

**ETHICAL ADDRESSES;
LECTURES GIVEN
BEFORE THE AMERICAN
ETHICAL SOCIETIES**

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MARCUS AURELIUS: A PHILOSOPHER ON THE THRONE*

BY FELIX ADLER

OF the five good emperors, as they are called, four had had their day—Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, and the elder Antonine, when, in the year 161 A. D., Marcus Antoninus, or Marcus Aurelius, as he is commonly styled, ascended the throne. It was a splendid and giddy height to which he was thus raised. The civilized world lay at his feet. The bounds of the empire at that time extended from the Atlantic Ocean in the West to the Euphrates in the East; from the African deserts to the Danube and the Rhine. Italy, Greece, Egypt, Asia Minor, Gaul, Britain and parts of Germany acknowledged the sway of the Roman eagle. And all the vast populations that thronged these lands lived in the sunlight of one man's presence, and their destiny, for good or ill, depended on his nod. Rarely has such power been concentrated in the hands of an individual. No wonder that it turned the feeble brain of some who possessed it—of Caligula, for instance, of whom it is related that, at his banquets, he used to chuckle with insane pleasure at the thought that, by a mere word, he could cause the necks of his guests to be wrung. Yes, the power of life and death, unlimited

* An Address given before the Society for Ethical Culture of New York, March 13, 1898.

power, power in all its forms, was at the command of the Roman Emperor. The lust of power is said to be one of the mainsprings of human action. The master of the Roman world had the opportunity, if he chose to glut himself with power, to give himself over to the indulgence of it almost without restraint, until the very excess of it might bring with it its natural retribution and unseat his reason, as it did in many an instance. And all the other forms of enjoyment which mortals ordinarily crave, were no less at a Roman emperor's disposal. If power is sweet, so is flattery; and the incense of flattery was constantly burned before him, even by the Senate, which, once the bulwark of republican freedom, had degenerated into a mere simulacrum of its former self. When the emperor spoke, the senators were often ready to applaud his poorest utterances, to go on their knees before him and overwhelm him with their adulations. He was deified while he was still among the living, and the honors of divine worship were exacted for his statues. Could mortal sense and sobriety exist, with such temptations to depart from them? And as for the common pleasures of life—the pleasures of the senses—these, too, were of course at his service: palaces, and feasts and costly robes, the place of highest honor at public gatherings, and the tokens of the willing subordination of others and of his own supereminence wherever he might appear. Such was the place made vacant for Marcus Aurelius in 161. How did he fill it? How did he judge of the things which it put within his reach?

He stood in "the fierce light that beats upon the throne," and yet it is possible to detect but few blemishes

in his character, and those of such a nature as do not detract from the general sense of elevation with which he impresses us. He was simple and abstemious in his habits. He combined plain living with high thinking. He set aside, as devoid of intrinsic worth, all those goods which the vulgar regard as the most desirable—wealth, fame, pomp and pleasure—and valued only the things of the soul. There is a natural delusion which leads the poor to over-estimate the satisfactions which wealth and worldly greatness can give. Many a poor lad, passing by the stately mansions of the very rich and catching, perhaps, a glimpse between the silken curtains of the luxury within, says to himself—comparing the mean conditions amid which he himself is compelled to pass his existence—“Ah! within there it would be possible to live the full, the free, the festal life, to taste the joys that earth is capable of yielding.” And if then, perchance, he listens to a preacher who tells him that, if wealth has its undoubted advantages, it has also its serious drawbacks, and that the higher satisfactions of life, fortunately for the human race, are independent of the possession of riches and are accessible to everyone; the poor lad listening to such a preacher, may think of the fable of the Fox and the Grapes, and say to himself: “The preacher would sing a different tune, if the wealth which he affects to belittle were within his reach. He is seeking to console himself by belittling what he cannot have.” I daresay that, to such a one, the testimony of an emperor might come home with incisive force. For silver and gold and all the joys of the senses were actually his, if he chose to have them. And yet he weighed them in the balance against the higher

satisfactions and decided in favor of the latter. His judgment was, at all events, unbiased. It was neither envy nor the bitterness of balked desire that spake from his lips.

But, after all, this argument is an ignoble one fit only for ignoble minds. The testimony of the emperor does not carry conviction with it because he was an emperor, but because quite apart from the imperial station which he filled, his was a great, sane, upright, magnanimous personality. And any person, in whatever rank, who voices the praise of the spiritual treasures with the same first-hand, realizing sense of their value, who is free from malice and the critical, carping disposition, who extols as best the things which he, in his inmost experience, has found to be best, will carry the same conviction to his hearers or his readers. The proof of this statement is to be found in the fact that there are two men in the ancient world who stand for essentially the same doctrine, and who were nearly, if not quite, contemporaries; the one an emperor, the other a slave; the one having in his veins the purest blood of Roman aristocracy, the other belonging by birth to the dregs of society; the one the type of manly beauty, the other sickly and deformed; the one Marcus Aurelius, the other Epictetus. And the tenets of the stoical philosophy, which both taught, came as convincingly from the lips of Epictetus as of Marcus. Yes, the emperor to some extent caught his inspiration from the slave, looked up to the latter as a pupil does to a master. Indeed, the whole burden of the teachings of the emperor is that rank and station make no difference; that the principles upon which a man acts, in whatever station, alone count; that it is possible to be a genuine man even in a palace.

Of the salient facts of his career let us give a brief resumé. He was born in the year 121. His father died while he was still in infancy, and he was brought up by his grandfather and his mother. To the latter he was deeply attached. He says of her: "From her I learned to abstain not only from evil deeds but even from evil thoughts; and, further, I learned from her simplicity in my way of living, far removed from the habits of the rich." And among the things for which he is grateful he mentions that, "though it was my mother's fate to die young, she spent the last years of her life with me." He had many and excellent teachers, applied himself with severe diligence to the study of jurisprudence and philosophy, and, in a lesser degree, of rhetoric and poetry, while, at the same time, he did not neglect the training of the body, and took delight in manly sports and athletic exercise. He was, from the first, of a healthy turn of mind. Philosophy, with him, did not mean bookishness, nor pedantry, but had about it the breath of the fields and the savor of life. Adopted as son and successor by the reigning Emperor, Antoninus Pius, he entered in his nineteenth year into public affairs. He married Faustina, the daughter of his predecessor, and, though there are doubts as to her worthiness, he seems to have been happy with her while she lived and he revered her memory after she was gone.

In 161, as has been said, he ascended the throne. His reign was disturbed from the outset. An inundation of the Tiber destroyed some of the most populous portions of the city; famine followed; earthquakes terrified the inhabitants of Italy; the soldiers returning from the Parthian campaign brought with them a fearful pesti-