

*How to Think Like A Roman Emperor: The Stoic Philosophy of Marcus Aurelius.* By Donald Robertson. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2019. Pp. 294. \$27.99 (hardback). 978-1250196620.

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The modern Stoicism movement is booming with online community members numbering more than 100,000. These folks and others seeking to improve their lives by means of Stoic thinking are Robertson's target audience. The book combines embellished tales about the life of Marcus Aurelius with both contemporary cognitive behavior therapies and ancient Stoic ideas taken from the writings of Marcus, Epictetus (Arrian), Seneca, and other Stoic philosophers. The goal is to inspire readers to take the Roman philosopher-king as a model to live their lives by. Judged on these terms, the book succeeds. It will appeal to non-specialists who seek psychotherapeutic techniques for quelling anger, envy, anxiety, and other destructive patterns of thinking, and entertaining stories about a powerful historical figure. But in working so very hard to present Marcus as a shining paragon of virtue, Robertson indulges in hero worship. The portrait he paints of this Roman emperor is of a perfect sage, not an admirable, fallible human being.

The book contains an introduction, eight main chapters, acknowledgments, notes, a bibliography, and an index. In the first sentence Robertson reports that when he was thirteen, his father died. The last chapter of the book is a reverie about death from the cosmic perspective, constructed from free glosses of texts of the *Meditations* and presented from the dying Marcus' stream of consciousness point of view. That this book begins and ends reflecting on death is very much in keeping with the Roman Stoics' emphasis on the necessity of remembering daily the mortality of all living things, including one's dearest loved ones and oneself. The introduction is a very personal account of the depression, anger, and troubled behaviors of the author as he searched for religious and philosophical meaning and solace after losing his father. The account of the poverty of the Robertson household in Ayr, Scotland is moving and contrasts sharply with the wealth and privilege of Marcus' family, which is passed over in silence. Robertson explains how he learned from the Freemasons of his hometown the four cardinal virtues of ancient Greek philosophy. These practitioners of Freemasonry presented Greek philosophy not as a kind of bookish study, but as a spiritual way of life. At university in Aberdeen, Robertson was dissatisfied with the approach to ancient philosophy, finding it too academic and theoretical (6). He was inspired by the ancient philosophers as 'veritable *warriors* of the mind', in sharp contrast to their modern counterparts who 'had become more like *librarians* of

the mind', more interested in collating ideas than living them in practice (6). Discovery of Pierre Hadot's works and study of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and rational emotive behavior therapy led him to the Stoics and to the writings of Ryan Holiday. But it was his daughter's desire for stories that impelled him to write a book that taught Stoic principles through real stories about its ancient practitioners to help her and others (12). Robertson cites the first book of the *Meditations* as evidence that Marcus 'believed the best way to begin studying Stoic philosophy was to look at living examples of the virtues' (13). Accordingly, the first seven chapters of his book tell tales about Marcus' life and character taken from the accounts of Cassius Dio, Herodian, and most of all the *Historia Augusta*. Robertson freely adorns these accounts with imagined dialogues and speculative details to enrich his story. To these embroidered tales he adds texts from not only the *Meditations* and Marcus' correspondence with Cornelius Fronto but also Epictetus, Seneca, and other sources of Stoic ideas, interwoven with CBT psychotherapies.

In the first chapter Robertson does a good job of explaining how Stoics understand mortality as inevitable and how Marcus learned not to fear death but to befriend it, shedding tears and mourning the losses of loved ones 'but as a wise man does' (22). Reminiscent of Socrates' death scene in Plato's *Phaedo*, Robertson imagines Marcus on his death bed admonishing his friends for weeping uncontrollably in anticipation of his death instead of accepting it and grasping its significance. But puzzles emerge from Robertson's account of the series of wars Marcus waged for over a decade against Germanic and Sarmatian tribes. He defends the soundness of Marcus' decision to confer adulthood upon Commodus at age sixteen with the *toga virilis* ceremony and accelerate the process of appointing him emperor as necessary for Rome's stability and a smooth succession. Had Marcus replaced Commodus with a substitute ruler, he argues, the entire empire would have been vulnerable to renewed attacks by the northern tribes and 'another invasion could mean the end of Rome' (24). Robertson never questions the wisdom of Marcus making Commodus his heir, despite the notorious depravity, cruelty, butchery, and megalomania Commodus would unleash during his reign. He only remarks that Marcus saw his son falling in with bad company and asked his friends to ensure that Commodus' moral education continue (23). A reader curious about the starkly contrasting moral characters of the philosopher-father and the 'gladiator'-son would have appreciated being told that Commodus believed he was the reincarnated Hercules and, in the arena, slew ostriches, elephants, a giraffe, and clubbed to death footless Roman citizens bound together while pretending they were giants. To be fair, this is a book about Marcus Aurelius, not Commodus. But the broader problem is that the *Historia Augusta* is not an impartial source, yet Robertson uncritically gathers every flattering characterization of Marcus in it so as to burnish his gleaming portrait of Marcus. A reader keen to learn a less biased account of Marcus' life would have appreciated mention of the rumor that Commodus' father was not in fact Marcus, but a gladiator his mother Faustina took as a lover. How would a Stoic deal with

an adulterous spouse who birthed an illegitimate child? Robertson offers no clues. We read only that the Empress Faustina was rumored to have committed suicide because of her association with Avidius Cassius and that Marcus held her in high regard and deified her after her death (251). That Marcus was blind to, denied, or completely forgave Faustina's flaws is tarnish Robertson silently scrubs from his story.

Another puzzle raised by the stories of Marcus waging war is what Stoics make of Roman militarism. Robertson presents Marcus defending the northern frontier moved by a concern for safe borders, with a 'vision of an empire that makes the freedom of its citizens its highest goal' (26). But how does this vision of imperialism fit with Stoic cosmopolitanism? Should Marcus the Stoic not favor political freedom for *all* people, including Sarmatians? Robertson calls the Marcomanni and Germanic tribes *barbarians*, failing to see the problem this creates for Marcus' commitment to cosmopolitan brotherhood among all peoples. We read that Marcus' external aim 'is the common welfare of mankind (not just of his Roman subjects, incidentally)' (194). Yet we also read about 'the enemy' that are the 'hostile Germanic and Sarmatian tribes' (27), 'the growing threat of barbarian invasion from the North' (113), the conflict in Syria rapidly escalating into a major military crisis (125), Pannonia being 'overrun by the Marcomanni and their allies' (128), and how 'the Romans repulsed the initial barbarian incursion' (128). Marcus' commitment to Roman imperialism, which Robertson casts as preservation of the freedom of the empire's citizens, seems to necessitate using military might to vanquish outsiders. But how can militarism accommodate cosmopolitanism, much less promote it? Does the Stoic cosmopolitanism of a wise emperor require pacifism? Evidently not, according to Robertson. For him, Marcus 'seems to have found unnecessary bloodshed vicious and barbaric' (122), while at the same time he waged many wars that dragged on for years, all of which, the reader is meant to believe, involved much *necessary* bloodshed. Robertson imagines Marcus saying to himself something like 'I will quell the Marcomanni and protect Rome, *Fate permitting*' (195). But he nowhere hints at how to reconcile the militaristic imperialism of this warrior-emperor with the ideal of cosmopolitanism inspiring this Stoic warrior of the mind.

In a chapter titled 'Grasping the Nettle', Robertson observes that though chronic health problems rendered Marcus physically frail, he was also known for his exceptional resilience. He describes the technique of cognitive distancing and how Stoics work to rid themselves of the fear of pain to help them tolerate discomfort. Throughout his book Robertson excels at showing how Stoic therapies help practitioners cope effectively with challenges like chronic pain. He mentions that Galen prescribed *theriac* to Marcus after the outbreak of plague at Rome, claiming that Marcus 'seems to have taken theriac judiciously and in a mild form' (159). Yet some historians are more cautious and suggest that Marcus may have become addicted to theriac.

Another puzzle concerns the account of the civil rebellion led by Marcus' general Avidius Cassius. Robertson has Marcus remind himself that 'even those who

oppose him are his kin, not necessarily through blood but because they are his fellow citizens in the universal community, sharing the potential for wisdom and virtue' (225). Because of this cosmopolitan sentiment, 'Marcus reminds himself not to regard the rebel faction as enemies but to view them as benignly as a physician does his patients' (225). In Robertson's story, Sarmatians and Marcomanni remain unalterably *barbarian enemies*, incapable of being regarded as fellow cosmic citizens deserving the benign medical treatment patients receive. Marcus' imperial clemency and restraint extend to fellow Romans as, after the civil war ended, he only had a handful of Cassius' allies and family members involved in the plot executed, specifically, 'those who had committed additional crimes' (250). Robertson does not explain why Marcus' imperial clemency and cosmopolitan brotherhood did not extend to peoples outside the empire.

How did Marcus think about the Christians? How ought a contemporary Stoic to think about religion and religious pluralism? Robertson explains well the importance of tolerance and compassion and the ugliness of rage. He accurately relates how Stoics regard gentle kindness as a strength not a weakness, how they use kindness to cure themselves of anger, and that for them kindness meant educating others. He aptly reports the Stoics' belief that remembering that everyone is fallible makes forgiving others easier. But did Marcus practice tolerance towards Christians or did he see them as political subversives defying Roman law? Did Marcus punish Christians justly? Robertson could have taken up these questions to explore how Stoics think about religious pluralism, extremism, and zealotry. Would Robertson defend Marcus against the charge some make that he energetically persecuted Christians? Unfortunately, Christians are nowhere mentioned in his book.

These cumulative omissions work to iron flat some fascinating textures of the Stoic-emperor, casting his three-dimensional life into a less complex, and for me less interesting, two-dimensional story. Robertson thinks that scholars produce dry, bookish studies, not gripping stories. The story he tells here is gripping, to be sure. But then given his aims, why does he bother with citations, a scholar's tool of the trade? Some of the citations are incomplete (ch. 2 nn12, 13, and 16; ch. 3 nn1, 14, and 16; ch. 4 n1; ch. 8 nn 1 and 2). One is incorrect (ch. 2 n34 should cite Epictetus, *Discourses* i 1.28-32 or Fragment 21, not *Handbook* 5). Such small defects annoy only scholars, who are not the target audience for this lively, creative, and well-crafted book. But must one be a desiccated scholar to want to examine Marcus *in toto*, warts and all?

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