The title is intended to be significant; it is designed to draw attention to the unity or, at least, the strongly presumed intimate connection between the two contingent functions of governing and thinking philosophically, of which Marcus Aurelius is taken to be a near perfect example. This view, though held by many, has never gained complete and unqualified acceptance and it has been challenged from time to time with varying degrees of emotional intensity and intellectual acumen. The latest attempt to degild the “venerable” figure of the emperor finds its expression in G.R. Stanton’s disposal of newly advanced documentation in favour of the opinion that Marcus Aurelius did in fact effectively apply his philosophical attitude to the business of running an empire. ¹

My immediate purpose is not to comment on Stanton’s scholarly and critical way of dealing with the evidential data supporting the dovetailing of Marcus’ social and political activities and his philosophical thought and conduct, but merely to point out that, even if he is right about the thin spread of evidence purporting to show conclusively the close affinity of the ruler-philosopher relationship, his own conclusions are a gross oversimplification and as such do not justify the uncompromising claim to the establishment of a definite separation of the two sides of Marcus’ life. One can, of course, sympathize with Stanton’s refusal to join the saintly circle of the emperor’s admirers — this is only philosophically legitimate and desirable. However, the opposite of adulation is not necessarily the only alternative: hypercritical debunking is as much a hindrance to a fair understanding of a man’s effort and achievement as unctuous idolatry. There is no doubt that some of the lavish praise heaped upon Marcus Aurelius diminishes rather than enhances his stature and, paradoxically enough, it contradicts his own assessment of the value of chasing distinctions. In view of what he had to say about the futility of fame and the spuriousness of glory, sought by and accorded to men, it is ironical that he should have been made an object of adoration. From a score of adulatory statements (including those of Frederick the Great, Goethe, Montesquieu, Gibbon and Bury) we may single out two character-portraits, that of Edward Zeller and Matthew Arnold.
The first (a celebrated historian of Greek philosophy) had this to say: "We know how consistently M. Antoninus himself lived up to his precepts. From his life, as from his words, there comes to us a nobility of soul, a purity of mind, a conscientiousness, a loyalty to duty, a gentleness, piety and love of man, which in that century, and on the Roman Imperial throne, we must admire two-fold." And according to the second (Matthew Arnold) Marcus Aurelius is perhaps the most beautiful figure in history — "one of those consoling and hope-inspiring marks, which stand for ever to remind our weak and easily discouraged race how high human goodness and perseverance have once been carried and may be carried again. The interest of mankind is peculiarly attracted by signal goodness in high places; for that testimony to the worth of goodness is the most striking which is borne by those to whom all the means of pleasure and self-indulgence lay open, by those who had at their command the Kingdoms of the World and the glory of them. Marcus Aurelius was the ruler of the grandest of empires; and he was one of the best of men." 2

Contrast these panegyrical remarks with the standpoint taken by Stanton: "Marcus Aurelius ... appears as emperor and philosopher, imperator et philosophus, but he is unable to unite the two roles. Rather his Stoic philosophy, like his opium addiction, serves as insulation against the discomfort of the Roman frontiers and the realities of Roman politics. Marcus gives scant thought to the application of his philosophical beliefs; they are too bound up in their own imagery. As an emperor, Marcus acts in much the same way as his predecessors, defending the empire to the best of his ability and without consideration for the Germanic tribes who are themselves under pressure of turning an unsuccessful rebellion to the advantage of his personal prestige; seeking to perpetuate his reputation by the unusual and, in the event, disastrous method of designating his own son a successor. The idea that Marcus was the greatest practitioner of Stoicism seems to be reached by focussing attention on the legislation enacted under Marcus, attributing it to his personal initiative and ignoring the similar legislation of emperors who made no claim to Stoic beliefs. The real Marcus Aurelius seems to be basically a Roman rather than Stoic." 3

This is, as can be seen, a clear, unequivocal assertion of the fundamental cleavage between Marcus Aurelius the ruler and Marcus the philosopher. A full rebuttal of the charges would require a careful examination of the various imputations, some of which are obviously
tenuous, as e.g. the debatable accusation of Marcus’ turning to his advantage the ‘Oriental rising’ of Avidius Cassius (for, according to the biographers and his own statements Marcus Aurelius merely felt sorrow on learning of the ingratitude and disloyalty of a “dearest friend”). Again, designating Commodus as his successor might have been no more than a tragic blunder – but stoicism, or any other philosophy for that matter, is no insurance against mistakes. These and similar speculations are imponderables which, not being amenable to a definite solution, are better left alone. They should certainly not be made the basis of an allegedly thoroughgoing demonstration of the divisibility or functional schizoprenia of Marcus Aurelius.

II.

Nobody in his senses would deny that Marcus Aurelius was a ruler and an excellent ruler at that – not just a paper-monarch, an ornamental figure, surrounded by pomp and circumstance. Naturally, he had to participate in the ceremonial circus and wear the cumbersome halo that attracted the crowds – it was, after all, part and parcel of his exalted position – but it can safely be assumed that he did not particularly enjoy the histrionics demanded by his role. Outwardly he had to acknowledge the existence of phoney dignity, knowing at the same time that the intrinsic dignity of a human being cannot be reduced to parading it on suitable occasions only, but that it turns man into an authentic, self-creating entity distinguishable from peacocks and similar showy creatures.

However, though his status as a ruler is beyond even methodological doubt, his position as a philosopher is not so clear-cut or secure. Whether he deserves to be called a philosopher depends ultimately upon the stipulative definition one is prepared to adopt and follow. If one considers philosophy in its traditional connotation to be moonshine or sees it as a bottle full of nasty and unwanted flies to be got rid of forthwith and if one endorses the analytical way as the only rightful approach to the philosophical hunting grounds then, of course, Marcus Aurelius goes into the limbo and we have no problem. As so much of today’s philosophy can be summarised in the pithy but telling Greek phrase Δευτεροπεριφοαικήσως (terrible talk about lentils) there is probably little general inclination to attach any importance to a view or attitude which is declared, if not dead and buried, then at least archaic and moribund.
Of course, anybody who undertakes to write anything about Marcus’ *Meditations* will, in the eyes of the fashionable, linguistically oriented set, be doing no more than contributing an indifferent chapter to universal hagiography and not to the field of philosophy. Be that as it may, it will be a while yet before this narrow view ossifies into a general dogma. And by that time it will perhaps not matter much what anybody thinks about philosophy or anything at all. In the meantime the popular conception of philosophy is still with us and the most striking feature of that idea is that ‘philosopher’ and ‘stoic’ are almost synonymous – which, of course, makes Marcus Aurelius an obvious paradigm of a philosopher. Broadly, this concept identifies the philosopher with the sage or wise man, who, in the last resort, is a being searching for its own meaning within the universe and who comes to terms with the totality of which he counts himself an intrinsic part; this realisation generating a peculiar attitude toward things and other beings – an attitude to be observed most conspicuously in the calm acceptance of experiences which circumstances bring along, no matter how perplexing, capricious and painful they are or appear to be. It is the last characteristic, with the implied idea of perfectability, which is specifically associated with Stoicism in general and Marcus Aurelius in particular.

It would be perverse and unduly dogmatic to contend that Marcus Aurelius was not much of a philosopher because he did not leave behind a closely woven philosophical system. It must, of course, be admitted that as a philosophical work the *Meditations* are not at all impressive and, if viewed from a professional point, they are a dismal failure. But then they were never intended to be a learned treatise to be published as an original contribution to philosophy or even as a vehicle of edification. They were, after all, intended to be private records, directed by the emperor to himself (τὰ ἑαυτῷ). It is therefore only natural that they appear as a messy patchwork, like (in the words of Farquharson) “improvisation upon themes in a variety of keys, where similar, even identical motives recur to a listener’s confusion.”

Some passages consist of carefully composed longer essays, fastidiously supported by examples; others are merely gems from the treasury of past thinkers, derivative and non-authentic; many “entries” are no more than consolatory reflections, admonitions to resipiscence, intermingled with brief personal memoranda, sharp psychological observations combined with almost cynical common-sense warnings (a perfect example of the latter is to be found in
B.X1. 18: “that to expect bad men not to do wrong is madness, for he who expects this desires an impossibility”); some again, often in the form of aphorisms, appear out of the blue, intruding into the natural sequence, disrupting the continuity of thought. Occasionally we also come across some irrelevant trivia, for which there seems to be no excuse. For example in the long passage (V I. 30) which is a masterly character profile of Antoninus, full of unqualified admiration for the personal traits of his adoptive father, Marcus includes inconsequential biographical nugae concerning the physiological peculiarities of his adored predecessor. (“What a man, too, he was to remain in his place until evening; because of his spare diet not needing even to relieve nature except at his usual hour.”)

The blame for this amorphous character of the Meditations could, of course, be put at the door of the unknown editors who either did not know what they were doing or seized upon the chance of capitalizing on the “diaries”. That some corruption is due to the vicissitudes of transmission is highly probable. But essentially the text ought to be taken as if it represented Marcus’ train of thought. In this I lean towards Gataker’s view that the text was not mutilated or corrupted but that it preserved in most important respects its original form. Paradoxically, this tends to support the authenticity not only of the text but also of the experiences of Marcus. It proves that Marcus had no ulterior motive in putting down on record his thoughts and feelings — as if expecting a prospective reader to re-live and judge them. Thus the book represents an accumulation of observations and reflections written at irregular intervals over a period of 10-15 years, depending upon circumstances and the prevailing moods of the emperor. It is the repository of those tranquil hours when, as Marcus says, he left his stepmother, the Palace, to set up his rest with his own mother, Philosophy (V I. 12).

It must not be forgotten that Marcus Aurelius shared with all men the human predicament — experiencing the whole usual gamut of feelings, sufferings, afflictions — only in his case probably magnified by the heavy demand of his office and deep sense of responsibility combined with an equally profound realization of his own inadequacy. Not only had he to struggle with emotions, both those caused by blows from outside (e.g. his wife’s infidelities, death of his children) and those which are the lot of all men — sensual desires and pleasures, (he most probably suffered from gastric or duodenal ulcers, hence his alleged opium addiction), but the burden of attending to the running of a cumbersome machinery of a state at war must have
also weighed heavily upon his shoulders, causing him countless worries and anxieties. It was not a man sitting in an ivory tower sweating over philosophical technicalities who wrote the *Meditations* but a man at the mercy of various shifting moods related closely to the stream of events which engulfed him and from which there was no escape. No wonder then that the *Meditations* lack the mark of a perfectly executed job.

However, for all that, they contain all the seminal principles which Kant (much later) articulated so well and elaborated with such systematic skill in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. We have the same emphasis on the practical nature of reason, the same stress on duty as the only right guide and test of moral actions, the same conception of human dignity and the idea of mankind constituting an autonomous, spiritual community (the Kantian Kingdom of Ends in themselves) in which other beings are to be treated with the same respect as one allots to one's own self; where to do wrong to others is to wrong oneself; where what matters is the action itself and not its consequences. Thus, though the *Communings* (as the *Meditations* are sometimes translated) do not present us with a carefully conceived and methodically worked out inquiry they have enough substance in them to make a peremptory dismissal of them (as non-philosophical) unacceptable. Brilliant and professional handling of philosophical material is not the only criterion of measuring philosophical worth.

III.

There is a story, probably apocryphal, that during his last stay in Rome, Marcus went around quoting freely Plato's dictum that "States flourish if philosophers rule or if rulers are philosophers" — implying, of course, that he was following that dictum. On the surface, this would make Marcus sound like a self-conscious prig — a verdict which would contradict all he had to say in the *Meditations*. The explanation may be quite simple; as Birley points out, Marcus merely attempted "to justify to sceptics and critics his continued public preoccupation with philosophy." He knew he had critics and it is a critic he had in mind when he wrote "we shall breathe more freely now this schoolmaster has gone; he was not hard on any of us, but I could feel he was tacitly condemning us".

In what sense can Marcus be said to be a philosopher? Obviously
not in the modern sense of being skilled in analytical method, or even the 19th century sense of being a system builder. His philosophy was rooted in the necessity of adjusting oneself to the ordinary business of living — it was thus predominantly practical. (The use of "predominantly" is deliberate, for all conduct, to deserve that name, must be anchored on some theoretical assumptions. In the case of Marcus the theoretical background of his attitude was the Stoic view of the rational unity of the universe). "Practical" here means merely the strict opposite of "theoretical" — the latter signifying the purely academic preoccupation, i.e. not related to actual conduct or, more generally, to a way of living. "Practical" is, of course, not synonymous with "philosophical". The latter implies an assumption of a peculiar attitude consistently applied in the process of actual or contemplated actions. The vital question, naturally, is what makes an attitude philosophical? This is a question which admits of a variety of answers of which that of the Stoic is one and which we shall note presently.

But before we go on to do that it might be of some advantage and relevance to mention at this juncture the bearing which the "theoretical-practical" dichotomy has on the disputed unity of ruler-philosopher. By adopting a purely theoretical standpoint the separation of the two activities is made more watertight than need be. One can, for instance, harmlessly play an intellectual game between 9 a.m. and 1 p.m. (writing e.g. a paragraph on the language of morals) and do something completely unconnected with it or even contradicting it for the rest of the day. It is quite possible to divide one's life into compartments, the theoretical and practical activities being kept in separate drawers to be opened singly at one's convenience. So that when we get engrossed in personal, social and political affairs, the purely academic side of us rests comfortably in its appropriate pigeon-hole, and vice-versa. Thus when one rules one does not philosophize (in the narrow sense of the term). It is, however, different in the case of a philosophical practical attitude. In this there is no intrinsic disjunction of functions, no artificial boundary-line between the way one lives and the way one thinks. The theoretical underpinnings of one's action are embodied in conduct. We don't wear different labels on different occasions e.g. "ruler" at t₁ and "philosopher" at t₂. That is why Stanton's assertion that Marcus was a Roman rather than a philosopher is of such dubious validity.

To come back to the original question: What makes Marcus' attitude philosophical? To answer this we might do well to inquire
into the conditions or requirements which allow us to distinguish the peculiarly philosophical from other kinds of attitudes. The best way to go about that problem is, in my view, to borrow from and freely adapt a recent aesthetic theory which wanders around under the names of psychical distance or aesthetic detachment. Briefly stated it amounts to this: you experience things and situations aesthetically when you put some object "out of gear" with the routine process of living, when you place yourself at a contemplative distance from it; in other words, you must never become so completely engrossed in a given situation as to lose awareness of yourself as a viewer or spectator — and if you do, you "suffer" from what is technically termed underdistance. (An example of this: the jealous husband at a performance of Othello who is unable to keep his attention on the play because he keeps thinking of his own wife's suspicious behaviour). On the other hand you would overdistance yourself if you concerned yourself exclusively with the technical details of whatever you are watching (e.g. as a producer watching rehearsals or his rival's productions). It is interesting to note that existentialism (especially of the Heideggerian brand) seems to entertain a similar idea — only if it applies to the total existential situation and not to isolated aesthetic moments. It also emphasises the deadly nature of the daily cycle of activities and non-activities, the essence of impersonality or the loss of authenticity in the mist of everydayness.

Now it can be seen that Marcus Aurelius adopts a similar policy of distancing himself both from the indifferent scene of everyday events and from the desolation of abstractions. He advocates the practice of retreat or withdrawal from the world (διωκώρησις) which amounts to a kind of philosophical detachment. It is important to note that the "retreat" he has in mind does not involve severing all links with the outside world and it is not an open invitation to hide in private phrontisteries. It is not the Epicurean dogma of total retirement, opting out of the fray and refusing to have any commerce with one's fellow-beings. That would be equivalent to shirking one's duty and could be taken as evidence of moral cowardice. In this Marcus Aurelius is emulating the Socratic habit of aloofness in a crowd (when he managed to be μόνος πρὸς μόνον alone with the Alone) and following the injunctions of Seneca and Epictetus.

A random collection of passages from Seneca's Epistulae Morales will illustrate this: "It's your soul you must change not your environment (animal debes mutare, non caelum (28.1));" "Where
one lives means little for one's peace of soul — it is the mind that must render all things agreeable to itself (55.8) ... Changes of residence show an unstable soul. The soul cannot through retirement grow into unity until it has given over its casting about and its roaming (69.1). Bedlam outside should not be disturbance within ... For of what good is a completely quiet neighbourhood if our emotions are in tumult.” This is also essentially the stance of Epictetus according to whom, though man is by nature a social creature, he must be prepared to be alone, to be sufficient unto himself and to live in the company of oneself. God (Zeus), as he points out, who lives alone, devotes his thought unceasingly to the government of the universe; just in the same way the consolation of the wise man will be to contemplate the world-order and to remedy, as far as he is able, the evils in the state of man. (III.8). A.J. Festugière declares this to be the true Stoic doctrine to be distinguished from the contemplative ἀναγώρησις of Philo, Seneca and Marcus Aurelius. And he quotes in support of his view a comment of W. Capelle: “Während Epiktet ... mit seinem Denken und Handeln ... ganz im Diesseits wurzelt, kommt dem Imperator ... immer wieder die Flüchtigkeit des Menschenlebens, die Vorgänglichkeit alles Irdischen engreifend zum Bewusstsein.” But does the reflective reference to the transience of life and the futility of human existence appreciably change the meaning of ἀναγώρησις? All one can say is that it reinforces it by drawing attention to an undeniable element in the human situation.

In any case, even a cursory perusal of a passage in the Meditations which relates to the retreat from the world reveals that, like Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius connects his defence of philosophical retreat with the fundamental assumption of a universal order. And this is hammered into place even more forcibly in the passage that follows. As it happens the beautiful passage alluded to (IV.3) provides a most comprehensive summary of Marcus’ philosophy and it might be fitting to quote the relevant lines: “Men look for retreats for themselves, the country, the sea-shore, the hills; and you yourself (i.e. Marcus Aurelius), too, are peculiarly accustomed to feel the same want. Yet all this is very unlike a philosopher, when you may at any hour you please retreat into yourself (εἰς ἐσορό τὸ ἀναγωρεῖν). For nowhere does a man retreat into more quiet or more privacy than into his own mind, especially one who has within him such thoughts that he has only to look into them to attain immediately perfect tranquility; and by tranquility I mean nothing else but a well ordered mind. Continually, therefore, grant yourself this retreat and renew
yourself; and let your principles be brief and fundamental and immediately you turn to them their presence will be sufficient to wash away all sorrow and to send you back free from all discontent with the things to which you return. For what is it that you are dismayed with? The wickedness of man? Recall the judgement that reasonable creatures have come into the world for the sake of one another; that endurance is part of justice; that men do wrong involuntarily; and how many at last, after enmity, suspicion, hatred, warfare, have been stretched on their deathbeds reduced to dust. This should make you quiet. But perhaps you are dissatisfied with the lot assigned to you by the universal nature? Consider, however, the alternative: Providence or the fortuitous concurrence of atoms, and the many proofs that the Universe is a kind of Commonwealth ... But perhaps the desire of the thing called fame will torment you? Look at the swiftness of the oblivion of all men; the gulf of endless time, behind and before; the emptiness of applause, the fickleness and folly of those who pretend to praise you, and the narrowness of the space in which it is confined. This should make you pause. For the entire earth is a point in space, and how small a corner thereof is this your dwelling place and how far and insignificant are those who will sing your praises here! And last, remember your retreat into this little domain which is yourself, and above all do not distract and strain yourself but be free to look at things as a man, a human being, a citizen, a creature that must die. And among what is most accessible to you are these two: the one, that things do not take hold of your mind but are left outside and are unmoved, and (remember) that disturbances come only from the judgement within; the second, that all you see will change in a moment and be no more; and continually think of the many changes which you have already witnessed. The Universe is change, life is opinion.

This is Marcus Aurelius in nuce. What he says here he repeats in numerous other passages — often with more concinnity and poignancy, but the themes are the same. Nearly everywhere there looms the constantly recurring thought of the utter futility of temporary existence and inevitibility of individual extinction. In this again he seems to have anticipated the modern existentialists who also emphasise the tenuous and absurd nature of human existence and the inescapability of death (M. Aurelius, however, would not subscribe to the "absurdity" view, for, on his view, the universe is rational and not just a series of accidental occurrences). For Heidegger, for example, death, in a way, determines the human condition. Man
becomes a whole in so far as he integrates the possibilities of his life and brings himself to the ultimate boundary possibility (Grenzmöglichkeit), i.e. to death as the most external unsurpassable possibility of its Being. The being which associates itself with death, runs forward in thought to it, seizes the totality of his Being and the man who becomes whole throws off the oppressive blanket of everydayness, of averageness and thus becomes free. The dread of death is far from demoralizing - on the contrary it is a source of ennoblement, giving dignity to man in so far as it makes him truly his own. For death is mine and nobody can steal it from me. Confronted with the threatening possibility of not-being man feels absolutely alone, lonely and solitary - he is alone with himself (mit sich allein). The Heideggerian conception of death differs in many respects from the simple and unsophisticated apprehension of it by Marcus Aurelius — but ultimately the message comes to the same: When we grasp the finality of death we discover the painful pointlessness of our individual existence and the utter insignificance of ourselves and other beings. And this revelation carries with it the practical corollary of adopting a different and wider point of view, of seeing things in their true illusory nature and of the necessity to prick the bubbles of our own importance and the empty pretensions of our fellow beings. But the discovery of the pointlessness of our transient lives should also open our eyes to the futility of worrying about it — hence the advocacy of a philosophical calm or detachment. Once the awareness of the non-significance of it all is kindled within the human frame of existence it permeates the whole man, influencing all actions and activities within and without. It will generally be admitted that Marcus Aurelius was as near as humanly possible to the attainment and cultivation of that peculiarly philosophical way of looking at things. That he sometimes lost his way in the wilderness of human entanglement and succumbed to the lures of the earthly "paradise" does not in any way prove that while administering an empire he was not trying to implement his philosophical precepts. And it was the trying that mattered — not the actual results. This, as can easily be seen, is implied in the Stoic view; judge behaviour by motives or reasons and not by external and often accidental consequences.
NOTES


