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“Politics” in the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius

Summary

This paper proposes to examine the diverse ways that conceptions of politics can be retrieved from the *Meditations* of the philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius. It claims that the *Meditations* are in a certain sense an important work on politics, owing to the theoretical and practical insights into not only (political) leadership, but also the (political) system and arrangements. As a matter of fact, a number of principles and codes of conduct are proposed by the Stoic philosopher who is faithful to the understanding of philosophy as being primarily a “way of life.” However, despite the attractive and inspiring treatments of human nature, society, and virtues that are at the heart of the “political” agenda of Marcus Aurelius, the *Meditations*, due to its “dislocated” nature, does not offer a fully-fledged political theory, at least as “politics” is understood today.

KEYWORDS

Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, politics, ethics, leadership

„POLITYKA” W *MEDYTACJACH* MARKA AURELIUSZA

Streszczenie

Artykuł podejmuje próbę zbadania różnych sposobów odczytywania koncepcji „polityki” zawartej w *Medytacjach* cesarza-filozofa – Marka Aureliusza. Poniższy tekst dowodzi, że *Medytacje* są w pewnym sensie ważnym traktatem na temat polityki, poszerzającym teoretyczne i praktyczne rozumienie nie tylko (politycznego) przywództwa, ale także (politycznego) systemu i układów. Ten stoicki filozof w istocie zaproponował pewne postawy i zasady postępowania, pozostając wierny rozumieniu filozofii przede wszystkim jako „sposobu życia”. Jednak pomimo interesującego i inspirowającego potraktowania ludzkiej natury, społeczeństwa i cnót, które leżą u podstaw „politycznej” agendy Marka Aureliusza, *Medytacje*, ze względu na swoją „przeniesioną” naturę, nie podają w pełni rozwiniętej teorii politycznej, przynajmniej w dzisiejszym rozumieniu „polityki”.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE

Marek Aureliusz, *Medytacje*, polityka, etyka, przywództwo

He [Marcus Aurelius] lived and died honoured by all because he has succeeded to the empire by inheritance and owed nothing either to the soldiers or to the people, and, further, has many virtues, which made him venerated by all, enabled him to keep both these parties in their place, and he was never hated nor despised [Machiavelli 1947, p. 56].

Early in the morning, when you find it so hard to get up, have these thoughts ready at hand: “I am rising to do the work of a human being” [Marcus Aurelius 1997].

INTRODUCTION

Speaking about politics in the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius poses a challenge and a difficulty. Since Marcus Aurelius was himself a philosopher in charge of highly political responsibilities, “trapped” as he was between the theoretical principles of philosophy and the pragmatic activities of politics, it is challenging to dissect and distinguish those two affiliations: the philosopher and the politician. On the other hand, due to the fact that Marcus Aurelius

did not intend to write any political treatise, it is difficult to identify political insights in the *Meditations* without running the risk of falsely interpreting it. For at the most and best, what we can retrieve from the *Meditations*, the only book Marcus Aurelius has ever written, are only some scattered bits and pieces relevant to political matters. Nevertheless, elaborating on politics in the *Meditations* is no anachronism or misinterpretation once we are clear about what we mean by the term “politics”.

“Politics”, as a concept that points at certain specific human activity, is a source of misunderstandings, depending on whether we situate it in Antiquity or modern times. One of the crucial elements that has formed the differences in the conception of politics rests less on its meaning, than on its relation with ethics. Without taking much risk, we may assert that the decisive schism between politics and ethics – observed in the modern conception of politics – has been accentuated with the apparition of the *Prince* of Machiavelli which established politics as a subject on its own, completely independent – both in its nature and practice – of ethical considerations. Politics and ethics, however, have not been so much clear-cut in many Ancient philosophers. According to Aristotle, for example, there is no unambiguous dichotomy between politics and ethics. Both are indeed kinds of practical sciences (knowledge) that are closely linked and influence each other. Having in mind the Ancient understanding of politics, we’ll try to read the *Meditations* with the purpose of extolling some insights which can be useful to us today in the way we conceive of and practice politics.

THE PHILOSOPHER AND THE POLITICIAN

The Greeks, more than the Romans, had a relatively different conception of politics. They thought of politics as

a communal decision-making effected in public after substantive discussion by or before voters deemed relevantly equal, and on issues of principle as well as purely technical, operational matters [Gill, Schofield 2000, p. 11].

Now despite the debt we owe to Greek political thought, and to the Roman distinctive political legacy of positive law, there are many differences about the way we understand and do politics within our respective communities. If indeed, for the Greeks, the civic space was located and centred in the “polis”, and if the nature of the citizen was strictly confined in a much smaller and more intimately personal scale, in modern times, however, politics goes beyond this “provincialist” confinement to embrace a much broader perspective and horizon. Hence, the general definition of politics as the “art of managing the affairs of the city” could be taken in its literary sense, in the Greek world.

Another important distinction we may draw between Ancient and modern conceptions of politics could rest on the place devoted to ethics. If modern political theory, much influenced by some utilitarian, realist, and interest-based considerations, is often reduced to a discourse of struggle for power, the art of politics in Antiquity was – at least theoretically and from the point of view of principles – closely related – if not subordinated – to the ethical realm. The Roman tendency to hold for pragmatism and leave the Greek highly speculative conception of the world in general and of politics in particular, will not be “innocent” to the later development of political theory.

Evoking here these remarks could help us better grasp what we intend to (re)construct, namely the political thought of Marcus Aurelius. This undertaking requires surely a thorough investigation into not just his writings that include his *Meditations* and personal correspondences, but also into some relevant historical works. Now, whether we should describe Marcus Aurelius as a philosopher-emperor or an emperor-philosopher poses a problem, at least, of priority. We know that, already in his young age, Marcus Aurelius preferred philosophy above all disciplines such as rhetoric, grammar, etc. [Marcus Aurelius 1997, IV, 3]. The prominence of philosophy was clear in his mind, since it is philosophy, and philosophy only that could help him live a happy and virtuous life. This primordial vocation of philosophy shows itself through in the *Meditations* which, apart from the first book which contains biographical information, draws up a more or less complete picture of existential problems of life and various ways to overcome them.

But Marcus Aurelius, in his *Meditations*, does not just speak as a philosopher, or an emperor. Refraining himself from any self-appreciation, self-satisfaction, or “self-reductionism”, Marcus Aurelius preferred a general portrait that would take into account the many dimensions and aspects under which man appears in his life. The comprehensive and realist picture of man as God’s creature (*anēr*), as human being (*antrōpos*), as citizen (*politēs*), and as mortal creature (*tnēton zōon*) helps grasp the complexities of human beings’ existential display. Even when Marcus Aurelius navigates through the theoretical Stoic principles, he tries always to get hold of reality by exercising his practical ethics and taking into consideration the *totality* of human being.

Everything in the life of Marcus Aurelius predestined him to live a luxury and pompous life. Not only was he born from a rich family, but also he was adopted from his young age by the Emperor Antoninus. (Un)fortunately what we can come to know about his life is not from the *Meditations*, but from the correspondences he exchanged with his master in Rhetoric, Fronto and from some historians; Fronto was very aware of the prince’s fondness for philosophy, at the expenses of rhetoric¹ [Marcus Aurelius I, 17]. That’s why he kept on repeating to him the value of rhetoric and its complementarity to philosophy. Infuriated by the stubbornness of the young man to carry on with philosophy, Fronto warned him:

even if you succeed in reaching the wisdom of Cleanthes or Zeno, you would have reluctantly to take the purple pallium, and not the pallium of the philosophers made of coarse wool [in Hadot 1992, p. 31].

The tensions between being a philosopher or a politician already being felt during his childhood. It is, nevertheless, clear that before being a politician, Marcus Aurelius had always wanted to be a philosopher. He put the philosophical principles before the “political activities”. Philosophy is, therefore, the ground swell of his political ideas, or rather ideals.

1 “That I was not more proficient at rhetoric, poetry and other pursuits in which I might well have become engrossed if I had felt that I was making good progress.” [Marcus Aurelius 1997, I, 17].

THE IDEAL RULER

We should again emphasize that the *Meditations* is not a “political” treatise. Therefore, we cannot expect any coherent and clear-cut picture of some fundamental thoughts on politics, let alone a political theory. However, a close and thorough reading of the *Meditations* can help us retrieve some elements that could constitute a framework for any possible political programme of Marcus Aurelius. The *Meditations* is not in the same group as, for example, the *Prince* of Machiavelli which is highly political, and focuses on the concept of leadership, and the person of the leader. Although different in their directions, these two books present us with a choice to be made and a direction to be taken, when tackling the issue between politics and ethics. Another important aspect that both books unearth is the underlying principle that lurks behind the various descriptions of the ideal ruler: a certain conception of human nature.

The importance of listening to the voice of Marcus Aurelius about the issue of leadership is that he himself has experienced being in that station, even though he never considered his emperorship as exempt of reproach. He presents in the *Meditations* examples of people who have accomplished great things and behaved morally. He does not, therefore, pretend to possess all the virtues of the ideal leader, but tries to live up to them by building himself up day-by-day. For Marcus Aurelius to be a good leader is a job that is never finished.

This undertaking passes through two major steps: retirement into yourself (*eis eauton anaxōrein*) and the renewal or regeneration of oneself (*ananeomai seauton*) [Marcus Aurelius 1997, IV, 3]. The first step, retirement into yourself, means taking care of our own governing faculty (*hēgemonikon*), after recognizing with Epictetus that there are things that depend on us and things that do not depend on us. This guarantees us not just an inner peace, but also orderly behaviour (*eukosmia*). The second step, namely the regeneration of oneself, which is profoundly rooted in the assertion of the fallibility and finite character of the human being, is the moment in which we put into question our certainties and open them to discussion. These “exercises”, although primarily designed for any human being, find a striking relevance in the person of the leader. Reading the

Meditations, it is crucial to pick out the striking passages in which Marcus Aurelius does not speak to the human being tout court, but rather to the leader. The following passage is interesting in that its different translations put us straight in front of this dilemma:

You should always be ready to apply these two rules of action, the first, to do nothing other than what the *kingly and law-making art* ordains for the benefit of humankind, and the second, to be prepared to change your mind if someone is at hand to put you right and guide you away from some groundless opinion. But this change of view must always be based on a conviction that it serves justice or the common benefit; and this or something like it should be the sole reason for your choice; rather than the impression that it would be pleasant or popular [Marcus Aurelius 1997, IV, 12)

Let's focus on the sentence which reads in Greek: “*duo tautas etoimotētas exein aei dei: tēn men, pros to praksai monon, oper an o tēs basilikēs kai nomotetikēs logos upoballē, ep'ōfeleia antrōpōn*”. Then, let us confront three translations, the one we already cited, of Robin Hard, the other English translation by Haines, and a French translation by A.I. Trannoy. Haines translates the sentence in the following manner:

thou shouldest have these two readinesses always at hand; the one which prompts thee to do only what *thy reason in its royal and law-making capacity* shall suggest for the good of mankind [*The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius* 2003].

The French translation reads as follows:

Il faut toujours tenir prêtes ces deux règles de conduite : d'abord de n'accomplir ce qu'enseigne *la règle de l'art de régner et de légiférer* que pour le bien des hommes” [Marcus Aurelius 2005].

The crucial problem relates here to the translation of the expression “*o tēs basilikēs kai nomotetikēs logos*”. Reading the two English translations would prompt us to think that Marcus Aurelius speaks here quite generally about man. But the French translation, which, I think, adheres faithfully to the meaning of the expression by rendering the genitive (*tēs basilikēs kai nomotetikēs*) which is related to the “*o logos*” (translated here as rule or law), clearly specifies that

the theme here is rather the “rule of the art of ruling and legislating” (*o tēs basilikēs kai nomotetikēs logos*), which is then the art of politics in general. We could then rightly infer here that Marcus Aurelius speaks really to the leader, and not just to any man.

If we side with the French translation, then we would agree as well that the second segment of the citation in which Marcus Aurelius calls for “revising one’s opinion when the other’s opinion is better”, is directed also to the ruler, when his advisers are right. Marcus Aurelius, in his exercise of power, was surely aware of the dangers of the latter, in that it can make us completely blind and deaf to the external world. Loneliness, which is quite often associated with the exercise of power, can be overcome by cultivating a permanent dialogue with learned people and a readiness to accept their views. That is, self-criticism (based on humility and a profound recognition of human inherent fallibility) and acceptance of criticisms from others, are important in the exercise of power. As he was aware of the danger of power which an almost inherent corruptibility,² Marcus warns himself, and us, about the danger of “being turned into a Caesar”:

Take care that you are not turned into a Caesar, that you are not stained with the purple; for such things do come about. Keep yourself simple, then, and good, sincere, dignified, free from affectation, a friend to justice, reverent towards the gods, affectionate, and firm in the performance of your duties. Struggle to remain such a man as philosophy wished to make you. Honor the gods, protect your fellows. Life is short; and our earthly existence yields but a single harvest, a holy disposition and acts that serve the common good. Be in everything a true disciple of Antoninus: imitate his energy in acting as reason demands, his unchanging equanimity, his piety, the serenity of his expression, the sweetness of his character, his freedom from vanity, and his eagerness to get to the heart of matters. And remember how he would never dismiss a matter until he had examined it carefully and clearly understood it; and how he would put up with people who reproach him unjustly, and never responded in kind; how he never acted in haste, and refused to listen to slander; and how acute he was in appraising people’s characters and actions, and how he was never one to carp, or to be easily flustered, or over-suspicious, or pretentious [Marcus Aurelius 2005, VI, 30].

2 Think of this citation of Lord Acton: “power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely”.

THE IDEAL “REGIME”

Still on our way to “constructing” certain political agenda for Marcus Aurelius, we would stop at the passage where he pays tribute to people who have taken part in his education and from whom he has taken good examples:

From Severus: love for one’s family, for truth, for justice; that through him I came to know Thrasea, Helvidius, Cato, Dio, Brutus,³ and to conceive the idea of a balanced constitution, and of government founded on equity and freedom of speech, and of a monarchy which values above all things the freedom of the subject [Marcus Aurelius 2005, 1, 14].

The choice of these names is not fortuitous: Thrasea was the famous senator who was obliged to commit suicide in 66 under the reign of Nero, because of his opposition to the latter. Helvidius Priscus was assassinated under Vespasian. Cato, considered by Seneca as one of the rare incarnations of the ideal of Stoic wise man, was an enemy of tyranny and fought during his lifetime for the moralization of politics and institutions such as the Senate. Dio re-established in Syracuse freedom and abolished tyranny; as for Brutus, he was also an enemy of tyranny and affirmed his conviction about a just society in which will prevail public freedom would prevail⁴ [*Meditations* 8, 13]. The above-mentioned citation does not only inform us about the political models of Marcus Aurelius; it gives us, in a nutshell, a sense of what the favoured political “regime” of Marcus Aurelius would be, with three principal characteristics:

- 1) A balanced constitution, *politeias isonomou*.
- 2) A government founded on equity and freedom of speech, *kat’ isotēta kai isēgorian dioikoumenēs*

3 Thrasea, Helvidius, Cato, Dio, Brutus, are all republican heroes.

4 In other place, Marcus Aurelius criticizes some political leaders while paying tribute to philosophers: “What are Alexander, Caesar and Pompey when compared to Diogenes, Heraclitus and Socrates? For these latter viewed all things in terms of both matter and cause, and their governing faculties were self-determined. As to the others, consider how many cares they had, and of how much they were the slaves!” [Marcus Aurelius 1997, VIII, 3].

3) A monarchy that values above all things the freedom of the subject, *basileias timōsēs pantōn malista tēn eleuterian tōn arkomenōn*

What is striking is not the originality of these thoughts *per se*, for we know how, from the point of view of principle, the Greek society has held on democratic principles. What might be interesting to note here is rather the topicality of the message of Marcus Aurelius. Many people today, either by ignorance or false-consciousness, speak of freedom of speech, for example, as a great discovery of our recent times. The *isēgoria*, equal right of speech, which enables each and every citizen to express his views on the public sphere is a sign of a democratic society as well as the existence of equity and the freedom of people, even when we are in a monarchy!

What is striking here is the manner in which Marcus Aurelius points out the *compatibility* of these ideals – equity, freedom of speech, and freedom of the subject – with monarchy. Generally monarchy is in the antipodes of these ideals. Marcus Aurelius presents here an ideal of a government and the rules that should make possible its perfect functioning. No doubt the reader may ask whether as a philosopher-emperor, Marcus did also hold to these principles. Luckily enough, some historians in Antiquity have left us some examples of the manner in which Marcus Aurelius applied some of the principles he announced in his *Meditations*:

- In order to finance the war on the Danube, he asks for the public Treasury, even if he could take that money without any consent from the Senate. But the Emperor thought, nevertheless that it belonged to the Senate and the Roman people to decide about that matter.
- The historian Herodian said that Marcus Aurelius was accepting all requests, while forbidding his guards to keep people away.
- He strengthened the role of the Senate, and was present, as much as possible, in every of its séance.
- He looked after the good functioning of justice, by establishing to 230 the number of days per year in which it was possible to plead.
- As for his relation with the people, he was closer to the ordinary people, rewarding them with generosity and punishing them with indulgence [Caratini 2004, p. 59-91; Hadot 1992, p. 314-325].

These historical deeds of Marcus Aurelius confirm us in our opinion that he has tried to live up to the two dimensions which are the

theory of practice. Boosted by the Stoic philosophical principles of life, he did the best he could to translate them into reality, showing the moral connection between the words we utter and the acts we pose in our everyday life. Marcus knew, then, that a good and healthy society would have to rely not just on its own people, but also that those people have to put into existence systems and structures that would guarantee their good functioning. But in all these aspects, one should have in mind the importance of ethics or moral principles.

Marcus Aurelius does not just call for simplicity but also he avoids any populism, or search for fame. And the kind of government, which is closer to an “enlightened monarchy” would be characterized by the following aspects:

- A certain kind of separation of powers (between, say, the monarch and the Senate).
- Both parties should also be given full possibility of expression.
- No solitary way of governing.
- A democratic way of government with also a practical involvement of the people (Consultation).

The history of philosophy is full of thoughts about what kind of government or political system is the best for human beings. The ideal Republic of Plato stands in a prominent place in this debate. In the *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius refers to the Republic of Plato in these terms:

you should not hope for Plato’s ideal state, but be satisfied to make even the smallest advance, and regard such an outcome as nothing contemptible [[Marcus Aurelius 1997, IX, 29].

This passage has also occasioned many misunderstandings. Pierre Hadot warns us about how we could understand this expression, “Republic of Plato”. In fact, he asserts that the “Republic of Plato” was a proverbial expression which had a precise meaning. It did not refer properly speaking to the political programme exposed in the dialogue of the great philosopher, but, in a more general manner, a state in which all citizens, once they become philosophers, would have been perfect” [Hadot 1992, p. 322]. The “Republic of Plato” is not possible, claims Marcus Aurelius, since humanity cannot be

converted to philosophers, and we cannot impose our proper idea of state to all humanity.

FURTHER "POLITICAL" REFLECTIONS IN THE MEDITATIONS

Projecting our modern understanding of politics into the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius does no justice to true meaning of this work. Politics in Marcus Aurelius refers to a discipline of action that implies serving the human community, devoting oneself to the other, and a spirit of justice [Hadot 1992, p. 324-325].

Participation in political life implies for Marcus Aurelius living like a citizen of the world, i.e., trying as much as possible to serve both communities, the particular and the universal, "to do what nature demands" and "be satisfied to make even the smallest advance, and regard such an outcome as nothing contemptible" [Marcus Aurelius 1997, IX, 29]. That is why when asked about his identity, Marcus Aurelius served the following answer: "As Antoninus, my city and fatherland is Rome, as a human being it is the universe" [Marcus Aurelius 1997, VI, 44]. For Marcus Aurelius it comes down to the responsibility of each individual to harbour civic awareness and practice his political duties in accordance with common ethical principles.

The *Meditations* is not, indeed, empty of insights related to the constitutional framework. For, as we have shown it, a close look to the rare passages where Marcus Aurelius tackles this issue shows that he feels sympathy with a certain combination of democracy and monarchy. In short, he would aspire for what could be regarded by many as an oxymoron, i.e., a "democratic monarchy", or some might say, an "enlightened monarchy". The expression of a "balanced constitution" is not much peculiar to Marcus Aurelius, if we know that already the political environment in Greece by 500 BC which held for an egalitarian ideal in which *isonomia* has recommended an

exactly, mathematically distribution of time for those deemed relevantly equal (*isoi*), a precise equality of treatment for all citizens under the current positive laws (*nomoi*.) [Gill, Schofield 200, p. 15].

Now, however beautiful and noble this talk on *isonomia* can be, we are always dragged to the reality of a highly hierarchical Greek and Roman society in which not everybody could be considered full citizens. Whether Marcus Aurelius has been himself also prisoner of his time is almost certain if we read the *Meditations* as a whole. But, one thing we should not overlook is the positive plunge he and the other Stoics, namely Seneca and Epictetus, have taken when asserting a common origin of mankind and the universal family. There is then a kind of nuanced approach that confronted them with the social contingencies and the highly transcendental philosophical claims [Gueye 2006, p. 52-55]. Hence, we would agree wholeheartedly with Noyen when he argues that the legislation of Marcus Aurelius’ reign reflected enlightened (stoic-inspired) thinking about women, children and slaves [Gill, Schofield 200, p. 614].

The general problem we may pose here is to which extent the Stoics in general, and Marcus Aurelius in particular have been revisionist not just about the overall prevailing constitutional theory but also about some aspects of social life such as the gender issue. We do not, unfortunately possess an extensive and systematized corpus either of a political-social programme, or a complete set of materials on which we could rely to hold the Stoic views on those topics as revolutionary ones that would call for a complete breakdown. We think this could be accounted for with respect to two things: first with respect to the plurality of voices within Stoic theory, from the early, middle, down to the imperial period of the school; and second, with respect to the strong inclination of Stoics to focus on practical ethics at the expenses of theoretically constructed frameworks. In the same lines, we should lay stress on the fact that what matters for the Stoics was not much what should be done, than the way things should be done. What matters was not the place one occupies in the societal structure, but how well one performs the role God has attributed to him.⁵ Marcus will go further in calling man to live up

⁵ See the analogy of Epictetus of life as a play in the *Encheiridion*, chapter 17.

to his natural sociability and become profoundly aware of his responsibility towards not just himself, but also towards the whole humanity:

Just as with the limbs of the body in individual organisms, rational beings likewise in their separate bodies are constituted to work in conjunction. The thought of this will strike you more forcibly if you say to yourself again and again, "I am a limb (melos) of the common body formed by rational beings." If, however, by changing a single letter, you call yourself a part (meros), you have not learned to love your fellows with all your heart, nor do you yet rejoice in doing good for its own sake; for you are still doing it merely as a duty, and not yet in the conviction that you are thus doing good to yourself [Marcus Aurelius 1997, 7, 13].

CONCLUSION

The "dislocated" character Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* on which many scholars have rambled makes it difficult to follow sometimes the thread of the philosopher-emperor's thought. This has made it difficult for us to detect and construct some of his political thoughts that have always to be contextualized within the general framework of his philosophy.

One salient aspect of his "political" agenda is the emphasis on not just the necessity of self-development that is incumbent upon every rational human being, but also his call for being aware of the impact of one's acts and deeds on society at large. Every human should strive for that goal, let alone the rulers who are in charge of the destiny of a great number of people. Being conscious of that vocation certainly requires a permanent "prise de conscience" and a valuation of the acts we pose in our everyday life. Hence, the political message in the *Meditations* is a message to the individual: the cultivation of the self for the benefit of the community.

“Politics” in the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius

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