

Stoicism and Historical Action during the Nervan-Antonine Dynasty

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States will never be happy until rulers become philosophers or philosophers become rulers. – Plato, *The Republic*

The question of why the Roman Empire declined and disappeared from history is perhaps one of the most extensively studied fields in the discipline, being exhausted by multiple angles of inquiry since at least the fifth century of the Common Era. As it is a tall order to challenge such extensive scholarship, the purpose of this essay will not be to argue why the Empire fell but instead to suggest that an element that has often been neglected by scholarship may have been a significant factor in the healthy operation of the state, namely under the Five Good Emperors and especially under Marcus Aurelius, and that its abandonment or absence under the later military despots during the Crisis of the Third Century contributed to a fatal spirit of civic disengagement, strife and manorialism. This element is the philosophy of Stoicism, which had a profound impact on the leadership caste of Mediterranean aristocracy from at least the time of the Diadochi, reached an apex during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, and is absent from the behaviors and writings of future emperors.¹ In sum, this essay will argue that the abandonment of Stoic behaviors in leadership was a significant factor that contributed to the decline by contrasting the reign of the late Stoic emperors with the despotic rule of the military emperors of the third century. In order to bring this argument to bear, we must first examine the historiography of the decline of the Empire.

In the fifth century of the C.E. Vegetius proposed in *De Re Militari* ("Concerning Military Matters") that the Empire declined as a result of increased Germanization of the military, that the Latins and Greeks who once comprised the army and who were more-

or-less faithful to the Emperor and the Roman civic system, were eventually replaced by foreigners who held their loyalty to particular generals who could win them loot on campaign.² In this manner, it was only inevitable that with increased Germanic influence, the Roman culture was diluted, leading to a fatal measure of decadence and apathy toward civic matters during a time of barbarian aggression in which service was most needed. While this rationale for the decline and fall is perhaps the first serious one proposed, historically it has been given some credence by modern historians, particularly Arthur Ferrill, who with contemporary scholarship and archaeological data affirmed the argument of Vegetius in *The Fall of the Roman Empire: The Military Explanation*.³

The Vegetius theory was essentially unchallenged until the late eighteenth century C.E. Between 1776 –1789, Edward Gibbon published the now famous *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which has stirred great controversy for its daring claims.⁴ Gibbon proposed that it was the loss of civic virtue in late antiquity brought about by an increasingly popular Christian religion which inspired the Roman citizens to remain apathetic to imperial matters in such a fashion that they were unwilling to defend the Empire from external threats. The author argued that the people increasingly devoted themselves to delusions of an afterlife and the prospect of a better tomorrow, rather than devoting the service needed to repel the barbarian incursions of the late fourth and early fifth century. This argument fails because it oversimplifies the complex “decline” yet holds merit in that it illuminates the importance of psychology and religion as motivating factors in the behavior of ancient peoples. Essentially my argument will be an elucidatory modification of Gibbon in that I will argue that the rejection of Stoic virtue (synonymous

with Roman civic duty) in the late Empire was a significant factor contributing to, but not the fundamental cause of, the decline of the Empire.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, a certain cadre of French historians proposed that the Empire did not in fact fall outright but instead was gradually transformed to come under the influence of Germanic peoples, who in turn contributed to administrating matters of state. Between 1875–1889, Fustel de Coulanges published *Histoire des institutions politiques de l'ancienne France* to solidify this argument, proposing that the Germanic peoples did not conquer the Empire but instead entered into civic life, transforming the nature of the Roman politic.⁵ Henri Pirenne would expand upon this notion in his "Pirenne Thesis," which argued that the Empire did not cease to exist with the captures of Rome in the fifth century, but existed in a different form until the Muslim incursions of the seventh century, at which time Mediterranean trade was disrupted to such a degree as to paralyze the Empire. This economic torpor, argues Pirenne, was fundamental in the decline of the Empire and lead to the consequent rise and flourishing of the Frankish kingdom, a polity which the author claims was a rightful heir to the Imperial title. Recent historians such as François Masai, Karl-Ferdinand Werner and Peter Brown have agreed with Pirenne's argument and expanded the chronology of the Empire's existence, arguing that the Roman system never truly disappeared after some climatic event but instead changed appearances and was operated by foreigners, that its institutions and culture remained as a profound impact on all European states and empires to come.

As Pirenne was forwarding his claims in the 1920's, another historian, John Bagnell Bury, was also hard at work constructing a complex thesis of his own, publishing

History of the Later Roman Empire from the Death of Theodosius I to the Death of Justinian in 1923. Bury begins his investigation by first taking on Gibbon and judging the classical dichotomy of Pagan and Christian virtue, arguing that it was not the latter which must have contributed to the decline of the Empire, as the eastern portion of it, more devout than the west, had outlived Rome's sackings of 410 and 455, and flourished for another thousand years. While Bury praised Gibbon's meticulous research and detailed documentation as being rigorously sound and excellent, he would judge the data with a different interpretation. Bury proposed that it was not a grand and fatal failing which culminated in the decline of the empire but rather a combination of factors, all working in concert, which brewed a perfect storm over the Empire, ultimately leading to atrophy and collapse. The historian cites such elements as a reliance on Goth auxiliaries, the treachery of Stilicho, the assassination of Aetius and the subsequent power vacuum, economic weakness and inflation, German encroachment and decline of discipline and standards in the military, as factors contributing to decline. Most importantly, Bury maintained that the events contributing to the Empire's waning were not predestined or fatal but contingent, capable of being remedied through serious labor.

Radovan Richta argued in *Man and Technology in the Revolution of Our Day* (1963) that technology and innovation are the movers behind historical events, rather than other factors which he interpreted as simply a consequence of technological innovation. In this manner, Richta argued that as the barbarians became better equipped to battle the Roman armies on the field, and as they discovered the tools to make heavier armors and the horseshoe, they eventually overcame their imperial foes and were capable of seizing the Empire. This perspective holds that the Romans were capable of defeating

the barbarians in the field prior to the fifth century due to a distinct advantage in arms, training and logistical technologies, and as the external foes eventually adapted these advantages, the playing field was evened. Richta's research seems to have been mostly a colorful aside from the mainstay of historiographical research as it has been mostly ignored by academia. This may be because Richta proposes that scientific advances are linked to Marxist/socialist revolutions, sensationalizing his argument.

In 1965 Lucien Musset published *Les Invasions : les vagues germaniques* and continued to expand upon the popular Pirenne Thesis, arguing that a "clash of civilizations" between the Greco-Roman and Germanic world culminated in a synthesis responsible for the creation of the Medieval era. Rather than interpret the fifth century as a decline and collapse of the Empire, Musset interpreted it as a creative process in which German peoples transformed the pre-existing institutions to adapt to their culture while emulating the culture of Imperial Rome, similar to how the Assyrians adopted cultural trends from the peoples they encountered.

In great contrast to all prior theories is the research of Arnold Toynbee and James Burke, who interpreted the scholarship of a late decline of the Empire as being incongruous with the evidence. They argued that the Roman polity was based on a broken foundation from the start: a "plunder economy" without a proper budgetary system or means of creating revenue due to lack of exportable goods, that only maintained the façade of flourishing by virtue of its constant expansion. Once imperial expansion ceased with the conquest of Dacia by Trajan, it was only a matter of time, argues Toynbee and Burke, before hyperinflation would result in a final failure, as revenue was only attained by conquering, demanding tribute from and looting foreign

lands. With the end of these ventures, the full brunt of the Empire's expenses was levied upon the citizenry, who paid the dues with increasingly devalued currency. Toynbee and Burke argue that the Empire finally ended when the title of Emperor became an irrelevant honor and yielded no effective power save pomp and formality. In this manner Odoacer, who conquered the western portion of the Empire in the late sixth century of the C.E., deposing Emperor Romulus Augustulus, who did not adopt the imperial title himself or create an entitled puppet, and who claimed the lands previously designated imperial, brought the end to bear. The title of "Emperor of Rome" ceased to mean anything, prescribed to it neither land titles nor grandeur, and the imperial system soon became anachronistic.

Michael Rostovtzeff and Ludwig von Mises in *The Rise and Decline of Civilization* would expand upon Burke and Toynbee's focus on economic matters, arguing that it was indeed foolish economic policies which ultimately lead to the fall of the Empire. In opposition to the previously popular theories of foreign encroachment and corruption, Rostovtzeff and von Mises claimed that the economy of the second century was a developed and unregulated market economy, low on tariffs, with restrained price controlling – that an environment of free trade and cosmopolitanism contributed to a flourishing state. After the third century, debasement led to inflation and the Imperial office began to levy price controls on the economy which resulted in forcing merchants to sell goods below their market value so as to keep the Empire operational. These artificially low prices lead to a deficient supply of food and ultimately disrupted the urban economy that relied on trade, forcing residents to relocate to rural areas to focus on subsistence agriculture. Combined with excessive taxation, this lead to a faltering

economy, which ultimately was unable to support the immense demand of the Empire's operation.

William H. McNeil explored the topic of depopulation further in 1976, arguing in *Plagues and Peoples* that the devastating plagues of the late second century, which ultimately destroyed half of the Empire's population, were responsible for creating an imbalance between state services and taxation. In this manner, the population was too small to bear the brunt of taxation to afford the large governmental and military structure which still existed in the Empire. As a result of this circumstance consequent economic and civic dysfunction contributed to the degradation of the imperial system. The western half of the Empire was devastated by the plague while the east, with its larger population, was able to endure and reconstitute itself, flourishing until the sack of Constantinople by Ottoman Turks in 1453.

Peter Heather returned to the thesis of Vegetius three years ago with his work, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, in which he argued that foreign encroachment did in fact play a significant role in the decline of the Empire, not by virtue of its own effect, but by the economic duress initiated by it. Heather argued that it was not the adventurism of the classical enemy of Rome, the Germanians, which ultimately signaled the death knell for the Empire's fortunes but rather a reemerged enemy in the east which had devoured the Parthian Empire in the third century C.E.: the Sassanid Persians. In confirmation with Bury and Gibbon, Heather claims that in the half century it took for the Romans to repel the initial Persian offensives and establish a weary and capricious status quo, the Emperor had reallocated tax funds from the western portion of the empire to the east. While this reallocation of resources was successful in staying the aggression of the Sassanid Empire,

a realm which mounted organized and focused offensives against the Levant, it established two long term trends in the Empire which ultimately proved to be fatal in undermining it. First, as the regional taxes were expended on the eastern empire, there was no incentive for local officials to develop provincial infrastructure, instead focusing on more reserved projects, leading to a general decay in the western portion of the Empire. Secondly, the land owning elites shifted their allegiance away from local politics to the imperial office. These two factors, combined with an increasingly wealthy Germanic people enriched by their contact as auxiliaries serving the Emperor, allowed them to assume local autonomy over portions of the western empire.

Next, Heather posited a new theory: that the migration and expansion of the distant Huns had forced the Germanic people, now empowered by their wealth, but not strong enough to resist the Huns in open battle, to flood across the borders of the Empire, initially seeking refuge and ultimately resulting in the conquest of the western portion, still drained of its resources. Ultimately, the eastern portion of the Empire cannibalized the west in order to resist the Sassanid Persians, and in doing so left the west unable to resist barbarian incursion. Heather rejects Goldsworthy's argument (reviewed later) that political infighting and civil war weakened the Empire as to cause its collapse, citing that the Empire and the republic had previous instances of such strife and was capable of enduring it. Heather further contends that Gibbon's "moral decay" theory provided an insufficient explanation, incongruous to the evidence, yet he tends to agree with Bury's contention that the fall was not inevitable, but rather the result of a contingent chain of events.

In his 1988 work, *The Collapse of Complex Societies*, Joseph Tainter would approach the topic from an altogether different angle, returning to the “plunder economy” theory of Toynbee and Burke and modifying it to argue a new perspective. Tainter interprets the history of civilization as a history of complexity in that societies become more complex as they encounter problems, and establish new layers of government to address the issues involved. Tainter extrapolates this thesis to the history of late antiquity, a time in which Roman agricultural production was decreasing as the population was increasing, resulting in a shortage of resources. The Roman solution for this deficiency was to conquer nearby neighbors and claim their resources, which did apparently succeed in stabilizing the situation for the short term. Yet just as in Toynbee and Burke, the plundering of the Roman Empire did not answer the fundamental problem underlying it, and the increased cost of logistics and an enlarged military needed to maintain the expanded frontier soon exceeded the initial gains of the conquests, further plunging the Empire into increasingly dire economic woes. Tainter comes to the conclusion that the situation became so unbearable to the lives of the Roman citizen in the west that the “fall” was a preferable outcome in which the quality of life of everyday people was perhaps improved by those who replaced the dysfunctional Roman bureaucracy. Now no longer being taxed excessively to maintain a bloated and out of control Empire, average citizens may have preferred the services of governments loyal to local necessity.

In 2005, Bryan Ward-Perkins published *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* and in agreement with Bury and Heather’s claim that the decline of the Empire was not inevitable but a contingent chain of events returned to the former’s thesis that the Empire broke apart by means of a complex number of factors. Unlike Bury

however, Ward-Perkins posited a new web of factors, in consideration of contemporary archaeological evidence, including political strife, external threats and increasingly devalued taxation. Ward-Perkins contends that the external invasions caused irrevocable damage to the provincial economies and taxation systems, paralyzing the ability of the Emperor to equip and pay the legions, leading to both decreased national security as well as dissension among the ranks, inspiring revolts by the foederati and pretender emperors. Constant invasions were the result of the diminished military, in which small amounts of territory of the western portion of the Empire were either captured or declared autonomous under the domain of the Germanic tribes. In opposition to the notion posited by some contemporary historians such as Tainter that the fall was not a negative force on the lives of everyday citizens, Ward-Perkins argues that the fall had a devastating impact on the citizenry, citing modern archeological evidence.

Adrian Goldsworthy, the esteemed British military historian, would approach the study of the decline of the Roman Empire from the pragmatic perspective of war, arguing in *The Complete Roman Army* (2003) that the Empire fell apart as a result of an endless process of civil war between military factions vying for power over the Empire. The army and government structure, argues Goldsworthy, was weakened as a result and was increasingly unable to defend itself against the growing number of enemies perched at the Empire's borders. As civil war diminished central authority and seeded serious economic and social problems, the Empire was eventually unable to confront the foreign foes, who would overcome and conquer them. While Goldsworthy rejected the decadence theories of decline as proposed by Gibbon and to a lesser degree Vegetius, he posits no reasons for the cause of such endless civil war. My thesis will attempt to bridge Gibbon and

Goldsworthy by arguing that while it may not have been a general decadence which inspired such contempt for civic virtue, the rule of law and service, it was the degeneration of Stoic-minded thinking in the aristocracy, as a properly instructed Stoic would not engage in civil war to further his own ambitions, is loyal to the rule of law and is devoted to serving the wellbeing of the civic body.

Other various theories that have been considered as arguments for the decline of the Roman Empire include environmental degradation and limited reserves of precious metal leading to escalatory debasement of currency. The former is succinctly argued by Jared M. Diamond in *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (2005), in which the author argues that artificial deforestation and grazing contributed to desertification while excessive irrigation lead to salinization. These activities perpetuated by the Roman citizenry eventually resulted in the land becoming nonproductive, forcing farmers to relocate in overpopulating cities, escalating disease and resource shortage. The latter theory contends that as the output of the silver mine at Rio Tinto peaked in seventy nine C.E., and as no new significant reserves of precious metal were secured, as with a general trend of peak production of the other mines across the Mediterranean under Roman control, the Empire was forced to debase the currency as demand increased but supply decreased or remained the same, leading to runaway inflation and the atrophy of technological and economic innovation.⁶ Both of these arguments are of secondary consideration and credence in academia (especially as comprehensive theses) but provide themselves as useful perspectives for initiating chains of inquiry, expanding the possible frame of reference for purposes of research and study.

As we have seen, the topic of the decline of the Roman Empire is one of the most exhausted and diverse studies of history, explained by a range of concepts, from elegant general theories to complex and systematic frameworks. While all of the historians surveyed propose reasons for why the Empire declined, or why we perceive it as having declined, none of them, save Vegetius and Gibbon, dare to argue for the cause of such change, the deeper and more fundamental reason why men chose to engage in civil war and kill one another for gold. Through modern Rankean cynicism many historians have rejected psychology, philosophy, and religion as meaningful movers of change, instead focusing on economic and political motives. Goldsworthy, for instance, documents the endless civil war of the third, fourth, and fifth centuries, but fails to sufficiently explain the motivation of such behavior.

My argument is that the economic and political decline of the Empire was only motivated by a psychological decline: the Stoic Emperors were better adept at dealing with crisis and seem to have ruled with relative selflessness and magnanimity, especially when contrasted with the period of anarchy and murder following them during the third century. Fundamentally, my argument is that the abandonment of Stoicism left the Roman leadership without knowledge of how to rule well. While Stoicism is not a political science in the sense that it does not provide the specific schema and mechanism for operation of government, it does prescribe a cosmopolitan worldview in which all human beings are united by the same divinity, one Logos, and so must be treated with impartiality and justice. This notion informs the exercise of a commonwealth, as well as notions of civic duty, civic virtue and universal natural rights.⁷

In sum, while the previous historiographical arguments for the decline of the Roman Empire are accurate and meticulous in the sense of research and collection of data, in depicting the circumstances of the critical time in question, they do not provide an explanation for the motive in the psychological habits of the historical movers. If one chooses to partake in treason and overthrow the rule of law, his mindset must necessarily facilitate that action, and it is not enough to simply speak of the treason's effect, lest we understand the event incompletely. In this sense, Vegetius and Gibbon were not misled, but they lacked the extensive archeological knowledge that we now hold, and so their arguments (in particular Gibbons) have to our current academic culture become classical debunks. We must therefore caution to discard the whole of their reasoning and to defer to the wisdom that character and moral judgments were influential in the formulation of action for ancient peoples. Philosophy was once a lifestyle rather than an academic knowledge, and in realizing this fact, the Stoic emperors can be perceived to have clearly exercised Stoic virtue in action, while the seemingly amoral pretenders to follow did not. Before this chain of reasoning can be examined, Stoicism must first be defined, its nature as a philosophy dissected and its historical prevalence discussed.

Stoicism is the philosophy that contemporary man has more or less forgotten but ironically was the most influential European philosophy from the time of Alexander of Macedon well into the early modern era, profoundly influencing New Testament ethics (most noticeably the writings of Paul), notions of social justice and aristocratic culture.⁸ While Stoicism is a fully developed philosophical system, including disciplines of physics, logic and ethics, for the purposes of this paper I will focus on the latter, as that field informs the behavior of actors.

Stoicism was founded in the early third century B.C.E. by Zeno of Citium. Zeno lectured on a colonnaded porch (Stoa) in Athens and this is seemingly how the philosophy came to be named. The earliest Stoic writings are unknown to us except in a few outstanding fragments and in references mentioned from other period philosophers and historians, complete Stoic works come much later, well into the Common Era⁹¹⁰. While the philosophy evolved over its formative period to be less severe, shedding qualities of self-denial and extreme austerity inherited from Cynicism, it remained from its conception to the days of Marcus Aurelius fundamentally the same.

The Stoic ethical system begins with the claim that much of the pain and suffering in the world is the result of faulty judgment, as the untrained man too readily clings to things outside of his control, and so is disturbed when they are taken from him.¹¹¹² The Stoics argued that the virtuous individual, having cultivated a will in accord with nature (prohairesis), would free himself of such grief.¹³¹⁴ Nature, as defined by the Stoics, refers to the Logos, the universal reason binding together all of humanity, all people being equal and sharing in bonds of fellowship.¹⁵ Living in accordance with reason and virtue, the Stoics held that in order to live properly one must recognize this common reason and the essential value of all people, treating others with fairness and magnanimity.¹⁶ The Stoics held that action and choice were extensions of virtue, and sought to behave constantly in a fashion consistent with those goods; they sought to build a self-sacrificing and tempered character, and so wielded the knowledge necessary to rule others and to be ruled by deferring to those with greater shares of wisdom.¹⁷ The ultimate goal of the Stoic philosopher is to become a “sage,” an individual unperturbed by external misfortune by the wielding of an aegis of virtue.¹⁸ The sage is immune to misfortune; his happiness

determined not by riches and the capricious happenings of fate but by “virtue...in a will which is in agreement with Nature”, a love of goodness, beauty and fairness, satisfied in his purity of character and judgment.¹⁹

The Logos (nature) grants to human beings an appreciation of beauty, truth and love, classically referred to as the “three treasures.” It is upon this appreciation that virtue is founded, as originally postulated through the Platonic tradition.²⁰ The Stoic virtues are temperance (decorum/sophrosyne), justice (lawfulness/dikaiosyne), fortitude (courage/andreia) and wisdom (prudence/sophia). As all share the same nature, the same Logos (in the Christian sense: we are all God’s children), all must be treated fairly, with magnanimity and impartially through the cultivation of justice.²¹ As we naturally appreciate beauty, we must restrain ourselves from ugliness and destructive behaviors and so cultivate temperance, restraining ourselves from unnatural, vicious indulgences and abandonment. Similarly we must love ourselves to assert ourselves in the world; hence Stoics cultivate courage, to endure “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,” to act with spirited expedience when duties call. Finally, the virtue of wisdom is the appreciation and questing after of truth, the prudent tempering of our character and the rational pursuit of an examined life, a search for and application of the knowledge of what is within and outside of human control. Ultimately wisdom is the virtue responsible for informing our opinions of nature correctly by means of the rational process, as misinformed opinions of the nature of the world (i.e. expecting people to drive correctly or hurricanes not to destroy property) often results in agony when events inevitably turn out differently.²²

Stoicism rose to become an influential philosophy by the time that Alexander's great empire was being divided up amongst the Hellenistic successor kings. Stoicism is a philosophy of selfless endurance, of striving toward godliness. The early Stoics used myths such as the story of Heracles, a tale in which the hero had soldiered through a laborious life of service to humanity and in the end became a god, as allegories to explain the tenets of Stoicism. Chrysippus of Soli argued that Homer and Hesiod were in fact Stoics, using a form of allegorical interpretation to delineate Stoic themes in the classical texts.²³ These examples were immediately intelligible to the Greek mindset so much so that "nearly all the successors of Alexander – ... all the principal kings in existence following Zeno – professed themselves Stoic."²⁴

By the middle of the 2nd century B.C.E. Stoicism had influenced the aristocracy of the Hellenistic world but had not yet expanded west of Greece proper in any significant way. While studying at the Stoic school in Athens, Panaetius of Rhodes had a chance encounter with Scipio Africanus, who was himself also a student. A friendship soon developed and in 146 B.C.E. the former traveled to Rome after finishing his education to join Scipio's circle of intellectuals, thinkers and advisors who were then tasked with modernizing the commonwealth.²⁵ The Stoic philosopher remained in service of Rome for the next fifteen years, disseminating notions of Stoic service, ethics and duty at the highest level of the Roman aristocracy, and profoundly influenced the intellectual culture of the period. Panaetius focused on presenting the ethics of Stoicism while in Rome, inspiring contemporary Roman philosophers such as Musonius Rufus, Seneca, Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus to do likewise; his presentation of the philosophy to the Roman

aristocracy greatly influenced the philosophical practice as a lifestyle for the Roman statesmen.²⁶

The philosophy was naturally intelligible to the Roman statesmen, as it was to the Greeks. In the early history of the Republic the Roman citizen valued virtue and selfless duty to the republic before all else. The people of Rome venerated the semi-mythical figure of Cincinnatus who unflinchingly abandoned his farm and family to repel the Gauls as the ideal role model and found the incorruptible and austere Cato the Younger who dared to resist the tyranny of Gaius Julius for sake of upholding his duty to the republic as a living example of the embodiment of their national pride, so inspiring his compatriots to virtue and integrity.²⁷²⁸ Both men embodied the Stoic virtues of temperance, prudence, justice and courage and were interpreted by Livy and Plutarch respectively as being ideal Romans: men who heroically served the community of the republic with no compromise and held loyalty not to individuals or to gods but the idea of what Rome could become, who laid down their lives in dutiful service, with no complaints. Polybian Roman soldiers fielded their own equipment and received no pay, offering their service to war not for a reward but for love of the country and its people.²⁹ The Roman social structure, mythology (itself borrowing heavily from the Greek tradition), patron-client relationship, and its system of laws were also compatible with Stoic conceptions of social justice.

The Roman aristocracy in the years following the advisement of Panaetius began to hire Stoic tutors for their children and the philosophy became ingrained as knowledge of the examined and good life.³⁰ As it had been with the Hellenistic successors, by early antiquity Stoicism had become the philosophy of the imperial life, prevalent not only in

the education of equestrian senators but also at the highest level of power: the emperorship itself. Early exercises in Stoic kingship were abortive and premature, as was the case with Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus (who ordered the suicide of his tutor Seneca), but by the reign of the first of the “Five Good Emperors” in 96 C.E. Stoic wisdom reached an apex, affording to the Roman citizenry rulers who ensured a lengthy period of prosperity, justice and harmony even in the face of mounting external and internal disaster and misfortune, including the devastating “Antonine Plague” and barbarian adventurism.

While Stoicism may have persisted to be influential in the education of the Roman aristocracy, after the death of Emperor and Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius (180 C.E.), there is no evidence to suggest that it was still prevalent as a political culture, or that it had any influence on the behavior of the transitory emperors to follow in the third century, who left no writings which have survived and judging from their recorded actions alone seem to have had no higher principles in mind.³¹ As Christianity became more popular Stoicism appeared in a state of flux, respected by the early Church fathers but falling into disuse as a way of life and a political philosophy. In 529 C.E. Emperor Justinian closed the philosophy schools, judging the pagan character of the Hellenistic philosophies to be at odds with the Christian society he envisioned ministering.³² Subsequently, Stoicism became a more academic philosophy, the writings of Stoics such as Seneca praised for technical usage of Latin rather than for moral guidance. While the ethical content of the philosophy was still praised in theory, its moral merits were often attributed to the subtle influence of the Christian God by contemporary apologists, the

latter of which went so far as to claim that several key Stoic philosophers were in fact Christians all along.³³

While we might be now ready to agree that Stoicism was prevalent during the period in question, we may not yet be ready to agree with the notion that Stoicism had such a significant impact on the Roman aristocracy that it influenced their lifestyle and actions. In order for this latter claim to be true, it must be illustrated that our traditional conception of philosophy, as an academic discipline and knowledge, is at odds with the ancient notion of philosophy. Numerous contemporary political leaders have studied philosophy in modern schools, but only the most generous of us would contend that they are vessels of virtue consistently acting upon philosophical principles. This is precisely what was expected of someone “studying” ancient philosophy: philosophy was not yet then a purely academic field but a way of life, a system for evaluating the good of life and putting that rational process into action, of living authentically to prescribed principles and oaths.³⁴ What philosophy was then might only for the modern reader be understood (haphazardly) as analogous to devout religious practice, albeit nuanced by analytical rather than faith-based reasoning. Indeed, the ancient philosopher was obsessed with practice and spiritual exercise more so than he was fanciful theorems – a good Stoic was one who could lead an army well (holding his spirit above the mire and inspiring his fellows by example), die well, keep his dignity intact during an interrogation, forgive someone who had betrayed him severely, endure the death of a loved one with majesty, act with decorum in the face of catastrophe; extend his virtue to his willful actions, decisions, inclinations and judgments. The evaluation of a philosophy student’s performance in the ancient world was based upon the degree to which he lived his

philosophy authentically, in both thought and action; it was not enough to simply speak the part. This sentiment is none more stressed than in the philosophy of Stoicism, which became the civic religion of the Mediterranean elite, guiding the direction of the imperial sword and pen for at least five centuries.

Pierre Hadot introduced the importance of the “spiritual exercise” in ancient philosophy, defining such as “practices which could be physical, as in dietary regimes, or discursive, as in dialogue and mediation, or intuitive, as in contemplation, but which were all intended to effect a modification and a transformation in the subject who practice them. The philosophy teacher’s discourse could be presented in such a way that the disciple, as auditor, reader, or interlocutor, could make spiritual progress and transform himself within.”³⁵ Hadot, encountering contemporary analytical criticisms of seemingly incoherent and contradictory ancient philosophical works, revolutionized the study of the discipline by arguing that such works were not systematic treatises as the moderns had erroneously assumed, but rather served as dialectical exercises intended to mold the character of the student.³⁶

In this fashion the ancient philosophical teachings were not intended to transmit information (as modern philosophical texts are) but rather “to produce a certain psychic effect in the reader or listener” so that disciples could more wisely “orient themselves in thought, in the life of the city, or in the world.”³⁷ These dialectical exercises “aimed at realizing a transformation of one’s vision of the world and a metamorphosis of one’s personality.”³⁸ Philosophy in the ancient tradition was not simply an abstract knowledge that one could detach him or herself from, but rather required the perpetual attention of the will “[kept] ready at hand at each instant [of] life,” practiced on a constant basis to

achieve serenity and the healthy operation and direction of the soul; philosophy was a sublime knowledge at the core of the student's existence, informing one's behavior and thoughts. The ancient philosophical schools did not attempt to "procure a total and exhaustive explanation of reality, but to link, in an unshakable way, a small group of principles, vigorously articulated together," the discourse serving as didactic meditation on the nature of the world in order to provide "the means [for students] to maintain their psychic equilibrium."³⁹ While ancient philosophical thought was often divided into separate domains of study (i.e. logic/dialectic, physics and ethics) for pedagogic purposes, it was not interpreted as lacking unity in practice; philosophy was practiced as "a single act, renewed at every instant, that one can describe, without breaking its unity, as being the exercise of logic as well as of physics or of ethics, according to the directions in which it is exercised."⁴⁰ In this fashion philosophy constituted a single, unified act, a way of being and of identity, constantly in mind and of gross influence in the disposition of the character; there existed no division between theoretical and practical, philosophy was a way of life. In the case of the Stoics, the practice of premeditation of possible future misfortune served to inform the character of students on the basis of prescribed principles, and so tempered mental habits with virtue by means of the rational process.⁴¹

Finally it must be stressed that ancient philosophy was not only tasked with transforming the mental inclinations, desires and judgments of its students but also their actions so that "the animated words of the philosopher are at the service of the philosopher's way of life."⁴² One of the most striking examples of this maxim is demonstrated in Xenophon. Socrates, having been cornered to provide an explanation of the nature of justice in argument by the sophist Hippias, responds with a typically Stoic

sentiment: “Instead of speaking of it, I make it understood by my acts.”⁴³ Epictetus would expand upon this logic in his framing of the Roman brand of Stoicism which became prevalent during the reign of the Five Good Emperors, summarizing it aphoristically in the *Enchiridion*:

Never call yourself a philosopher, nor talk a great deal among the unlearned about theorems, but act conformably to them. Thus, at an entertainment, don't talk how persons ought to eat, but eat as you ought. For remember that in this manner Socrates also universally avoided all ostentation. And when persons came to him and desired to be recommended by him to philosophers, he took and recommended them, so well did he bear being overlooked. So that if ever any talk should happen among the unlearned concerning philosophic theorems, be you, for the most part, silent. For there is great danger in immediately throwing out what you have not digested. And, if anyone tells you that you know nothing, and you are not nettled at it, then you may be sure that you have begun your business. For sheep don't throw up the grass to show the shepherds how much they have eaten; but, inwardly digesting their food, they outwardly produce wool and milk. Thus, therefore, do you likewise not show theorems to the unlearned, but the actions produced by them after they have been digested.⁴⁴

Simplicius, writing contemporaneously to Epictetus, confirmed the Stoic philosopher's doctrine and disdain for ostentatious study, claiming in this commentary of the philosophical manual that “the real essence of man is his rational soul, which makes use of the body, as its instrument of action.”⁴⁵ Action in accordance with underlying principles is the final form of an instruction in ancient philosophy.⁴⁶

As we have substantiated the claim that Stoicism was both prevalent in the period in question and where it was prevalent it was instructed in a fashion so that it was meant to transform the character and actions of its students, we can reasonably conclude that the presence or absence of such a system of thought would have influenced the behaviors of

the historical actors under examination. While we cannot directly correlate the mental habits of the aristocracy with their recorded actions, we can wisely consider the former as a motivating factor in their determination in a way which is less rigorous and apparent when considering contemporary equivalents, as the didactic nature of the respective education and discourse varies fundamentally. Herein lies the critical fault of our modern historiography: having become accustomed to more theoretical education in our time, we have understandably discounted the transformative nature of ancient philosophy, and so overlooked it as a force behind the ancient politic, instead tending to imprecisely relegate our historical sketches to other exclusive domains of inquiry.⁴⁷ While the influence of Stoic philosophy in leadership can be observed in the lives of republican and early Principate era statesmen, for purposes of this paper we will examine the benevolent and stable reign of the “Five Good Emperors” (96-180 C.E.), as those years of rule chronologically contrast with the century of philosophical abandon to follow; the third century and its apparent crisis, rife with anarchy and murder, provide the ultimate foil for purpose of comparison with the preceding century.

While traditional republican ideals were upheld with varying levels of integrity by the emperors of the Principate leading up to Titus, Domitian (81-96 C.E.) abolished the rule of law, marginalized the senate and elected himself as divine monarch.⁴⁸ Maligned as a tyrant for his forceful execution and removal of senators and for his autocratic micromanagement, Domitian was finally assassinated by court officials after a fifteen year reign of terror, a senatorial decree of *damnatio memoriae* levied against him.⁴⁹⁵⁰ Marcus Cocceius Nerva, the first of the “Five Good Emperors” and a lifetime public servant since the time of Nero, subsequently was elected to the imperial office by vote of

the senate and immediately set out to reform the state. Nerva condemned the brutality and arbitrariness of his predecessor and moved to restore the senate and judicial system's faith in the integrity of the Roman commonwealth of laws, banning the execution and unlawful expulsion of senators and the kangaroo trial, returning illegally confiscated property, as well as granting amnesty to those who had been exiled or had escaped into hiding.⁵¹

Nerva took a particular interest in the wellbeing and civil liberties of the poor and orphans. The emperor passed legislation to reduce taxes levied against the poor, granted 60 million sesterces of soil to the landless impoverished, waived the inheritance tax on condition of need and offered public loans to citizens on the condition that 5% interest be paid in the form of social services to orphans and needy families in a series of alimentary laws which would be eventually expanded upon by the other "Good Emperors."⁵² In order to afford these public welfare reforms the emperor reduced a number of splendid projects originally enacted by Domitian to compete with the majesty of the reign of Caesar Augustus, including several expensive games, races and religious festivals, as well as publicly auctioning the prior emperor's vast holdings and possessions.⁵³ Rather than inflate his glory by constructing self-praising monuments as prior emperors tended to indulge, Nerva renovated the Roman system of roads, erected a much-needed granary, and expanded the strained aqueduct system, greatly improving commerce and public health.⁵⁵

As the elderly emperor's health began to falter a conspiracy soon brewed in the military ranks, threatening to destabilize the realm.⁵⁶ The legions, loyal to the memory of the soldierly Domitian, who had led them to numerous victories against the barbarians,

demanded his deification and became increasingly disenchanted with the emperorship as it pardoned the senators considered implicit in the treasonous overthrow.⁵⁷ Nerva refused to treacherously surrender the officials responsible to the Praetorian Guard, instead remaining loyal to the senate, and the situation loomed toward civil war.⁵⁸ In 97 C.E. following an abortive coup attempt by Calpurnius Crassus the Praetorian Guard besieged the imperial palace, and having kidnapped the emperor, forced him to decree the surrender of those responsible for the murder of Domitian, leading to their consequent executions.⁵⁹ Nerva found himself in a position of spoiled authority, his rule effectively devalued by the schemes of disloyal military men, and in order to avoid civil war and the devastation of the realm sought to abdicate the throne, electing the then general Marcus Ulpius Traianus (Trajan) as his successor and co-consul.⁶⁰ Thus began the Nerva-Antonian tradition of electing successors on the basis of merit, ability and virtue rather than on family ties, as the latter had been commonly practiced previously. In the words of Cassius Dio:

Thus Trajan became Caesar and later emperor, although there were relatives of Nerva living. But Nerva did not esteem family relationship above the safety of the State, nor was he less inclined to adopt Trajan because the latter was a Spaniard instead of an Italian or Italot, inasmuch as no foreigner had previously held the Roman sovereignty; for he believed in looking at a man's ability rather than at his nationality.⁶¹

Nerva's humble decision to adopt a man with a greater share of ability and virtue to replace him, and so keep the commonwealth intact, has been cynically criticized by several modern historians as an exercise in necessity rather than a deliberate and reasoned process to establish adoption as a mode of succession, an attempt at restoring his battered reputation and appeasing the conspirators so as to guarantee his survival.⁶² In this sense it

is interpreted that the election of Trajan was the inevitable consequence of a military faction's interloping into imperial matters, as the new emperor was privy to the political machinations and intrigues of the age. This interpretation of events fails in that it does not account for the continuation of the adoption process well beyond Trajan's reign, the continued state service of Nerva even after his defacto abdication and the related character and virtue of the man himself, the practice of which is incongruous with his supposed latter-day corruption.⁶³⁶⁴ Whether or not Trajan was elected to appease the Praetorian conspirators is in the end perhaps irrelevant for purposes of this paper, as Nerva's replacement continued to rule in a fashion consistent with the Stoic character.⁶⁵

The political reforms of Nerva reveal general principles at work behind all of the Five Good Emperor's behavior: notions of civil liberties, welfare and the innate worth of all human beings, concepts which have been illustrated in previous pages to have derived principally from Stoicism. Rather than lust for the most power and wealth possible, sacrificing the public good in the wake of his ascension to glory, positioning himself as a divine emperor to be served as a god, Nerva elected to rather, in the spirit of Stoic justice and prudence, defer to the wisdom of the commonwealth's elected officials and to minister the needs of the many, all of whom are bound by the same divinity, the Logos. As we shall see, this is in stark contrast to the behavior of not only Nerva's predecessors in the Flavian dynasty, but also the base despots to follow in the third century.

The reign of Trajan began as his predecessor with an attendance to duty: informed of his election as emperor, Trajan opted to stay on the German frontier rather than immediately indulge in the fanfares of Rome, bolstering the threatened security of the region by inspecting the integrity of the *limes*.⁶⁶ Satisfied with the preparations in

Germania, the new emperor turned his attention to the faltering Danube frontier, which had since the administration of Domitian been pacified by the paying of regular tribute, but had in recent years turned volatile, King Decebalus of the Dacians raiding with abandon into Roman territory and pillaging the land.⁶⁷ Having fulfilled his duty as general, Trajan now turned to Rome to fulfill his obligations as emperor, at once adopting a conciliatory tone toward the senate, granted a measure of approbation for his respected character and virtue.⁶⁸ Trajan, while an absolute monarch in the same way his Flavian forefathers had been, chose to wisely consider rather than arrogantly reject the voice of the electorate, respecting their station and duties in the spirit of Stoic justice. In this fashion Trajan wielded the same power as prior emperors but chose not to indulge in it, tempering his desire with prudence, and so winning the applause of the elected officials, who could rightly respect him without fearing him; while Trajan adopted the defacto absolute powers of Domitian, he used such powers for the good of the state rather than to satiate himself, choosing a rough life of soldiering against the enemies of Rome over the palace bacchanalia of Nero and the late Tiberius, not a tyrant but a servant of the public trust.⁶⁹

While many of the emperors preceding Trajan tended to centralize authority in fear of encroachment on their personal share of power, Trajan delegated and/or shared the position of consul and other high offices with merited and wise men, expanding the civil liberties of the citizens. In Trajan the Roman aristocracy perceived what we contemporary observers would rightly label the mythologized philosopher king of Plato, a leader with the virtue to resist corruption and the liberality to ensure the wellbeing and freedom of his people as a paramount duty.⁷⁰ The examples of Trajan and Nerva

convinced the Roman aristocracy that liberty and absolute rule were, contrary to traditional republican ideology, compatible. Tacitus spoke highly of this newfound marriage of virtue and power in *Agricola*:

Now at last our spirit is returning. And yet, though at the dawn of a most happy age, Nerva Caesar blended things once irreconcilable - sovereignty and freedom - though Trajan is now daily augmenting the prosperity of the time.⁷¹

As Trajan became aware of the economic inequities plaguing the commonwealth, a growing division between the upper and lower classes contributing to alarming deprivation and material inequality, he devoted considerable state funds to expand the alimentary system begun under Nerva, improving the welfare of citizens most in need, particularly orphans.⁷² In annexing Dacia, Arabia and Mesopotamia the emperor directed the acquired wealth of his conquests to the construction of numerous public works including libraries, granaries, aqueducts, baths (founded on Nero's *Domus Aurea*), harbors, markets and bridges, affording to him the adoration of the general population.⁷³

In addition to passing legislation to improve the material wellbeing of the citizenry at state (and by extension of absolute rule, his own) expense, Trajan also adopted a relatively cosmopolitan and liberal social policy, instructing his provincial ministers to afford to Roman citizens freedom of religion, as long as their worship not endanger the state, a sentiment echoed by the other "Good Emperors." In this fashion Trajan relates in a letter to Pliny the Younger that while Christians should be punished if found to be engaging in divisive behavior, in other matters, magistrates should exercise a sort of statutory neglect and tolerate their existence, that they should not be molested and that they should refrain from prosecuting citizens without evidence, "as it is introducing a very dangerous precedent, and by no means agreeable to the spirit of the age."⁷⁴ Trajan is

alluding to the widespread influence of the Hellenistic philosophies, chief amongst them Stoicism, and must have interpreted himself as living in an enlightened age, electing himself to ensure human decency and justice be afforded to all people of the *cosmopolis*. Trajan also, perhaps in accordance with the same underlying principle, adopted, albeit in a seemingly less systematic way, a liberal policy toward the opposite sex, affording to several court women honorific titles, office, monuments and inscriptions.⁷⁵

Having spent the majority of his reign on the frontiers of Germania, Dacia and Mesopotamia keeping the enemies of Rome at bay, Trajan finally succumbed to disease while still contesting to seize the latter region from the Parthians. Trajan's final order was the adoption of his most able general, Publius Aelius Hadrianus (Hadrian), to the emperorship, so continuing the tradition established by Nerva of adoption of successors on the basis of virtue.

If we are to believe the infamous *Historia Augusta*, Hadrian was a friend of Epictetus and a lover of philosophy, possibly having studied under the Stoic master at Nicopolis.⁷⁶ Whether or not we can substantiate the fact that Hadrian was himself a Stoic, he was surely exposed to the philosophy in his classical aristocratic education (which as we might recall, had commonly included Stoic tutorship since the time of Panaetius), and he is described as living the ascetic lifestyle of a Stoic philosopher by Cassius Dio:

...he reformed and corrected in many cases practices and arrangements for living that had become too luxurious ...he everywhere led a rigorous life and either walked or rode on horseback on all occasions, never once at this period setting foot in either a chariot or a four-wheeled vehicle. He covered his head neither in hot weather nor in cold, but alike amid German snows and under scorching Egyptian suns he went about with his head bare.⁷⁷

In any case, Hadrian proved to be an exemplary leader, at once a patron of the arts, a polymath, a soldier's soldier, and a conscientious administrator. The impact of the emperor's reign in influencing the norms and social order of the Roman Empire was enormous, perhaps best summarized by the funeral oration of Aelius Aristides. Herein we glimpse at the foundation of the "society of equal laws, governed by equality of status and of speech... of rulers who respect the liberty of their subjects above all else" which would eventually flourish under Marcus Aurelius:⁷⁸

But there is that which very decidedly deserves as much attention and admiration now as all the rest together. I mean your magnificent citizenship with its grand conception, because there is nothing like it in the records of all mankind. Dividing into two groups all those in your empire - and with this word I have indicated the entire civilized world - you have everywhere appointed to your citizenship, or even to kinship with you, the better part of the world's talent, courage, and leadership, while the rest you recognized as a league under your hegemony. Neither sea nor intervening continent are bars to citizenship, nor are Asia and Europe divided in their treatment here. In your empire all paths are open to all. No one worthy of rule or trust remains an alien, but a civil community of the World has been established as a Free Republic under one, the best, ruler and teacher of order; and all come together as into a common civic center, in order to receive each man his due.⁷⁹

For purposes of this discussion we will avoid summarizing Hadrian's great artistic and literary triumphs and instead focus on how his actions contributed to a society governed in the spirit of Stoic magnanimity and fairness.

Hadrian took an interest in the wellbeing of slaves, mitigating their treatment by enforcing a series of regulations intended to alleviate the common practices of abuse, including legalizing marriage, restricting excessive corporeal punishment, and demanding the emancipation of slaves whose owners had violated sales contracts (for example: if the

seller stipulated that the sold slave was not be used as a prostitute, and the buyer deviated from the contract, the slave was freed).⁸⁰

The emperor's political policy focused on fortifying the already existing borders of the empire whilst guiding the rehabilitation of the commonwealth after the decade of draining frontier wars under the administration of Trajan. Accordingly, Hadrian adopted the practice of extensively touring the provinces in order to personally attend to the battle readiness of the legions, inspecting and constructing fort systems in threatened areas (the most famous of which: "Hadrian's Wall"), ordering public works where necessary to improve the welfare of the citizenry, quelling upsets (Such as at Alexandria), regulating public debts and generally streamlining the operation of local government so as to benefit the operation of the commonwealth.⁸¹ In this way Hadrian continued the tradition of Nerva and Trajan by devoting the great share of his time to matters of state and the public good, indulging rarely save in the occasional hunt, an activity he tempered so as not to neglect his duty.⁸² While the military had become accustomed to constant expansion and grew restless in the peace of his reign, Hadrian inspired confidence in his men by his soldierly character and strict regime of training. Accordingly, the emperor had the opportunity to devote state expenses to building programs aimed at securing a better life for the general population which would have otherwise been used to finance costly wars of expansion and punishment.⁸³

Hadrian took a particular interest in the fairness of the law, which had by his time become labyrinthine and unintelligible to the common man, constituted as a jumble of thousands of senatorial and imperial edicts dating from 67 B.C.E.⁸⁴ The emperor ordered Salvius Julianus to modernize the law into a coherent and unified whole, the result of

which was a new code of laws which could service the needs of the many by course of Praetorian and aedilician jurisprudence. Furthering the liberal policies of his predecessor, Hadrian's rescript to Minicius Fundanus reiterated Trajan's decree on the Christians, affording to that alien religion a relative degree of tolerance, while his election of a non-Roman to the presidency of the Epicurean School at Athens underscores his disposition as a ruler of a cosmopolis rather than simply of Rome alone, anticipating notions of racial and ethnic tolerance on the basis a common Logos.⁸⁵⁸⁶ We might be prone to believe that examples similar to this latter case are what must have inspired Aelius Aristides to speak so passionately of the emperor's reign in his oration, as Rome had once been the hostile enemy of the "barbarians" and seemed to, under the wise administration of the "Five Good Emperors," adopt a more universal association.

The reign of the next adopted emperor, Titus Aurelius Fulvus Boionius Arrius Antoninus, entitled Pius by the senate for his exemplary devotion to the divine order, was one of the most peaceful administrations the empire had yet seen, marked by internal flourishing as well as a external status quo ensured through skillful diplomacy.⁸⁷ As was the case with the adoptive emperors before him, Antoninus Pius paid special attention to the plight of the poor and in particular orphaned girls, further expanding the alimentary system of loans intended to redirect state funds on the basis of local necessity.⁸⁸ The emperor avoided expensive and lavish cultural and artistic projects, as his predecessor intended to indulge in, and focused on the creation of public works such as granaries, roads and aqueducts.⁸⁹ Provincial magistrates were ordered to keep the costs of administration at a minimum and to balance their budgets, the use of informers was abolished and the emperor disbursed his own funds to distribute aid during times of

famine, fire and flooding, remaining in Rome so as to focus on social matters and to refrain from burdening the provinces with the expense of imperial reception.⁹⁰ Antoninus Pius enacted numerous legislations protecting the rights of slaves, freedmen and bastards, banning the unlawful murder of servants, as well as factoring the wishes of women into marriage law.⁹¹ Julius Capitolinus, writing contemporaneously, praised the benevolent reign of the emperor: "With such care did he govern all peoples under him that he looked after all things and all men as if they were his own."⁹²

In matters of foreign policy Antoninus adopted an increasingly cosmopolitan disposition, questing to cultivate long lasting peace and stability across the realm by establishing congenial embassies with kingdoms adjacent to the Empire's borders, tempering his international discourse with reason and averting a serious war with the dangerous Parthian kingdom through use of firm but respectful diplomacy.⁹³ In this fashion Antoninus Pius practiced Stoic prudence, and so spared the commonwealth the devastating effect of punitive war, a propensity of his imperial forefathers.

The character of Antoninus Pius served as a model for the most explicitly Stoic and last of the "Five Good Emperors," Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus.⁹⁴ The character of Marcus Aurelius might be best glimpsed in several entries from his philosophical journal which has survived to the modern age, a collection of reminders intended to initiate spiritual exercise, the *Meditations*:

...I have seen the beauty of good, and the ugliness of evil, and have recognized that the wrongdoer has a nature related to my own – not of the same blood or birth, but the same mind, and possessing a share of the divine [logos]. (2.1)

If thought is something we share, then so is reason – what makes us reasoning beings.

If so, then the reason that tells us what to do and what not to do is also shared.

And if so, we share a common law.

And thus, are fellow citizens.

And fellow citizens of something.

And in that case, our state must be the world. (4.4)

Not to be driven this way and that, but always to behave with justice and see things as they are.

(4.22)

My city and state are Rome – as Antoninus. But as a human being? The world. So for me, “good” can only mean what’s good for both communities. (5.43)

Be satisfied if you can live the rest of your life, however short, as your nature demands. Focus on that, and don’t let anything distract you. You’ve wandered all over and finally realized that you never found what you were after: how to live. Not in syllogisms, not in money, or fame, or self-indulgence. Nowhere.

– Then where is it to be found?

In doing what human nature requires.

– How?

Through first principles. Which should govern your intentions and your actions.

–What principles?

Those to do with good and evil. That nothing is good except what leads to fairness, and self-control, and courage, and free will [the Stoic virtues]. And nothing bad except what does the opposite. (8.1)

Herein we glimpse the psychological culture Marcus Aurelius and his predecessors must have been exposed to via the aristocratic education of the age, informing their behavior as statesmen and citizens of a universal world. As with the other Stoic-minded emperors preceding him, Marcus Aurelius would also rule in accordance with these underlying liberal principles, establishing an administration of unprecedented freedom, decency and equity, a constitutional monarchy in service of a commonwealth bound by the rule of law rather than autocratic whim, inspiring the writers of the *Historia*

Augusta to entitle him Plato's philosopher king.⁹⁵ Cassius Dio lamented the passing of the honorific emperor as signaling the end of Rome's golden age and ushering an age of rust and decay, while Herodian called him "the perfect emperor" and praised the emperor's fair criteria for electing government officials: "he preferred men who were modest in manner and moderate in their way of life, for he considered these virtues to be the only fit and enduring possessions of the soul."⁹⁶ Marcus was said to be concerned with excellence and to have been a notable lover of classical texts, philosophy, poetry and the whole college of liberal arts, commonly granted audience to his subjects regardless of social prestige and wealth, and by example of his "blameless character" inspired those under his charge to imitate his virtue, producing an imperial court comprised of learned and wise men.⁹⁷ Marcus sought to establish a democratic society bound by freedom of speech and other civil liberties.⁹⁸ Having acquired a copy of the works of Epictetus through his tutor Rusticus, Marcus adopted the Stoic way of life sometime during his formative years spent as a servant of the state and elect of Hadrian.⁹⁹ Yet Marcus not only was an inheritor of the eloquence and fair-mindedness of his adopted father, but also the fortitude of Trajan and Hadrian, personally commanding the Roman legions against the belligerent tribes of the Quadi and Marcomanni along the German frontier.

Marcus' exceptional devotion to Stoic justice is underscored by his election of his adopted brother, Lucius Verus, to the emperorship following the death of Antoninus Pius. Having been declared emperor alone by the senate following the death of his adoptive father, Marcus immediately called for the co-election of his brother, in accordance with Hadrian's original wishes.¹⁰⁰ While Marcus Aurelius could have easily asserted sole authority, and so acquired a greater share of wealth and power allotted to him, the fair

emperor opted to instead honor his adoptive grandfather's decree, and to partially cede power in deference to the wisdom of his decision. Yet Marcus recognized the moral weakness and decadence of his adopted brother, his poor military skill, his tendency to indulge in debauchery and amusements, and so had the prudence to surround him with wise advisors, skilled generals and philosophers when he was dispatched to lead the forces of Rome against the stirring Parthian threat in the east.¹⁰¹ It was this same capacity for faith in the vicious which would later undo the marriage of "sovereignty and freedom" forged from the time of Nerva, as Marcus selected his unreformed and unstable son Commodus to succeed him.

Marcus, in the tradition of his forbears, devoted his chief labor to improving the equity of the legal system and expanding the civil liberties of the citizenry.¹⁰² The emperor elected the most capable men to positions of high office, deferring to the skill of others in matters he was ignorant to, and sought the council of wise and virtuous minds, summoning experts and philosophers to advise him soundly on matters of legislation, extending Nerva's criteria of adoption to that of court officers and the everyday operation of government.¹⁰³ When a provincial governor, Avidius Cassius of Syria, rebelled and claimed the throne while Marcus was on campaign against the Germanians, Marcus tempered his response with justice and prudence, trying the conspirators with due process before the senate rather than passing a summary judgment, illegally imprisoning them or executing them.¹⁰⁴ Rather than respond severely to the situation, Marcus passed a statute legislating that provincial governors could not serve in home provinces, aimed at reducing the threat of rebellion.¹⁰⁵ In order to finance the many counterattacks and renovations necessary to sustain the empire in the face of mounting pressure originating

across the Danube, the *Historia Augusta* relates to us that Marcus publicly auctioned the imperial furniture, trinkets and artworks.¹⁰⁶ While we must caution against taking the colorful *Historia Augusta* at face value, such an anecdote seems plausible considering the philosopher king's disdain for superficial materiality and his professed love of the common good.¹⁰⁷

Marcus ministered to the wellbeing of his subjects while simultaneously and continuously assaulted by both war and plague, the latter of which was brought to Italy by the victorious legions of Lucius Verus returning from Mesopotamia. Rather than restrict civil liberties during the difficult and trying periods of his administration, as tyrants since the time of Dionysius of Syracuse tend to do, Marcus positioned freedom and liberty as natural and inalienable rights.¹⁰⁸ In this fashion Marcus Aurelius rightfully earned the lavish praise of his contemporaries by furnishing a just and decent commonwealth.

While the flaws of Marcus Aurelius were few, and while his character seldom deviated from Stoic principles, where there was flaw, it was devastating. Marcus' decision to elect his biological son as his successor was perhaps the most critical blunder of antiquity: Commodus served as a divisive role model for all the future emperors to follow, and his character, his savagery, his unbridled lecherousness, legitimized base greed as a policy and quality of leadership. Rather than adopt a successor indifferently on the basis of ability, Marcus Aurelius, perhaps under duress of disease, adopted a replacement not yet a man – who while afforded the same quality tutors as had instructed his father, nevertheless was corrupt in character.¹⁰⁹ Herein the greatest flaw of Marcus Aurelius is revealed: a greatness of heart too liberal, too forgiving and too

accommodating. While the Stoic philosopher is liable to forgive the transgressions of others, in the case of selecting an emperor the subject must be excellent. The emperor in his final days, fearing that his son might become a tyrant in the fashion of Nero or Domitian if tempted by the prospect of absolute power in his youth, summoned his advisors to his deathbed at Vindobona and compelled them swear to carefully guide the behavior of his son to that befitting a virtuous and temperate prince.¹¹⁰ Marcus succumbed to his disease in March of 180 C.E.

At first the plea of his father was obediently executed by the tutors entrusted to Commodus, and his leisure was moderated on the basis of health.¹¹¹ It was at this point that another faction of court officials began to meddle into affairs, lobbying the emperor to leave the meager conditions and rough life of the Danube frontier, where Marcus' campaign of subjugating the belligerent tribes was not yet complete, in order to enjoy the pleasures and entertainments of Rome.¹¹² Leaving the frontier, Commodus took to a hedonistic life of indulgence, depleting the empire's wealth on lavish and cruel exhibitions, games and festivals, and increasingly neglected matters of state, relegating the government's administration to various favorite substitutes who preyed on his baser instincts and so won his favor.¹¹³ One such advisor, Perennis, "driven by his insatiable lust for money," poisoned the ear of the young emperor with suspicions, convincing him to execute most of the advisors his father had appointed to him, and confiscated their property.¹¹⁴ In order to fund his entertainments the young emperor overtaxed, and in some cases, simply confiscated the property of, the senator class, in concert with a general marginalization of their office.¹¹⁵ In this fashion Commodus was "not naturally wicked but, on the contrary, as guiltless as any man that ever lived. His great simplicity,

however, together with his cowardice, made him the slave of his companions, and it was through them that he at first, out of ignorance, missed the better life and then was led on into lustful and cruel habits, which soon became second nature."¹¹⁶

When Commodus did find the occasion to turn from his endless bacchanalia and rule himself he labored to rename the various months, ships, legions, monuments, gods and cities of the realm after his own titles, establishing an extensive cult of personality in which he fancied himself as the founder of Rome and the world, a living and absolute god.¹¹⁷ With delusions of grandeur fed to him by sycophantic company, Commodus initiated a reign of terror against the people of Rome, slaying numerous innocent public and private citizens. Book 73 of Cassius Dio chronicles this bloody time, in which a multitude of men loyal to the Stoic principles of Marcus Aurelius and his predecessors were brutally disposed of, the breadth of which might only be summarized as such: "Commodus was guilty of many unseemly deeds, and killed a great many people."¹¹⁸ The decadent emperor declared his era the one and only golden age of Rome.¹¹⁹ Malnourished in education and absent knowledge of the good, and of man's civic duties, Commodus and his successors' behavior became degenerate, intoxicated by the allure of power, and in service of themselves alone.

Disturbingly, the reign of Commodus represents one of the most stable periods in the next century of history, secured in years by the bittersweet achievements of his virtuous forefathers, whose constructions were stubborn to collapse entirely under the corrupt emperor's mismanagement. The years following Commodus' assassination saw a nearly endless stream of civil war and political strife, only capriciously alleviated by the temporary tyranny of the Severan dynasty, itself founded on treason, the end product of

the brutal culling of a throng of contesting pretender emperors who had risen to lay claim to the empire. The will of the senate, of the law, and of tradition, became irrelevant considerations to this new breed of leadership informed by the poor precedents of Commodus: military might was to be exercised to acquire the most for personal gain, and the good life involved excess, gold and leisure. The situation became so deplorable that following the assassination of Commodus' successor Pertinax by the Praetorian Guard in March of 193 C.E., the emperorship itself was publicly auctioned by the conspirators to the highest bidder.¹²⁰ As if the state of Rome could suffer no greater dishonor, a bidding war soon followed in a shouting match outside of the Praetorian camp, resulting in the election of Didius Julianus.¹²¹ Generals in three different parts of the empire commanding three legions each (Pescennius Niger; Syria, Septimius Severus; Pannonia, Clodius Albinus; Britain) seized upon this opportunity to challenge the new emperor's authority, plunging the realm into a civil war of succession.¹²² This anecdote serves as a good illustration of the sort of politics that would dominate the third century, a time in which the stable constitutional monarchy and commonwealth of Marcus Aurelius was replaced by a series of transitory military dictatorships.

While in the past the emperorship was inhabited by equestrians who had been groomed all their lives to become emperors, treated to the best tutors in order to refine their eloquence, rhetoric and morals, and whom commonly held other government positions prior to their election so as to prepare them for office, by the time of the "Crisis of the Third Century" (235-284 C.E.) that high office was commonly claimed by relatively ignorant military men, who came to power often by instrument of treason, murder or overthrow – made possible by the command of their armies. Abandoning their

posts to contest the throne, these “barracks emperors” greatly endangered the security of the state, as moving their legions to engage in civil war, they left sections of the frontier open to the threat of barbarian adventurism. The situation was so dire that in 271 C.E. Aurelian, then in control of Rome, was compelled to construct a new set of walls around the city to protect it from the real threat of a direct attack, the near countryside ravished by such barbarian incursions.¹²³ Throughout the third century dozens of soldier “emperors” contested the throne, many of whom ruled for less than two years while simultaneously opposed by other existing pretenders who warred against them, culminating in seemingly limitless cycle of civil war and assassination which broke the empire into three separate states by 258 C.E.: the Gallic Empire, the Palmyrene Empire and the prefecture of Rome.

Accorded to this perpetual strife was a general decline in the rights and wellbeing of the citizenry. The role of the elected official operating local councils, provincial assemblies and the senate declined, marginalized by the introduction of a new sort of martial administrator into the equestrian class, so that by 282 C.E. the senate ceased to function as a legislative and judicial body.¹²⁴ Cassius Dio reports that Severus’ final order to his sons before his death was to “live in harmony, enrich the soldiers, and scorn all others.”¹²⁵ In this fashion the soldier replaced learned men of senatorial rank as governor, legate and emperor.

The society was stratified into two classes: those who held military power, and so built vast manors (*latifundia*) to finance their position by virtue of a “house economy”, and the poor, who paralyzed by the “illegal extortions of soldiery and officialdom” endemic to the age, sought refuge with the former.¹²⁶ Herein we observe the beginnings

of manorialism and of feudal life, as the everyday citizen could no longer rely on the imperial government, powerless and depleted by endless struggle, to meet everyday needs, and so pledged allegiance to manor lords for purpose of survival. In matters of economy, hyperinflation and debasement of the currency, as well as the disruption, banditry and lawlessness caused by the numerous civil wars, contributed to a general stagnation of commerce. The imperial currency was accordingly devalued, and barter soon prevailed.¹²⁷ While in the past citizens volunteered for public service for a love of country, peasants now found themselves in indentured servitude to local lords, as they were unable to afford the various additional taxes levied upon them to finance the numerous military retinues of government, and so surrendered their rights to alleviate debts.¹²⁸ While under the stable reign of the “Five Good Emperors” a vast, interdependent trade network, regulated by a “highly organized system of transport and marketing,” spread goods throughout the empire, and so offered to citizens an abundance of resources, the instability of the third century fatally disrupted the system, and so the peasants were forced to rely exclusively on local agrarian economy.¹²⁹

By the time Diocletian restored central authority to the Empire in 284 C.E. after five decades of anarchy the character of the Roman state and society had been indelibly altered. The benevolent ideals of the republic and of the commonwealth, bound by Stoic principles, served as only historical memory; a new generation, malnourished of classical education, had assumed power and rejected tradition. The Roman state, once a polity of law and reason, was by the age of Constantine ruled by military men who claimed authority by will of force. Serfdom would follow as social order, the bastard product of a most bloody time, hindering the development of civil liberties until recent centuries.

Discussion

In the end we must admit that the “Five Good Emperors” were connected by a common spirit of civic duty, service and virtue. These men are isolated from their contemporaries because of their character: they served the commonwealth first, and seemed to esteem public service above private want, a disposition which was inversely held by the mediocre and tyrannical “barracks emperors” to follow. Whether or not we attribute this spirit to Stoicism is questionable (We might consider the prevalence of other Hellenistic systems and the Platonic virtue ethic), but we must concede that these men had some quality in them which can rightly be identified as a knowledge of how to rule human beings well – their reigns represented an unprecedented period of human flourishing, decency, cultural/artistic patronage and internal peace. It is not enough to contend, as William H. McNeil might argue, that the chaos of the third century, and the subsequent decline in respect for the emperorship, was initiated by a power vacuum produced by the Antonine Plague.

Power vacuums of sorts were created upon every new adoption of our five emperors, and the aristocracy had the wisdom to accept the rule of law, rather than cannibalize itself in an attempt to seize the most power. Ultimately, I contend that all action is precipitated and informed by knowledge of the good: it is possible to rise above our barbaric infancy, where our own indulgences must be fulfilled first, a ‘wolf’s life’ as Marcus Aurelius might refer to it, and serve the common good. The purpose of this paper has been to suggest that the behavior of the five Nervan-Antonian emperors was informed, at least superficially, by Stoic principles, namely: behavior consistent in character to the practice of Stoic virtues informed by a physical system positing that all

human beings are bound by the same essence and so must be treated with equity and liberality. This preceding notion was justified by an examination of ancient philosophical education, wherein it was argued that such a tradition sought to transform the actions and willful inclinations of its students. Basic historical evidence was used to substantiate the fact that Stoicism was prevalent during the period, and grossly influenced the education of the Roman aristocracy since at least the time of Scipio Africanus.

In sum, the logic of the argument was posited as follows in (a)+(b)+(c)=d:

- a. Stoicism is a philosophy of action and psychic transformation; where it was taught it was most plausibly taught in this fashion.
- b. Stoicism was prevalent; it was taught.
- c. Stoic principles appear to underscore the behavior of actors.
- d. Since the case seemingly conforms to both (a), (b) and (c), Stoicism could have reasonably influenced the behavior of the historical actors.

While I may not contend that Gibbon's select emperors were all Stoic philosophers, I must adhere to the judgment that Stoicism influenced their behavior in a way that it did not the emperors of the third century, that it became the prevailing philosophical spirit of the ruling elite in the same fashion French culture was imitated by the Russian tsarists of more recent centuries. Stoicism seems to be the most plausible connecting thread behind the common justice, prudence, fortitude, temperance and cosmopolitan policy of these five good administrations, a notion which Gibbon understandably could not decipher fully, as our knowledge of Stoicism has only matured

in the last century. Had Gibbon read the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius, he might have fixed the sublime puzzle in his mind's eye, and in the final passages of his great work restrained from passing such harsh censure on the Christians, instead elucidating his argument by demonstrating the importance of Stoicism as a system of civic responsibility. Having abandoned the civic mindedness of such a system of thought, it was only inevitable that daggers met backs, putting the anarchy of the third century into context.

This topic is so important because without factoring Stoicism into history as a grossly influential force, we only glimpse at an incomplete record of events. It is as if setting out to chronicle the history of Ireland, we mention that the druidic tradition was abolished by the high kings without considering the missionary work and influence of the Christians. Or as another corollary, we might construct a history of South Africa's apartheid reservation ('Bantustan') system and sketch the political ideology of Hendrik F. Verwoerd without mentioning the overt National Socialist influences on National Party conceptions of the homeland and racial identity.

Yes, our contemporary historians have very skillfully and comprehensively described the roll of historical events contributing to the so-called decline of the Empire, the strife, manorialism and political disintegration, but perhaps out of fear of being dismissed as adherents to debunked and quaint research, the contemporary academic culture has failed to defer to Gibbon's (As well as the period historians) wise consideration of the importance of ancient psychology in the determination of action. While Gibbon was mistaken in precision of fact, he was not mistaken on the assumptions of his general thesis, as he, perhaps accidentally, argued for the transformative nature of

ancient thought. This latter point is substantiated with negligible doubt by the life's work of Pierre Hadot, who revolutionized the study of the classics by elegantly illustrating that the ancient works of philosophy were esoteric cases indeed, unlike our modern systematic treatises. The philosophical understanding of Hadot buttresses the sentiment of Gibbon to create, at least in my mind, a compelling new thesis.

While I caution to concur with contemporary writers such as Goldsworthy who claim that civil war weakened the Roman state and so it found itself in an untenable position against the barbarians, succumbing to external pressures as a result of an internal dysfunction, I would argue that the internal dysfunction of civil war was but a shroud of smoke concealing a fire, produced by an even more subtle dysfunction present in the character of the leadership: that of a will bereft of virtue. The treacherous murderers of the third century chose their actions because they had not been educated in the civic philosophy, and so at best amoral, defrauded the public trust. The virtuous emperors were indifferent to this compulsion, "touched...by the better angels of our nature," and so rightfully became whom Epictetus would describe as Stoic sages, "not only...[partners] at the feasts of the gods, but also of their empire."¹³⁰¹³¹

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¹ Gilbert Murray, *The Stoic Philosophy* (1915), p.47

² Stewart Perowne. *Death of the Roman Republic: From 146 B.C. to the Birth of the Roman Empire*. 1968. p. 55

³ Arthur Ferrill, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: the military explanation*, London, Thames & Hudson, 1986, p.22

⁴ Shelby Thomas McCloy, *Gibbon's Antagonism to Christianity* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1933)

⁵ William James Ashley. *Survey of Historic and Economic*. 1900. p. 137-143

⁶ Malcolm W Browne. *Ice Cap Shows Ancient Mines Polluted the Globe*, The New York Times, December 9, 1997.

⁷ Derek Heater *World Citizenship*. 2005.26-37 also: Malcolm Schofield. *The Stoic idea of the city*. 1991.

⁸ Ralph Stob, "Stoicism and Christianity," *Classical Journal* 30 (1934-1935): 217-224.

⁹ pseudo-Plutarch *Philosophers' Opinions on Nature*, Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (3rd c. CE), and Stobaeus' *Excerpts* (5th c. CE)—and their sources Aetius (ca. 1st c. CE) and Arius Didymus (1st c. BC-CE)

¹⁰ A.A.Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, p.115.

¹¹ Epictetus, *Enchiridion* 1.

¹² Seneca, Ep. 59.18

¹³ Seneca Ep. 66.32

- ¹⁴ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 4.49a
- ¹⁵ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 5.8
- ¹⁶ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 5.20, 5.22, 1.1, Epictetus, *Enchiridion* 31 etc
- ¹⁷ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 10.6
- ¹⁸ Epictetus, *Enchiridion* 2.
- ¹⁹ Bertrand Russel. *A History of Western Philosophy*. p. 254
- ²⁰ *Republic* 443d.
- ²¹ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 2.9
- ²² Epictetus, *Enchiridion* 5, Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 2.1, 8.47
- ²³ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2nd edn. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 334, 336.
- ²⁴ Murray 45-48.
- ²⁵ Marcia L. Colish. *The Stoic tradition from antiquity to the early Middle Ages*, 1985. p. 10-11.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*
- ²⁷ Livy, Book 3, sect 14
- ²⁸ *The Parallel Lives* (1919), p. 257 Plutarch
- ²⁹ *Roman Warfare* (1999) Adrian Goldsworthy
- ³⁰ The *Parallel Lives* by Plutarch graphs numerous statesmen of the period who were privileged to the same character of tutors Marcus describes in such extensive detail in Book I of the *Meditations*
- ³¹ John Sellars. *Stoicism*. 2006. pp. 135-136.
- ³² Agathias. *Histories*, 2.31.
- ³³ Moses Hadas. *The Stoic Philosophy of Seneca*, 1958. p. 1.
- ³⁴ Hadot. *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. pp. 1-45.
- ³⁵ Pierre Hadot. *What is ancient philosophy?*. 2002. Harvard University Press, p6.
- ³⁶ Hadot. *La philosophie antique: une éthique ou une pratique?*. p. 8 also: *Presentation au College International De Philosophie*, pp. 1-2
- ³⁷ Hadot. *Jeux de langage et philosophie*. p. 341. Also: Hadot. *La philosophie antique: une éthique ou une pratique?* p.11.
- ³⁸ Hadot. *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. p. 21.
- ³⁹ Pierre Hadot. *Philosophie, discours philosophique, et divisions de la philosophie chez les Stoiciens*. p. 216. Also: Hadot. *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. p. 22.
- ⁴⁰ Hadot. *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. p. 25.
- ⁴¹ As in *Premeditation of Seneca*; ep. 63.14;91.3-4, 7-8. also: Marcus Aurelius provides a sound example of such a practice in *Meditations* 2.1
- ⁴² *Ibid.* p. 23.
- ⁴³ Xenophon. *Memorabilia*. 4.4.10. as translated in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*
- ⁴⁴ Epictetus. *Enchiridion*. Trans Elizabeth Carter. 46.
- ⁴⁵ Simplicius. *Commentary on Epictetus' Enchiridion*. Trans. Richard H. Lewis.1.12
- ⁴⁶ *Meditations*. 4.2.
- ⁴⁷ While most histories include studies of economy, society, religion and politics, few contain studies of character and philosophy. It would be imprecise to include the influence of philosophies such as Stoicism in discussions of religion or society; instead, it demands an altogether novel way of examining ancient history. We must caution against the inconsistencies and fallacies of “psychohistory”, but we must not discount the fact that philosophical systems had a gross influence on the behavior of ancient actors.
- ⁴⁸ Brian W. Jones. *The Emperor Domitian*. 1992. p. 22.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 178-179.
- ⁵⁰ Suetonius, *Life of Domitian* 14;16
- ⁵¹ Cassius Dio, *Roman History* LXVIII.1-2
- ⁵² Alice Ashley. 1921. "The 'Alimenta' of Nerva and His Successors". *The English Historical Review* 36 (141): 5–16.
- ⁵³ Jones 72.
- ⁵⁴ Cassius Dio LXVIII.2.
- ⁵⁵ Ronald Syme (1983). "Domitian: The Last Years". *Chiron* 13: p. 58.
- ⁵⁶ Nerva's poor health is alluded to in Cassius Dio LXVIII.3 – it seems that he had some sort of gastric illness involving vomiting.

- ⁵⁷ Suetonius, 23.
- ⁵⁸ Aurelius Victor, *Epitome de Caesaribus* 12.7
- ⁵⁹ Ibid. 12.8.
- ⁶⁰ Pliny the Younger, *Panegyricus* 7.4; Cassius Dio, LXVIII.3.
- ⁶¹ Cassius Dio, LXVIII.4.
- ⁶² Ronald Syme (1930), "The Imperial Finances under Domitian, Nerva and Trajan". *The Journal of Roman Studies* 20: 55–70; Geer Russell Mortimer (1936) "Second Thoughts on the Imperial Succession from Nerva to Commodus" (subscription required). *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 67: 47–54.
- ⁶³ Edward Gibbon classically argues in *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, volume 1, Chapter 3 that Nerva did in fact adopt Trajan on merits rather than to spare his reputation, and praises the wisdom of the system.
- ⁶⁴ Source materials which speak of Nerva's virtue, wisdom and moderation: Tacitus, *Agricola* 3, "the dawn of a most happy age, [when] Nerva Caesar blended things once irreconcilable, sovereignty and freedom" (As quoted in Ronald Mellor. *The Roman Historians*. 1999, p. 78) ; Aurelius Victor 11.15; Cassius Dio, LXVIII.2.
- ⁶⁵ In *The Western Regions according to the Hou Hanshu* 11 the adoptive system of Nerva is detailed by an external Chinese observer, who describes the nature of kingship: "Their kings are not permanent. They select and appoint the most worthy man." Trans. John E. Hill.
- ⁶⁶ A. King, *Roman Gaul and Germany* (Berkeley, CA, 1990)
- ⁶⁷ Syme, "Domitian: The Last Years," *Roman Papers* IV (Oxford, 1988) 252-77
- ⁶⁸ Tacitus 1-3.
- ⁶⁹ Waters, K.H., "Traianus Domitiani Continuator," *AJP* 90 (1969) 385-404 effectively highlights the absolute powers of the emperor and the senate's simultaneous respect of his character.
- ⁷⁰ Moses Hadas. *History of Latin Literature*. 1952. pp. 313-314.; Summarizes Pliny's *Panegyric* and its treatment of Trajan's character. Pliny seems to imply that Trajan was a gift from the gods, a divine king in virtue rather than entitlement.
- ⁷¹ Mellor 78.
- ⁷² Bourne, F.C., "The Roman Alimentary Program and Italian Agriculture," *TAPA* 91 (1960) 47-75
- ⁷³ P.J. Aicher, *Guide to the Aqueducts of Ancient Rome* (Wauconda, IL, 1995) 44, 76-79
- ⁷⁴ *Epist.* 10.97. trans. H. Walker.
- ⁷⁵ M.-T Raepsaet-Charlier. *Prosopographie des Femmes de l'Ordre Sénatorial(Ier-IIe siècles)* (Louvain, 1987)
- ⁷⁶ Aelius Spartianus. *The Life of Hadrian* (HA 16); Robin Fox. *The Classical World: An Epic History from Homer to Hadrian* Basic Books. 2006 p. 578
- ⁷⁷ Cassius Dio 69.9.1-4. trans. E. Cary; *Meditations* 1.6 speaks of the "Greek lifestyle," the rough habit of the Stoic philosopher perhaps inherited from the school of Cynics. Cato the Younger, a Stoic exemplar, perhaps illustrates this lifestyle best – it is related to us by Plutarch that the republican senator would only wear a plain black tunic, sleep on the floor and only drink cold water.
- ⁷⁸ *Meditations* 1.14 trans. Gregory Hays.
- ⁷⁹ As quoted by: J.H. Oliver, *The Ruling Power* (Philadelphia, 1953), p. 901.
- ⁸⁰ Philippe Ariès. *A History of Private Life*. 1992. pp. 66-68
- ⁸¹ Cassius Dio 69.8-10 depicts the tours of Hadrian, the settling of the Roman debt, his quelling of the revolt at Alexandria by mere decree, his military preparations and his construction of public works; Rostovtzeff chapter 8 discusses how the settling of the Roman debt freed funds to aid orphans and strengthen the local economy.
- ⁸² Ibid. 69.10.
- ⁸³ Ibid 69.9.
- ⁸⁴ W. Kunkel, *An Introduction to Roman Legal and Constitutional History*, tr. J.M. Kelly, (Oxford, 1966)88-89.
- ⁸⁵ E.M Smallwood. *Documents Illustrating the Principates of Nerva Trajan and Hadrian* (Cambridge, 1966) p. 442.
- ⁸⁶ Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 4.8.6, 4.9.
- ⁸⁷ HA *Hadrian* 24.4 suggests that the emperor was entitled Pius because of his saving of senators condemned to death under Hadrian in the latter's late years, while HA *Pius* 5.1-5.2 claims that he was

entitled as such for his honorable deification of his predecessor. Eutropius *Breviarium* 8.8 speaks to the extent of flourishing under the emperor's administration.

⁸⁸ HA *Pius* 8.1; E. Bryant. *The Reign of Antoninus Pius* (Cambridge, 1895). pp. 120-22.

⁸⁹ H.A. *Pius* 4.10

⁹⁰ H.A. *Pius* 6.1 and 7.2. Also: 8.11-9.3; A. Garzetti, *From Tiberius to the Antonines* (translated by J.R. Foster, London, 1974), 451.

⁹¹ H.A. *Pius* 12.1; Ariès.

⁹² H.A. *Pius* 7.1

⁹³ R. Weigel. "The 'Commemorative' Coins of Antoninus Pius Reexamined" in W. Heckel and R. Sullivan, editors, *Ancient Coins of the Graeco-Roman World: The Nickle Numismatic Papers* (Waterloo, Ontario, 1984), 187-200; *Book of the Later Han* describes Antoninus Pius' (King of the "Da Qin") embassy to china, revealing his cosmopolitan sense of politics; Edwin G. Pulleyblank: "The Roman Empire as Known to Han China", *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 119, No. 1 (1999), pp. 71-79

⁹⁴ *Meditations* 1.16 is a long praise of the author's adopted father. Marcus clearly considered him a most prevalent role model.

⁹⁵ 27.7

⁹⁶ Dio 71.36.4. Herodian. *Roman History*. 1.2.1-2.

⁹⁷ Herodian 1.2.3-4. The letters between Fronto and Marcus underscore the emperor's passion for the liberal arts: E. Champlin., *Fronto and Antonine Rome* (Cambridge, MA, 1980); Cassius Dio 71.35.

⁹⁸ HA *Marcus* 8.1 "And now, after they had assumed the imperial power, the two emperors acted in so democratic a manner that no one missed the lenient ways of Pius; for though Marullus, a writer of farces of the time, irritated them by his jests, he yet went unpunished." Trans. Loeb Classical Library 1921; by his own admission: *Meditations* 1.14.

⁹⁹ *Meditations* 1.7.

¹⁰⁰ HA *Marcus* 7.3.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid* 8-9.

¹⁰² Cassius Dio 71.6.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*. 71.22.1

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*. 72.28.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*. 72.31.

¹⁰⁶ HA *Marcus* 17.4-5.

¹⁰⁷ See: *Meditations* 2.12, 4.14-15, 6.13

¹⁰⁸ Herodian 1.3.2.

¹⁰⁹ Herodian 1.2.1 trans. Edward C. Echols: "Commodus, his father reared with great care, summoning to Rome from all over the empire men renowned for learning in their own countries"; 1.3.1: "When the emperor suspected that there was little hope of his recovery, and realized that his son would become emperor while still very young, he was afraid that the undisciplined youth, deprived of parental advice, might neglect his excellent studies and good habits and turn to drinking and debauchery (for the minds of the young, prone to pleasures, are turned very easily from the virtues of education) when he had absolute and unrestrained power."

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*. 1.3-4.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*. 1.6.1

¹¹² *Ibid*. 1.6.1-3.

¹¹³ *Ibid*. 1.8.1.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*. 1.8.1-8.

¹¹⁵ M. P. Speidel, "Commodus the God-Emperor and the Army," *Journal of Roman Studies* 83 (1993), 113.

¹¹⁶ Cassius Dio 73.1.2 trans. E. Cary.

¹¹⁷ M.P. Spiedel, 'Commodus the God-Emperor and the Army', *Journal of Roman Studies* LXXXIII, 1993, pp.109-114; A. D. Nock, "The Emperor's Divine Comes," *Journal of Roman Studies* 37 (1947), 103..

¹¹⁸ Cassius Dio 73.4 – herein may be one of the significant causes of future lack of Stoic training: in Commodus' time those who imitated the virtue of Marcus Aurelius were being killed, and the climate may have proved too dangerous to profess the teachings of Zeno.

¹¹⁹ Cassius Dio, 73.15.

¹²⁰ Herodian, 2.6.4.

¹²¹ Cassius Dio, 74.11.1-3; HA, *Didius Julianus*, 2.4-6; Herodian, 2.6.7-8.

¹²² Cassius Dio, 74.14.3-4; HA, *Didius Julianus*, 5.1-2.

¹²³ Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus*. 35, 7.

¹²⁴ Naphtali Lewis. *Roman Civilization*. 1990. p. 372.

¹²⁵ Cassius Dio 74.15.2.

¹²⁶ Lewis 373.

¹²⁷ Gary Keith Young. *Rome's Eastern Trade*. 2001. p. 126.

¹²⁸ George Mousourakis. *The historical and institutional context of Roman law*. 2003. p. 278.

¹²⁹ H. St. L. B. Moss, *The Birth of the Middle Ages*, p. 1 describes the interdependent system of trade during the principate.

¹³⁰ *Meditations* 1.16 “you could have said of [Antoninus Pius]... that he knew how to enjoy and abstain from things that most people find it hard to abstain from and all too easy to [abuse].” Trans. Gregory Hays.

¹³¹ Abraham Lincoln's First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1861. And *Enchiridion* 15 trans. Elizabeth Carter