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## Values, The Blueprint of Our Character and The Road Map of Life

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HI-100-G: Western Civilization I: Ancient to 1500  
Professor Gradie  
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Values permeate the realm of existence in which all creation lives, and whether we are aware of this fact or simply ignorant of it will not alter their presence. Every person conducts themselves in a way that they believe best contributes to life in general, whether their focus is egocentric or altruistic. We are driven by our values, the important ideals that help members of a culture differentiate good from bad, desirable from undesirable; the beliefs that have a pressing influence on one's behavior and attitude, and offer guidance as we face the various situations that we encounter.<sup>1</sup> Reflecting on my life, I can certainly confirm the significance of values as they have shaped my entire worldview- how I treat others, how I conduct myself, and how I approach the hills and valleys from which my emotions arise. My values dictate how I respond to life, the fruit it bears, and the tests it lays before me, as they did for Roman emperor, Marcus Aurelius.

Marcus Aurelius, the last of the Five Good Emperors, ruled the Roman Empire during its highest peak. This period, known as the Pax Romana, was one of great prosperity, a duration in which Rome had minimal threats imposed upon them, and a period when the Mediterranean was under the control of a single power, a first occurrence in Roman history.<sup>2</sup> The monarch dove deep into the study of stoic philosophy, which emerged around 300 B.C.E. in the Greek city state of Athens.<sup>3</sup> This era, known as the Hellenistic Age, experienced a flux of new ideas, including one strain of philosophy known as stoicism which ruled dominant during this time. Introduced by Zeno of Citium, stoicism states that the universe is rational and purposeful, and that happiness can be found through self-discipline and a fulfillment of duties. In the eyes of a stoic, the

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<sup>1</sup> Business Dictionary. "Values." BusinessDictionary.

<http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/values.html> (accessed March 14, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Joshua Cole and Carol Symes, *Western Civilizations Fourth Edition Volume One: Their History and Their Culture* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2017), 130.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 101-102.

ultimate good is the serenity and tranquility of the mind.<sup>4</sup> Tolerance, forgiveness, self-discipline, and civic participation serve as the blueprint for the obtention of this good, and these are the values that Aurelius adopted so wholeheartedly.

With great power comes great responsibility, and by utilizing his values to steer him in the proper direction, Aurelius proved competent as a ruler. His composition, *Meditations*, written in 167 A.C.E., reflects a stoic worldview that is reinforced through his personal morals, many of which mirror my own. In this essay, I will compare and contrast the values that he held so dearly from my own, using *Meditations* as a reference for discussion. Like Aurelius, I cling tightly to the following values and depend on them to live a fulfilling life of sincerity and servitude: loving others, honesty, selflessness, a desire to understand other perspectives, thankfulness and reverence, respect, and embracing discomfort for the purpose of personal growth.

Love is one of the most powerful forces in the entire world, but is often the most difficult to carry out. Though feelings constantly come and go, humans have a tendency to react solely on their emotions. Aurelius and I believe, however, that rationality is to be cherished: “These are the properties of the rational soul: it sees itself, analyses itself, and makes itself such as it chooses.”<sup>5</sup> I believe that the only way to drive out hate is love and compassion. In my point of view, the prime example of perfect, selfless love is Jesus, and He is the example that I vow to live by. There may be times that I stumble, giving into anger and grumbling, but I know that love is a choice, and it is indispensable. One simple act of kindness can change a life forever, imprinting one’s memory with a stamp of hope in the midst of a world eclipsed with greed. As an emperor, Aurelius possessed a massive reservoir of power, and as many politicians have demonstrated since the birth of civilization, swaying in the way of corruption is certainly feasible. Thus,

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>5</sup> Marcus Aurelius, *The Meditations*, trans. George Long, 1.

making a conscious effort to fix the mind on rational ideals is imperative, for it prevents bad-decision making and instills a sense of prudence within a person. As Aurelius claims, “the fruit which it bears itself enjoys,” referring to the positive outcomes that derive from living rationally.<sup>6</sup>

The truth sets you free. As clichéd as the term may be, it is a principle of utter truth in itself, and once one truly comprehends this principle and tastes the sweet, compelling substance seeping from it, the veil of ignorance will be torn. “The man who is honest and good ought to be exactly like a man who smells strong, so that the bystander as soon as he comes near him must smell whether he choose or not...Nothing is more disgraceful than a wolfish friendship.”<sup>7</sup> Without honesty, there is no sincerity, and if people live a life of deception, what is the point of fellowship? “Avoid this most of all. The good and simple and benevolent show all these things in the eyes, and there is no mistaking.”<sup>8</sup>

Although all of my virtues equip me to live a life of servitude, seeing through the eyes of other people is pivotal. There are times when I find myself between the rigid confines of my own opinion, finding it difficult to see from different perspectives (though I am working on detaching myself from one-minded viewpoints). I acknowledge that my perception isn’t necessarily always the “right” one. However, my concern and tenderness towards the homeless has softened my heart tremendously, and the tears that they and their stories have induced continue to teach me the importance of stepping into the shoes of another. I have learned that it is important to see past one’s flaws and instead embrace the person veiled by them, and to do this requires selflessness and wisdom.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 4.

One of the most common judgements thrown upon the desperate, earnest people living on the streets is the assumption that they are mere drug addicts who will move to fulfill their cravings if given the opportunity to do so. Many dwelling within the homeless population do in fact struggle with addiction, but to be honest, if people walked past me as if I was dirt under their shoes, I would probably use substances as a means to escape, as well. As Aurelius humbly exclaims, “What is my relation to men, and that we are made for one another.”<sup>9</sup> To feel invisible in the midst of a selfish, bustling crowd is demeaning and absolutely heart wrenching, and it strips those in need of any last hope they may possess. Human beings were created for the sake of fellowship; we are to live for one another, not merely for ourselves. When presumptions try to creep their way into the mind, we ought to wipe them out. We should “take away these opinions then, and resolve to dismiss thy judgement about an act as if it were something grievous, and thy anger is gone.”<sup>10</sup> We must come together and live for those who have had life stripped from them, those who have been deemed unworthy. We who have remained on the sidelines must join the fight for freedom, assisting them in their battles. There is wisdom in the following statement: “Consider that thou dost not even understand whether men are doing wrong or not, for many things are done with a certain reference to circumstances. And in short, a man must learn a great deal to enable him to pass a correct judgement on another man’s acts.”<sup>11</sup>

There are many ways to utilize love and selflessness as a method of reaching out to people trying to survive on the streets. If your wallet is parched, simply stop, smile, and offer a friendly greeting. Remind them that someone cares. Ask for their name, for there is power in knowing one’s identity even when they have forgotten it themselves. Let them catch a glimpse of

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 4, 5.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 5.

the worth they have been made to believe no longer exists, for when the world shuts the broken out, we must let them in. It is through understanding of this kind that compassion and empathy can ripen into the fullest, most beautiful fruits of humanity.

Often, the negativity of life straps a veil to our eyes, fixing our focus on the turmoil and waste around us. However, there is still so much to be thankful for. Thankfulness is like a parent who keeps their child in check; it places our minds on the proper track. Feelings, as they are least dependable to rely on, sway and fluctuate constantly. Thus, our sense of gratitude often slips to the back of our minds. It must become a conscious, active focus in the foreground of our brains, for thankfulness fixes our eyes on the beauty behind the mess. It does not make us ignorant of the problems surrounding us, rather it pushes us to act. Thankfulness equips us to proactively change the world without wallowing in despair. Thus, I agree with Aurelius when he says, “a good disposition is invincible.”<sup>12</sup> I try to approach the mountains in my life as opportunities to grow rather than chances to fall. And if I do stumble? I get back up. As musician and vocalist of the band Memphis May Fire, Matty Mullins, sings, “Falling down is life, living is getting back up again.”

The pain and anger that circumstances cultivate must be combatted with positivity, as stated in *Meditations*, “For what will the most violent man do to thee, if thou continuest to be of a kind disposition towards him, and if, as opportunity offers, thou gently admonishest him and calmly correctest his errors at the very time when he is trying to thee harm, saying, ‘Not so, my child: we are constituted by nature for something else.’”<sup>13</sup> This not only embodies the stoic idea of purposefulness, but it also reveals the strong link between positivity and thankfulness, two values that launch an individual to a place of reverence and respect.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 5.

Reverence plays a very important role in my life as it is closely linked to the sacred virtue of thankfulness. Every day, I try to remind myself of the amazing, Fatherly God I serve and the endless possibilities there are each day to lighten the load of another. I look out into the horizon, my eyes grazing over the fields and trees dancing in the evening breeze, and I ponder, “*There is no way that all of this was created by accident.*” I aim to serve the Creator of all that is beautiful, and I aim to love His people. I have reverence for what He did for me and all that He continues to do in my life, in addition to the miracles He works in the lives of those around me. I still experience periods of doubt and discouragement, but I have come to learn that I need not to understand everything in order to pursue a relationship with Him. The beautiful thing is I am not required to fix myself before coming to Him- His arms are open wide. It is *He* who cleanses me. It is based on *His* love, and *that* is the freedom that I am called to bestow unconditionally upon others.

Though Marcus Aurelius did not classify himself as Christian, he and I share many of the same universal morals, for stoicism heavily influenced the rise of Christianity during his time. For him, respect is to be displayed even when wrong is committed. “Consider that thou also doest many things wrong, and that thou art a man like others; and even if thou dost abstain from certain faults, still thou hast the disposition to commit them.”<sup>14</sup> Reflecting upon this demonstrates respect towards oneself and towards others, for the ability to remain humble when in a dispute is a priceless virtue that prevents the invoking of harm to any parties involved.

Though the following virtue is not explicitly implied in Aurelius’ *Meditations*, embracing discomfort is a sacred and valuable skill to acquire. I was admitted into the foster care system at fourteen years of age, and the four years that I spent trying to heal never grew easier. Wandering

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 5.

outside of the realm of familiarity almost always elicits discomfort, fear, doubt, and worry, however it is the only way to grow. Stepping outside of one's own comfort zone is the only way to change the world, and doing so requires a complete severing of ties between an aspiring, ambitious, and selfless world changer and the materialistic, selfish norms of society which works, directly *and* indirectly, for the benefit of a media that promotes egocentrism. I've vowed my life, my time, and my energy to loving other people, and in order to do this I must walk through and embrace uncomfortable situations. Moving from family to family while under the demands of anxiety, depression, and spurts of hopelessness strengthened my character and gave me the tools to encourage others who have been in my place. Because of my experiences, I know how to approach the shadows that sometimes creep behind my step, and I can assure others that things truly do get better. I have no doubt that Marcus Aurelius faced moments where he could have either retreated to the confinements of his own comforts or branched out into the realms of uncertainty, for that is the environment in which a tremendous growth of character occurs.

Life is a beautiful gift, and our values dictate how we *treat* that gift. They determine how we will sow into the lives of others, and thus are essential components of the overall human experience. People hold different values, and that is okay, however it is important that we as individuals take time to examine ourselves with the purpose of pinpointing our beliefs and morals. By doing this, we can come to know ourselves better. *Meditations* reflects the self-searching that Marcus Aurelius conducted, and his knowledge of those values equipped him to serve others as a powerful yet humble leader. Similarly, I long to use my values to become more selfless as I vow to serve others in a broken world.

Forever, this shall be my axiom: "Have I done something for the general interest? Well then I have had my reward. Let this always be present to thy mind, and never stop doing such

good.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 1.

