

# The character of a stoic

[Business](#)



Today, people keep diaries with all their personal stories and innermost thoughts that serve as a magnum opus into the life of the writer. These books provide much needed documentation of emotions and passions that are lost in the passage of time. Marcus Aurelius was the emperor of the Roman Empire from 161 AD to 180 AD, during which time he also wrote his book of stoic philosophy, *Meditations*, that did the exact same thing. This was a compilation of multiple books he had written throughout his time of rule that he intended only for himself and gives an intimate view into his personal thoughts on life and existence. The books were not written in chronological order, however, each book was added to over time to show his progression of thought.

The book overall has no plot, it only supplies wisdom and reason that Aurelius acquires over time. Throughout his life he faced many obstacles that influenced his seemingly objective world view. As Aurelius faced his own mortality he moved towards a more panicked and frantic view of existence; his writing moved from books of stoic thought into ways of coaxing himself to serenity before death. Instead of simply looking at the messages *Meditations* provides, comparing his philosophy to his life story shows his own personal revelations and feelings that he uses his books to document. From entering rule, to the betrayal of his wife and facing death, Aurelius lived a turbulent life and his philosophy tells his story. When Marcus Aurelius first inherited the throne, he was joined with his brother, Verus, as co-emperor.

During their rule together, Rome was prosperous and celebrating a Golden Age which is apparent in his optimistic writings. Aurelius had been tutored by

<https://assignbuster.com/the-character-of-a-stoic/>

the great philosopher Fronto when he was a young adult in the style of Stoicism: an ancient school of thought that emphasized reason, wisdom and virtue. Fronto's teaching encouraged Aurelius to look at the world around him and make sense of the natural order. In the early part of his reign, Aurelius was extremely stressed by the demands of power and needed ways to reason as to why people acted the way they did around him. Aurelius wrote back and forth to Fronto while also recording his thoughts in his books where he tried to make sense of people, how they were motivated and how to best interact with them.

During this period of his life, *Meditations*, is filled with tidbits of information that guide the reader on how to treat people according to the natural orders whim. The passages are not heavy or intense, they simply provide guidance and helped the Emperor himself make sense of the people around him. The style reflects his stance in life where he is diligent yet optimistic about humanity; he wishes to find a formula on how to live before the thought of dying has even crossed his mind. Their light-hearted outlook greatly contrasts his future writings that shift from analyzing the world with reason into coaxing himself with philosophy. During the later part of his reign, Marcus Aurelius fell ill following military campaigns in Germania.

Word falsely spread to Egypt alerting his longtime friend Avidius Cassius, the commander of Egypt and Syria, of his death. Cassius led a revolt in his territories and decided to usurp the position of Emperor. Upon hearing this news, Aurelius' wife, Faustina, left her ill and dying husband for Cassius hoping that a marriage with him would be able to protect the lives of her children during a dynastic change. As Cassius prepared his army, Aurelius' <https://assignbuster.com/the-character-of-a-stoic/>

health returned and he began to form his opposition. While preparing his siege of Rome, Cassius was assassinated by a centurion and the revolt quickly dismantled. Faustina returned to Rome and was shunned by the people of Rome, Aurelius forgave her, but the betrayal of both his wife and friend during his close skirmish with death left him disgruntled.

His writings transition from observances and guidelines about people into a more pessimistic outlook where he begins questioning the character and motives of those around him: "Life is neither good or evil, but only a place for good and evil." *Meditations*, reflects what he now sees in the world, what he faced and moves away from his objective outlook of the world. As the Emperor moves towards the end of his life, his writing takes an even darker turn. He develops the Antonine Plague and slowly dies while he watches his empire succumb to the same disease. He names his son, Commodus, the co-emperor of Rome and makes his last omens.

This period of his life caused for him to write serious, dismal and existential philosophies which he uses to help comfort himself. Aurelius talks about how the humans who came before him have gone on to be forgotten and how he will eventually join that cycle. He says that everything is made of atoms and alike the beginning, he will return to being those atoms without a trace of existence. He even ponders about how, in true stoic philosophy, that he is glad he will return to nature, since nature creates the order of the universe. His philosophy is no longer about pieces of wisdom he gains over time, his work transitions to him purely writing for himself trying to prepare himself for what will come with death.

Aurelius chooses to embrace death instead of pondering his fear and finds solace in his philosophy: "Death smiles at us all, all a man can do is smile back." The writing during this period of his life demonstrates the magnitude at which his circumstance in life is reflected in his views of the world that he records in *Meditations*. The words of a deadman ring true even today when reading his great work. A reader gets a glimpse into the extremely personal, diary style philosophy where we see the inner thoughts of a man coming to terms with his own death. His progression of thought over time is greatly influenced by the periods of his life.

When Rome was peaceful and prosperous his philosophy was tidbits of wisdom he had collected through his experience. When the empire was ravaged by war and Marcus Aurelius was confronted with the betrayal of his wife and friend his writing is where he omits his pain and questions the motives of those around him. As the emperor faces his death, Aurelius turns to Stoic philosophy and uses its basis to comfort himself in times of fear. *Meditations* itself opens the world to the life of one of the most famous leaders of all time. He too faces mortality, he too must embrace death so that he can keep on living. Aurelius gives us insight into the natural order of the world; *Meditations* provides us with the insight of the stages of his life and how they changed the mindset of one of the greatest philosophers in the world.