
Book Reviews

The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius: Selections Annotated and Explained (annotation by Russell McNeil; trans. George Long; Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths, 2007), 288 pp., \$16.99 (pbk), ISBN-10: 1-59473-236-1. Review doi: 10.1558/jsrnc.v2i2.269.

In this slim book of annotated selections from the *Meditations*, Russell McNeil makes the mind of the Stoic Roman philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius (121–180 CE, emperor 161–180 CE) stunningly accessible to the modern reader. The foregoing sentence may seem paradoxical, because Marcus Aurelius is arguably the most accessible of ancient philosophers, and his masterpiece, the *Meditations* (the original work lacks a title: it has also been called *Marcus Aurelius to Himself*) has remained in publication almost continuously from its first printing in 1558, and sells well in a number of translations in a variety of languages today. What McNeil has accomplished is to select and reassemble many of the disconnected fragments that make up the accepted text, arranging them into parts that exhibit a rational arrangement by subjects. These parts have to do with the Stoic ideas of happiness, virtue, the body, the mind, method, the environment, daily practice, and society.

It is important to note at the outset that this edition is not a new translation of the *Meditations*. McNeil has used the authoritative edition of the 1862 translation by the British scholar George Long, but has modernized and Americanized Long's Victorian English, carefully avoiding language that might seem sexist or politically incorrect these days. The result is clear and readable, although unless one were to turn to Long and the original Greek (the language in which the well-educated emperor chose to write his own reflections), one could not be sure if Marcus Aurelius was indeed as smooth as McNeil makes him sound. Also, this is not, strictly speaking, a commentary on the *Meditations*, since McNeil's annotations are intended not only to explain the thoughts and syntax of the author, but also to expand on the ideas encountered in the text and to expound on their relevance to the reader and to modern issues. The book is not only a competent scholarly treatment of an ancient philosophical text, but is beyond that a tract written by an articulate and convincing modern Stoic. McNeil makes no attempt to conceal that he finds the Stoicism of Marcus Aurelius valuable as a guide to personal and social thought and action.

This reviewer must make a brief quibble before proceeding further; McNeil refers to the philosopher by the name 'Aurelius' almost throughout the book. All modern classical scholars and historians call him 'Marcus', however, which was the only one of his many names that was used throughout his life. (In the *Meditations* he, when referring to himself by name, uses his adoptive father's name, Antoninus.) In the rest of this review, then, I will use the traditional nomenclature.

Marcus has a lot to say about nature. The word appears constantly in his writing and has a central role in the structure of his philosophy. McNeil notes this with approval, and envisions Marcus as a forerunner of the ideas of 'nature as a single

ecosystem' (p. xxii) and 'an ancient and universal Gaia ecology' (p. 158). But do the selections in this volume even support such an interpretation of Stoic ideas? At times it seems so. Marcus speaks of 'The nature of which you are part' (p. 155) and 'The continuous spinning of the web and the interconnections in all of its parts' (p. 159). His most constant concern, however, is with the only thing over which we have any control—our opinion (attitude). It is that which we must bring into accord with nature, and the nature with which we must be most concerned is our own human nature. True enough, in Stoic thought, human nature is inextricably linked with the natural law that governs the universe. Marcus constantly warns us to act in accord with nature, and to do nothing against nature. In this effort, reason will be our guide. But reason tells us that we can do nothing against nature: 'Nothing can happen to a man or woman which is not according to the nature of a human being' (p. 203). Nature is absolute necessity; nothing can happen against nature. What, then, is the import of Marcus' warning that we must do nothing against nature? It is a warning against false opinion. Opinion guided by reason is true opinion, and all other opinion is false opinion. If we act following false opinion, we act, as it were, against nature, and the result will be pain, anger, depression, and other bad things for ourselves. Nothing from outside can hurt us; only the false opinion we have can hurt us. The cure is reason (philosophy) and the true opinion it will provide.

Then what about environmental problems such as climate change? McNeil says that Marcus would 'tell us that it is within our intellectual power to see this looming misfortune as an opportunity to restore the harmony between nature and humanity that is the basis of human purpose' (p. 166). But would he, really? It seems to me that Marcus would say that climate change is something that comes from outside, and therefore cannot harm us. What could harm us is the false opinion that it can. Also, Marcus would say that we can do nothing about climate change, and that therefore it should not concern us. It is one of those many things, like violence done to us by others, or poverty, or sexual abuse, which cannot really harm us in our inmost soul and is therefore neither good nor evil. So is there no Stoic response to climate change that modern humans can find at all satisfying? I think there is. McNeil constantly emphasizes Marcus' insistence on love as a basic principle, and that we are by nature social beings: 'The prime principle then in the rational constitution is the social' (p. 147). If climate change is negatively affecting fellow members of our community (and if Marcus could be enlightened by the modern scientific understanding of anthropogenic causes of climate change), Marcus could well say that as an act of benevolence toward our fellow rational beings we ought to do the various things that science indicates may at least mitigate the magnitude and impact of climate change. He does say that even within the broad spectrum of those things that are neither good nor evil, such actions are rationally indicated and in accord with nature. The exercise of virtue is a personal good. As in feeding the hungry, however, our own personal good must be our concern. Feeding the hungry does them no good in itself, since it only meets the needs of their bodies and does not teach them true opinion.

Even if one is not convinced by this book to adopt Stoic principles for oneself, one can admire it as a work of scholarship and a valuable explanation of an ancient philosophy that has lasting influences in today's intellectual world. There are very few errors in matters of fact, but one at least calls for correction. McNeil, in explaining Marcus' sense of the vast size of the Earth compared to an individual human inhabitant, refers to Eratosthenes' measurement of the size of the terrestrial globe (p. 26).

Eratosthenes did this by measuring the angles (not the lengths) of shadows cast by vertical poles in two distant locations (they did not have to be of the same height, and in the usual version of the story, one location was not a pole, but a well in which no shadow appeared). This occurred at noon on the same day, the summer solstice (not when the Sun was at the zenith in each spot, but only in the southern one). McNeil says one pole was in Alexandria (correct) and the other in Cyrene in modern-day Libya, which he says is about 500 miles due south. A glance at the map shows this to be impossible, since Cyrene is 500 miles off to the west, and almost at the same latitude. The correct identification of the second place is Syene at the First Cataract, which corresponds to modern Aswan in Upper Egypt, in fact 500 miles south of Alexandria. Eratosthenes' solution for the size of the Earth's circumference is argued by modern geographers because there are conflicting values for the length of the Greek stadium, the unit of distance Eratosthenes used, but some estimates are closer to the true girth of the globe than the one McNeil gives.

In representing the character of Marcus Aurelius, McNeil is uniformly laudatory, and when flaws appear that are inescapable for any imperfect human leader, defensive. If Marcus despised the bloody spectacles of the Roman arena, why did he do nothing to stop them? McNeil says that Marcus detested war, spent much of his reign fighting the northern barbarians only out of defensive necessity, and did not engage in wars of expansion or conquest. But in reality, when he erected his notable public monument, the Column of Marcus Aurelius, which portrays his battles in a spiral relief, he patterned it exactly after the Column of Trajan, one of his predecessors, which portrays the aggressive annexation of Dacia (modern Romania). McNeil says Marcus Aurelius favored representative democracy, but in the relevant passage Marcus says only that a king should respect the freedom of subjects, indicating a benevolent monarchy, not a republic. Although McNeil portrays him as lenient toward those who held other ideas (but not self-serving egoists), Marcus Aurelius did not extend toleration to the Christians. McNeil presents several excuses for this (p. 212), but nonetheless there were bloody persecutions during his reign in Lugdunum and Vienne, and Marcus did not intervene. This was a source of confusion to Christian historians such as Eusebius, who thought that good emperors like Marcus Aurelius should not have been persecutors, but found evidence to the contrary. None of this invalidates Marcus' Stoic ideals, of course. It only shows that he did not consistently embody them, a fact that McNeil seems reluctant to admit.

These oversights are forgivable, however, in an editor who has manifest sympathy with his subject and a profound understanding of the many dimensions of the Stoic worldview. McNeil is a fine writer who can introduce the reader who has little background in the classics to one of the most temperate and consoling philosophers of all time. In a period of history when many philosophers, Neo-Platonists, and others valued pure spirit above such physical things as the body and the natural environment, Marcus Aurelius insisted on the integration of human inner life with nature and maintained that the creations of nature were at least as beautiful as works of art. We still have much to learn from him and McNeil's eloquent book can help us in that task.

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Mary C. Grey, *Sacred Longings: The Ecological Spirit and Global Culture* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), pp. 272, \$19.00 (pbk), ISBN: 0-8006-3647-3. Review doi: 10.1558/jsrnc.v2i2.272.

In *Sacred Longings: The Ecological Spirit and Global Culture*, Mary Grey's methodology is intrinsic to her thesis. She argues that globalization functions as an effective spirituality of consumerism. Such a seductive spirituality cannot be challenged by rational discourse alone; a method is required that appeals to the reader's imagination and emotions (p. v). Grey's methodology draws on story as both 'conceptual tool' and frame for various chapters in the book (p. vi).

Drawing on biblical stories, myth, poetry, and case study, Grey centers her thesis around four main stories. First, the story of disillusioned anti-globalization protesters draws attention to the question of what people really want, suggesting a deeper longing than what the mechanisms of globalization offer. Second, the biblical story of Miriam at the well makes the connections between faith traditions' ongoing struggles with the reality of drought and the current crisis of global water scarcity. The tale of Miriam also draws attention to the sacramentality of water and its potency as a symbol of human longing. Third, the story of Psyche and Eros is utilized in order to demonstrate the relationship between our desires and the integrity of the human self. The fourth story explores the drought in the Thar Desert of Rajasthan, in northwest India. Grey emphasizes how women are disproportionately affected by the lack of water in that region. This story brings a concrete face to the consequences of globalization.

The author moves back and forth among these four stories, interweaving them to develop her thesis and move the reader to a deeper level than rational discourse typically allows. Water, as symbol, metaphor, and illustration of the problem Grey is addressing, appears throughout, forming the central image upon which the reader can focus.

For Grey, the spirituality of consumerism has caused a spiritual turn away from the earth. This in turn has caused a 'crisis of misplaced desire' whereby many people have moved away from a sense of place within the earth community, becoming addicted to money and things. This crisis of misplaced desire perpetuates the suffering of the earth community, including poor women and children.

Grey's analysis of this crisis and her suggestions for recovery are organized into three sections. In the first, she depicts the problems with globalization and with the failure of current theological education to address them adequately. In the second section, Grey explores a range of theological themes that may be helpful in reorienting human desire, including an empowering vision of kenosis, a sacramental vision of water, and a pneumatology of Spirit present in the healing of the earth. In the third section, Grey begins the turn back to the earth via three theological paths: the hope of ecofeminist theology; the practice of a collective ecomysticism; and the contribution of Gandhian spirituality to sacrificial living as an expression of love.

Grey covers a lot of ground in *Sacred Longings*. Her method may take some getting used to, especially for readers who are used to the traditional terrain of argumentation in theology. In contrast to such argumentation, Grey's prose reads something like a dance. The stories take the reader from one place to another in time and space, and the themes move the reader around from one topic to another, including liturgy, theological education, pneumatology, and ecofeminism.

A central question in *Sacred Longings* is the question of praxis: What do we *do* in light of the problems presented by globalization? In answer, Grey develops the idea of an 'ecomystical way' based upon an ecofeminist understanding of mystical experience as a community experience, while drawing upon the Gandhian example of actively living out one's spirituality by resistance to injustice. Grey suggests that a collective practice of voluntary simplicity and austerity is a necessary aspect of the ecomystical way. The path is a community-oriented one of relating to the earth, refusing the injustice of globalization, and learning new lifestyles that are full of passion, compassion, and desire for God.

This practical turn is Grey's most significant contribution in *Sacred Longings*. Many scholars are writing about the need for worldview shifts, including emotional shifts, that respond to the ecological crisis and the related problem of globalization. More recently, theologians have begun to ask precisely how such shifts might manifest themselves. Grey offers a pragmatic suggestion, in theological and prophetic language, upon which communities can act.

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Jeyamalar Kathirithamby-Wells, *Nature and Nation: Forests and Development in Peninsular Malaysia* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press; Singapore: Singapore University Press; Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 487 pp., \$32.00 (pbk), ISBN: 87-91114-7 (NIAS pbk), ISBN: 9971-69-302-X (SUP pbk), ISBN: 978-0824828639 (UHP pbk). Review doi: 10.1558/jsmc.v2i2.274.

Foresters and forest scientists, long concerned with the state of the world's dwindling forests, have during the last decades seen the forest debate grow far beyond their profession. Forests are now at the center of environmental, social, and economic debates. Attention on woody perennials—in the 1980s 'discovered' as a solution to the rural energy and erosion crisis—was boosted by the recent upsurge of the biofuels debate. With globally three million 'forest-dwelling, forest-dependent' people being among the poorest sections of society, and a much larger populace indirectly benefitting from forest services such as water and soil protection, forests are critically important in development and poverty-reduction discourse. Recently, the dramatic climate negotiations in Bali had deforestation as a key feature in their portfolio. Yet the centrality of forests and the environment to human and ecological well being has rarely been recognized in the larger field of political and economic historiography. Observing this for Malaysia, and endeavouring to rectify it, Kathirithamby-Wells produced this magistral work on Malaysian forest history and its broader national context. This is a must read for every professional whose field of work has to do with forests.

Kathirithamby-Wells describes the history of Malaysia's forests from the start of British colonization to the beginning of the current millennium. Her material is chronologically ordered and cleverly weaves in specific cases with broader perspectives, linking the local level with state, federal, regional, and global domains.

What makes the book especially interesting for this journal is that its analysis of the role of forests in nation-building digs beyond the socio-economic and political domain into attitudes and values inspired by religion. The latter is an area where most forest-oriented scientists fear to tread. Even global projects to unravel the underlying causes of deforestation, though recognizing religious values, rarely debate them.¹ Kathirithamby-Wells brings religion to the fore as a way to underpin her argument that forests have been central to Malaysian nation-building. She analyzes indigenous as well as Christian and Islamic dimensions of the phenomena in her study.

Unfortunately, Kathirithamby-Wells uncritically accepts Lynn White's famous thesis of a direct relation between Jewish and especially Christian beliefs fostering environmentally destructive behaviors (p. 28). Although White's thesis may well apply to the colonial explorers under her scrutiny, she might have shown some awareness that this thesis is contested (see Whitney 2005). Furthermore, she lays the roots of 'interest in natural history...as a humanist pursuit' in the Renaissance, whereas White and others trace this interest into the Middle Ages (e.g. Crombie 1971). And while White describes religion as a direct and potent driving force throughout history, she presents it as an undercurrent surfacing only occasionally.

1. Such as the 'Global Workshop on Addressing the Underlying Causes of Deforestation and Forest Degradation', *Sustainable Developments* 21.1 (25 January 1999). Online: <http://www.iisd.ca/download/pdf/sd/sdvol21no1e.pdf> (accessed 15 December 2007).

The undercurrent comes back in the introduction of Chapter 7, where the author argues that dominion theology has prompted an unbridled exploitation of nature. This unsettling thought is not pursued *per se* but underlies her description of the early stages of the wildlife debate in the peninsula in the 1920–30s—‘the most emotionally charged in conservation history’ (p. 189). She cleverly describes how in the later stages of this deeply entrenched wildlife–agriculture controversy the solution of an integrated National Park was promoted by deploying nationalistic sentiments for the first time (p. 211). Conservation thus came at the nexus of multiple interests and even garnered support from religious sectors.

Indigenous (Orang Asli) beliefs and culture, and their introduction into mainstream culture, are featured throughout the text. Kathirithamby-Wells describes the importance of *saka*, the Orang Asli’s magico-religiously founded territorial orbits for tribal identity, the encroachment upon which by colonial powers attacked not only the material basis for subsistence but also culture and lifestyle (pp. 130 and on). I agree with Teresa Shewry’s (2006) praise of the author’s highlighting the merits of the Orang Asli’s vast indigenous knowledge throughout the forest history.

In contrast to the Orang Asli, Malay religious culture is mostly taken for granted in her book. The Malay population broadly sides with westerners in holding ‘mixed utilitarian ethical and aesthetic concerns’ for natural heritage (p. 209), with a growing urban citizenry supporting conservation organizations (pp. 293–94). Wildlife management was influenced by Malays’ religious prohibitions on hunting pigs (p. 245). Post-war Malaysian nationalist writers evoke an idyllic but forlorn natural world and the return to such a world informed by the (Muslim) teaching of the unity of God, as well as by aboriginal magical knowledge and wisdom (pp. 246–47, 292–93).

In Chapters 6 and 7, the author describes in detail how the emergence of ethical issues in forestry began during the inter-World War years: forestry itself evolved from an almost mathematical timber production science into the more systemic science of ecology and became the arena of conflicting views of nature and interests. Timber production, hydrological and soil preservation, agricultural expansion, shifting cultivation, growing appreciation of the knowledge and rights of Orang Asli, and wildlife conservation competed with each other. Significantly, government policies generally lagged behind and crucial decisions were left to individual forest officials in the field, leaving them to cope with significant ethical issues for which they were unprepared in their education (Oesten 2005). In the last decade, foresters’ training in Malaysia underwent improvement, with motivational courses and even ‘religious instruction’ suggested for inclusion in the curriculum (p. 379) to prepare them for such tasks. Not discussed further are the obvious complications of this suggestion in a formally Muslim but self-professed ‘multicultural’ country with 40 percent non-Muslims. Malaysian religious scholars have cautiously indicated that a dialogue between the secular sciences and religious scholarship in the Malaysian higher educational system would be desirable to promote sustainable development, but at the same time acknowledged a gap between the two (Bakar 2006; Baharuddin 2007). There is clearly a long way to go before such a dialogue will be able to address the practical ethical questions confronting foresters.

Malaysia, however, is progressing toward wise forest stewardship in other ways. After years of dialogue with the International Timber Trade Organisation (well documented in the book) and bilateral partners (such as from the Netherlands, hardly documented), Malaysia is now working towards a Voluntary Partnership Agreement

(VPA) for legalizing the timber trade with the EU under its 2003 Action Plan for Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT). This would at least guarantee that only legally processed timber from Malaysia would enter the EU market. The agreement (expected to be signed in 2008) would be a milestone for Southeast Asia and beyond. Although the book ends just before the start of these new developments, the author's conclusions (p. 408) nevertheless remain valid: civil society's watchful eye will be indispensable for transparent and sustainable management of Malaysia's forests. Malaysia's institutes of religious scholarship could help inspire citizens, in all their cultural diversity, toward a meaningful dialogue about their national forests and better practices with regard to them.

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