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MARCUS AURELIUS – A POSSIBLE PARADIGM FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PHILOSOPHICAL COUNSELLING

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Abstract

In "To Himself", Marcus Aurelius prescribes a set of moral rules for his own use, a kind of "daily account of life" for self-concern. Self-concern is the attitude by which the individual shapes his self and which involves both a way of being characterized by reflection on the self and a series of practices by which the individual takes care of himself, trying to change, purify, to turn to achieve the rectitude of his moral actions. In this paper, I will show how Stoic self-concern is, from the perspective of philosophical counselling, an important instrument used in philosophical practice, being conceptualized as a philosophical meditation and re-grounding the premise of discovering philosophy as a way of life.

Keywords: Marcus Aurelius; self-concern; stoicism; philosophical meditation; philosophy as a way of life;

1. INTRODUCTION

In the history of European thinking and order of ideas on which the European civilisation was founded, To Himself by Marcus Aurelius can be placed at the early stage of the evolution of a dissociation that the political, cultural and spiritual European space had capitalized on until the dawns of modernity, through Augustine's City of God, Ignatius of Loyola's Spiritual Exercises and Pascal's Pensées, being subsequently turned upside down by Voltaire's Letter XXV (Philosophical Letters) or Nietzsche's Antichrist. This dissociation is between the inner and the outer man or, better said, between the spiritual and material man, one that, in the twentieth century, Existentialist Gabriel Marcel synthesised as Etre et Avoir [To be and to have] (1935).

In this paper, I intend to show how Marcus Aurelius' self-concern can be exploited in the context of this inner-outer dissociation, in an attempt to re-establish the valences of philosophy as a mind and soul subject, and implicitly, as a way of life, thus recovering a tradition that comes all the way from Plato and embraces the present with Pierre Hadot. Within one's reach is the instrument of philosophical counselling, an emerging practice in the Romanian area that has all chances to grow, if we consider that there are available both a professional association of philosophical counsellors, and accredited researchers in the field.



2. PROBLEM STATEMENT – THE NECESSITY OF PHILOSOPHICAL COUNSELLING

Does contemporary man need philosophical counselling? Is the ethical and philosophical counsellor a different kind of ‘apprentice wizard’ meant to help the man of the present to overcome their discontents and crises, to put order in their inner life, to integrate the conflicts that are part of their own world and, why not, to be happy? Isn’t this type of counselling, as a matter of fact, a newly induced necessity by which people find out that what they are and have is not sufficient, that they must request more from their lives, or that they are helpless and in need of yet another prosthesis? (Mihăilescu, 2014). The short answer – I think it is not. Philosophical counselling is not yet another ‘acquired incompetence’, simply because this philosophical practice brings forth the imperative of regaining balance and rediscovering the authentic being (Frunză, 2018) that breathes inside each and every one of us. Philosophical counselling does not provide the recipe of a form of happiness imposed by collective or personal development standards, meant to ensure one’s success. Quite the opposite, when resorting to this practice, one must stop from the race one is part of in their day-by-day reality (consumerism, social media, all kinds of dynamics, from the labour market to geopolitics, social, political or economic crises, etc.) and be ready to have a dialogue with oneself.

If we accept the premise that the globalizing society we live in is one of patterns increasingly dominating our lives, imposed through various channels and accepted for different reasons (the need for integration and belonging being one of our features as primates and social beings), that we live in societies determined by technology, then we can probably note that the inner-outer paradigm is unbalanced by the latter term to such an extent that happiness itself has a pattern to which man must circumscribe, and that not reaching it leads to despair (Ștefănescu, 2017).

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS – A SUITABLE PARADIGM?

Is the inner man-outer man paradigm suitable for building a justification of philosophical counselling? I think it is. If “so much technology, as much philosophy”, then “transformations are so complex and profound that affect even the man’s way of being in the world in general and one’s way in particular. They draw in both reflections on the human condition in general and novel ways of thinking of man and his humanity which lead towards the necessity of redefining the postmodern human being. Therefore, they require an increase in the importance of philosophical reflection, impose a re-enclosing of the entire matter of man within the philosophical space, and challenge one to take on a reflective and active attitude in the assumption of one’s own life (Frunză, 2019: 8). This kind of attitude related to one’s own person has all the chances of leading to a rediscovery of the role played by philosophy during the Antiquity and the Middle Age, when it was a subject of the mind and soul, interiorized as a way of life. According to Pierre Hadot, philosophy is firstly a peculiar way of life and only secondarily a type of theoretical discourse. In the 1970s, he would note an increase in the readership’s interest in Epicureanism and Stoicism. It is thus how the philosophy professor converts to philosophy and writes *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* (1981). Philosophy itself is an act of conversion – this notion “pervades the totality of Pierre Hadot’s works” (Bădiliță, 1997: 17). Hadot identifies, up to 20th-century philosophers, the survival of this tradition that construes philosophy “as a concrete and practical activity and a transformation of the way of living or perceiving the world” (Hadot, 1998: 293), after the publication, in 1992, with Fayard, of *La citadelle intérieure. Introduction aux Pensées de Marc Aurèle* [The Inner Citadel. The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius].

In the Romanian area, it was Nae Ionescu who brought philosophy near individual practice. According to him, metaphysics – just another name for philosophy, as a matter of fact – represents “a total vision of existence” suitable only for the one who has reached the extreme limits of existence through personal experience. This way, philosophy becomes “a sort of disclosure, a sort of confession of faith of the one resurrected from the dead” (Ionescu, 1999: 18). The spiritual meaning is obvious in this characterisation, but the separation from religion emphasises the therapeutic role of philosophy more clearly: “It stands to reason that metaphysics has been a purely human concern of those who failed deliverance and who try to balance in existence, in this human condition, by the total and harmonious understanding of existence. Metaphysics does not lead to redemption, as the religious experience would do; it only leads to reconciliation” (Ionescu, 1999: 18-19).

Naturally, one cannot disregard the Păltiniș School, where the ritual would constantly accompany the way of life built around the essential books of philosophy and would provide intimacy for the group gathered around Constantin Noica. “Those who, in the Diary (but also in fact, as the author of these lines may testify), visit Noica at Păltiniș and entertain him – especially Gabriel Liiceanu, Andrei Pleșu, Victor Stoichiță, Sorin Vieru, Petru Creția – submit, alongside the magister – to rituals meant to ‘get them in shape’: ‘the Păltiniș tour’, which takes exactly one hour and five minutes, lighting the fire in the stove, chipping the wood, presenting their work and future plans, methodically critiquing past or present philosophies, daily discussions and ‘vivisections’ of the intellectual activity of each participant (‘trials’). They use a quasi-esoteric language, almost unintelligible for the profane (‘becoming unto being’, ‘the fringe that does not fringe’, ‘individual-determined-general’, ‘the expanded self’, etc.). It is “a ritual without a dogma”, as Andrei Pleșu perfectly described the genius of the place” (Cornea, 2004: 1999). The road to Păltiniș is a rite of passage to an upside-down world, a place of salvation, an island – all, equivalent to the interiority of a paideia model described by rules, restrictions, schedule and exercising – at any rate, a kind of intellectual and corporeal askesis well crystallised in a life experience.

4. THE SELF - MARCUS AURELIUS AND PHILOSOPHICAL MEDITATION

Marcus Aurelius’ stoicism is one approach that can respond to the philosophical interrogations of contemporary man and that can be, implicitly, useful for ethical and philosophical counselling. Resorting to interiority and re-establishing its dignity in the context of a technological and communicational society can be initialised by openness towards the Aurelian way of discovery and ‘authentication’ of the self. To Himself is evidence of late Antiquity that philosophy was construed as a practice and as disciplining the personality, a work on the territory of man’s inner citadel.

The hermeneutics of Marcus Aurelius’ stoic text reveals the fact that this kind of introspection/spiritual exercise is suitable as a method in philosophical counselling, equating the philosophical meditation that goes back to Socrates, Plato or Epicurus. Assumed by Christianity, but forgotten in the age of modernity, philosophical meditation is shaped the way advocated by Marcus Aurelius in view of secluding within oneself, a way described by Pierre Hadot in *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*:

Cette méditation peut prendre la forme d’un exercice écrit, qui sera un véritable dialogue avec soi-même : eis heuton. Une grande partie des Pensées de Marc Aurèle correspond à cet exercice : il s’agit d’avoir présents à l’esprit d’une manière vivante les dogmes fondamentaux du stoïcisme. Ce sont des morceaux du système stoïcien que Marc Aurèle se redit ((à lui-même ». À cette c mémorisation)) des dogmes s’ajoutent, chez l’empereur philosophe, d’autres exercices spirituels écrits, tout à fait traditionnels eux aussi. Tout d’abord, il y a l’examen de conscience dans lequel on observe son progrès spirituel. Et puis, il y a l’exercice de la *præmeditatio malorum* destiné à éviter que le sage soit surpris inopinément par l’événement. On se représente donc très vivement les événements fâcheux qui pourraient arriver, tout en se démontrant à soi-même qu’ils n’ont rien de redoutable. Les Pensées de Marc Aurèle sont donc un document extrêmement précieux. Elles nous conservent en effet un remarquable exemple d’un genre d’écrit qui a dû être très fréquent dans l’Antiquité, mais qui était appelé, par son caractère même, à disparaître facilement: les exercices de méditation consignés par écrit. (Hadot, 2002: 150).

This meditation can take the form of a written exercise, which will be a genuine dialogue with oneself: eis heuton. A significant part of Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations* corresponds to this exercise: it is a matter of presenting in the spirit of a living manner the fundamental dogmas of stoicism. These are the pieces of the stoic system that Marcus Aurelius submit (to his memorization). Dogmas are added, in the Philosopher Emperor’s case, to other written spiritual exercises, also traditional. First of all, there is an examination of conscience in which one sees one’s spiritual progress. Then, it is an exercise in *Premeditatio malorum* (“the pre-meditation of evil”) meant to prevent the sage from being taken by surprise by the event. The unfortunate events that may take place are thus vividly represented, while proving to oneself that there is nothing dangerous about them.

Therefore, Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations* are an extremely valuable document. Consequently, they preserve for us a remarkable example of a writing genre that must have been very frequent during the Antiquity, but which was meant, by its own nature, to disappear easily: the meditation exercises recorded in writing (Hadot, 2002: 150).

Practising meditation is considered an exercise on inner freedom specific to all philosophical schools of Antiquity: “A shared feature of all ancient schools of philosophy is that the practitioner of a meditation exercise learns to focus his attention to the present moment, which is later labelled as a genuine secret of spiritual exercises” (Hațegan, 2019: 20).

In Pierre Hadot’s view, the starting point of Stoicism is Socrates’ claim that “no evil can come to a good man either in life or after death, and God does not neglect him. So, too, this which had come to me has not come by chance, but I see plainly that it was better for me to die now and be freed from troubles” (The Apology of Socrates 41d. In Plato, 1974: 43). If good and evil are just moral, for the stoic, happiness consists in “the exigency of good, imposed by reason and transcending the individual” (Hadot, 1997: 154). The only aspect that depends on us is the will to do good and act according to reason.

The radical opposition of what depends on us, as object of our own decision, and what transcends our decision leads, on the one way, to the discovery of the inner citadel, where man finds freedom and harmony, and on the other hand, to the discovery of the external reasoning in which the reason of human action is grounded. This is way physics has ethical finality to stoics and “the stoic option of life postulates and requires, at the same time, that the universe be sensible” (Hadot, 1997: 156). Pursuant to Marcus Aurelius’ rhetorical question “Or think you that order subsisting within yourself is compatible with disorder in the All?” (IV 27, 1977: 110), Hadot adds: “Human reason that wishes logical and dialectical coherence with itself and institutes morality must be grounded in Reason of All, of which it is nothing but a part. Living according to reason would be, therefore, living according to nature, to the universal Law that transforms the evolution of the world from inside out” (Hadot, 1997: 156). The stoic emperor expresses the eulogy to law and order of nature, while asserting the spirit’s harmony with them: “I am in harmony with all, that is a part of thy harmony, great Universe. For me nothing is early and nothing late, that is in season for thee.” (IV, 23).

5. CONCLUSION

Marcus Aurelius’ Meditations represent the author’s spiritual exercises. Writing itself is a practice of meditation, as vouched by the repetitions of ideas and formulae that keep appearing in the text every once in a while. These repetitions are catalyst for the association of ideas, for bringing back to memory inner representations and practices. He writes only with a view to always keeping in mind the doctrine and rules of stoic life. It is thus obvious that writing itself is an exercise in meditation. But if it is so, then reading the text written by the stoic emperor also acquires the function of philosophical meditation (Hadot, 1997: 48-50).

Philosophical meditation was one of the most important practices of ancient philosophies. The comparison to Cartesian meditation highlights the huge difference between two types of philosophy and implicitly, two different worlds: one that did not ignore interiority and could establish a balance with the exteriority hypostatized in political, economic and juridical organisation, and another, in which interiority was exiled to the private dimension of life, ending up being either ignored or disregarded.

Today, the rediscovery of interiority promoted by philosophy brings forth the development of philosophical practices that contemporary man needs in order to re-establish the harmony between himself and the others. Thus, philosophy, by its specific practices, must regain its place in the agora, not just as a theory belonging to a specialised academic space, but also as therapy, communication, critical thinking or ethical expertise in various environments. The harmony, balance and freedom that it can promote may represent as many contributions to a reality at the same time globalising and atomising, which depersonalises each and every one of us to various extents.

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