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In memoriam

LIGIAE BÂRZU

(1930-2003)

archaeologist and professor

Cuprins/ Content

Articole și Studii/Articles and Studies

Florica (Bohîlțea) MIHUȚ, Rodica URSU-NANIU – Remembering Ligia Bârzu (1930-2003) …….....6
Sterling WRIGHT, Franceska-Cristina ȘTIRBU – Exchanging genes and goods: How ancient DNA can potentially illuminate complex mobility patterns in the Black Sea region…….. 14
Noria PETRACHE – Defining the Human Condition in Stoic Philosophy: A Case Study on the characterization of Emperor Marcus Aurelius……..26
Ana-Maria BALTĂ – Some preliminary conclusions regarding the end of the Roman Provincial Coinage in *Dacia*.....40
Vlad CIUR – A brief discussion about the circulation of North-Italic *Firmalampen* marks found in Roman Dobrudja……53
Hanna MILEWSKA – Working animal's welfare in antiquity. An interdisciplinary comparison of ancient horse breeding and training methods, as well as historical equipment, with modern horse welfare research results…… 75
Adrian-Gabriel MATEȘAN – Between archaic and modern: σκύθαι and πατζινάκοι in *The Alexiad* of Anna Komnene…….....89

Recenzii și prezentări de carte/ Reviews and Book Presentations

Tracy B. Henley, Matt J. Rossano, Edward P. Kardas (ed.), *Handbook of Cognitive Archaeology. Psychology in Prehistory*, New York, Routledge, 2020, pp. 545, ISBN: 978-1-1385-9450-0 – Noria PETRACHE……..101
Llyod Llewellyn-Jones, *Persians: The Age of the Great Kings*, New York, Hachette Book Group, 2022, 448 p., ISBN: 978-1-5416-0034-8 – Georgia-Bianca-Maria ISCRU.....105
Bruno Currie, *Herodotus as Homeric Critic*, HISTOS Supplement 13, Oxford, HISTOS, 2021, 109 p., ISSN (Online): 2046-5963; (Print):2046-5955 – Melania Teodora MUNTEANU.....108
Andrew G. Scott, *An Age of Iron and Rust. Cassius Dio and the History of His Time*, Leiden, Boston, Ed. Brill, 2023, 258 p., ISBN: 978-90-04-54111-5 – Nicolae-Vlad CIORICARU.....112

Andrei Opaiț, Alexandru Barnea, Bianca Grigoraș, Adriana Panaite, Dragoș Hălmagi, *Dinogetia II. Amforele romane,* Editura Mega, Cluj-Napoca, 2022, Biblioteca Istro-Pontica, Seria Arheolgie 22, 180 p + 105 pl. + 18 figuri incluse în text, ISBN: 978-606-020-549-4 – Florentina GHEMUȚ.....115

Cronica activității Centrului de Istorie Comparată a Societăților Antice, anul 2023 – Florica (Bohîlțea) MIHUȚ.....119

Defining the Human Condition in Stoic Philosophy: A Case Study on the characterization of Emperor Marcus Aurelius

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Abstract: This paper investigates, from a psycho-sociological perspective, notions of self-reflection and the human condition in the Greco-Roman world during the ancient period, focusing on the social constructionism of personal characterisation. In this context, Marcus Aurelius, one of Rome's most remarkable philosopher-emperors, was considered an exemplary, wise, and moral leader during a tumultuous period marked by wars, epidemics, and betrayals. The positive image of Marcus Aurelius has endured in history due to the efforts of recording and transmission of this depiction in ancient sources, which emphasised the enrichment of imperial power with attention to the philosophical form. Both within the Stoic doctrine and from the perspective of symbolic interactionism, the human condition is perceived as a result of social construction and subjective interpretations, in which the individual has the power to shape their own experience and create their reality. Qualitative research methods associated with symbolic interactionism emphasise individual experience and understanding of the world, being helpful in explaining broad social changes and the agency of participants. This perspective provides a broad framework for analysing interactions that shape social architecture through which the image of Marcus Aurelius is propagated.

Keywords: self-reflection; free will; symbolic interactionism; social constructionism; agency.

Introduction

Ancient philosophy elucidates the human condition by establishing a connection between the elements within human control and those beyond their influence. It also emphasises the necessity of maintaining a tolerant attitude towards external events dictated by providence. Stoic philosophy, rooted in traditional Hellenic thought, makes a clear distinction between an objective, rational, introspective mode of thinking, detached from the sensory realm, and a subjective mode of thinking based on attachment to value judgments. Maintaining a balance between personal development and fulfilling social responsibilities represents a crucial theme in governing an empire. This philosophical approach, rooted in Stoicism, explores how leaders, especially during the imperial period of ancient Rome, were required to manage and integrate aspects related to physical health, mental stability, and intellectual development into their policies and actions. In numerous ancient texts from various philosophical schools, a particular form of self-reflection is encountered. This type of attention

has been extensively analysed in scholarly works by authors such as Michel Foucault, Pierre Hadot, and Anthony Long, where self-perception or self-awareness seems to resemble the modern notion of subjectivity, even though the Stoics did not have a specific term to define the self. In the Greco-Roman world, philosophy was not just about acquiring erudite discourse and specific teachings; it primarily promoted 'recipes', states, and attitudes through which individuals could attain self-awareness. The purpose of this paper is to analyse the context in which the role of the leader Marcus Aurelius unfolds, primarily how the image of the 'good emperor' was constructed, as it appears in ancient sources such as the *Historia Augusta*, Cassius Dio, or the correspondence with Cornelius Fronto. By comparing this characterization with the imperatives Marcus Aurelius uses to define his responsibilities associated with his role, the following questions emerge: *How was the image of Marcus Aurelius as a philosopher-emperor, considered one of the best and wisest rulers of the empire, created, and transmitted in history? How did Marcus Aurelius adapt the notions of self-perception and the exploration of the human role in the universal context to maintain a balance between personal development and social duty? How does the emperor define his social role in his notes, and how does he present this role in public contexts in interaction with others?* In order to answer these questions, the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism has been employed to analyse the proposed case study. This interdisciplinary approach has the potential to contribute to a deeper understanding of the human condition in ancient history because sociological and anthropological perspectives can provide explanations for the diversity of cultural practices, while ancient history provides the socio-political context in which these societies existed. The creation and reproduction of social structures, as explained by Anthony Giddens, offer a stable framework for analysis. At the same time, the narrative descriptions of individuals about themselves, as interpreted by Jerome Bruner, highlight the construction of individual reality and its relation to the public sphere. Additionally, the perspective of the mobility of structures in space and time and the role of objects in this relationship, presented by Bruno Latour, underscores the actors' capacity to influence social structure.

Theoretical framework

Recent theoretical developments in sociology and anthropology, stemming from the perspective of symbolic interactionism, have emerged as a reaction to the rigid view of social structure proposed and produced by sociologists at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. This field of study was defined around the writings of American psychologist,

philosopher, and sociologist George Herbert Mead, who argued for the existence of consciousness only in relation to action and interaction. The theorization of social structure, already declining in the research interests of sociology and anthropology by the mid-1960s, gave way in the early 1970s to what came to be called interpretivism.[1] Interpretivism sought to improve static models of social structure by emphasizing practice and interaction. With the theory of practice, anthropological and sociological research shifted their focus to the agent, person, self, individual, or subject, who, by definition, possesses the freedom to choose and the capacity to act.[2] The relationship between agent and structure can be more easily understood in contrast to the issue of the relationship between the individual and the collective and reiterates, in sociological terms, the philosophical dilemma of free will versus determinism. Do the structural circumstances so constrain individuals that they lack free will, or are social structures merely a consequence of what actors do while pursuing their personal desires?[3] As described by sociologist Anthony Giddens, Structuration Theory serves a similar purpose and provides a model that encompasses structure and agentive action, elaborating on their mutual constitution. The duality of structure occupies a central position in this theory, where Giddens posits that actors carry the structural properties of significant and enduring social groups as forms of competence that allow them, through the authentic or modified reproduction of a general form of practice, to act in specific ways in appropriate situations. Any single act cannot alter the structural properties of a culture or group. Only the multiple reproduction or alteration of practices by numerous actors over long periods can solidify or revise the structural traits characteristic of that culture or group.[4]

The theory developed by anthropologist Bruno Latour in the 1980s, known as Actor-Network-Theory (ANT), aimed to integrate structuralist and functionalist perspectives with the interpretative methods characteristic of symbolic interactionism in order to explain social life by identifying the motives behind actions. The author presents the issue of the social realm in terms of motivational force through the exercise of free will: *"When we act, who else is acting?" "How many agents are also present?"*[5] Who or what compels us to act? Is there free will, or are we subject to forces created more at the collective level than the individual one? The author argues that action, defined as a conglomerate of many sets of agents, does not occur under the complete control of consciousness. Throughout his career, the author has been interested in

[1] Birx 2006, 2097.
[2] Birx 2006, 2097.
[3] Turner 2006, 15-16.
[4] Giddens 2006, 108; Turner, 2006, 613.
[5] Latour 2005, 43.

developing a methodology that incorporates the idea, contrary to traditional approaches in science, that both living and non-living entities should be considered 'actors' exhibiting agency.

Terms associated with ethnomethodology, such as 'account', have also emerged from the perspective of symbolic interactionism. This concept has a solid historical basis and has been viewed as a linguistic tool of argumentation that can be used as an empirical window through which one can glimpse the shared moral inclinations of a studied social group through explanations and justifications.[6] Throughout his life, psychologist Jerome Bruner made substantial contributions to the field of cognitive psychology through his research on self-construction, with a particular focus on language acquisition and development. Bruner believed that the self is constructed through interaction and is a product of transactions and discourse[7]. The narratives that respondents evoke about themselves in an interaction reveal modes of belief organisation, personal identity protection, or engagement with the surrounding reality. The methodology proposed by Bruner in his work *A Narrative Model of Self Construction* (1997) for analysing the narrative construction of the self follows several indicators of individualism that emerge when we think about ourselves. These indicators primarily serve two functions. The function of species maintenance through enhancing species reciprocity (*other people are like us in being them*). This action is based on mutuality and mutual attention and is organised around questions such as *'What particular beliefs can be expected from others, and what can they expect from us? What legitimate courses of action can be pursued? How should values be applied?'*[8] The other function pertains to the individualisation of the self and has two facets, one oriented towards personal preferences and understanding and the other toward what is appreciated and considered legitimate.

Self-reflection

The historian Anthony Long extensively explored the concept of self-reflection in ancient philosophy.[9] Numerous ancient texts belonging to various philosophical schools show a distinct concern for introspection and self-knowledge. The focus on the self involves a separation of the whole into a part that directs attention and a part upon which attention is directed. From this arises the theme of self-perception, which, as discussed in scholarly works,

[6] Turner 2006, 1.
[7] Bruner 1997, 150.
[8] Bruner 1997, 151.
[9] Long 2001.

has led to an association between the modern notion of subjectivity and the ancient notion of the soul.[10] Regarding self-reflection, the defining features of the human condition can be traced precisely in the individual's capacity to separate themselves from the world, to create a distance between themselves and the immediate experience. This enables planning, flexible thinking, inventiveness, and taking control of the world around them, in contrast to a passive attitude[11]. The relationship between the evolution of self-awareness and the sense that others are beings similar to us, thus evoking empathy and understanding, is confirmed by the close relationship between the development of self-perception and what is referred to in psychology as the 'Theory of mind', defined as the ability to exercise empathy, to put oneself in another person's place.[12]

The relationship with the master is essential for the practice of philosophy in the ancient period because it establishes a framework of interdependence wherein the individual, in order to know oneself, first needs to know the other. The indispensable role that 'the other' occupies in the context of self-care is structured by Michel Foucault into three aspects, which relate to learning by example, acquiring the concrete skills of the master, and adopting the Socratic model of inquiry and dialogue. Thus, the master serves as an actor who generates the desired outcomes in the individual's reform and in shaping his identity as a subject, akin to a patient's relationship with a doctor. The master acts as a mediator in the individual's relationship with their constitution, facilitating the transition from ignorance to knowledge, as ignorance can no longer be the element that brings knowledge. The subject cannot be the person who accomplishes their own transformation, hence the need for a guide. This is the central point on which the necessity of a mentor is based in classical thought[13]. In the ancient period, introspection encouraged by philosophy contributed to defining the individual's relationship with others and to a deeper understanding of one's existence, while the effective communication promoted by sophists generated both power and influence in both the private and public domains. Regarding the oratorical training technique, the recurring theme of metaphor was identified in the letters of Fronto. Metaphorical thinking is fundamental for understanding our universe because metaphor defines a shared experience, with separation existing only at the linguistic level[14]. Discussing how the analogy between human behaviour and an object produces contamination of elements, in which the objectification of humans

[10] Bejan 2018, 10.
[11] McGilchrist 2019, 21.
[12] McGilchrist 2019, 88.
[13] Foucault 2005, 133.
[14] McGilchrist 2019, 115.

becomes equal to the personification of objects, philologist Bruno Snell states that *'...a person must listen to an echo of themselves before they can hear or know themselves.'*[15]

Case study: Characterization of Emperor Marcus Aurelius

1. Construction of the Virtuous Emperor image

Marcus Aurelius has left a lasting legacy in history as one of the most notable philosopher-emperors of ancient Rome, renowned for being a paragon of moral leadership. The constructed and perpetuated characterization in primary sources repeatedly emphasizes his ability to uphold imperial power through philosophical wisdom. He proves this ability by fulfilling his responsibilities dutifully and displaying tolerance and acceptance in the socio-political context that dictates his obligations toward the citizens that define the empire.

According to Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration, groups have specific structural properties and characteristic patterns of relationships that persist over long periods, and these structures/patterns either remain stable or change when reproduced in interactions between individuals. Interaction is the fundamental element that maintains and creates the group's structure, but simultaneously, members' interactions occur within an existing structure.[16] This dichotomy expresses the central concept of structure and agency, and ontologically, the contradiction stems from the philosophical issue of free will. Giddens uses the concept of competence to connect the structural perspective with personal agency, emphasizing the importance of a person's ability to act in accordance with the rules of the structure and to recognize social structures in the actions of others.[17] The ancient writers' characterization of Marcus Aurelius as a good emperor is made in the context of Stoic philosophy that influences the belief systems and values adopted, applied, and integrated within the governance of an empire through networks of political and social actors. According to the narratives presented in *Historia Augusta* and the works of Cassius Dio, these authors shaped and perpetuated a favourable image of Emperor Marcus Aurelius, consistently highlighting aristocratic virtues, wisdom, and, above all, his inclination toward tolerance and clemency. In his book *Meditations* the emperor pays special attention to these qualities, which he considers essential characteristics of a good emperor. These qualities, rooted in Stoic philosophy, reflect his competence, bridging the structure formed around the role of the ruler with the space of

[15] Snell 1960, 200.
[16] Giddens 2006, 108.
[17] Turner 2006, 613.

interaction in which the role is reproduced. They correspond to the Senate's requirements for selecting the emperor based on merit[18] rather than genetic inheritance, so both the Senate and the emperor possess the competence to identify and reaffirm the social structure of the 'best' and reproduce it in interactions.

2. Analysis of primary sources

Although, upon analysing the primary sources, it can be observed that references in this regard are very few, there are also moments when the image of being a good emperor does not correspond to the opinion of those close to him. Contradictory events in the emperor's life highlight the aspects discussed so far and raise questions about the extent to which Marcus Aurelius' self-image aligns with his public image. Are there differences between what the emperor thinks and what he does in specific moments? What do these discrepancies reveal about the role of philosophy in his life? What role do certain material or immaterial elements play in the decisions made during tense moments? The events I will discuss below bring to attention periods of external or internal conflict in which specific contexts lead to changes in the emperor's behaviour. These situations highlight the tensions that arise from the need to reconcile one's perspectives and viewpoints with social responsibility, which requires rational, objective distancing from subjective, personal beliefs. This process is often marked by an emphasis on the emperor's forgiving attitude.

Within the significant events recorded in ancient sources, Marcus Aurelius stands out for adopting a forgiving attitude, and this desire becomes even more substantial in situations of economic or political crisis due to external pressure. Although the emperor has solid training in controlling his emotions, as his father Antoninus says when Marcus Aurelius loses control, *'neither philosophy nor the empire can make emotions disappear'.*[19] The betrayal by Avidius Cassius, this pivotal event in the life of Marcus Aurelius, was extensively documented by Cassius Dio. Presenting the actions Marcus Aurelius undertook during this period, Cassius Dio mentions that *'as he passed through all the populations that had risen in favour of Cassius, he behaved with unusual magnanimity toward all'.*[20] His discourse in front of the soldiers, agitated by circulating rumours, reveals a multitude of dissonances that Marcus Aurelius tries to resolve by maintaining the facade of a wise and forgiving man. Marcus Aurelius, approaching his role as emperor with seriousness and depth, highlights in the speech addressed to the soldiers the

[18] Pliny, *Panegyric* 63.2: „*uns ex nobis*"=like one of us. Eck, 2012, 98.
[19] *Historia Augusta*, *Antoninus Pius*, 10.
[20] Cassius Dio 71, 28.

conviction that the greatest reward he could receive was the ability to forgive Avidius Cassius for the attempted revolt he undertook.

> *'It would mean that I would be deprived of a great reward, expected both from the war I am waging and from the victory we will achieve, namely a reward such as no man has ever received. What do I mean? I mean the possibility I have of forgiving someone who has done wrong, of remaining friends with someone who has violated friendship. These words may undoubtedly seem incredible to you, and yet you must not doubt their sincerity...'* (Cassius Dio, 71, 26).

The preference for a modest manner of living is an integral part of the philosophical school to which Marcus Aurelius adheres. However, generous acts of forgiveness of debts, taxes, or substantial rewards to the people also appear in times of tension, war, or emotional distress. An example mentioned by Cassius Dio that showcases this aspect is the moment when Marcus Aurelius returns to Rome from Athens after his wife's death. According to custom, citizens raised eight fingers in the air, hoping to receive an equal number of gold pieces, but M. Antoninus granted them 200 *denari*, an extremely generous sum. The manner in which the emperor employs forgiveness to showcase his competence is intriguing not only in major life events but also discernible in minor occurrences as well, such as the condemnation of a circus performer who brought a trained lion into the arena to eat people. Interestingly, Marcus Aurelius does not grant him pardon; instead, he condemns him, despite the people's wishes. Here, his aversion to any act of violence is emphasized, which, besides fulfilling his moral duty to the citizens he must set an example for, is also a personal preference. Marcus Aurelius's aversion to violence is altruistic and aimed at educating the public, but it is also a subjective opinion. In this context, it is worth noting that Cassius documented the emperor's profound aversion to '*shedding blood*'.

> *'Indeed, Marcus Antoninus felt such a strong aversion to shedding blood that in Rome, the gladiatorial contests he watched were harmless, just like athletic games. He never allowed the gladiators to fight with sharp swords, and all they had in their hands were swords with blunted tips, as if they were covered with sheaths.'* (Cassius Dio, 71, 29)

Indeed, as argued earlier, sociologist Anthony Giddens states that no single act, not recognized and repeated through imitation, can create a structure around it. However, the actions of Marcus Aurelius, such as not freeing the circus performer and the 'peaceful' gladiator contests, do not actually reproduce a structure to which Marcus Aurelius adheres. On the contrary, he attempts to change the context of certain practices. Confirming the sociologist's statements, it can be observed how the gladiators' custom of not using sharp swords was abandoned after the reign of Marcus Antoninus, who was succeeded by one of the most violent rulers of the Empire.

In an effort to offer o more integrative view of the duality of structure, the free will of the agent, and the role of interactions as a basis for creating meaning, Bruno Latour suggested that both living and non-living entities are social actors. The agency of objects within the sphere of Marcus Aurelius's role as emperor is understood by the ruler through the lens of philosophy, as Stoic beliefs about physics and ethics generate theories about all the elements that make up the world, including objects endowed with forces and properties. Primarily, the attitude toward objects is dictated by an attempt to maintain an objective internal discourse without assigning value judgments through methods such as division into quantitative parts or the analysis of causal relationships with events dictated by nature. In a contemporary context, when people and objects act, networks for transmitting information are formed because living beings and things possess agency.[21] Thus, the network structure is not static but involves a context of interaction between humans and objects. In Marcus Aurelius's book, there are several examples where he refers to the manner of using particular objects that hold symbolic significance for his role as emperor, intending to emphasize that an austere lifestyle is desired and dictated by the laws of nature.

> *'From the gods:living at the court, it is possible not to use guards carrying spears, nor elegant clothing, nor chandeliers, statues, and such objects, and a luxury of the like...'* (M.A., *Meditations*, 1, 17).

Among the enumerations of things he learned from his mentors, as presented in Book I, are remarks regarding the manner of wearing the toga (for example: '*...not to walk around the house dressed in a toga, not to do such things*' [22]). This behaviour, acquired through the

[21] Latour 2005, 65.
[22] M.A. 1, 7.

examples provided by those responsible for his philosophical education, is recalled both in the biography compiled by Cassius Dio: '*...In his own home where he lived... he greeted the highest-ranking dignitaries without wearing the formal toga befitting his status..., even receiving them in the room where he slept*'[23] but it also has strong echoes in the accounts in the Historia Augusta. Surprisingly, this remark is addressed and can be found in the biography of his father, Antoninus Pius*: '...Indeed, he often received his friends without the robes of state and even in the performance of domestic duties...*'[24].

In an attempt to provide a clearer definition of the relationship between the agent and social structure, Bruno Latour exposes the difference between understanding the term 'social' as 'social ties' and 'social' in the sense of 'associations', with the latter being closer to the original etymology.[25] Contrary to previous sociological perspectives, for Latour, the social does not designate a domain of reality or a particular object but rather is the name of a movement, a displacement, or a transformation. It represents an association of entities that cannot be recognized as social in the usual sense, except for the brief moment when they are associated, as is the case with the toga as an object in itself and the space in which it is or is not worn, or with the dull-tipped swords, which become agents of the emperor's intention. These transformations are, in fact, what will later become the 'networks' through which actors express their capacity to act.[26] Thus, from Bruno Latour's theoretical perspective, 'social' is the name of a type of momentary association characterized by the way it brings together new forms of actors, both living and non-living. In the particular case analysed in this work, the relationship between Marcus Aurelius' behaviour and the context in which he performs his role is not solely dictated by social forces that impose a specific type of conduct learned and reproduced through imitation. As Latour argues, a power relationship that mobilizes only basic social skills would be limited to very short and fleeting interactions. Shifting the focus to associations and short-term interactions through the analysis of practical means and the ingenuity employed in expanding said interactions, reveals aspects related to the sustainability of society and those related to its substance.[27] Therefore, even though the type of interaction between humans and objects in this case is dictated by the tenets of Stoicism, the specific manner in which these rules are put into practice denotes Marcus Aurelius' unique perception of the world and

[23] Dio 71, 35.
[24] *Historia Augusta, Antoninus Pius*, 6.
[25] Latour 2005, 64.
[26] Latour 2005, 65.
[27] Latour 2005, 66.

himself. This perception implicitly contributes to the construction of the social reality in which he is involved. Although wearing the toga represents a straightforward example, it is not the only object that gains agency in interaction networks. Others that are worth mentioning are the letters of correspondence that Marcus Aurelius insists on writing by hand, a fact emphasized in the three sources, the statues erected in honour at certain times, or even immaterial things like principles, defined as objects of thought in Stoic philosophy. Because the analysis of ancient sources reveals cases where Marcus Aurelius' interaction with these objects is inconsistent, distinctions denote the difference between personal motivation, social responsibility, and the effects these actions have on the social context in which they are integrated. Despite the Emperor's characteristic seriousness in maintaining correspondence, during moments like the betrayal by Avidius Cassius, he neglects to dispatch informative letters to the Senate (and destroys those that could harm his image). Although a preference for a modest and restrained lifestyle is highlighted in both his book and ancient sources, the *Historia Augusta* points out that '*...in general, he bestowed great honours upon his teachers and even maintained golden statues of them in his chapel...*'[28]. From these contexts, it can be inferred that social architecture is fluid, and the condition to fulfil certain roles is closely related to an individual's ability to balance their intention and the purpose of their duties.

In the process of forming social structures, Bruno Latour emphasizes motivational force or free will and argues that action is not entirely under the control of consciousness. The author provides an example that illustrates this worldview, demonstrating that certain aspects persist over long periods, even if there seems to be no apparent connection between the initial identifiable moment of an action and its replication over time. This aspect is also evident in a seemingly insignificant detail from the emperor's life, but it is relevant to the ongoing discussion.

> *'Among other illustrations of his unfailing consideration towards others, this act of kindness is to be told: after one lad, a rope dancer, had fallen, he <Marcus Aurelius> ordered mattresses spread under all rope-dancers. This is the reason why a net is stretched under them today.'* (*Historia Augusta, Marcus Antoninus,* 12).

Although the period in which the *Historia Augusta* was written remains uncertain, the gesture continues to be practiced today, nearly 1800 years later. This quote highlights the

[28] *Historia Augusta, Marcus Antoninus,* 3.

perpetuation of social practices through the actions of individuals and objects within social structures. Of course, it cannot be said whether the idea of providing safety to entertainers first appeared in human history due to Marcus Aurelius. Upon brief research into the history of safety nets in entertainment performances, it can be observed that there are numerous instances where, following an accident, a decision was made to protect performers 'for the first time'. However, the generosity of Marcus Aurelius, which is always manifested through his appreciation for human life, is repeatedly emphasized because his devotion to providence and loyalty to the Roman state create enduring networks for information transmission. Although the example mentioned above pertains to an apparently trivial matter within a specific context, it broadly reflects the emperor's attitude towards himself and the universe. This deep inclination towards subjective awareness of the connection with nature, responsibility towards the social aspect, and creating a community united by divine rationality resurfaces in collective experience throughout history. Complex social structures are formed through the mimetic capacity of individuals to replicate specific practices derived from experience.

Conclusions

In Stoic philosophy, the human condition is shaped by the relationship between the individual and the world. Humans are endowed with reason and can use this reason to act virtuously. It is believed that nature is providential, and therefore, it is essential to accept external events as they occur. Being a part of this nature, each individual bears the responsibility to act for the benefit of the community. Each person develops a personal relationship with the concept of providence, and the understanding that only the intellect, especially its rational part, can be controlled represents a central goal in the practice of ancient philosophy.

As a leader, Marcus Aurelius strives for an ideal model in accordance with divine nature because the duty he carries towards himself actually reflects the duty he fulfils towards the citizens. Politics without philosophy is not in harmony with nature, as these two aspects are interdependent, just as self-care and care for others are intertwined.

In the ancient sources, Marcus Aurelius is highly praised. In his own work, he outlines an ideal of imperial leadership during a period when introspection had already become an institutionalized practice, and the concern for personal development was characteristic of individuals with leadership aspirations. In the biographies of the leader, the emphasis on qualities such as forgiveness and tolerance in specific contexts serves as a means to create the

image of a good emperor, as these qualities are indicators of adherence to a particular doctrine. The adoption, reproduction in interactions, and recognition of these qualities in others form the structure through which the conception of a good emperor is propagated. However, in ancient historical sources, there are instances mentioned where his behaviour does not meet the ideal standard. Even though these incidents are sometimes mentioned briefly and superficially, they can provide insights into the questions raised.

Marcus Aurelius's indulgent behaviour becomes pronounced in situations of economic or political crisis when external pressure is higher. To resolve the cognitive dissonance that arises due to the limitations of free will, the emperor believes that Roman citizens are subject to the same laws, have the same rights, and are equal in free expression. When the subjective perspective (personal preference) contradicts the action toward the good of the community, it appears camouflaged in the intention of social behaviours, which seemingly have an altruistic character. Moreover, the way he uses objects to emphasize different qualities demonstrates that social structures are not just rigid rules to be followed or customs to be imitated. They are dynamic, and objects such as the toga, swords with dulled tips, statues, or letters play an active role in social interactions that, together with people, form complex networks for transmitting information. Therefore, the notions of subjectivity and objectivity correspond to how people generally perceive reality and represent specific functions that Marcus Aurelius uses to balance the private and public aspects of life. The self cannot be perceived as a passive entity entirely subjected to external influences. In the process of defining one's identity, individuals not only act within specific contexts but also actively contribute to shaping community structures. The processes of accumulating information and imitating customs intertwine in a complex manner with the exercise of free will, revealing numerous connections between individual experience and abstract systems.

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