



Stoic  
Reflection

By William  
Ferraiolo

The *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius have provided inspiration, comfort, and counsel to intrepid readers for approximately two millennia. Having read through it yet again (for at least the twentieth time), I found myself puzzled by the fact that I had never undertaken a similar exercise. Keeping a journal of my thoughts about the vicissitudes of the human condition, and my struggle to understand its challenges, had not become a habit. Marcus, as far as we know, never intended to have his ruminations published. Those thoughts were not meant for the world at large. He simply kept a journal for his own use, for his own efforts at self-rectification and self-governance. The original title was *To Himself*, and the book in which he recorded his thoughts was not, to our knowledge, shared with family, friends, or staff. The last great Roman Emperor thought a great deal about the nature of the good life, the nature of virtue, the temptations to vice and weakness, and his own insignificance by comparison to the vast Cosmos and the power of the all-pervading, governing Logos (the organizing principle of the natural world).



Marcus Aurelius

He regarded himself as a simple man, an ephemeral being, and nothing more than an actor in a grand play authored by Zeus—the only true king, worthy of genuine reverence and awe. His simple humility is exhibited repeatedly in passages such as this:

*Letting go all else, cling to the following few truths. Remember that man lives only in the present, in this fleeting instant: all the rest of his life is either past and gone, or not yet revealed. This mortal life is a little thing, lived in a little corner of the earth; and little, too, is the longest fame to come – dependent as it is on a succession of fast-perishing little men who have no knowledge even of their own selves, much less of one long dead and gone. (Meditations, Book Three, 10)*

The most powerful man on the planet regarded his life as “a little thing, lived in a little corner of the earth,” occupying merely a fleeting moment. The Roman Emperor understands that even he, in the final analysis, is just another “fast-perishing” person playing a role assigned to him by Fate. We can all learn a great deal from this man and his humble wisdom. I certainly hope that I have done so—though I see no evidence that I am capable of emulating the greatest Graeco-Roman Stoics such as Marcus, Seneca, and Epictetus. I decided to

begin collecting my own thoughts about the pursuit of wisdom, virtue, and my seemingly constant failure to make any real or lasting progress. Perhaps this endeavor would help me to stay on the “straight and narrow,” or, at the very least, occupy my time and mind with a virtuous aim.

During the height of the U.S. Presidential election campaign of 2016, I found the time and opportunity to consider the many ways in which I had allowed external states of affairs, conditions beyond my control, to cause anger, frustration, and anxiety to undermine my equanimity. The more time I spent in introspection, the more I realized that my mental states were being dictated by contingent circumstance rather than by reason and a mature pursuit of honorable character. I regularly, and repeatedly, allowed myself to slip into unhealthy cognitive habits and toxic emotional states. Allowing this to continue struck me as intellectually lazy and, in some sense, cowardly. I needed to take steps to get my cognitive house in order. Marcus’ *Meditations* struck me as an excellent model for developing and cultivating rational discipline. Thus, I began a rigorous, even brutal, self-assessment. I found weakness, irrationality, and sloth befouling my thoughts time and time again. These habits, and the unreasonable beliefs and expectations undergirding them, had to be challenged and expunged. This process would prove to be neither easy nor pleasant. The first of my reflections on the human condition spilled out onto the page and ultimately read:

*You can control nothing other than your own attitudes, values, and efforts directed at mental discipline. The rest of the world is as it is, will be as it will be, and unfolds as it does with or without your consent. This is as it should be. Indeed, this is as it must be. You have enough to contend with just governing your own thoughts and actions. Your consciousness and your will are more than enough to keep you busy, engaged, and challenged. Master yourself, administer your affairs, discipline yourself, and you will have accomplished more than most ever dare. This is your only purpose. Are you not ashamed to allow the events of the day to throw you off balance? What business is it of yours if lives begin or end, warfare erupts*  
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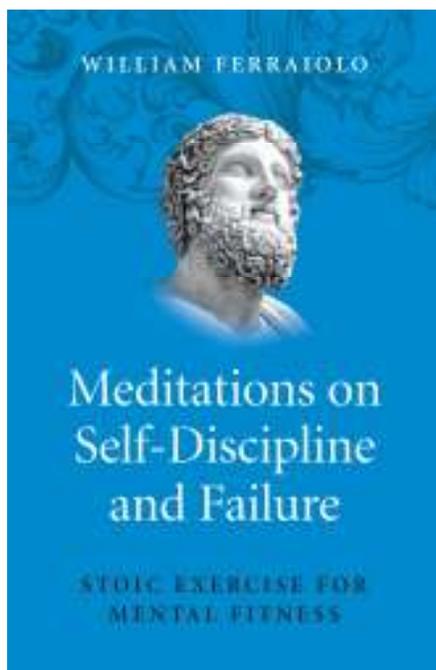
*here or peace is restored there, economies shudder, earthquakes strike, or storms beat down upon the land? Will it all to be otherwise if you can. What answers directly to the exertion of your will? That, and only that, is your business. Do not invite needless distress and perturbation by insisting that the world must conform to your expectations or whims. Who, after all, do you think you are? Control the very small sphere that answers to your direction. As for the rest, cultivate gratitude for the opportunity to draw breath and take part in a life that you never earned.*

Hopefully, that encapsulates as much of the Stoic worldview and its analysis of our circumstances as could be managed in a brief written meditation. This began my work, and it culminated in a book that, as far as I am aware, I did not originally intend to publish or share with others. My work was initially intended only for my own self-rectification and my own consideration. Ultimately, I decided that the content of my reflections might be useful to others who

struggle with similar challenges. A few titles presented themselves, but *Meditations on Self-Discipline and Failure: Stoic Exercise for Mental Fitness* struck me as a better fit than the others. It is my hope that the value of self-discipline, and a rational approach to the inevitability of failure can be understood through the prism of a Stoic conception of mental discipline and fitness. Surely, many other persons face challenges similar to mine. If I can provide some assistance to those who struggle to maintain reason and cultivate virtue, then my efforts will not have been wasted. The author and the reader need each other. We are, in some sense, in this thing together. Good luck.

**William Ferraiolo** received a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Oklahoma in 1997. Since that time, he has been teaching philosophy at San Joaquin Delta College in Stockton, California. His work can be found here: <https://deltacollege.academia.edu/WilliamFerraiolo>

[wferraiolo@deltacollege.edu](mailto:wferraiolo@deltacollege.edu)



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