

THE STOICS

5. Marcus Aurelius

AGENDA

1. Introducing Marcus
2. The Format
3. Detachment
4. Duty
5. Legacy





1. INTRODUCING MARCUS











PROVINCES OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE, AD 180









INTRODUCING MARCUS AURELIUS

121 – 180 CE

Roman Emperor from 161-180 CE

Turbulent reign, but widely remembered as a wise, effective ruler

Last of the “five good Roman Emperors” (Machiavelli)

‘Marcus Aurelius, devoted to philosophy as long as he lived, and pre-eminent among emperors in purity of life’ (*Historia Augusta*)

“He didn’t have the luck which he deserved ... but was confronted, throughout his reign, by a multitude of disasters. That is why I admire him more than any other, for it was amidst these extraordinary and unparalleled difficulties that he was able to survive, and to save the Empire.” (Cassius Dio)









2. THE FORMAT



M. V. A. ANTONINVS IMPERATOR. Vc

London Printed for R. Sare 1701.

THE
EMPEROR
Marcus Antoninus
HIS
CONVERSATION
With Himself.

TOGETHER
With the Preliminary Discourse of the Learned
GATAKER.

As also,

The Emperor's LIFE, Written by Monsieur D'acier,
and Supported by the Authorities Collected by
Dr. STANHOPE.

To which is added the Mythological Picture of
CEES the Theban, &c.

Translated into English from the Respective Originals,
By JEREMY COLLIER, M. A.

L O N D O N:
Printed for Richard Sare, at Grays-Inn-Gate in Hol-
born. MDCCL.

THE TEXT

Never published in his lifetime, nor does it have a title

Variouslly: “To Himself”; “The Meditations”

Two centuries later, Themistius mentions Marcus’ exhortations, but it is unclear whether he had access to the 12 books/scrolls we have

Resurfaces in 9th – 10th century Byzantium: Bishop Arethas in a letter of 907 CE describes “the very profitable book of the Emperor Marcus

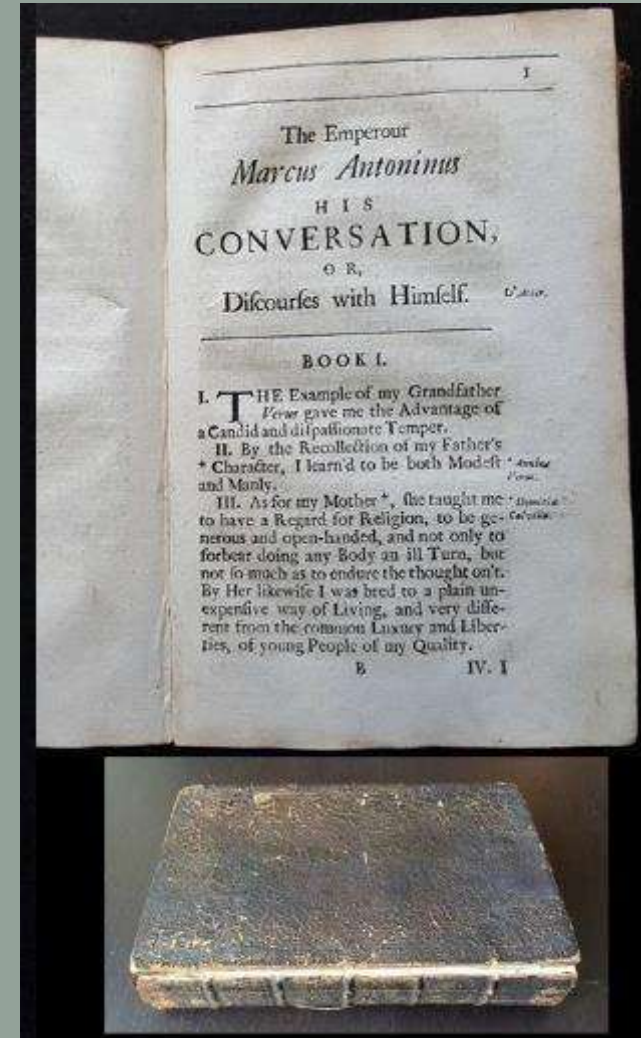
1559 sees the first edition, with Latin translation; then there are a flood of translations into modern European languages, under a host of titles: ‘On Himself or on his Life’; ‘Meditations Concerning Himselfe’, ‘On the Duty of Life’, ‘To Myself’, ‘Thoughts’

THE TEXT

Divided into 473 sections and 12 books from the 17th century, each 16 to 75 sections.

But: the originals are not numbered, and the divisions between all 12 of our books were not always marked

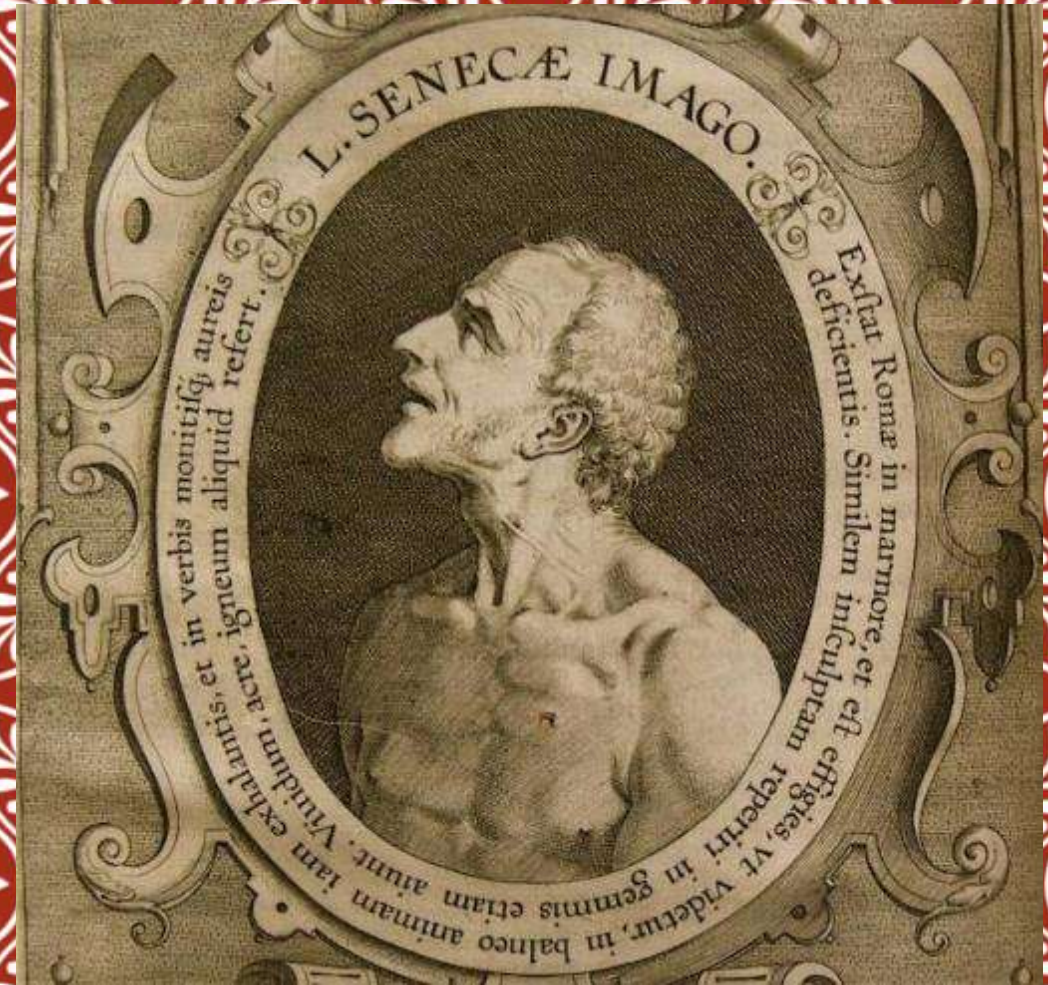
Occasionally, the context appears, e.g. at the end of books II and III, "Written in the land of the Quades ... at Canraturum", from which we can date to the last decade of his life, when he was on military campaign



‘We should see to it that whatever we have absorbed should not be allowed to remain unchanged, or it will be no part of us. We must digest it: otherwise it will merely enter the memory and not the reasoning power’ (Seneca)

Consider also the admonishing,
disapproving, even rude tone
of Epictetus...

... Via Rusticus's Introduction

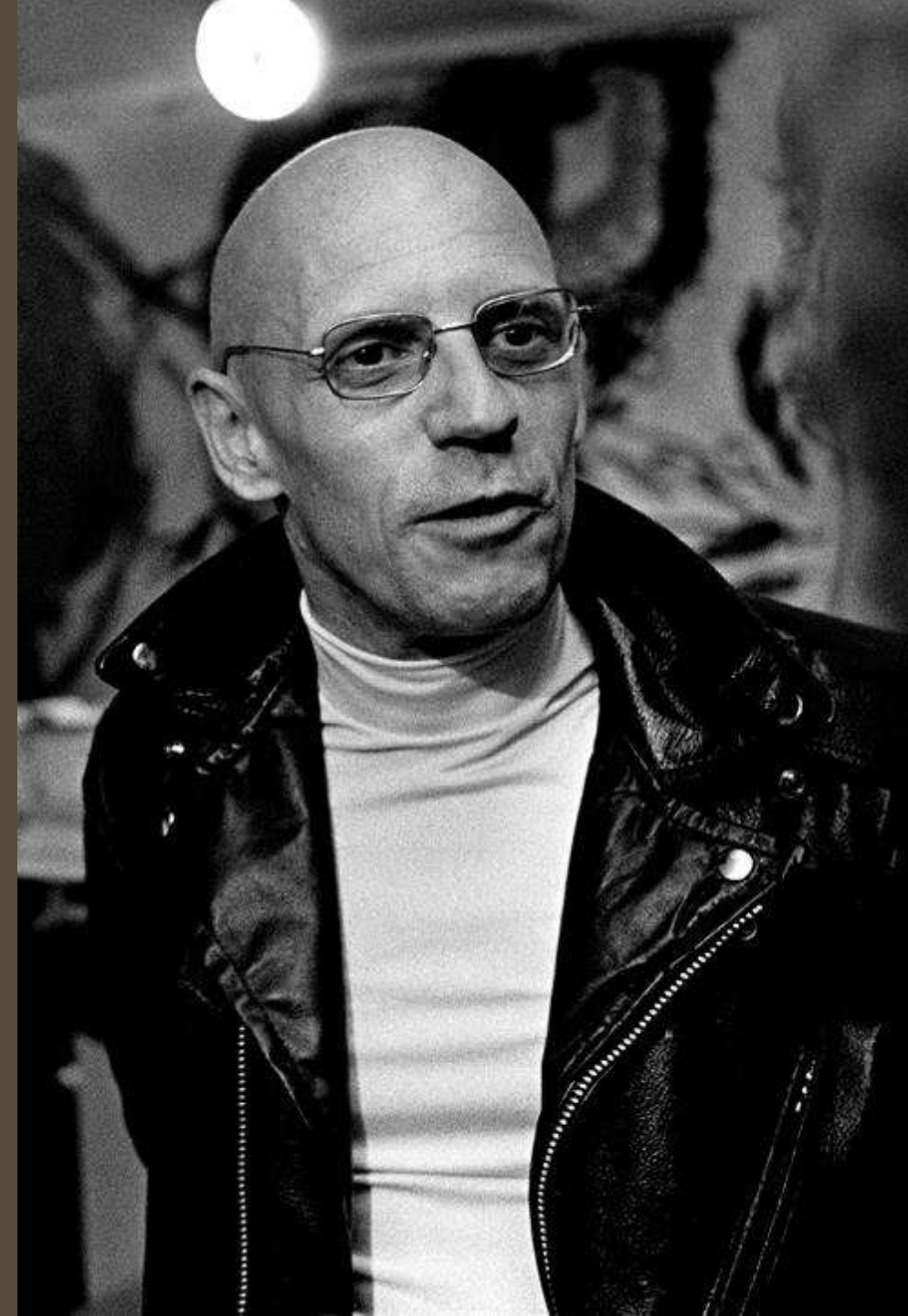


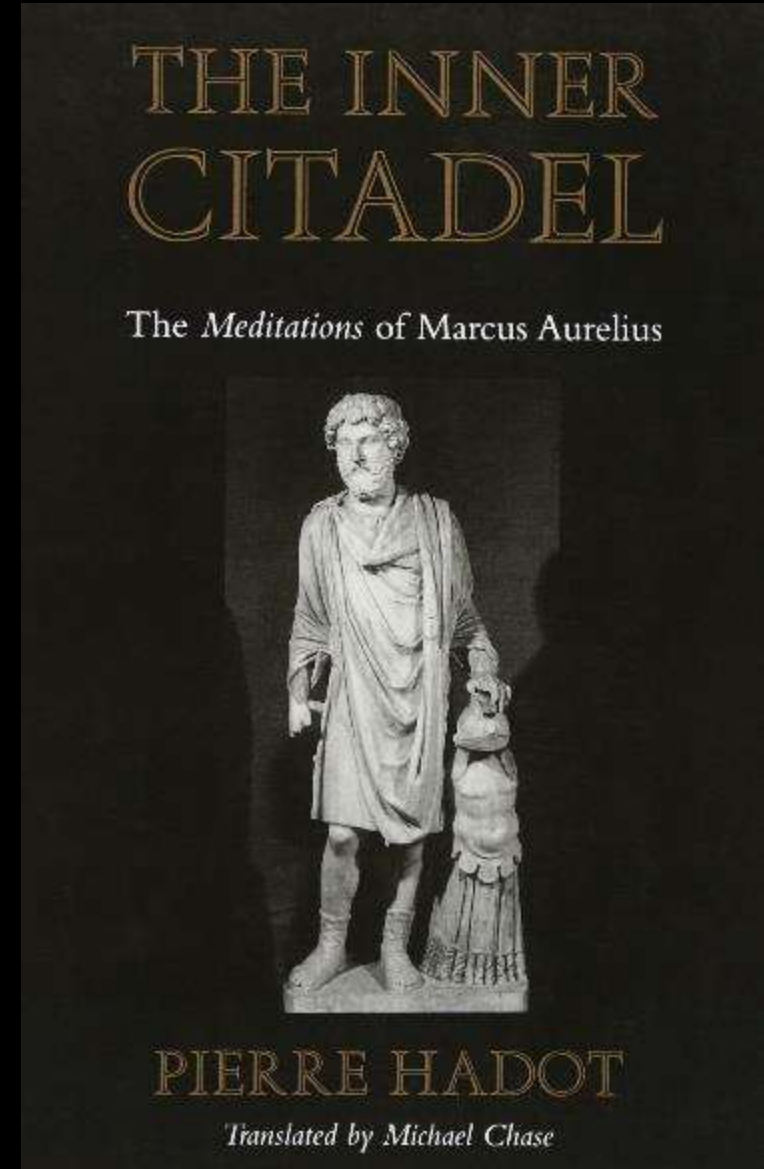
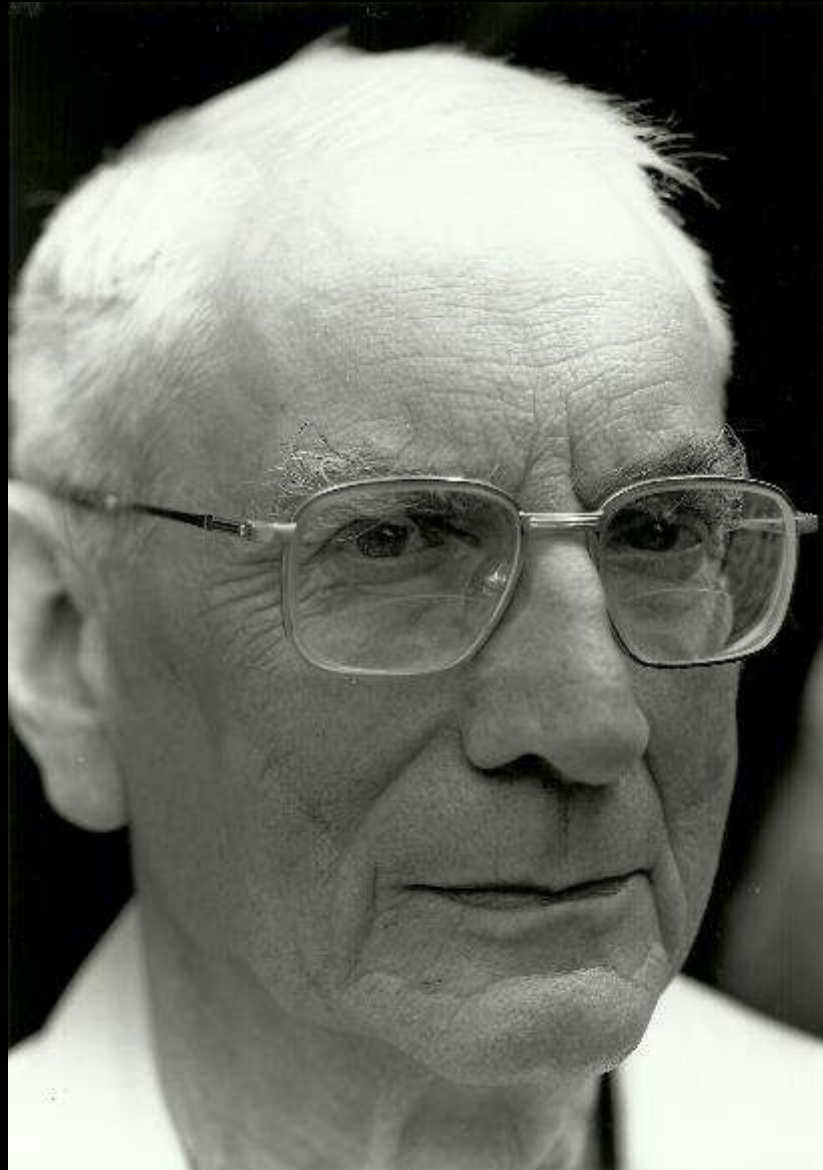


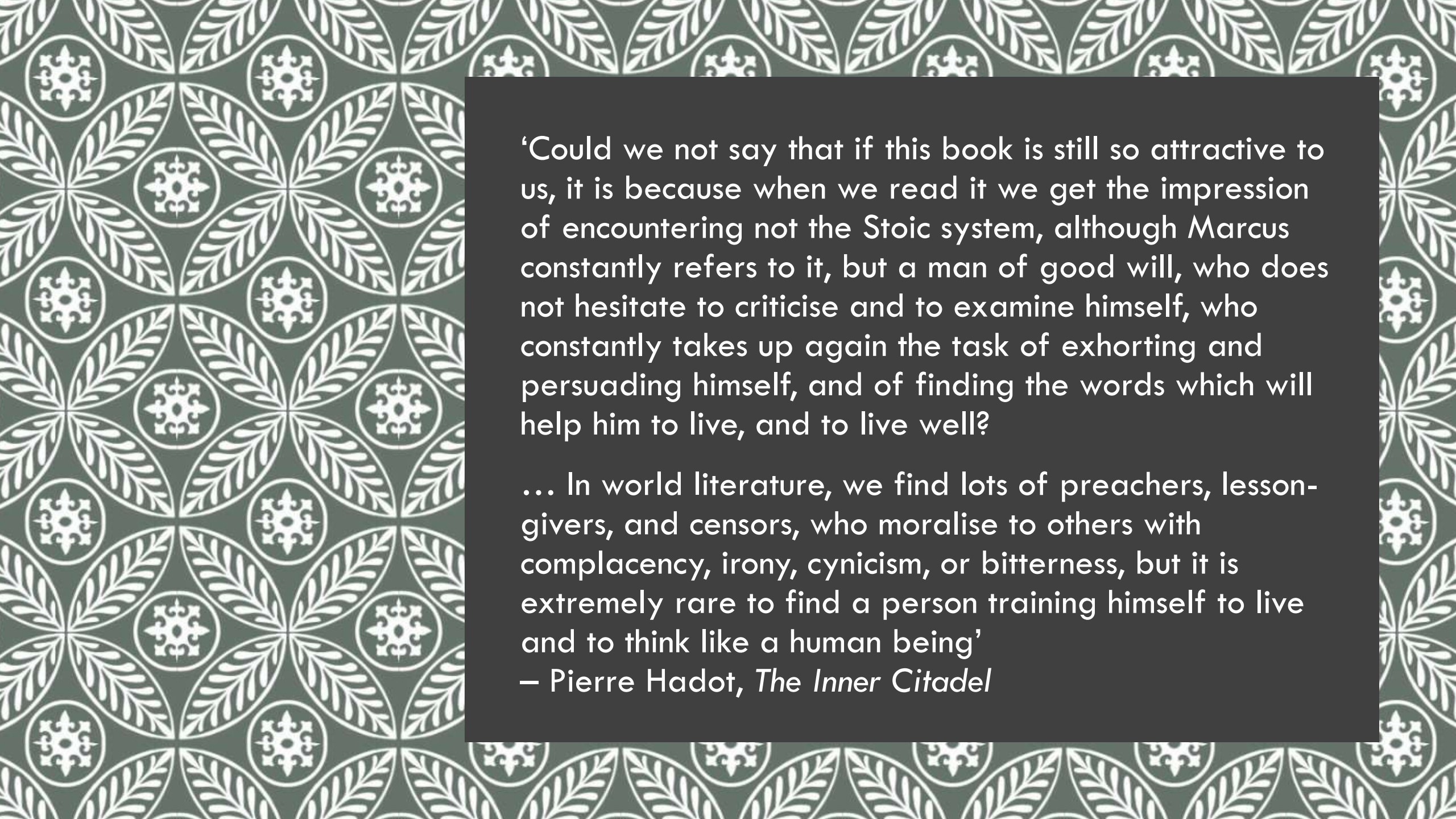
One wrote down quotes in them, extracts from books, examples, and actions that one had witnessed or read about, reflections or reasonings that one had heard or that had come to mind.

They constituted a material record of things read, heard, or thought, thus offering them up as a kind of accumulated treasure for subsequent rereading and meditation.

... in which one presented arguments and means for struggling against some weakness (such as anger, envy, gossip, flattery) or for overcoming some difficult circumstance (a grief, an exile, ruin, disgrace).’ — Foucault, “Self Writing”

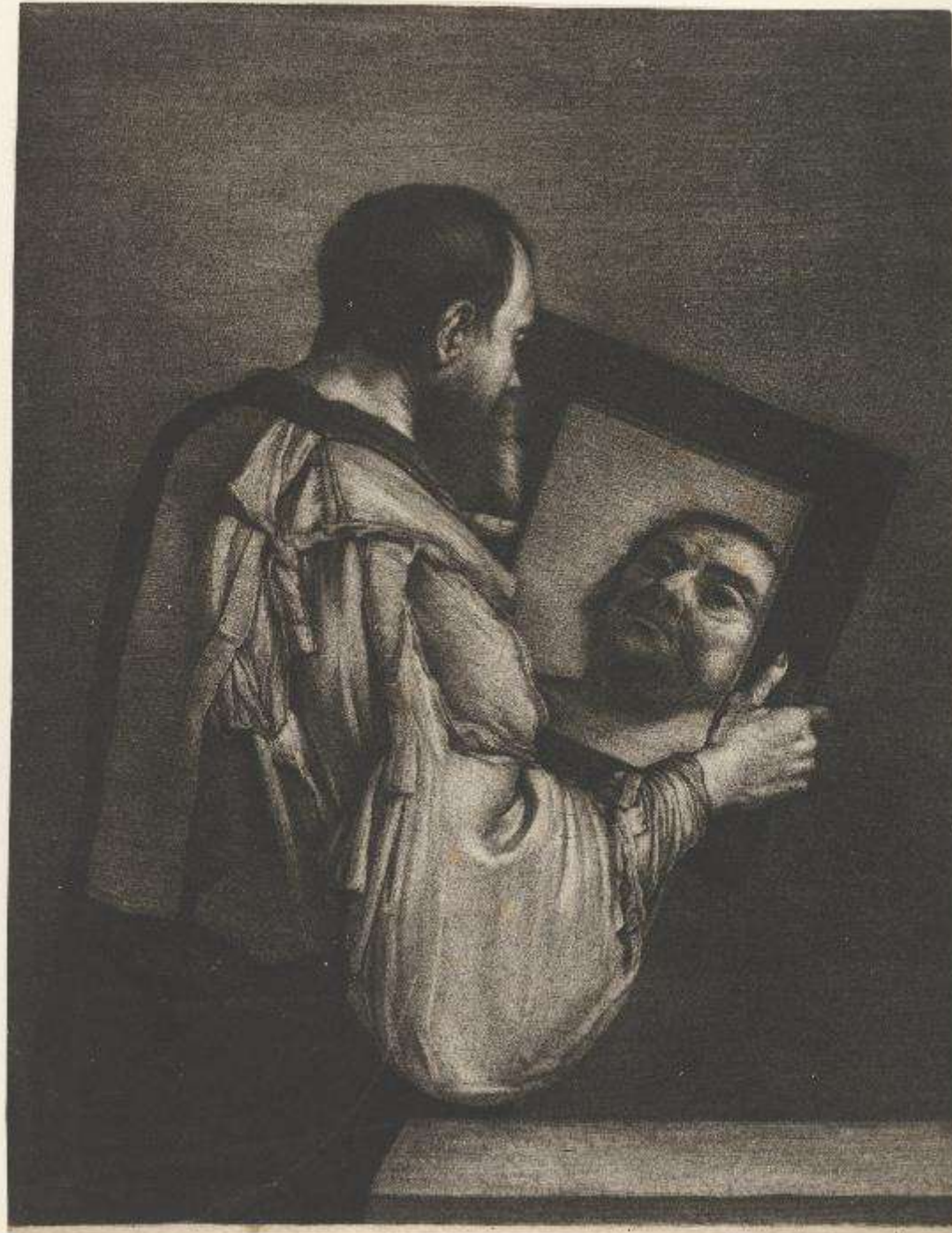




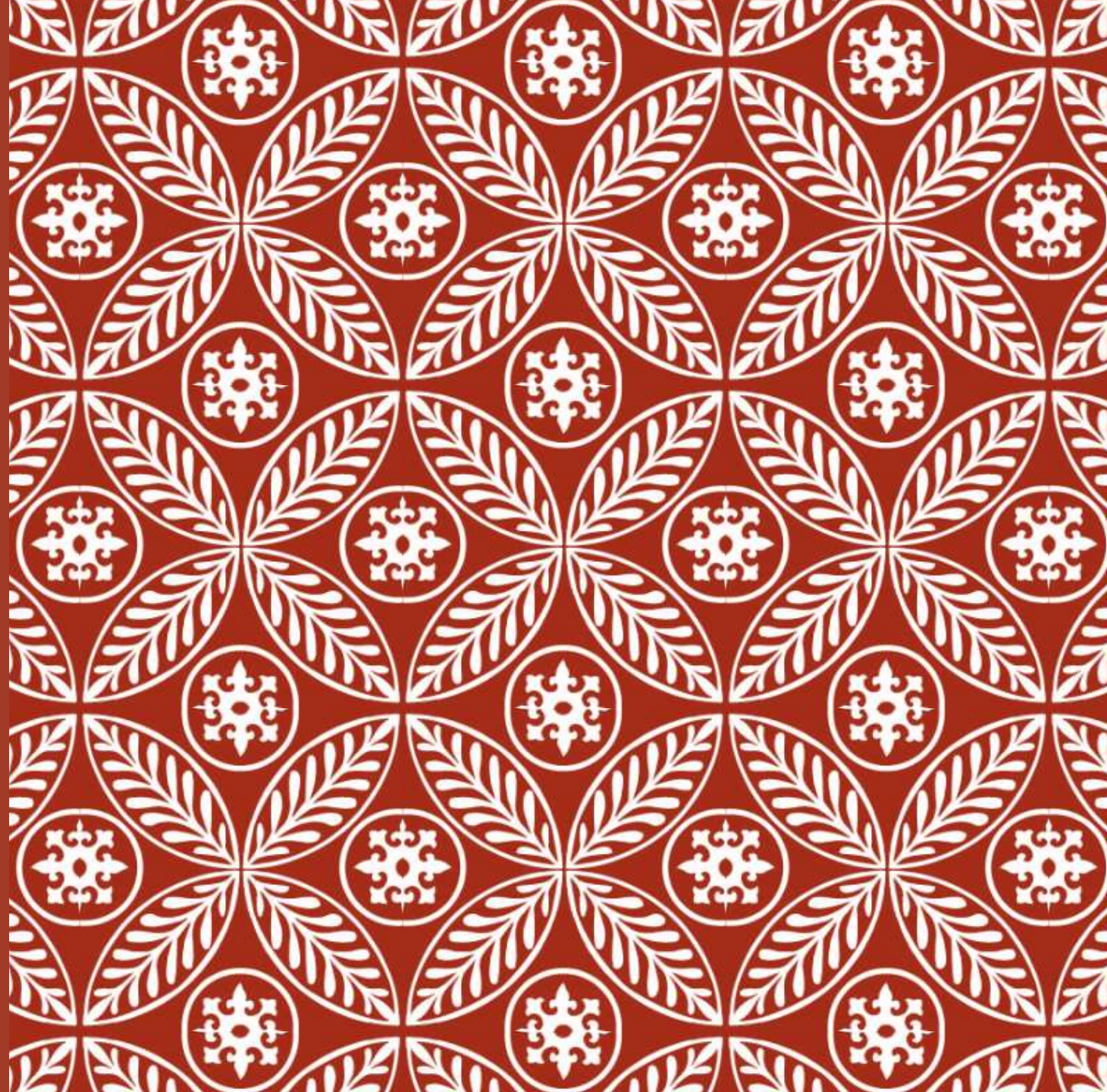


‘Could we not say that if this book is still so attractive to us, it is because when we read it we get the impression of encountering not the Stoic system, although Marcus constantly refers to it, but a man of good will, who does not hesitate to criticise and to examine himself, who constantly takes up again the task of exhorting and persuading himself, and of finding the words which will help him to live, and to live well?’

... In world literature, we find lots of preachers, lesson-givers, and censors, who moralise to others with complacency, irony, cynicism, or bitterness, but it is extremely rare to find a person training himself to live and to think like a human being’
– Pierre Hadot, *The Inner Citadel*



3. DETACHMENT





THE INNER CITADEL

‘People try to get away from it all—to the country, to the beach, to the mountains. You always wish that you could too.

Which is idiotic: you can get away from it anytime you like. By going within.

Nowhere you can go is more peaceful—more free of interruptions—than your own soul.

Especially if you have other things to rely on. An instant’s recollection and there it is: complete tranquillity.

And by tranquillity I mean a kind of harmony. So keep getting away from it all—like that. Renew yourself.

But keep it brief and basic. A quick visit should be enough to ward you.’ (4.3)









THE VANITY OF THE WORLD

‘Survey the records of other eras. And see how many others gave their all and soon died and decomposed into the elements that formed them. But most of all, run through the list of those you knew yourself. Those who worked in vain, who failed to do what they should have—what they should have remained fixed on and found satisfaction in.

... What is “eternal” fame? Emptiness. Then what should we work for? Only this: proper understanding; unselfish action; truthful speech. A resolve to accept whatever happens as necessary and familiar, flowing like water from that same source and spring.

Our lifetime is so brief. And to live it out in these circumstances, among these people, in this body? Nothing to get excited about. Consider the abyss of time past, the infinite future. Three days of life or three generations: what’s the difference?’ (4.32)











‘No, but to be admired by Posterity—people they’ve never met and never will—that’s what they set their hearts on. You might as well be upset at not being a hero to your great-grandfather.’ (6.18)

‘People out for posthumous fame forget that the Generations To Come will be the same annoying people they know now.’ (8.44)

Alexander the Great and his mule alike into the life force of the world, or dissolved alike into atoms.’ (6.24)

POSTERITY





4. DUTY

‘1. When you wake up in the morning, tell yourself: The people I deal with today will be meddling, ungrateful, arrogant, dishonest, jealous, and surly.

They are like this because they can't tell good from evil.

But I have seen 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. And so none of them can hurt me. No one can implicate me in ugliness.

Nor can I feel angry at my relative, or hate him. We were born to work together like feet, hands, and eyes, like the two rows of teeth, upper and lower.’

COMPASSION





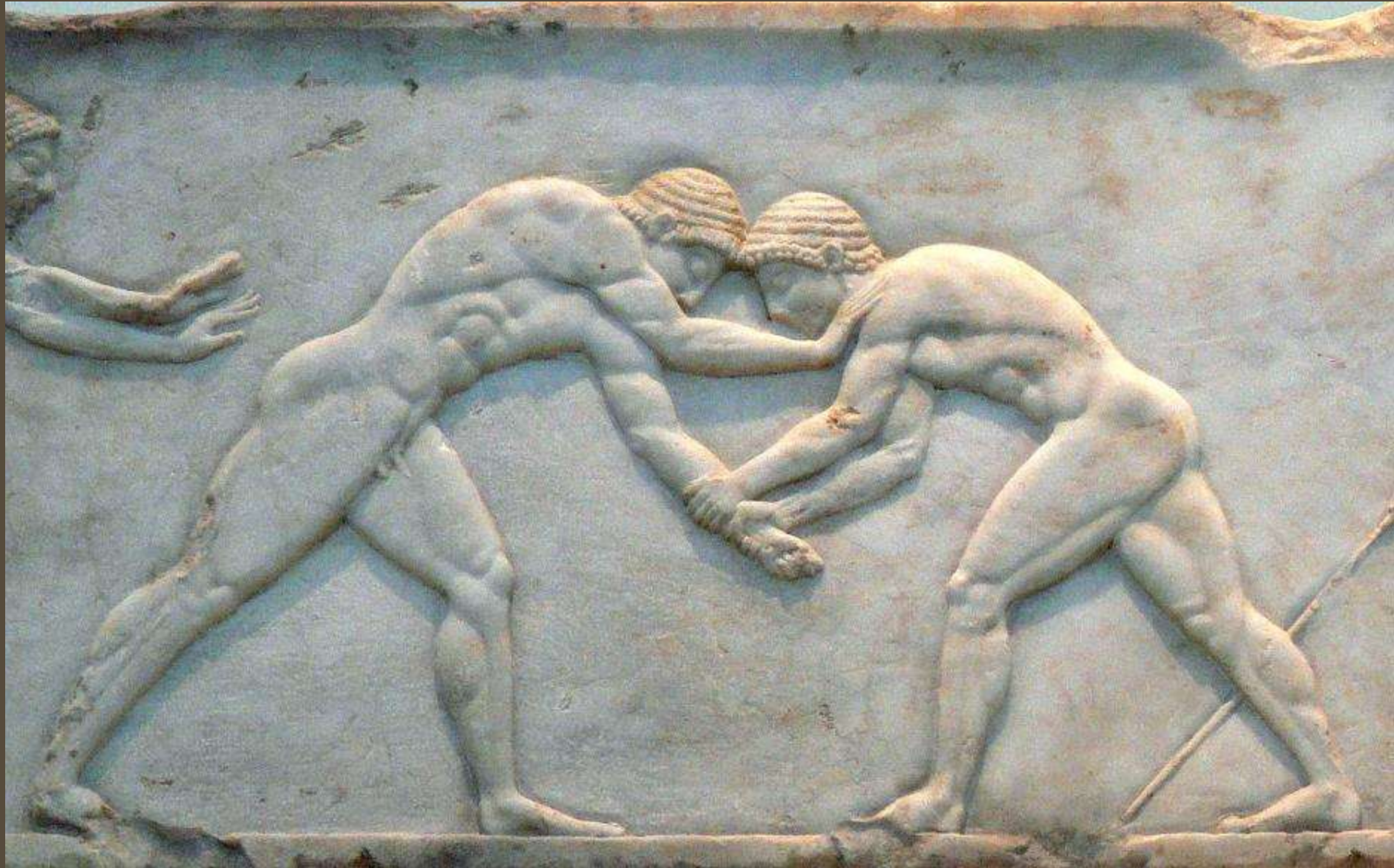
‘Life. Though distributed among a thousand different natures with their individual limitations.’ (12.30)

‘Everything is interwoven, and the web is holy; none of its parts are unconnected. They are composed harmoniously, and together they compose the world. One world, made up of all things. One divinity, present in them all. One substance and one law—the logos that all rational beings share.’ (7.9)

THE PART AND THE WHOLE







SPIRITUAL EXERCISE

1. Accepting others

‘Surrounded as we are by all of this, we need to practice acceptance. Without disdain.’ (7.3)

‘To feel affection for people even when they make mistakes is uniquely human. You can do it, if you simply recognize: that they’re human too, that they act out of ignorance, against their will, and that you’ll both be dead before long.’ (7.22)

‘It’s silly to try to escape other people’s faults. They are inescapable. Just try to escape your own.’ (7.71)

2. Self-admonition

‘When faced with people’s bad behavior, turn around and ask when you have acted like that. When you saw money as a good, or pleasure, or social position. Your anger will subside as soon as you recognize that they acted under compulsion (what else could they do?).’ (10.30)



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‘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. What other entity could all of humanity belong to?’ (4.4)

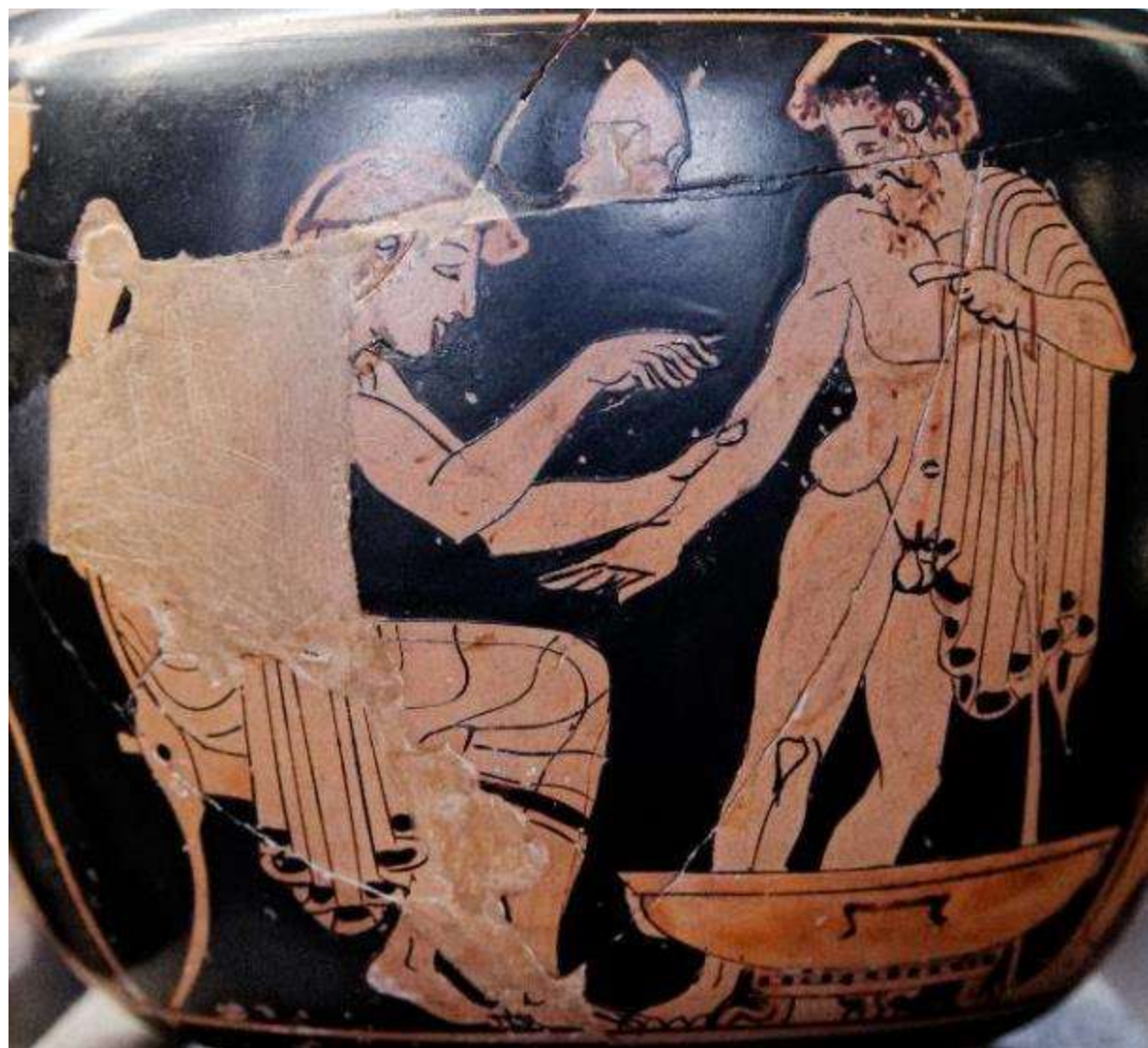
‘My city and state are Rome—as Antoninus. But as a human being? The world. So for me, “good” can only mean what’s good for both communities.’ (6.44)

‘Only a short time left. Live as if you were alone—out in the wilderness. No difference between here and there: the city that you live in is the world. (10.15)

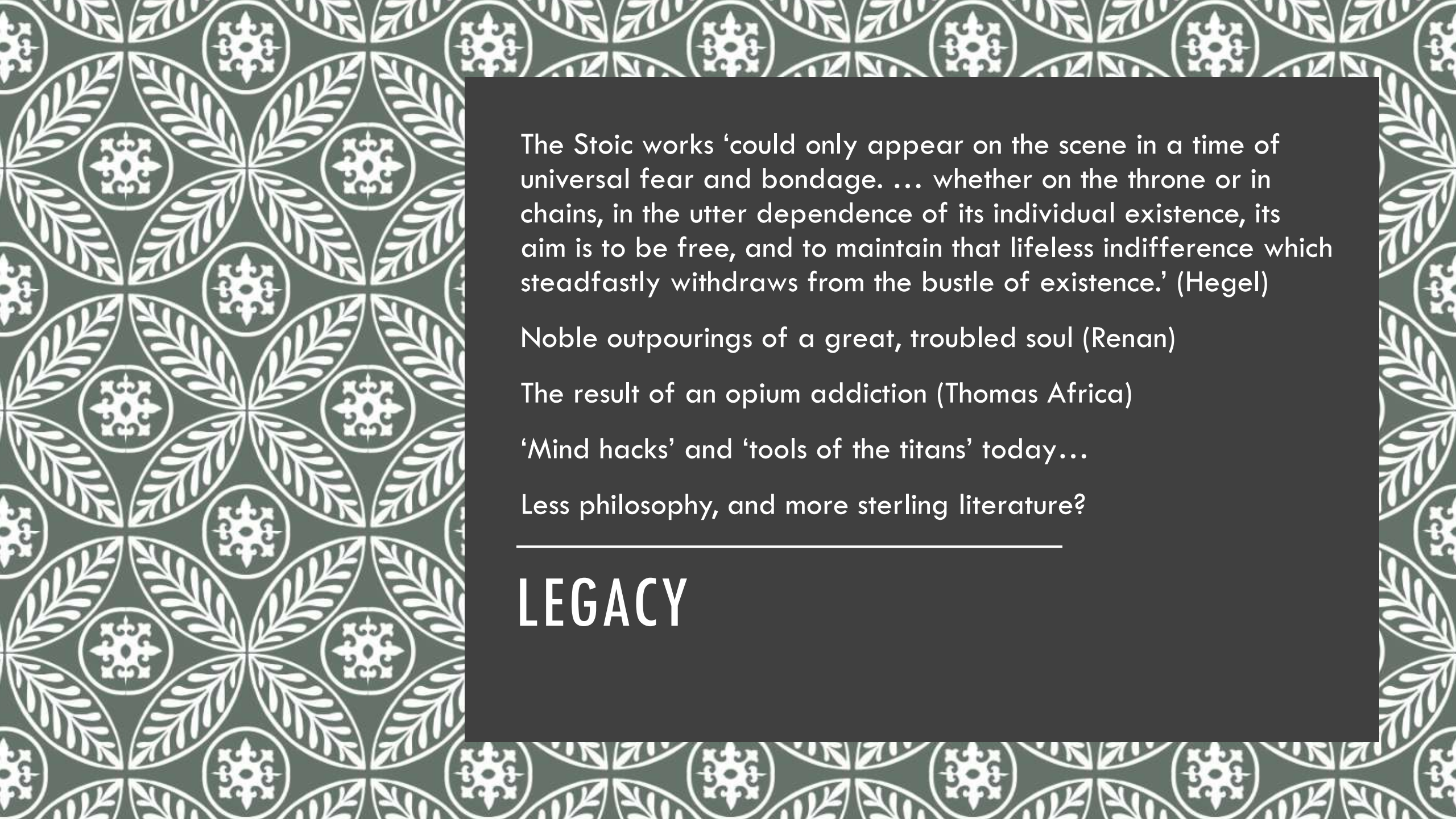
CITIZENS OF THE WORLD

5. LEGACY









The Stoic works 'could only appear on the scene in a time of universal fear and bondage. ... whether on the throne or in chains, in the utter dependence of its individual existence, its aim is to be free, and to maintain that lifeless indifference which steadfastly withdraws from the bustle of existence.' (Hegel)

Noble outpourings of a great, troubled soul (Renan)

The result of an opium addiction (Thomas Africa)

'Mind hacks' and 'tools of the titans' today...

Less philosophy, and more sterling literature?

LEGACY

FOR DISCUSSION ON MONDAY

1. What is the purpose of the *Meditations*?
2. What characterises the perspective of Marcus?
3. How do we categorise this work?

Discussion: 1pm-3pm. You can use the same Zoom link from last week. It's also up on Moodle

WEEK 6: THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES

Not a Stoic or even a work of philosophy, right?

Let's reconsider it.

Traditionally attributed to King Solomon, but likely written by someone else around the 3rd-4th century BCE

Please read the King James Version.

For anything, email Dan.Taylor@marywardcentre.ac.uk