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MAN IN THE FACE OF PASSING AND THE TRANSITORY NATURE OF THE MOMENT IN MARCUS AURELIUS' *MEDITATIONS*

> Even as are the generations of leaves, such are those also of men.
>
> As for the leaves, the wind scattereth some upon the earth, but the forest, as it bourgeons, putteth forth others when the season of spring is come; even so of men one generation springeth up and another passeth away.
>
> (Homer , *Iliad*, VI, 147, transl. by A.T. Murray)

Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. […]
A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains for ever.
The sun rises and the sun goes down, and hastens to the place where it rises.
The wind blows to the south, and goes round to the north; round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns.
All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full;
to the place where the streams flow, there they flow again. […]
What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done;
and there is nothing new under the sun.

(Ecclesiastes 1, 2–9, RSV)

> She should have died hereafter.
> There would have been a time for such a word.
> Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,

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Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

(William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act 5, Scene 5)

1. *MEDITATIONS* – AN EXPRESSION OF PERSONAL VIEWS OR A SPECIFIC CATECHISM OF A STOIC?

Anyone who has come into contact with the text of Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, as well as the studies on them, may notice a certain dichotomy of views that has emerged particularly in recent years on the character of this work. On the one hand, commentators read them as a personal record of the views and experiences of their author, emphasising the pessimistic and sceptical attitude of Marcus Aurelius as a thinker, who tended to self-criticism, and even attributing to him depression, ulcer disease and other disorders in the mental and somatic sphere.[1] On the other hand, with the appearance of the work by P. Hadot, entitled *Philosophy as Way of Life*,[2] *Meditations*

[1] John M. RIST, *Stoic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 54–80. The author emphasizes here the influence of the Cynic philosophy, which underlines the sometimes drastic formulation of Marcus Aurelius' thought. See also Eric R. DODDS, *Pogaństwo i chrześcijaństwo w epoce niepokoju*, transl. by Jacek Partyka (Kraków: Homini, 2004), 20: "Just as the Earth it is a small point in an infinite time, a sharp knife between two eternities—στιγμὴ τοῦ αἰῶνος. Man's actions are 'smoke and nothingness'; his rewards are 'a bird flying by, which disappeared before you managed to catch it.' The battle of the armed is like 'dogs fighting over a bone'; the pump of Marcus' triumphant parade after the victory over the Sarmatians is the satisfaction of the spider who caught a fly. For Marcus Aurelius, this is not just rhetoric: this is his view of the human condition, and he utters it deadly seriously". And a bit further on: "Even Marcus Aurelius, whose days passed on the management of the empire, could sometimes express the feeling of alienation resulting from the lack of belonging [...]. With all the strength of his Stoic religion, he fought against the exclusive domination of such thoughts, reminding himself that his existence is a part and a fragment of the Great Unity" (p. 29 f.). This view is also shared by Giovanni Reale (*Historia filozofii starożytnej*, vol. 4: *Szkoły epoki cersarstwa*, transl. by Edward I. Zieliński (Lublin: Redakcja Wydawnictw KUL, 1999), 150–154).

[2] Pierre HADOT, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1981). Polish edition*: Filozofia jako ćwiczeniaczenie duchowe*, transl. by Piotr Domański (Warszawa, Aletheia 1992).

began to be treated as a specific set of philosophical recommendations, which the philosopher emperor was believed to repeat to himself in order to form his soul, in order to constantly revive the dogmas of Stoicism, so that they could provide guidelines of conduct in everyday life. Marcus Aurelius followed the advice of Epictetus who recommended such written meditations.[3] P. Hadot claims strongly:

> Therefore, meditations are an extremely valuable document; they are an example of a genre of literature which must have been very widespread in antiquity, but also, by its very nature, predestined to quickly disappear: an example of exercises-meditations recorded in writing. [...] The pessimistic formulations by Marcus Aurelius are not an expression of the personal views of the disappointed emperor, but spiritual exercises carried out according to the rigorously observed methods.[4]

Therefore, if we agree with the thesis presented above, all the fragments of his writings (of which there are many) concerning the passing, the briefness of the human life, the banality of all human actions and the path to inevitable death and oblivion would not be an expression of personal reflections or a record of authentic, pessimistic frame of mind, but only a kind of conscious intellectual exercise, designed to induce a proper distance to the world, not to give too much value to things that do not have it, and thus to prepare oneself to come to terms with the inevitable fate.[5] But did Marcus Aurelius achieve that distance? Did this intellectual exercise achieve its goal? To what extent did the Stoic emperor manage to identify himself with the views presented in his writings? Was he a pessimist or an optimist? Can we even ask such questions? Hadot himself states that *Meditations* will not provide us with the answers to any of them: "They acquaint us with the spiritual exercises of the Stoic school, but they say almost nothing about the 'case of Marcus Aurelius'."[6]

However, it seems that this statement is not entirely correct. Even assuming that the philosopher emperor does some kind of "homework" recommended by the Stoic school, on the basis of the selected quotations, arguments and examples we can formulate some conclusions as to the views accepted and professed by Marcus Aurelius. Of course, this should be done

[3] EPIKTET, *Diatryby*, III, 24, 103; III, 5, 11.

[4] Pierre HADOT, "Fizyka jako ćwiczenie duchowe, czyli pesymizm i optymizm u Marka Aureliusza," in IDEM, *Philozofia jako ćwiczenia duchowe*, 148–149.

[5] Ibid., p. 150 ff.

[6] Ibid., p. 163.

with caution, but it would be unjustified to completely resign from presenting here his personal position.

2. MARCUS AURELIUS AND STOIC PHYSICS

It is commonly believed that as a representative of the final stage of Stoicism, Marcus Aurelius focuses primarily on ethical issues and is not interested in physics or the problems of logic. Indeed, in view of the traditional division of philosophy into physics, logic and ethics used by the Stoic school,[7] the philosophy of Marcus Aurelius is a moral philosophy, relating to the practical sphere of life. This approach is characteristic not only of Marcus Aurelius' philosophy, but of the schools of the Hellenistic period in general (Epicureanism, Stoicism and Scepticism).[8] The philosopher emperor himself rejects and even condemns the study of cosmos, physics and dialectics, considering them to be too abstract and not bringing any concrete benefits. He even thanks the gods that he did not devote time to these areas of philosophy (I, 17):

> To the gods I am indebted for […] when I had an inclination to philosophy, I did not fall into the hands of any sophist, and that I did not waste my time on writers

[7] Adam KROKIEWICZ, *Zarys filozofii greckiej* (Warszawa: Aletheia, 2000), 462: "The Stoics divided philosophy into three parts, i.e. logic, physics and ethics, whereby they compared logic to the eggshell, while physics and ethics usually to egg white and yolk respectively. The Stoic logic consisted of rhetoric and dialectics, which included grammar, silogistics and the theory of cognition (science of the truth)."

[8] Frederick COPLESTON, *Historia Filozofii*, vol. 1: *Grecja i Rzym*, transl. by Henryk Bednarek (Warszawa: PAX, 1998), 432; Leon JOACHIMOWICZ, "Wstęp," in SENEKA, *Dialogi* (Warszawa: PAX, 1989), 97: "The period of great speculative systems has passed away, the whole post-Aristotelian philosophy in its three main variations—Stoicism, Epicureanism and Scepticism—ceased to be a school and vocational science but, above all, one universal all-science, covering all fields of knowledge. The scope of philosophical research is narrowed down to three main areas—logic, physics and ethics, with the latter taking the leading and privileged place. In a way, philosophy takes on the task and functions of religion, which is shaken in its foundations by sophists, it defines the goals and directives of action, becoming *magistra vitae*—the teacher of life, as it is referred to by Cicero—*Tusc. disp*. V 2, 5, while a philosopher becomes a teacher of the mankind—*humani generis paedagogus*, *Epist*. 89, 13. Its main line of development is marked by the escape from pure and detached speculation and, on the other hand, by a turn to religion, ethics and the practical issues of life wisdom. In the centre of attention there is a man and his relation to gods and people, to the state and the world."

> of histories, or in the resolution of syllogisms, or occupy myself about the investigation of appearances in the heavens.[9]

The abandoning of this type of research did not prevent Marcus from honing other skills such as the ability to live a good life (VII, 67):

> And because thou hast despaired of becoming a dialectician and skilled in the knowledge of nature, do not for this reason renounce the hope of being both free and modest and social and obedient to God [ἐλεύθερος καὶ αἰδήμων καὶ κοινωνικὸς καὶ εὐπειθὴς θεῷ].

Although, as G. Reale claims, among the representatives of the new Stoic school, it is "Marcus Aurelius who narrows the philosophy down to moral problems and gives it, just like Seneca and Epictetus, a strong religious tone",[10] it is impossible not to notice that the method of practising philosophy proposed by the philosopher emperor, similarly to his predecessors, is based on the principles of Stoic physics, explaining not only the structure of the universe itself, but above all the place and role of all that surrounds the human in the universe, and thus immediately puts the human in his proper place. As the afore-cited P. Hadot rightly notices:

> The physical discourse was to justify a life choice and explain the way of life in the world resulting from that choice. The Stoics, like the Epicureans, practice physics not for its own sake, but for an ethical purpose. [....] It can be said at once that Stoic physics is necessary for ethics as it teaches people that there are things outside their authority, things that dependent on external causes, connected in a necessary and reasonable way.[11]

The Stoics were the followers of materialistic pantheism. They considered the universe to be too material, permeated by the divine *pneuma* or the divine *logos*, which also remained a corporeal entity, shaping the matter according to specific rules and giving it a purposeful, organized form[12]. According to Diogenes Laertius, this is how Chrysippus and Posidonius put it:

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[9] English quotes of fragments of *Meditations* are given after G. Long's translation (1862).

[10] Giovanni REALE, *Historia filozofii starożytnej*, vol. 4, 150.

[11] Pierre HADOT, *Czym jest filozofia starożytna?*, 171 ff. Hadot quotes SVF, III, 68: "Physics is learned only in order to be able to make distinctions between what is good and what is bad."

[12] DIOGENES LAERTIUS, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* [henceforth DL], transl. by Robert D. Hicks, VII, 134: "They [the Stoics] hold that there are two principles [ἀρχαί] in the universe, the active principle and the passive [τὸ ποιοῦν καὶ τὸ πάσχον]. The passive principle, then, is a substance without quality [ὕλη], i.e. matter, whereas the active is the reason inherent in this substance [λόγος], that is God. For he is everlasting and is the artificer of each several thing

> The world is ordered by reason [νοῦς] and providence [πρόνοια], […] inasmuch as reason pervades every part of it, just as does the soul in us. Only there is a difference of degree; in some parts there is more of it, in others less. For through some parts it passes as a "hold" or containing force [ἕξις], as is the case with our bones and sinews; while through others it passes as intelligence, as in the ruling part of the soul [ἡγεμονικόν]. Thus, then, the whole world is a living being, endowed with soul and reason [ζῷον ἔμψυχον καὶ λογικόν].[13]

> The world has no empty space within it, but forms one united whole. This is a necessary result of the sympathy and tension [σύμπνοια καὶ συντονία] which binds together things in heaven and earth.[14]

Such a concept of the universe (which, in a specific philosophical context, can be considered optimistic) is adopted by Marcus Aurelius. The unity of everything that exists is obvious for him. In his *Meditations*, he very often presents the world that surrounds us as one living organism: "All things are implicated with one another, and the bond is holy; and there is hardly anything unconnected with any other thing."—Πάντα ἀλλήλοις ἐπιπλέκεται καὶ ἡ σύνδεσις ἱερὰ καί τι οὐδὲν ἀλλότριον ἄλλο ἄλλῳ (VII, 9, 1)[15]. This thought is expressed even more forcibly in another statement: "Constantly regard the universe as one living being, having one substance and one soul."—Ὡς ἓν ζῷον τὸν κόσμον μίαν οὐσίαν καὶ μίαν ψυχὴν ἐπέχον συνεχῶς ἐπινοεῖν (IV, 40).

Alongside the thesis on the unity of the cosmos, the thesis on the cyclical changeability of the universe adopted from Heraclitus, inevitably leads Marcus Aurelius to the constant reminiscence about transience, fleetingness

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throughout the whole extent of matter." See also Adam KROKIEWICZ, *Zarys filozofii greckiej*, 463: "There is neither matter without God, nor God without matter. God is inherent in matter. There is only the body, i.e. the connection between God and matter, and this presence of God makes it possible for every body to change its size, shape and general appearance. Therefore, the Stoics are simultaneously pantheists, monists and materialists."

[13] DL VII, 138. Emphasis M.S.

[14] DL, VII, 140. Giovanni REALE (*Historia filozofii starożytnej*, vol. 4, 366) summarizes the coexistence of these two realities (heavenly and earthly) in the following way: "Thus, the passive and active principle, matter and God *are not two entities separated from each other*; they can be logically and conceptually distinguished, but ontologically they cannot be separated from each other; therefore they are the only single reality." Emphasis (italics) by the original author.

[15] See also *Meditations*, VI, 38: "Frequently consider the connexion of all things in the universe and their relation to one another."—Πολλάκις ἐνθυμοῦ τὴν ἐπισύνδεσιν πάντων τῶν ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ καὶ σχέσιν πρὸς ἄλληλα; VI, 10 and IX, 9; Francis H. SANDBACH, *The Stoics* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1975), 175–176.

and insignificance of everything—both the life of every single human being and entire generations (IX, 28):

> The periodic movements of the universe are the same, up and down from age to age. And either the universal intelligence puts itself in motion for every separate effect, and if this is so, be thou content with that which is the result of its activity; or it puts itself in motion once, and everything else comes by way of sequence in a manner; […] Soon will the earth cover us all: then the earth, too, will change, and the things also which result from change will continue to change for ever, and these again for ever. For if a man reflects on the changes and transformations which follow one another like wave after wave and their rapidity, he will despise everything which is perishable.[16]

Similarly to Heraclitus, Marcus Aurelius does not believe that this constantly changing universe can plunge into chaos. All this is held together by the ordering principle—*logos*.[17] Such an approach to passing is not marked by pessimism or a sense of hopelessness and despair, but rather by a desire to keep the distance and indifference towards the mortal and impermanent things. "This river, which engulfs all things, *does not bring them to eternal nothingness*, just as it does *not bring them forth from nothingness*, but it *has its source in the eternal being, and returns to the eternal being*."[18]

3. MARCUS AURELIUS AND HIS ATTITUDE TO THE PASSING OF TIME

To define the concept of time, Marcus Aurelius uses two basic terms. The first is αἰών—infinite, cosmic, divine time, while the second is human time—χρόνος.

[16] See also *Meditations*, IX, 29: "The universal cause is like a winter torrent: it carries everything along with it." Reale (*Historia filozofii starożytnej*, vol. 4, 150) believes that Marcus Aurelius adopted Heraclitus' theses through the sceptic Aenesidemus and that to him they disturb the cheerful image of the stoic cosmos. See also *Meditations*, V, 23 and IX, 35: "Loss is nothing else than change."

[17] Krzysztof NARECKI, *Logos we wczesnej myśli greckiej* (Lublin: Redakcja Wydawnictw KUL, 1999), 58; Gerald J. WHITROW, *Czas w dziejach*, transl. by Bolesław Orłowski (Warszawa: Prószyński i S-ka, 2004), 68. The term "cosmos" in reference to the universe was first used by Anaximander. The term was previously used to describe social and political order. See Werner JAEGER, *Teologia wczesnych filozofów greckich* (Kraków: Homini, 2007), 35 and 116.

[18] *Historia filozofii starożytnej*, vol. 4, 154. See *Meditations*, IV, 45; V, 8; VI, 38; VII, 9.

However, Marcus Aurelius' writings do not form a coherent philosophical treatise, which is why we encounter in them thoughts that seem to be contradictory. This is also the case when we want to take a closer look at his views on the subject of passing. The Stoic, cheerful vision of the universe guided by reason is obscured by other more gloomy and pessimistic images. Consider some of the most characteristic ones:

> Of human life the time [χρόνος τοῦ ἀνθρωπίνου βίου] is a point, and the substance is in a flux, and the perception dull, and the composition of the whole body subject to putrefaction, and the soul a whirl, and fortune hard to divine, and fame a thing devoid of judgement. And, to say all in a word, everything which belongs to the body is a stream, and what belongs to the soul is a dream and vapour, and life is a warfare [πόλεμος] and a stranger's sojourn [ξένου ἐπιδημία],[19] and after-fame is oblivion [λήθη]. (II, 17)
>
> How quickly all things disappear, in the universe the bodies themselves, but in time the remembrance of them.—Πῶς πάντα ταχέως ἐναφανίζεται, τῷ μὲν κόσμῳ αὐτὰ τὰ σώματα, τῷ δὲ αἰῶνι αἱ μνῆμαι αὐτῶν. (II, 12)
>
> Everything is only for a day, both that which remembers and that which is remembered.—Πᾶν ἐφήμερον, καὶ τὸ μνημονεῦον καὶ τὸ μνημονευόμενον. (IV, 35)
>
> Time [ὁ αἰών] is like a river made up of the events which happen [ποταμός τις τῶν ἐκ τῶν γιγνομένων], and a violent stream [ῥεῦμα βίαιον]; for as soon as a thing has been seen, it is carried away, and another comes in its place, and this will be carried away too. (IV, 43)
>
> Asia, Europe are corners of the universe: all the sea a drop in the universe; Athos a little clod of the universe: all the present time is a point in eternity [Πᾶν τὸ ἐνεστῶς τοῦ χρόνου στιγμὴ τοῦ αἰῶνος]. All things are little, changeable, perishable. (VI, 36)
>
> Consider that before long thou wilt be nobody and nowhere, nor will any of the things exist which thou now seest, nor any of those who are now living. For all things are formed by nature to change and be turned and to perish in order that other things in continuous succession may exist.—Ὅτι μετ οὐ πολὺ οὐδεὶς οὐδαμοῦ ἔσῃ, οὐδὲ τούτων τι, ἃ νῦν βλέπεις, οὐδὲ τούτων τις τῶν νῦν βιούντων. ἅπαντα γὰρ μεταβάλλειν καὶ τρέπεσθαι καὶ φθείρεσθαι πέφυκεν, ἵνα ἕτερα ἐφεξῆς γίνηται. (XII, 21)

Marcus Aurelius does not offer any consolation in the face of such a course of things, except the realization that all these processes occur in accordance with rational nature and that the only thing a person can do is to accept the effects of change and passing away. He also draws attention to the

[19] Ξένου ἐπιδημία is rather "a visit of a wanderer," a temporary stay of a foreigner.

monotony of the observed phenomena, he seems to be a bit tired of it. He writes:

> He who has seen present things has seen all, both everything which has taken place from all eternity and everything which will be for time without end; for all things are of one kin and of one form.—Ὁ τὰ νῦν ἰδὼν πάντα ἑώρακεν ὅσα τε ἐξ αἰδίου ἐγένετο καὶ ὅσα εἰς ἄπειρον ἔσται. (VI, 37)

> All things are the same, familiar in experience, and ephemeral in time, and worthless in the matter. Everything now is just as it was in the time of those whom we have buried. (IX, 14)

His fatigue and discouragement is also present in other passages; observing people and their actions every day is similar to watching the same performance in the theatre all the time—only the actors change, but the content of the play remains the same (VI, 46). Such a formulation as: "There is nothing new: all things are both familiar and short-lived."—οὐδὲν καινόν, πάντα καὶ συνήθη καὶ ὀλιγοχρόνια (VII, 1) reminds us of the quotation from Ecclesiastes cited in the introduction to this article. Therefore, Marcus repeatedly speaks of the fleetingness and insignificance of all fame after—death, condemning at the same time those who strive for it, and showing the futility of such efforts.

> He who has a vehement desire for posthumous fame does not consider that every one of those who remember him will himself also die very soon; then again also they who have succeeded them, until the whole remembrance shall have been extinguished as it is transmitted through men who foolishly admire and perish.—Ὁ περὶ τὴν ὑστεροφημίαν ἐπτοημένος οὐ φαντάζεται, ὅτι ἕκαστος τῶν μεμνημέων αὐτοῦ τάχιστα καὶ αὐτὸς ἀποθανεῖται, εἶτα πάλιν ὁ ἐκεῖνον διαδεξάμενος, μέχρι καὶ πᾶσα ἡ μνήμη ἀποσβῇ δι' ἁπτομένων καὶ σβεννυμένων προιοῦσα. (IV, 19)

He often mentions famous philosophers and rulers who, despite their undeniable achievements, had to succumb to the merciless course of time and passed away in the same way as the countless crowds of ordinary people (III, 13). He renounces any illusions about the memory of future generations. He assumes in advance that his actions and his character will also share the fate of other, even eminent individuals.

At this point one could risk the question whether the repeated evocation of such images is only an "intellectual exercise," which is supposed to make the Stoic philosopher resistant to the temptation of dealing with matters unworthy of a rational person, or whether Marcus Aurelius expresses his personal doubts and fears, as well as the feeling of hopelessness of his

actions and hardships experienced every day. Perhaps both answers are partly true and the repetition of the principles of Stoic science is aimed precisely at removing unnecessary fears and developing a proper judgement of external situations that are difficult even for a philosopher.[20] Apparently, these doubts must have been quite real for Marcus, because otherwise he would not have returned so often to these motifs.

His reflections on the passing of time are not limited only to emphasizing the impermanence of all human affairs and the vanity of the world. A lot of space is devoted to capturing and using the present moment [τὸ παρόν] because this is the only moment that fully belongs to us. The past and the future remain beyond our reach, we have no influence on them. All that remains to us is the fleeting present.

> Throwing away then all things, hold to these only which are few; and besides bear in mind that every man lives only this present time, which is an indivisible point, and that all the rest of his life is either past or it is uncertain. Short then is the time which every man lives [...].—Πάντα οὖν ῥίψας ταῦτα μόνα τὰ ὀλίγα σύνεχε καὶ ἔτι συμμνημόνευε, ὅτι μόνον ζῇ ἕκαστος τὸ παρὸν τοῦτο τὸ ἀκαριαῖον· τὰ δ' ἄλλα ἢ βεβίωται ἢ ἐν ἀδήλῳ. μικρὸν μὲν οὖν ὃ ζῇ ἕκαστος [...]. (III, 10; emphasis M. S.)

In another place he writes even more clearly: Εἷς γὰρ ὁ βίος ἑκάστῳ—"Every man's life is sufficient" (II, 6). When in Book I Marcus Aurelius enumerates what he owes to whom, he remembers his adoptive father, Antoninus Pius, and among the many things he learned from him he mentions the ability "to look into the future wisely and consider without exaggeration even the smallest circumstances" as well as "the modest and, at the same time, willing use of the gifts of the fate which contribute to making life more pleasant—but simply to use what there is [literally: touching the reality in an unsophisticated, unpretentious manner—παρόντων ἀνεπιτηδεύτως ἅπτεσθαι] and the lack of desiring what there has not been [literally: not feeling the need for what is not there—ἀπόντων μὴ δεῖσθαι]" (I, 16). And one more fragment: "In a word, thy life is short [βραχὺς ὁ βίος]. Thou must turn to profit the present by the aid of reason and justice [κερδαντέον τὸ παρὸν σὺν εὐλογιστίᾳ καὶ δίκῃ]" (IV, 26).

Marcus Aurelius emphasizes very strongly not only the fact that the present is fleeting, it is only a point between what has passed and what is still awaiting us (II, 14), but also the fact that, despite this fleeting nature,

[20] Pierre HADOT, *Czym jest filozofia starożytna?*, 228.

one should use it properly: "Thou must now at last perceive of what universe thou art a part, and of what administrator of the universe thy existence is an efflux, and that a limit of time is fixed for thee [ὅρος ἐστί σοί περιγεγραμμένος τοῦ χρόνου], which if thou dost not use for clearing away the clouds from thy mind [εἰς τὸ ἀπαιθριάσαι], it will go and thou wilt go, and it will never return" (II, 4). Emphasizing this transience of the moment, Marcus does not present a pessimistic, passive attitude, he does not succumb to resignation and sadness. He constantly and even insistently orders:

> Every moment think steadily as a Roman and a man to do w h a t t h o u h a s t i n h a n d with perfect and simple dignity, and feeling of affection, and freedom, and justice; and to give thyself relief from all other thoughts [= fantasies, φαντασίαι]. And thou wilt give thyself relief, if thou doest e v e r y a c t of t h y l i f e as if it were t h e l a s t, laying aside all carelessness and passionate aversion from the commands of reason, and all hypocrisy, and self-love, and discontent with the portion which has been given to thee.—Πάσης ὥρας φρόντιζε στιβαρῶς, ὡς Ῥωμαῖος καὶ ἄρρην, τὸ ἐν χερσὶ μετὰ τῆς ἀκριβοῦς καὶ ἁπλάστου σεμνότητος καὶ φιλοστοργίας καὶ ἐλευθερίας καὶ δικαιότητος πράσσειν· καὶ σχολὴν σαυτῷ ἀπὸ πασῶν τῶν ἄλλων φαντασιῶν πορίζειν. Ποριεῖς δὲ ἂν ὡς ἐσχάτην τοῦ βίου ἑκάστην πρᾶξιν ἐνεργῇς ἀπηλλαγμένην πάσης εἰκαιότητος καὶ ἐμπαθοῦς ἀποστροφῆς ἀπὸ τοῦ αἰροῦντος λόγου καὶ ὑποκρίσεως καὶ φιλαυτίας καὶ δυσαρεστήσεως πρὸς τὰ συμμεμοιραμένα. (II, 5)

And in another place:

> The perfection of moral character consists in this, in passing every day as the last, and in being neither violently excited nor torpid nor playing the hypocrite.[21]—Τοῦτο ἔχει ἡ τελειότης τοῦ ἤθους· τὸ πᾶσαν ἡμέραν ὡς τελευταίαν διεξάγειν καὶ μήτε σφύζειν μήτε ναρκᾶν μήτε ὑποκρίνεσθαι. (VII, 69)

This statement very aptly defines the attitude that a person should adopt towards passing, and at the same time it sets a perspective for each human act. This perspective is death. Marcus Aurelius is looking for a right relation to it. On the one hand, he warns against being seized by fear when faced by it and undertaking nervous actions, and on the other hand, against numbness and renouncing all actions, against the thoughtless resignation from the possibility of doing good and just deeds. The thought of the inevitable death should not have a paralysing effect, but should rather encourage taking control of not only every day of life, but also of every act and every thought.

[21] Literally: "neither in anxiety/shaking, nor in numbness, nor pretending to play any role."

It is the perspective of death that defines Marcus Aurelius' attitude towards the present. He uses a short phrase: περίγραψον τὸ ἐνεστὼς τοῦ χρόνου (VII, 29), which can be understood and translated in different ways. In Polish translation Reiter proposed: "Be the master of the present", which may sound solemnly but seems rather vague. Long translated it as: "Confine thyself to the present." Hadot, on the other hand, proposes a different solution: "Determine the boundaries of the present" and he explains its meaning referring to the Stoic theory of the divisibility of time:

> The Stoics claimed though that time is infinitely divisible, and therefore there is no present sensu stricto, they rather assumed "extensiveness" (πλάτος) of the present time as experienced by the human consciousness. It is the human consciousness that can "determine the boundaries of the present," the phrase that contains a double sense—on the one hand, to separate what depends on us (the present) from what does not depend on us (the past and the future), and, on the other hand, to reduce something that can worry us to a fleeting moment (but still having an "extension," even if only minimal). Taken together, to share the difficulties instead of being overwhelmed by the anxiety caused by the general idea of all the difficulties of life. Every moment escapes us when we try to capture it—the present is reduced to a minimum when one tries to delineate its boundaries (VIII, 36)[22] [...] This means—try to feel how infinitely short a moment is, in which the future becomes the past.[23]

At first glance, it may seem that the solution proposed by P. Hadot completely exhausts this issue and offers a full and meaningful explanation of "determining the boundaries of the present," in particular since the statements in which Marcus Aurelius puts emphasis on fleetingness and rapid passing appear on the pages of *Meditations* very often (III, 10). But is Marcus Aurelius' goal only to equate the things that may worry us with a fleeting moment? The fleeting nature of the present is not what he fears. He rather fears that the present will pass away and will not be used in an appropriate and decent way. The semantic structure of the verb περιγράφω allows for a broader interpretation than that proposed by Hadot. In addition to the meanings: "define," "determinate," "limit," Liddell–Scott's dictionary

[22] The invoked fragment of *Meditations* (VIII, 36) reads: "In the next place remember that neither the future nor the past pains thee, but only the present. But this is reduced to a very little, if thou only circumscribest it, and chidest thy mind, if it is unable to hold out against even this.— οὔτε τὸ μέλλον οὔτε τὸ παρῳχηκὸς βαρεῖ σε ἀλλὰ ἀεὶ τὸ παρόν. τοῦτο δὲ κατασμικρύνεται, ἐὰν αὐτὸ μόνον περιορίσῃς καὶ ἀπελέγχῃς τὴν διάνοιαν, εἰ πρὸς τουτο ψιλὸν ἀντέχειν μὴ δύναται. Emphasis M.S.

[23] Pierre HADOT, *Fizyka jako ćwiczenie*, 152. See also: IDEM, *Czym jest filozofia?*, 245-246.

also gives "bring to an end."[24] One could therefore suggest even the meaning: "fill in fully," "complete" the present moment.

According to Marcus Aurelius, "determining the boundaries" or rather "filling in to the end" of the present serves only to remove fear and achieve the perfection of the spirit, which manifests itself in indifference to passing, but above all, this should serve another purpose—to realize how little time was given to people and that in this situation one must not postpone life according to the orders of reason, that is—in other words—obeying the commands of gods, which boils down to a just and reasonable conduct, respecting the common good. We can no longer do anything about the past, we are not able to change anything, while the future is uncertain and counting on it can be deceptive.

At this point it is worth going a few centuries back and reaching to one of the few surviving fragments of the sophist Antiphon (480-411 BC). It bears a striking similarity to Marcus Aurelius' writing:

> There are people who do not live the present life, but are eagerly preparing for some other life and on that they spend the time that is left to them.—εἰσί τινες οἳ τὸν παρόντα μὲν βίον οὐ ζῶσιν, ἀλλὰ παρασκευάζονται πολλῇ σπουδῇ ὡς ἕτερόν τινα βίον βιώσομενοι, οὐ τὸν παρόντα· καὶ ἐν τούτῳ παραλειπόμενος ὁ χρόνος οἴχεται.[25]

That would be those who, according to the words of Marcus Aurelius, were unable to determine the boundary of the present, shifted it somewhere far into the future, thus losing the only thing that depends entirely on them, and relying on what is uncertain and completely independent of them.

It is worth mentioning here the figure of Antiphon, not only because of the similarity of some of his remarks on time to the words of Marcus Aurelius, but also because in the writings of this sophist, for the first time in Greek thought, there appears the definition of time: "According to it, time

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[24] Henry G. LIDDELL, Robert SCOTT, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), s.v. περιγράφω; *The Greek-Polish word*, ed. Zofia Abramowiczówna, vol. 1–4 (Warszawa: PWN, 1958-1965), s.v. περιγράφω.

[25] DIELS–KRANZ, B 53, Antiphon. Polish translation by Janina Gajda. See also B 50: τὸ ζῆν ἔοικε φρουρᾷ ἐφημέρῳ τό τε μῆκος τοῦ βίου ἡμέρᾳ μίᾳ, ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν, ᾗ ἀναβλέψαντες πρὸς τὸ φῶς παρεγγυῶμεν τοῖς ἐπιγιγνομένοις ἑτεροις.—"Life is similar to one-day guard duty, and its length to one day in which, after seeing the light, we pass on the password to others, born after us"; B 52: "Life cannot be repeated like a movement in the game of dice."

does not exist objectively, but is only an intellectual concept or a method of measuring"[26]—νόημα ἢ μέτρον τὸν χρόνον, οὐχ' ὑπόστασιν.[27]

As it has already been mentioned, according to Marcus Aurelius, the "determining of the boundaries of the present" always takes place from the perspective of death:

> Do not act as if thou wert going to live ten thousand years. Death hangs over thee. While thou livest, while it is in thy power, be good.—Μὴ ὡς μύρια ἔτη μέλλων ζῆν. τὸ χρέων ἐπήρτηται· ἕως ζῇς, ἕως ἔξεστιν, ἀγαθὸς γενοῦ. (IV, 17)

Marcus Aurelius interprets death as yet another phenomenon within the Stoic world, as a transformation, i.e. a necessary phenomenon, consistent with nature [ἔργον φύσεως] and therefore also good (II, 12).

> Observe constantly that all things take place by change, and accustom thyself to consider that the nature of the Universe loves nothing so much as to change the things which are and to make new things like them. For everything that exists is in a manner the seed of that which will be.—Θεώρει διηνεκῶς πάντα κατὰ μεταβολὴν γινόμενα καὶ ἐθίζου ἐννοεῖν, ὅτι οὐδὲν οὕτως φιλεῖ ἡ τῶν ὅλων φύσις ὡς τὸ τὰ ὄντα μεταβάλλειν καὶ ποιεῖν νέα ὅμοια. σπέρμα γὰρ τρόπον τινὰ πᾶν τὸ ὂν τοῦ ἐξ αὐτοῦ ἐσομένου. (IV, 36)

Thus death is not a complete annihilation, but is like going into a different phase in the eternal cycle of world transformations.

Speaking of the inevitable end that awaits everyone, Marcus Aurelius uses very beautiful, poetic comparisons. For him, life is a sea journey, death is only landing in the harbour, reaching the destination of the journey (III, 3). In another place he compares people to the grains of incense, which are burned on the altar, one sooner, the other later (IV, 15). The following fragment is also very significant:

> Pass then through this little space of time conformably to nature, and end thy journey in content, just as an olive falls off when it is ripe, blessing nature who produced it, and thanking the tree on which it grew.—τὸ ἀκαριαῖον οὖν τοῦτο τοῦ χρόνου κατὰ φύσιν διελθεῖν καὶ ἴλεων καταλῦσαι, ὡς ἂν εἰ ἐλαία πέπειρος

[26] Gerald WHITROW, *Czas w dziejach*, 84; William K.C. GUTHRIE, *The Sophists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 292: "As yet unnoticed are his interesting observations about time (fr. 9), that is has no substantive existance but is a mental concept or means of measurement." Guthrie believes that this is the oldest Greek concept of time, even older than the one attributed to Archytas.

[27] DIELS–KRANZ, B 9, Antiphon.

> γενομένη ἔπιπτεν, εὐφημοῦσα τὴν ἐνεγκοῦσαν καὶ χάριν εἰδυῖα τῷ φύσαντι δένδρῳ. (IV, 48)

One could ask here whether such frequent mentions of passing, short-livedness and death are not a proof that the philosopher emperor, contrary to the obvious contradictions and repetition of the Stoic principles, was afraid of death and by constantly recalling it, he simply wanted to cure himself of this fear. Undoubtedly, many of his notes were written for this purpose, in accordance with the principles of the spiritual exercises, but it is not the fear of death that is the main reason for their creation. For Marcus Aurelius, death was certainly a phenomenon with which, like the vast majority of people of that time, he could have become familiar with, even without knowing the principles of the Stoic philosophy. Wars, illnesses, high mortality among children made people accustomed to death. For them it was not something unanticipated (which does not mean we can attribute to them insensitivity, but their perspective was simply different than ours—perhaps we should say that they valued life more, after all, it was so elusive). Marcus himself writes with deep sadness about the death of his children and does not seem particularly comforted by the fact that death is a phenomenon "as familiar and well known as the rose in spring and the fruit in summer [οὕτω σύνηθες καὶ γνώριμον ὡς τὸ ῥόδον ἐν τῷ ἔαρι καὶ ὀπώρα ἐν τῷ θέρει]" (IV, 44).

Marcus Aurelius is afraid not of death, but rather of the fact that he will not manage to be good, that he will misuse his time. He does not yearn for a particularly long life also because life often ends in old age, which deprives people of their strength, sharpness of mind and ability to work on themselves, to form themselves according to the orders of reason:

> We ought to consider not only that our life is daily wasting away and a smaller part of it is left, but another thing also must be taken into the account, that if a man should live longer, it is quite uncertain whether the understanding will still continue sufficient for the comprehension of things, and retain the power of contemplation which strives to acquire the knowledge of the divine and the human. For if he shall begin to fall into dotage, perspiration and nutrition and imagination and appetite, and whatever else there is of the kind, will not fail; but the power of making use of ourselves, and filling up the measure of our duty, and clearly separating all appearances […]. We must make haste then, not only because we are daily nearer to death, but also because the conception of things and the understanding of them cease first.—Οὐχὶ τοῦτο μόνον δεῖ λογίζεσθαι, ὅτι καθ' ἑκάστην ἡμέραν ἀπαναλίσκεται ὁ βίος καὶ μέρος ἔλαττον αὐτοῦ καταλείπεται, ἀλλὰ κἀκεῖνο λογιστέον, ὅτι, εἰ ἐπὶ πλέον βιώη τις, ἐκεῖνό γε ἄδηλον, εἰ ἐξαρκέσει ὁμοία αὖθις ἡ διάνοια πρὸς τὴν σύνεσιν τῶν πραγμάτων καὶ τῆς θεωρίας τῆς

> συντεινούσης εἰς τὴν ἐμπειρίαν τῶν τε θείων καὶ τῶν ἀνθρωπείων. ἐὰν γὰρ παραληρεῖν ἄρξηται, τὸ μὲν διαπνεῖσθαι καὶ τρέφεσθαι καὶ φαντάζεσθαι καὶ ὁρμᾶν καὶ ὅσα ἄλλα τοιαῦτα, οὐκ ἐνδεήσει· […] χρὴ οὖν ἐπείγεσθαι οὐ μόνον τῷ ἐγγυτέρω τοῦ θανάτου ἑκάστοτε γίνεσθαι, ἀλλὰ καὶ διὰ τὸ τὴν ἐννόησιν τῶν πραγμάτων καὶ τὴν παρακολούθησιν προαπολήγειν. (III, 1)

As we can see in the above fragment, it is not death that terrifies Marcus, but the possibility of losing control over one's own fate, the loss of one's self-awareness, the ability to reflect. It is not the intrusive thoughts about death that arouse his anxiety, but the insignificance of the present. This is also the reason for his constant calls to hurry, to reach one's goal before death – and the goal is to properly form one's soul, in accordance with the commands of the divine reason, and (which results from the previous one) to do favours to others:

> For what more dost thou want when thou hast done a man a service? Art thou not content that thou hast done something conformable to thy nature, and dost thou seek to be paid for it? […] so also as man is formed by nature to acts of benevolence, when he has done anything benevolent or in any other way conducive to the common interest, he has acted conformably to his constitution, and he gets what is his own—τί γὰρ πλέον θέλεις εὖ ποιήσας, ἄνθρωπε; οὐκ ἀρκεῖ τοῦτο, ὅτι κατὰ φύσιν τὴν σήν τι ἔπραξας, ἀλλὰ τούτου μισθὸν ζητεῖς; […] οὕτως καὶ ὁ ἄνθρωπος εὐεργετικὸς πεφυκώς, ὁπόταν τι εὐεργετικὸν ἢ ἄλλως εἰς τὰ μέσα συνεργητικὸν πράξῃ, πεποίηκε πρὸς ὃ κατεσκεύασται, καὶ ἔχει τὸ ἑαυτοῦ (IX, 42).

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MAN IN THE FACE OF PASSING AND TRANSITORY NATURE OF THE MOMENT IN MARCUS AURELIUS' *MEDITATIONS*

S u m m a r y

In his *Meditations*, the Stoic emperor Marcus Aurelius very often resorts to the motif of passing and transitory nature of human life. On the one hand, this permanent and pessimistic motif may be interpreted as a certain kind of spiritual exercise, practised not only by Stoics. On the other hand, we cannot exclude that this is a manifestation of the author's personal views and experiences. Marcus often touched upon the topic of death, a fact that was not necessarily an expression of his fear of what was inevitable since, according to the Stoic doctrine, death belongs to the immutable order of the world and is congruous with nature, hence it is completely acceptable. Marcus Aurelius is rather afraid of the transitory nature of the moment that we are given. He stresses that life "is passing away" each day and, at the same time, he is tormented with the lack of time that must be filled with good and respectable behaviour, with life in conformity with reason, or the deity. Marcus Aurelius is not frightened by death itself, but by the possibility to lose control over one's life, loss of consciousness, and the ability to reflect (in case of an illness or old age). He also firmly stresses the importance of favours that we may and should render to others, which besides properly forming one's soul, are the goal of human life.

Key words: Stoic ethics; passing of time; determining the limits of the present time; forming of the soul; living in line with reason.

Translated by Rafał Augustyn

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