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Marcus Aurelius sought to grasp the reality that remained to him as a fact to be experienced in all the change and decay, where the way through life, held together only by time, has no unity, and the progress through the ages of man means a dying of the youth in the man and of the man in the greybeard, the conception that passed from Heraclitus through the Stoa, through Scepticism, and through Platonism.

The properties of the rational soul: it is conscious of itself, it moulds itself, makes of itself whatever it will, the fruit which it bears it gathers itself (whereas others gather the fruits of the field and what in animals corresponds to fruit), it achieves its proper end, wherever the close of life comes upon it; if any interruption occur, its whole action is not rendered incomplete as is the case in the dance or a play and similar arts, but in every scene of life and wherever it may be overtaken, it makes what it proposed to itself complete and entire, so that it can say: "I have what is my own" (XI, 1).

In his words there is a foretaste of the poems of Gregory of Nazianzus. He continues:

Moreover, it goes over the whole Universe and the surrounding void and surveys its shape, reaches out into the boundless extent of time, embraces and ponders the periodic rebirth of the Whole, and understands that those who come after us will behold nothing new, nor did those who came before us behold anything greater (XI, 1, 2).

Through such contemplation "you will make a large room at once for yourself" (IX, 32); "nothing is so likely to promote an elevation of mind" (X, 11).

Seneca, too, had said this in the same personal way. But Marcus Aurelius knew of yet another activity in the course of which the soul grows in stature, and in this experience he overcame from within the intellectual attitude to moral life that took it only as the material to be subdued by the moral law. "You should regard as an indulgence whatever you can achieve in accord with your own nature, and this you can achieve everywhere" (X, 33, 1). While the living beings not gifted with reason have no movement of their own on all sides, while the stone pushing down, the flame pushing up, show that when an obstacle comes in their way they suffer and become worse:

mind and reason are able to move through anything that opposes, as their nature and their will prescribe (X, 33, 2). . . . The sovereign power within . . . is like a fire, when it masters what falls into it, whereby a little taper would have been put out, but a bright fire very quickly appropriates and devours what is heaped upon it, and leaps

up higher out of those very obstacles (IV, 1). . . . If one may so put it, a man becomes better and more laudable by right use of circumstances (X, 33, 4).*

So the temporal existence received a meaning for the personality that rests in itself. When Marcus Aurelius says frequently to himself that at all times there is only life in the present, man's true self having to be brought out in actual life ever anew in the same way, this is for him only one side of the human condition; this realization is at the same time a purposeful effort, stretching through the whole course of the temporal life. "He who has not one and the same aim in life is unable to remain one and the same through all his life" (XI, 21). There is such an aim, which is universally binding (the Stoa here received back in strengthened form the notions which it had given to the Romans of the Republic and to the best of the emperors): it lies in life for the community and the State, in which reasoning beings live for one another.

For he who directs every private impulse to this will make all his actions uniform, and because of this will always be the same man (XI, 21). . . . As you are yourself a complement of a social system, so let every act of yours be complementary of a social living principle. Every act of yours, therefore, which is not referred directly or remotely to the social end sunders your life, does not allow it to be a unity, and is a partisan act (IX, 23).

With this idea of the divine whole, resulting in life being considered as essentially relationship, Marcus Aurelius outgrows the traditional notion of rational will constituting the personality of the self-reliant individual, and outgrows it to such a degree that he regards a breach in the community knit by nature as irreparable by deliberate action. It is, he considers, a divine gift that a man who has cut himself off in disgust from his neighbour and so, without knowing it, has destroyed his own membership of the whole community, can re-enter the whole as a member, although the reunion becomes the more difficult the more often such a scission has taken place. "Generally speaking, the branch which originally grew on the tree and shared its transpiration, by remaining with it, is different from the branch which is engrafted again after being cut off, whatever gardeners may say. The binding may hang together, but that is not fundamental unity" (XI, 8).

In this feeling he loses the pride in his own moral energy:

* Cf. VIII, 35; X, 31.

