Marcus Aurelius’s 19-year reign as Roman emperor capped of a period from AD 96-180 the Roman Empire enjoyed a period ruled by men who are now referred to as the “Five Good Emperors” (Birley 2012, 11).[[1]](#footnote-1) Aurelius was perhaps that epitome of what Plato referred to as a philosopher king as a he was a student of Stoicism and it played a large role in his entire life, whether be in affairs dealing with governance or family. This paper will explore the question of how Marcus Aurelius used these Stoic principles as emperor of Rome. In particular, the paper will explore how the Stoic philosophy that Aurelius seems to focus on in *Meditations* reveals itself in his choices and leadership style as emperor. This paper will use descriptive analysis as its research methodology.

Being among the most recognizable and well know emperors in the history of Rome means there has been extensive research done into the life of Marcus Aurelius. The general consensus among sources is that Aurelius was among the best emperors Rome ever had being called “an excellent, well-educated, philosophically minded ruler, and emperor who led an exemplary life” (Ackeren and de Blois 2012, 171).[[2]](#footnote-2) But as is the case with all leaders, there are those who believe Marcus was too much philosopher and not enough emperor. He may have preached wisdom and tolerance, but while ruling was persecuting Christians, taking from slaves conquered people, and waging war (McLynn 2009, 452-56).[[3]](#footnote-3) Aurelius seems to have been a man with two sides, and the current research about him exemplifies this split. Research about him tends to either focus on his decisions as emperor, or his Stoic philosophy as revealed in his personal journal, *Meditations*. Rarely is it analyzed how that Stoic philosophy that seemed so important in his journal made its way into his decisions as emperor. This paper will look to bridge the gap between Aurelius the emperor and Aurelius the philosopher and provide some insight into why he led the way he did.

Stoicism is a very involved doctrine, and the someone like Marcus would have been versed in all aspects of it, from its views on the nature of God to its moral philosophy. The Stoic doctrine is vast and can at times be confusing and contradictory, which is why when one reads *Meditations* it may feel less like traditional works about Stoicism than those of its originators in Greece. McLynn argues that while Greek Stoicism was a theory of the universe, the Roman Stoicism we see Marcus prescribe to is more of a “guide to living” (2009, 213).[[4]](#footnote-4) Because of the nature of Roman Stoicism, it offers us a glimpse at the value system that buttressed Marcus’s decisions as leader. W.H.D Rouse identifies two themes of Stoicism that reveal themselves in *Meditations* (Casaubon and Rouse 1906, 7)[[5]](#footnote-5) that I assert capture this value system best and will thus provide the clearest lens through which to examine the impact Stoicism had on Marcus’ leadership. The first is the Stoic’s focus on distinguishing between things that we have power and control over, and things that we do not. The Stoics believed that the individual was called to control his/her emotions, desires, etc, via their will while recognizing that there was much about the world that was outside of their control. The second principle is an emphasis man’s duty to serve as part of the “greater whole”; as part of a unified universe. These two principles of Stoicism will be the focus of the discussion here when examining his leadership.

One way that that these principles were exemplified by his leadership can be found in his sense of community. Marcus emphasized the importance of one remembering that they do in fact belong to a community of others and are in union with them. This community was so important to Marcus because to him, in accordance with Stoic philosophy, everything from the everyday Roman citizen to the Empire of Rome itself participated and was part of a larger, universal whole. The sense of duty that will be discussed in the next paragraph and sense of community go hand in hand in Stoicism, and Marcus drew his sense of duty from the constant reminder that he served a community greater than himself (Sherman 2007, 169-70). This emphasis on unity and constantly being a part of the whole can be seen in comments about the reaction of the empire as a whole when Marcus died in AD 180. “There was not a single subject throughout the Roman Empire that did not grieve at the news” after he passed wrote the Greek author Herodian and while this is of course an exaggerated passage it certainly speaks to the aura of unity that Marcus brought to the empire (Ackeren and de Blois 2012, 177). This unity with the Roman people can be seen in his actions too, not just his perception among the populous. Marcus would regularly receive petitioners and wouldn’t allow for his bodyguard to push away Romans who approached him (Ackeren and de Blois 2012, 177). Another instance of Marcus making sure to always remember that he served this community was during the Antonine plague. Marcus provided the Roman population with games and spectacles to distract them (perhaps mercifully) from the death that surrounded them, and even made sure that the funerals of all plague victims would be paid for by the state (McLynn

Tied into this sense of unity of everything that Marcus had during his reign was the astute sense of duty that he had in everything he did. Like the philosopher-kings that Plato describes, being emperor was not something that Marcus longed for. It was well known that Marcus was reluctant to rule, but he knew that Rome needed an emperor and his education had prepared him for that role, his Stoic philosophy “made the path of duty plain” (Birley 2012, 116).[[6]](#footnote-6) This sense of duty is again seen in his activity in deciding legal cases for Roman citizens. He was particularly careful with details and language, pouring over each case with earnest as he knew that each decision he made had to be well thought out, as was his duty as emperor (Birley 2012, 139).[[7]](#footnote-7) In his work on Aurelius, de Blois says that this attitude towards the law is less grounded in Marcus’ philosophy and more in adherence to Roman tradition (2012, 179).[[8]](#footnote-8) It certainly is true that Marcus adhered to this code because it was tradition, but I argue that it was the duty to serve Rome that Stoicism would necessitate that would result in Marcus approaching the law this way. If it were simply the case that the emperors all treated the law like Marcus did, there wouldn’t be such stark contrast between the seriousness of his approach and the less serious and “humorous” approach that the emperor before him, Antonius Pius, took (Birley 2012, 139).[[9]](#footnote-9) Another area where Marcus’s Stoic sense of duty is in his approach to the military campaigns of Rome during his reign. He was no military man, and in fact when he was young and throughout his reign as emperor, his contemporaries commented on his sense of duty despite his physical weakness (Birley 2012, 89).[[10]](#footnote-10) It was not just his own weakness that he had to overcome, but familial troubles plagued his life as well. One such instance of tragedy occurred right before his departure to the war front in AD 169. One of his sons fell ill with a tumor under his ear and would pass away at the age of 7. In a typical Stoic fashion, Marcus mourned for just five days and immediately departed to do his duty to Rome on the front lines (Birley 2012, 162).[[11]](#footnote-11) Marcus’s approach to duty can be most clearly summed up by entry two in book six of *Meditations*. He writes that no matter what “whether half frozen or well warm, whether only slumbering, or after a full sleep; whether discommended or commended thou do thy duty” (Casaubon and Rouse 1906, 47).

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