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## [The greco-roman world - suite]

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### Présentation de la fiche

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The ceasing of action, impulse, and judgment is a pause, as is death, and by no means an evil. Now pass to the ages of life, such as boyhood, youth, manhood, old age; for each of them is a change, or a death—is there anything to be afraid of? Pass now to your *bios*, your manner of life, under your grandfather, then under your mother, then under your (adoptive) father, and observing many other instances of dissolution, change, and coming to an end, ask yourself: "Was it anything to be afraid of?" So, then, even the ending, pause, and change of your whole life is not.

Here he does not show us the pictures that may have risen before him at the thought of his youth; he gives only the outline of his passage through life—how as a boy, after his father's premature death, he came under the guardianship of his father's father, Marcus Verus, then grew up in the house of his mother Lucilla, and then, after his adoption by Antoninus Pius, came to the imperial palace. The main point is the change in conditions of life. This change, he argues artificially enough, had nothing special about it; it was merely an instance of the change that is universal, is the fundamental characteristic of reality. Heraclitus, the founder of the pantheism which the Stoics made a most effective spiritual agency in the ancient world, had expressed in this formula his vision of the living reality that is ever in transition: "The birth of one is the other's death." We came upon this formula and its effect in the popular philosophical literature of the Hellenistic period, when we were considering the development of the naturalistic conception of Man in that age. Thus Plutarch said that "the man in his prime passes away when the old man comes into existence, the young man passes into the man in his prime, the child into the young man, and the babe into the child".\* This view served to dispose of the common conception of the unity and constancy of the individual. Marcus Aurelius makes use of it to remove the significance which we men give to our lives and the events in them and their end in death, or to reason it away and so to be freed from the emotions arising out of that aspect, and especially out of the fear of death. We have here one more example of the naturalistic technique of dissection of the phenomenon of life which we have followed throughout his *Meditations*, a technique that consists of the dissolution by the intellect of the consciousness of value and significance bound up with the experience of life. Since he pursues this line of thought, which he compares with that of the natural philosopher, in looking back on his life, not a

\* See above, pp. 377-8.

biographical but a "biological" aspect results from that looking back, and in the course of it there comes very clearly into view what we have already established in general, that the truth of the understanding, imposed in this way in regard to a man's own life, turns into untruth—the attribute "true" being taken in the sense of "true to life".

But here, too, this dissolution, which leads to freedom only in the "negative" sense, that of freedom from emotions, is not his last word, but there rises over against it the positive attitude to life, based on the moral consciousness, which makes the will free for the doing of good and for its recognition in other people. So we meet here once more, where we are concerned with the biographical method of self-disclosure, with the ethic associated with Stoic pantheism, the profound religious truth of which we tried to show; except that here we have not first to try, as in the religion of the philosophic emperor, to find the passages in which he seems to show us his truest self and to put them together. For he himself has collected a comprehensive survey of his life from the biographical point of view in a continuous series of passages, which fill a whole "book" of the work. It is an autobiographical product of a unique kind. For the history of the *genre*, this is an invaluable document, in which the rise of the sap to a node of development may be observed.

In contemplating his passage through life Marcus Aurelius recalls the people who have influenced him, one after another. He does not show himself as a separate individual concerned with self-cultivation, but proceeds from the others, to whom he finds himself indebted throughout his life; and as he recalls them, the critical details of his intellectual and moral development come back to him and find expression as exemplary traits of those people or as their teachings and direct services on his account. "From my grandfather Verus", this book begins, and that "from" comes at the beginning of each of its seventeen sections. So he recalls the persons who influenced him in the course of his life. After his grandfather Verus comes his father, whom he lost when he was barely ten years old; then his mother and her grandfather, Severus, to whom he felt indebted for "not having had to attend public schools but having enjoyed good teachers at home". He devotes, however, only a few lines to his ancestors, and passes on quickly to his teachers and tutors. These, eleven in all, he recalls in a long series, from the sports master and the teacher of painting in his boyhood to his Roman and Greek teachers

