with the breath (*pneuma*), which can move gently or violently, when it has drawn itself apart and recognized its own power. If my suggestion that Marcus takes for granted some basic distinctions belonging to the Early Stoic is somewhat reasonable, one might object that the difference between *dianoia* and *pneuma* that he appears to establish here does not look very ‘orthodox’ in character. In fact, the older Stoics took the soul (of which *dianoia* is an expression) to be breath (*pneuma*), or rather ‘breath conatural to us’.11 But this can be understood as a development of Marcus who surely is drawing on Platonism when positing a soul-body dualism.12 I cannot say why Marcus departs from orthodox Stoic

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12. For discussion on this point see Alles 2001: 113–118; Gill 2007: 191–194. As noted by Cooper (2004: 337), when stating that pain lasting a long time is tolerable, Marcus even may be having some Epicurean tenets in mind (he is certainly thinking of Epicurus’ view that the most intense pain is present a very short time; Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines* 4).
psychology in this important point; yet, it is rather clear that in the recently quoted passage the distinction between mind and breath constitutes an important detail that explains that we cannot control what is corporeal and beyond one’s mind (apparently a much subtler substance). Clearly, the idea is that corporeal items introduce turmoil, as they can ‘move gently or violently’, this way preventing one from achieving the calmness necessary to evaluate what really matters.13

Now this brings us back to another detail in Marcus’ approach to turns out to be crucial for understanding the notion of what depends on us: the causal power that one’s beliefs possess for yielding certain events or states of affairs. Indeed Marcus is intent on proving that we cannot let our beliefs (dogmata) die unless the impressions (phantasai) which correspond to them are extinguished. But it is in one’s power (epi soi) to continuously rekindle (diemelos anazopureithi) these beliefs, insofar as one can have a belief about anything which one ought to have.

Yet if one can do that, nothing will be presented to oneself as a disturbance; and this is so because what is external to one’s mind has no relation at all to one’s mind (7.2). If the agent has certainty and clarity regarding this point, he will be able to recover his own life since recovering life (anabionai), Marcus goes on to say, actually consists in looking again at things as one has looked at them but from a new perspective based on one’s beliefs or opinions about things. This depends on oneself; that is, these beliefs and opinions are the result of one’s mental activity. The meaning of this is certainly that one should look at things bearing in mind the fact that what is external to oneself does not affect oneself; that this should be the sense of this admonition appears to be emphasized by Marcus himself when he suggests later that there must be freedom from perturbations regarding what happens from the external cause, and that there must be justice in the domain of things done on account of the internal cause:

T1: Let there be freedom from perturbations with respect to the things which come from the external cause; and let there be justice in the things done by virtue of the cause deriving from you; that is, impulse and an action terminating in a social acting itself; for this is according to your own nature. (9.31)

13 In 2.2 Marcus insists that one is "a little flesh and breath (μυκών ἐνοί καὶ αέροφυσήν), and the ruling part (ἡγεμόνιον). As far as I can see, Marcus is not entirely uniform in the use of his terminology, even though one certainly may say that he usually associates the ruling part to mind (διανομή) or intellect (νοῦς), and breath (πνεῦμα) to flesh — which is blood, bones, dust, nerves, veins, and arteries and body (cf. §56 and Cooper 2004: 361, who reminds us of Marcus’ expression nous hégemónikes at 12.14). He also distinguishes mom to re. and intell (3.16), and points out that perception belongs to the body, impulses to the soul, and beliefs (dogmata) to intellect. In other passages Marcus even assimilates soul both to πνεύμα and πνεῦμα. On body, soul, and intellect as the three constituents of human being see Alese 2001: 113-116 and the Marcus passages cited and discussed there. On the Platonic antecedent of such a tripartition of human being see Plato, Timaeus 30b, Laws 896b and Alese 2001: 115, 119 n.26. As recently observed by Alese (2009: 256, and n.3), Marcus’ dualism between reason, on the one hand, and body and breath, on the other, clearly moves him away from the older Stoics and brings him closer to the late Platonism. In fact, in regarding ψυχή as merely being ‘mind’ (ανοιγματος: 2.2), he leaves aside the crucial metaphysical and explicative features of ψυχή used to have in the Early and Middle Stoicism.
But one should here wonder why Marcus takes the external causes as not having power over one’s mind. It is quite clear that he never thinks this and in any case do the external causes affect the person’s mind; there are cases where such affection occurs or rather, one might assume, that is what occurs for the most part. The person who is not properly disposed and trained to understand how things should be is potentially vulnerable to being affected by the external causes. Marcus has no doubts that ridding oneself of many unnecessary disturbances depends on oneself, as such useless disturbances wholly depend on one’s own belief:

T2: You can remove out of the way many useless things among those which disturb you, for they lie entirely in your own opinion (hypoliptris). (9.32: part)

Marcus repeatedly insists that if one is pained by any external thing, it is not this particular thing that disturbs oneself, but rather one’s own judgment about it (8.47: krisma). In other words, it is one’s belief that really has causal power over oneself, and this mental state depends on oneself. If anything in my own disposition gives me pain, nothing hinders me from correcting my own opinion or belief, since the factor causing me to be in pain is under my control. Yet, one might wonder, when and how my mind, which is an internal cause, is stronger than the external things. To respond to this question I shall limit myself to briefly commenting on T1 and T2 (quoted above). As we have seen in T2, Marcus maintains that the external causes should not have causal power over one’s mind, insofar as one’s own opinion or belief is able to remove all the perturbations disturbing oneself (he probably is presupposing that one’s mind should be properly trained in order to be able to remove what is disturbing oneself). He clarifies this point by adding that there are impulses and actions terminating in a ‘common’ praxis which depend upon oneself.14 What he is saying, in a rather conservative Stoic manner, is that an impulse (horme) and its corresponding action depend on the agent, surely thinking of assent as the mental act that allows one to produce an impulse and the subsequent action. That Marcus is considering assent as the item which depends on the agent in the impulse-action sequence can be confirmed by looking at Meditations 8.7:

T3: Every nature is contented with itself when it goes on its way well; and a rational nature goes on its way well when in its impressions it assents to nothing false or uncer-

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14 This ‘common acting’ probably should be understood in terms of the possibility one has “to embrace the whole cosmic order with one’s mind” (9.32: tei hoion taxis an periethen ti gelma esto), and this is possible once one has taken control of his judgment as an internal (and real) cause to give meaning to things. See also 10.6, where the view that, as long as one is part of a whole, one will not be disconnected with any of the things that are assigned to oneself out of the whole. This presupposes that we are social beings naturally constituted for fellowship (see 5.8, where Marcus appears to be evoking the Stoic oikodomei; see also 12.26, where he says that a human being is a new koinonia. The connection between the human faculty which forms belief or opinion (hypoliptris dunamei) and ‘familiarization’ (oikodomei) is explained in 3.9, where Marcus asserts that it depends on such a faculty whether there will be in the ruling part any opinion inconsistent with nature and the constitution of the rational animal. This being so, such faculty (presumably when it is properly developed) announces a lack of precipitancy (apropofusia) when giving assent, familiarization with all human beings, and coherence (akolouthia) with the gods.
tain,15 and when it directs its impulses to common acts only, and when it confines its desires and aversions to the things which are in its power, and when it is satisfied with everything that is assigned to it by the common nature.

This passage makes it clear that Marcus, inspired by Epictetus, takes the orthodox Stoic view that assent to an impression depends on the agent and constitutes the previous logical step for action.16 This text also reveals that Marcus was quite aware of the Stoic technical terminology in action theory, and that he was willing to apply it to his whole project.

The last detail I would like to briefly comment on regarding Marcus’ idea about what depends on us is related to the causal power of one’s mind for yielding some ‘phenomenal’ state of affairs, so to speak. Marcus’ tenet here is that your mental states have a real causal power to make you invulnerable to external things. When a Richter 8.8 earthquake is threatening your town, your emotional state may be that of fear. However, according to Marcus, the earthquake would just be an external cause, and as such it should not disturb you, as you are able to completely remove what is disturbing you because what really disturbs you depends on your belief (see T2: ἐπιθετοῖς σοι ημενα). This trust in the power of one’s mental states to give reality to a state of affairs is certainly striking, but that view is consistent with his idea that, on the one hand, working on the armor of one’s interiority turns out to be crucial to rightly discern what is really valuable in life and, on the other hand, that adopting an attitude of compromise with oneself gives us the indispensable peace of mind to deal with the external things. One might suggest that such an idea probably draws on an Aristotelian view, according to which any pathos involves a ‘doxastic’ ingredient.17 Fear, rage, or any other emotion or affective state would not be what they are without the agent’s belief that he or she is somehow being affected. Thus the agent’s belief is crucial in the emotional response. Going back to Marcus, he has no doubt that when you are in pain due to any external thing what is really disturbing you is not the external thing, but your own judgment about that external thing (τὸ πρὸς αὐτὸν κρίμα; 8.47). But given that it depends on you to wipe out your own judgment, it also depends on you to remove

15 This idea is taken from Epictetus, Dissertationes (Diss.) 1.28, 4; 3.3, 2; 3.7, 14-15, but the presence of ἀπατεῖς in order to avoid giving assent in advance to cognition (ἐπιθετοῖς) goes back to Chrysippus. For evidence see DL 7.46 (STF 2.130); DL 7.48 (LS 3IB); and Papyrus Hered. 1020 (STF 2.131) with the remarks by Oître 1977: 85-86 (see also the previous note). Like the Older Stoics, Marcus associates the absence of precipitation (ἀπατεῖς) with the fully rational disposition of a rational agent.

16 See Clement, Stromatae 6.8 69, 1 (FDS 298); Plutarch, De statuorum regnatorum 1057A (STF 3.177; LS 538); Plato, Legum allegoricae 1.30, 1-6 (FDS 299); Cicero, Academica 2.37-38 (LS 400, FDS 363). For Epictetus’ influence upon Marcus see Long 2002: 12, 40-43; 119, 126, 159. On some divergences between Epictetus and Marcus (especially regarding their conception of god), see Long 2002: 179-206.

17 For Aristotle, as for the Stoics, any emotional state involves a judgment or belief (Aristotle, Rhetoric 1382b29-34; 1358b13-17). Although the Chrysippian emotions are not only caused by judgment but rather are judgments, the idea is similar: the belief is the cause of the emotion. See Stoebens, Rcl. 2.50, 8-12, where it is argued that the cause (αἰτίων) of appetite (ἐπιθετοῖς) is to hold the opinion (δοξαζωμ) that a good thing is approaching; that of fear (πάθος) is to hold the opinion that a bad thing is approaching.
the state of fear and calm yourself. Moreover, Marcus puts a great deal of trust in the mind (3.20): even though some people may seem as if they were obstacles to your own actions, such people may become indirect to you ("no less than the sun or wind or a wild beast"). While my own action might be impeded by these people, they do not constitute real impediments to my impulse and disposition. Once again, this is so because these people are just external causes, but my impulses and actions are ruled by my mind or intellect on account of my reservation and ability to retire into myself.\textsuperscript{18} The issue of "reservation" (or "circumspection": \textit{hypereurêsis}) as a causal factor which impedes the possibility that events are contrary to the agent's desire and impulse is already present in the Early Stoicism,\textsuperscript{19} and indeed it is also present in Epictetus, on whom Marcus seems to be drawing.\textsuperscript{20}

In the next section of this paper, I return to the issue of "reservation" and its relevance to understand that the future, both in Epictetus' and Marcus' view, is totally uncertain and that the past is unimportant since it has already elapsed and therefore it is unchangeable. This approach argues for the thesis that the present is what matters, that all that lies beyond the present is indifferent and hence it has nothing to do with what is up to us.

3. Emotions, indirects, present time, and what depends on us

So far I have been discussing some specific passages where Marcus distinguishes between what depends on the agent ([his own judgments or beliefs]) and what does not depend on the agent (the externalities, such as other people transformed into obstacles for one's life, earthquakes, and other events, apparently minor for one's own inner citadel, to use Hadot's expression). Now I would like to focus on the notions of indifferent and the present, so as to establish the proper connections with the issue of what is up to us in Marcus. In doing so I shall explain the role that we should give to emotions in our life, according to Marcus Aurelius.

The theme of \textit{adiaphora} is well-known in Stoic theory of value; however, let me briefly summarize it: according to the standard definition, an indifferent is what is intermediate between virtue and vice, i.e. what is neither good nor bad, or, as they are also called, "neutral items" (\textit{oudetera}) which neither benefit nor harm (such as life-death, health-illness, pleasure-pain, beauty-ugliness, wealth-poverty, and so on).\textsuperscript{21} Insofar as indirects can be "preferred" or "dispreferred", they are also closely related to the notions of value (\textit{axia}) and disvalue (\textit{apaxia}), a preferred

\textsuperscript{18} On this point see again Marcus, 4.3: \textit{ei loipon anaschoûsin.}

\textsuperscript{19} Stobaeus, Ecl. 2.115, 5 ff. (\textit{StF} 3.564): "They say that nothing happens to the wise man which is contrary to his desire and impulse and effort, since he does all such things with reservation and none of the events which oppose his plans befalls him unexpectedly" (transl. B. Inwood).

\textsuperscript{20} See Epictetus, \textit{Handbook} chap. 2; see also frag. 27: "We must discover, he said, an art of assent (\textit{technêm} [...] \textit{perip to sukhatasthêsia}), and in the area of impulse, we must keep our attention fixed so that it is exercised with reservation (\textit{metai hapezaresed}), from desire we must abstain altogether, and we must not seek to avoid anything that is not in our power (\textit{ouk eph hémei}) (transl. R. Hard). This passage is quoted in full by Marcus (11.36).

\textsuperscript{21} E.g. 7.102-107, 165; Galen, \textit{PHP} 7.2, 434, 31-436, 29 (cf. \textit{StF} 3.374). See also Epictetus, \textit{Disc.} 1.20, 5-8.
indifferent being ‘valuable’ (as it is according to nature) and a dispreferred indifferent being ‘disvaluable’ (as it is contrary to nature). 22

Now before attempting to elucidate the way in which indifferents, the present, and to eph’ hēmin work together in Marcus, it seems reasonable to explore what he means by ‘indifferent’. By way of introduction, we may concentrate on Meditation 6.32, where two senses of adiaphorôn are distinguished, one related to our body (somatic), and the other one related to our mind or reflective faculty (dianoia). The text is as follows:

T4: I consist of body and a soul. Now to this body all things are indifferent, for it is not able to distinguish. But to my mind those things which are not its activities are indifferent. But whatever things are its own activities, all these are in its power. And of these however [my mind] refers itself only to the present; for as to the future and the past activities of the mind, even these are for the present indifferent.

The main line of Marcus’ argument is simple: (i) I consist of body and soul. (ii) To my body all things are indifferent for it is not able to distinguish (diapheresthai). By contrast, (iii) to my mind (dianoia) are indifferent those things which are not its activities (energemata). So (iv), whatever things are the activities of my mind depend on it, i.e. they depend on me, since my dianoia is my self. As is more or less clear, none of these two meanings of indifferent seem to match with the Stoic classical characterization of adiaphorôn: in both cases (i.e. in the case of indifferent with regard to our body and to our mind) what Marcus appears to mean is that something is indifferent because it concerns neither my body nor my mind. But Marcus’ use of indifferent maintains the Stoic orthodox view that what is indifferent activates neither impulse nor repulsion, 23 this is particularly relevant regarding what is indifferent to dianoia (at steps iii and iv above), since a strong claim repeated in the Meditations is that for a real rational person the only factor that should promote or activate his impulses and actions is his own mind, not the external things. The last lines of T4 interestingly link the notion of ‘indifferent’ with the present and what depends on oneself: the agent is only concerned with what is present for the future and the past activities of one’s mind are indifferent: only the present depends on us since what we really live is the present, that ‘fleeting instant’, which, even being momentary, is the only real, 24 in another remarkable passage Marcus clarifies what he means by ‘indifferent’ and its relation to what depends on us:

T5: As to living in the best way, this power is in the soul, if one is indifferent to things which are indifferent. And one will be indifferent, if one looks on each of these things separately and all together, and if one remembers that not one of them produces in us a belief (hypeleptos) about itself, nor comes to us; but these things remain immovable.

22 Stobaeus, Echologe 2.83, 10-11 (LS 581D). This description of indifferents is a simplification; a complete and useful discussion of Stoic indifferent can be found in Barney 2003: 307-319. For the Socratic-Platonic antecedent of the Stoic doctrine of indifferents see Alexee 2000: 320-331.
23 DL 7.104 (STP 3.117, 119; 3.82; LS 58A-B), probably reporting a Chrysippian view.
24 See also Meditations 2.14; 3.10.
and it is we ourselves who produce the judgments (kriseis) about them, and, as we may say, write them in ourselves, if being in our power (axon) not to write them, and it being in our power, if perchance these judgments have imperceptibly got admission to our minds, to wipe them out [...]. (11.16: part)

In Marcus' view, adelphora are as they are due to the fact that none of them produces in us a belief (hypothesis) nor 'comes to us', since the external things whose pursuits and avoidances disturb us are indifferent and do not affect us. And this is so insofar as one is indifferent towards things indifferent and it is oneself who goes to them (cf. 11.11). But one might wonder what requirement one should have in order to be capable of being 'indifferent towards things indifferent', and Marcus replies: when one considers each of these things separately and all together and if one remembers that those things remain quiescent (ateymel) given that we are those who produce the judgments (kriseis) about them, being possible for us 'to write them in ourselves' (graphontes en heanoi), and even to wipe them out. Once again the power of our mind and judgment, which depend on us, is what actually confers reality or, rather, value to the external things. Moreover, our mind's power locates the external things where they should be. To be sure, in stating that our mind is what confers 'reality' to something belonging to the external world Marcus does not mean that an extra-mental object, such as the rain which is falling down on me right now, exists because I want it to exist. What he seems to be suggesting is that my mind, in depending upon me, is able to give value or dis-value to such an external object for my practical life: if rain turns out to be annoying, it is in my power to make it be indifferent, since both what is annoying or pleasant is up to my own state of mind. The rain can get me wet, but this is not significant to me; after all everything is belief, and such a belief is up to oneself.

T6. [Consider] that everything is opinion, and opinion is in you power (apoi sot). Take away then, when you want, your opinion, and like a mariner who has doubted the promontory, you will find calm, everything stable, and a waveless bay. (12.22)

My example of rain indeed is rather futile: Marcus actually thinks of more demanding cases, such as pain, pleasure, reputation or even death (the Stoic classical examples of indifferents). All of these things produce disturbance in human beings; but the relevant question is, in Marcus' view, 'who is to himself the cause of his uneasiness?' (ascolia, 12.8). And his obvious answer is that each one is such a cause, since, insofar as 'everything is one's own hypothesi', no one is hindered by another person and, one should assume, nobody is compelled to feel disturbance because of the fact that one is in pain or knows one is about to die. Certainly, this does not mean that one is not in real pain when one is feeling physical or psychological pain, but pain should not constitute a real disturbance to one's life planning. The view that the present is a fleeting instant and that both the present and the events seen through the present constitute the only reasonable viewpoint of consid-

25 With this expression Marcus is probably making reference to his method of reducing a thing to what it is, decomposing it into parts (Haddot 1998: 133).
26 Marcus is evoking Epictetus (Handbook chap. 5).
eration for a real rational being is common place in Marcus. One of the strongest accounts advanced by Marcus for suggesting this is that a person cannot lose either the past or the future, for what a person does not have he cannot lose. If this is so, the present is the only thing of which a person can be deprived, inasmuch as this is the only thing which he has, but a person cannot lose a thing if he does not have it (2.14). This means that every person lives only the present, which is a 'fleeting instant' (akariation): all the rest either has already been lived (the past) or is uncertain (adelon), the future (3.10). To be sure, Marcus is, once again, closely drawing on Epictetus who is intent on proving that the future is entirely uncertain and thereby it should be considered with caution. In the previous section we saw that Marcus is willing to argue that impulses and actions are ruled by one's mind because of one's reservation and ability to retire into oneself. It would be appropriate here to recall the quoted passage from Stobaeus, presumably referring to an Ancient Stoic view, according to which nothing happens to the Stoic sage which is contrary to his desire and impulse, 'since he does all such things with reservation'. This is an interesting passage because it emphasizes the important fact that desiring is related to the future, as it envisages a future action. But the point is that the future is uncertain, so there is nothing that guarantees that I will get what I desire. That is why reservation is so important in dealing with desire: one's desires can be of different kinds, some of them reasonable, some others unreasonable (especially if you are not a Stoic sage, which is the condition of most people). But even if you have a reasonable desire, nothing can guarantee that you will get what you desire, since there can be impediments to your getting that which you desire and such impediments do not depend on you. What indeed depends on you is the way in which you evaluate and control, even moderate, your expectations with regard to the future. If one's expectations are too high, the possibility of frustration is very real. The mistake you can make is to believe that the future is real, when in fact it is not. It is at this point that it becomes clear how my impulses and actions are ruled by my mind due to my reservation, since my impulse and the action consequent on said impulse are performed 'with reservation' when I have chosen something (5.20). That is to say, the agent cannot guarantee himself that he will get what he desires, and this is so because there may be impediments to his getting what he desires that do not depend on him. This is, again, Epictetus' view, which Marcus takes for granted; however, if what I have discussed earlier is at least plausible, there seem to be reasons for thinking that the systematic connections between desire and reservation (and even what depends on us) go back to the Older Stoics.

27 For other remarks in Marcus on the present, see 6.37 (Hó to ra mnu idon punta hekóraheí); 7.8 (To meliosta mé yarrasaí); 7.29 (perigráfrapson to emeróte tou chronou).
28 Cited in full above, n.19.
31 See the previous note; Epictetus' approach, surely shared by Marcus, is that if one desires what does not depend on oneself, one will be necessarily unfortunate. By contrast, if one only makes use of the psychological movements of impulse and rejection (these movements being toward and away from all the external things) with reservation, one will avoid frustration and thereby misfortune.
The interesting point on which Marcus remarks with regard to what is indifferent, the present, and what depends on us is focused on the fact that what is not present becomes indifferent and thereby not dependent on the agent. If we bear in mind once again T2 and what we have already pointed out regarding the place of the present for Marcus, it becomes clear that it does not make sense to formulate value-judgments centered on the past or the future; as a matter of fact, what disturbs us is usually based on judgments such as: ‘if I had done that, everything would have gone well’; similarly, we are disturbed when thinking about the consequences a present action may have in the future. But both the past and the future do not depend on me: the past is necessary, and insofar as it is unchangeable I can do nothing to modify it. With regard to the future, it seems to me that Marcus is not suggesting that, as a rational being, I should not plan a course of action. But such planning must be done with an awareness of the fact that there can be no certainty about what will happen: there may be obstacles to my plans that are not up to me. If this is so, one should plan his practical life with a clear consciousness that one cannot control everything; this can be an effective remedy for avoiding frustration and hence pain and disturbance.\(^{32}\)

Richard Sorabji has suggested in passing that Marcus’ emphasis on the present is explained by his interest “to free himself from the fear of assassination by the exercise of placing value only on the present”.\(^{33}\) However, Marcus’ insistence on the present as the only thing which is real in human life probably has some systematic reasons. The idea Marcus has in mind, I suggest, is the (orthodox) Stoic view, according to which the only temporal instance which is relevant is present, as it is the only part of time that is ‘existent’ or ‘real’.\(^{34}\) If one is interested in stressing the ontological Stoic distinction between ‘existing’ (or ‘belonging’: hyparekein) and ‘subsisting’ (hypostatrami), it seems reasonable to briefly explore the Chrysippean tenet that ‘only the present belongs or exists, while the past and the future subsist’.\(^{35}\) Since a determined body (i.e. an ‘existent’) is disposed in a certain manner at this present moment, the present ‘belongs’ to it: while I am writing, the predicate ‘to be writing’ belongs to me and exists in me while I am writing and disposed in this way. But in the previous line of the above passage cited from Stobaeus Chrysippeus had said that “no time is present exactly, but it is broadly said to be so” (transl. Long-Sedley). Now, this clarification reminds us that, in the strict sense, not even the present ‘is’, or ‘is wholly present’, as ‘no time is wholly present’.

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\(^{32}\) For some textual evidence confirming these insights, see Marcus 8.28, where he presents the issue in terms of an exclusive disjunction: pain is either an evil to the body or to the soul. But the soul is able to maintain its own serenity (arhexa) and tranquility (galene) and not believe that pain is an evil. The conclusion (which is not given by Marcus) is that pain is not an evil to the soul, instead as it depends on the soul to remove pain (see also 8.29).

\(^{33}\) Sorabji 2006: 179. In his previous book Sorabji offers a more complete discussion of the theme of present in Marcus (see his 2006: 239-240).

\(^{34}\) This is particularly stressed in 8.36.

\(^{35}\) Stobaeus, Eccl. 1.106, 5 ff. (= SVF 2.509; LS 518).
(hōkēs enistatai). What the passage intends to show is that not even the present (that broadly may ‘belong’ or ‘exist’) is present: there is no present, it just subsists. When Chrysippus says that walking around (a predicate and thus an incorporeal in the Stoic ontological map) belongs to me when I am walking around but when I am seated it does not belong to me, he is pointing out that the incorporeal predicate coincides with a certain fact or event, and that, because of that, one may broadly (kata platos) say that the incorporeal ‘walking around’ belongs or exists.

I cannot say that Marcus is thinking precisely of this discussion when highlighting that the only real temporal instance in life is the present: indeed, Chrysippus’ discussion does not fit into Marcus’ style. Nevertheless, it is not impossible that Marcus has at least kept the conceptual foundations of the Chrysippian discussion of time and has incorporated the idea of the present into his project of practical ethics.

4. Epilogue: how should one behave towards emotions and how to understand the absence of a fine theoretical discussion in Marcus?

Marcus Aurelius opens his Meditations by saying that he learned good morals (kalōthēs) and to not be an ‘irascible person’ (aorgetōn, 1.1) from his grandfather Verus. In a memorable passage of his book Marcus provides nine fundamental rules in order to know how to behave if someone else offends you. I shall only focus on rule seven and on the general conclusion Marcus draws after listing and explaining all of his rules. According to rule seven, it is not people’s acts which disturb us, but our own beliefs (11.18). So, if one takes away these beliefs and is willing to dismiss his judgment as if it were something fearful, the anger is gone. This approach does not add anything new: the real cause of one’s perturbation is one’s belief, but if everything is reduced to my conviction or belief, the way to take away one’s wrong beliefs with regard to the external facts is only possible by reflecting (logismenōs) that there is not a shameful act bringing shame on me. Marcus recommends that one guard oneself against being flattered by sycophants as well as becoming angry with them. The reason for this is that both actions are unsociable (akoivnētēs) and lead to harm. In all the cases of anger, Marcus insists, being moved by wrath is not a manly or brave disposition; mildness and gentleness are actually manlier or braver, as they are more human or agreeable to human nature. The one who is able to have a mild disposition also has strength and bravery, for insofar as one is free from emotion in the same degree one is closer to strength. In fact, bravery is regarded as a military virtue by Marcus, but what he seems to be emphasizing here is that courage actually starts by being able to control oneself, a condition for being a real courageous person. To be sure, anger is usually present in the fighter, it eventually can be a mitigating factor for fear, which naturally is also present in the warrior without being undermining. It seems to be counterintuitive to demand that the combatant be calm or mild: but such calmness and mildness is a hallmark of strength, not of weakness. Surely it is not

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34 The reason for that is that, since continuous things are infinitely divisible, and time is a continuous, every time is infinitely divisible (cf. Stobaeus, Eel. 1.105, 8-106, 23; VFP 2.509; LS 51B, D, E).
easy being an Aurelian Stoic warrior, especially if one thinks that Marcus, like the Older Stoics, endorses the thesis that emotions should be eliminated. Learning to reflect properly enormously contributes to the improvement of one’s pence of mind, and this is once again, power, both in battle and in daily life.

One of my purposes in this paper has been to argue for the view that Marcus, as a thinker not particularly interested in theoretical but rather in practical ethics, leads his discussions making use of a rather general knowledge of some Stoic theoretical technicalities. There is no doubt that he is not worried about such technicalities in themselves, but if the examples I have given above are sound we may have some reason to suspect that Marcus incorporated the Stoic technical terminology and even some canonical accounts. I started this article by mentioning how hard Marcus’ admonitions sometimes may turn out to be if what we are seeking is some clear theoretical arguments supporting some explicit or implicit thesis; but if one explores the backgrounds of such advices or admonitions, one can realize that for him practical philosophy is not merely a set of commands or prescriptions, but such commands and prescriptions are vigorously endorsed by some theoretical devices belonging to Stoicism that Marcus incorporates and handles in a more or less conservative Stoic manner. At least some of those devices, which can be seen at work in addressing the notions of indifferentes and what depends on us, if not identical to what the Older Stoics used to say, are quite similar to Marcus’ Stoic forerunners. In a more charitable way one might say that he has put into practice some of the key tenets of Stoic ethics and action theory: his main interest was to develop a way of life able to express itself in a set of actions that translate the theoretical principles of Stoicism into practical terms. Certainly, Marcus does not have the sophistication of the Older or Middle Stoics, but he offers a coherent picture which, as recognized by Cooper and others, never abandoned the Stoic principles.

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