

Topography as Epistemology in Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*
Yasuko Taoka (Southern Illinois University)

The *Meditations* employs a metaphor of geographical space for psychic space: Marcus Aurelius urges himself to turn away from the constant flux of the physical world and to retreat to the stability of an internal, psychic world of springs, mountains, and roads. The use of the geographical term *horos*, however, complicates this internal geography and reveals the difficulties of philosophical self-exploration and self-knowledge. The dual meaning of *horos* as both geographical boundary and philosophical definition renders the topographical project into an epistemological and ethical one. While previous treatments of the *Meditations* (Rutherford 1989, Hadot 1998) have identified elements of the geography metaphor, they have not yet explored the use of *horos*.

While *horos* typically means *boundary* or *limit*, it is also used in the *Meditations* to mean *definition*, and is employed as part of the philosophical practice by which one gains control over objects and the emotions they arouse. The technique is presented at 3.11: one uses reason (the primary characteristic of the psyche) to arrive at a definition (*horos*) for an object; by developing knowledge of an object and its role in the world, one is able to utilize it appropriately. As Foucault has famously noted, the ethics of the *Meditations* rests upon the attainment of a peaceful life through repeated application of this technique to all objects one encounters.

And yet the internal, psychic world is largely without boundary in the *Meditations*: while *horos* and its cognates are often used of the external world, it is used only once of the internal world. That there are no boundaries to the internal world suggests that it is without limit. But, more interestingly, it also suggests that the internal world is not subject to definition. Thus the internal world's lack of a *horos* complicates its status as an object of knowledge or control. The epistemology, and thus the ethics, of the *Meditations* consequently originates from an unbounded and undefined place.

This topography is further complicated by the only occurrence of a form of *horos* in reference to the internal world. At 7.55, the reasoning process is described as uniquely having the ability to circumscribe (*periorizein*) itself. The act of bounding and defining is here reflexive. The internal self, it seems, defines all else, but can be defined by itself alone. However the veracity of a definition established through reflexive observation is subject to scrutiny.

The status of this internal place from which the epistemology of the *Meditations* originates is thus ambiguous. The difficulties of defining this place invites questions about epistemology in the *Meditations*. Is the epistemology, and the ethics that depend upon it, unsound as a result of the complication at its core? Or, conversely, is such a non-place necessary as the origin of an epistemology at all?

In this way the innocuous geographical term *horos* opens up a discussion about the basis for knowledge, and also ethics, in Marcus Aurelius' philosophy.

Foucault, M. (1986). The Care of the Self, tr. R. Hurley. Random House.

_____. (2005). The Hermeneutics of the Subject, tr. G. Burchell. Palgrave MacMillan.

Hadot, P. (1998). The Inner Citadel: The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius, tr. M. Chase. Harvard University Press.

Rutherford, R. B. (1989). The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius: A Study. Oxford University Press.