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# The Therapy of Desire. Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics (review)

John T. Kirby

*University of Miami*, [corax@miami.edu](mailto:corax@miami.edu)

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**Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire. Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*. Martin Classical Lectures, New Series, Volume 2. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994. Pp. xiv + 558. ISBN 0-691-03342-0. \$29.95.**

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**Reviewed by John T. Kirby, Purdue University.**

Even for those with some knowledge of ancient philosophy, which in realistic terms may mean no more than 'Small Plato, and lesse Aristotle,' the realm of Hellenistic philosophy likely represents today an uncharted and darkling terrain. This is certainly a sign of the times, and while it is convenient to round up such likely suspects as sloth, and a general Hesiodic declension of the race, it is also prudent to remember that the contours of knowledge are themselves changing. While we still have only the same number of hours in our day as the scholar of two hundred years ago had, there is now by contrast exponentially more to be known -- about everything from classical antiquity to fiber-optics -- and the total mass of human knowledge continues literally to double and redouble (it is estimated) every few years. This I take to be both a cause and an effect of professional specialization. Too, there are (whether we like to admit it or not) fashions in classical scholarship. Less than twenty years ago I asked a professional Latinist whether he liked to read the tragedies of Seneca. His reply: 'Sure -- when I want a good laugh.'

One can see, then, how it might come to pass that Hellenistic philosophy has of late received rather less than its due in terms of scholarly attention.

Happily this is beginning to change,<sup>1</sup> and quite recently there has been substantial good work in the realm of ethics; for example, Brad Inwood's *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism* (Oxford 1985); Phillip Mitsis' *Epicurus' Ethical Theory: The Pleasures of Invulnerability* (Ithaca 1988); and Malcolm Schofield and Gisela Striker (edd.), *The Norms of Nature: Studies in Hellenistic Ethics* (Cambridge 1986). A recent issue of *The Monist* has also been devoted to Hellenistic Ethics,<sup>2</sup> and Nussbaum herself edited an issue of *Apeiron* on the same topic.<sup>3</sup>

Hellenistic philosophy, we learn from Nussbaum's lengthy programmatic introduction to *The Therapy of Desire*, 'is hard to study partly on account of its success ... one must deal, in effect, with six centuries and two different societies' (6). Nussbaum has decided to shape her investigation around a nexus of themes stemming from a central metaphor, that of philosophy as 'a way of addressing the problems of human life' and of the philosopher as 'a compassionate physician whose arts could heal many pervasive types of human suffering' (3). The metaphor, whose appearance Nussbaum traces in the three major Hellenistic schools, has deep roots in Greek thought; it is to

be found in Homer's *Iliad* and in the Presocratics. While not perhaps specifically medical in focus, the notion of 'care of the soul' appears at least as early as Plato (*epimeleisthai tes psukhes*, e.g. *Apology of Socrates* 29d 30b). Nussbaum wastes no time in revealing one of the startling implications of the medical metaphor -- that philosophy-as-therapy deals not only with cognitive but also with affective issues: not just with 'invalid inferences and false premises' but also with 'irrational fears and anxieties ... excessive loves and crippling angers' (37). A key aspect of this -- and thus of Nussbaum's whole enterprise here -- is the Hellenistic assessment of the emotions as 'not blind surges of affect' but 'intelligent and discriminating elements of the personality that are very closely linked to beliefs, and are modified by belief' (38). Nussbaum asserts that the same is true of desire: hence her book's title.

Not surprisingly -- given Nussbaum's own training and predilections, as well as the nature of the matter at hand -- she begins her study by grounding it in Aristotle (chapters 2-3). The *Maestro di color che sanno* himself, as Nussbaum shows in chapter 2, drew explicit parallels between philosophy and medicine;<sup>4</sup> moreover (though Nussbaum is careful to distance herself from postulating a genetic link between Peripatetic and Hellenistic thought) both Aristotle and the Hellenistic thinkers construed ethics in relation to 'human flourishing' (Nussbaum's term for *eudaimonia*). In chapter 3 Nussbaum firmly underscores the notion, already fairly widely accepted, that Aristotle posits a cognitive origin to the emotions. But she also points out that his ethical theory places great emphasis on external factors in one's life, particularly good luck in terms of family and friends, upbringing, health, and so on. She compares such philosophy, finally, to giving vitamins to the healthy, rather than healing the sick (101) -- thus pointing up a major difference between Aristotle's approach and that of the Hellenistic philosophers.

From this point on, the book follows in its main contours a structure similar to that of Long's *Hellenistic Philosophy*: a sizeable section on Epicureanism, a chapter on Skepticism, and another sizeable section on Stoicism. In her treatment of Epicureanism (chapters 4-7) Nussbaum focuses on the Epicurean approach to erotic passion, the fear of death, and anger. Chapter 4 evokes a vivid picture of life and education in the *kepos* of Epicurus. Nussbaum's Epicurus is surprisingly up-to-date in some respects; for example, he valorizes 'the testimony of the senses and the bodily feelings' (107). On the other hand, he also harbors the notion of some normative and pure *phusis*, 'nature,' that can be appealed to and capitalized upon, as if *nomos* were not (to pirate Pindar's felicitous phrase) *ho panton basileus*. Ironically, the Aristotle that Epicurus is said to counter is not the immemorial logocentrist perpetrator of the western tradition, but a relativist whose dialectic respects 'the beliefs of the elite whom it interrogates, and ... [turns] these social dogmas, through a sort of critical scrutiny, into "truth"' (104). The philosophy of Epicurus is unblinkingly focused on *eudaimonia*, and consequently is unapologetically therapeutically-oriented; for him, 'every branch of philosophy must be assessed for its contribution to

practice. If it makes none, it is empty and useless' (121). Thus, for him such apparatus as logic have a sheerly instrumental value.

Lucretius is of course a crucial source for the reconstruction of Epicurean doctrine, and so it is not surprising to find that chapters 5-7 are devoted to the *De rerum natura*. Chapter 5 treats at considerable length the Lucretian attitude toward love; in this Nussbaum has plenty of antecedents, including (in this century) Cyril Bailey, E.J. Kenney, David Konstan, and Diskin Clay. Much information is laid out before the skilful summation, synthesis, and assessment found on pp. 188-191. Chapter 6 provides a detailed examination of death and the doctrine of the mortality of the soul. Here the power, profundity, and grave beauty of Nussbaum's summary of the problem (pp. 192-193) make one hope that she will someday turn to the writing of fiction; rather than rend the fabric of that prose by citing an excerpt, I will simply urge my reader to peruse it *in situ*. The argument in the remainder of the chapter is exceedingly complex, and Nussbaum interacts with the opinions of a number of other scholars. Chapter 7 investigates Lucretius' teachings on those 'monsters of the soul,' anger and aggression. Here Nussbaum investigates an aspect of what I have elsewhere termed the 'Great Triangle,'<sup>12</sup> particularly the *peitho/bia* dyad; her chapter title, 'By Words, Not Arms' -- a translation of Lucretius' *dictis, non armis* (*De rerum natura* 5.50) -- makes this clear.

For the eighth chapter's treatment of Pyrrhonian Skepticism -- a radical approach that proposes 'the purgation of all cognitive commitment, all belief, from human life' (285) -- Nussbaum draws mainly on Sextus Empiricus. She believes, like Burnyeat, and *pace* Frede, that for the Skeptics, *epokhe* -- that suspension of reason in which one turns away from belief -- extends to all beliefs (but not to all emotions; cf. p. 495). The *ataraxia* that follows upon this does so by chance, 'like a shadow' (300).

Chapters 9-12 then turn to Stoicism, and here we see that the therapy of desire is Stoicism's central focus in ethics. Nussbaum examines Stoic therapeutic strategies, especially the self-governing and critical powers of the *psukhe*. Chapter 9 explores some of the differences in approach between Stoic and Epicurean thought: for example, while both schools stress that the individual who comes for philosophic therapy is in a dialogic relationship with others, in Epicureanism this is with the philosophical/therapeutic community as a whole, while in Stoicism it is more specifically between master and pupil. Moreover, while in the latter case the relationship is symmetrical and non-authoritarian, the structure of relationships in the former is much more hierarchical. Chapter 10 assesses the Stoic recommendation that the passions be extirpated. Nussbaum finds this problematic, as it is based on an undifferentiated notion of the *psukhe* (unlike that propounded by Plato). In this regard the Posidonian model is favored over the Chrysippean. The connection between belief and emotion, and the role played by the former in the latter, is carefully explored.

Chapter 10 ended with the assertion that, if the Stoic position on the passions is accurate, then 'it is only in the Stoic life of self-containment that we can have stable gentleness and beneficence, the avoidance of terrible acts' (398). To pursue this exploration further, chapters 11-12 provide an examination of Seneca's *De ira* and *Medea*.

In conclusion, chapter 13 gives some summarizing 'reflections about several themes that link the book's various chapters and sections' (485). Here Nussbaum provides a retrospective assessment of such topics as Hellenistic views of nature; the extent of *ataraxia*; the implications of Hellenistic philosophy for economics, politics, and social life in our own time; and, finally, the extent to which a real extirpation of the passions can be successful.

*The Therapy of Desire*, then, while extensive in breadth, does not pretend to the status of a systematic overview of Hellenistic philosophy. Rather it is a 'somewhat idiosyncratic account of certain central themes' (6) inspired by the medical analogy. Aware of the pitfalls that typically beset such studies, Nussbaum makes it clear that she does not consider it sufficient simply to raid extant Roman sources in order to reconstruct vanished Greek ones (6-7). On the contrary, 'good Roman Epicurean or Stoic philosophy must at the same time be a searching critical inquiry into Roman traditions ... This book ... is committed to studying the philosophical arguments in their historical and literary context' (7). Nussbaum early makes clear her commitment to (what I think are) sound historicist interpretive principles: '... Roman philosophy pursues its questions about the relation of theory to practice while standing in an intimate relation to Roman history and politics' (7). In doing so she invokes Wolfgang Iser's notion of the 'implied reader.'<sup>6</sup> Nussbaum gives a clear rationale for the literary shape of her philosophical investigations:

Literary and rhetorical strategies enter into the methods [*scil.* the philosophical methods of the Hellenistic schools] at a very deep level, not just decorating the arguments, but shaping the whole sense of what a therapeutic argument is, and expressing, in their stylistic concreteness, respect for the pupil's need (486).

While Roman authors are given respectful attention, one might still wish that Nussbaum had addressed more thoroughly certain Roman social institutions, such as marriage; the footnote on p. 187 merely raises the question and whets the appetite. Certainly there has been a significant amount of good work done recently on such topics.

Nussbaum is sympathetic to her subjects, but not slavishly so. She notes, for instance, that the Hellenistic philosophers were 'far more inclusive and less elitist in their practice of philosophy than was Aristotle' (10). And she is enthusiastic about the enduring practical value of their thought:

'... the Hellenistic focus on the inner world does not exclude, but in fact leads directly to, a focus on the ills of society. One of the

most impressive achievements of Hellenistic philosophy is to have shown compellingly and in detail how specific social conditions shape emotion, desire, and thought.' (11)

But she is quite ready to take judicious exception to a number of the central tenets of Hellenistic philosophy. She is not comfortable with the Hellenistic notion that *eudaimonia* flows from a reduced attachment to the unstable elements of the world (what the ancients called *ataraxia*, 'not-being-distressed'),<sup>2</sup> and she attempts to explore the extent to which the therapy-model is dependent upon this notion. She points out that the Epicurean model of therapy may make the student/patient progressively more dependent on the system itself, and thus 'less adept at reasoning for herself' (136). She wonders whether Lucretius might not carry the notion of *autarkeia* -- self-sufficiency -- too far: 'Is this the attitude of a cured lover, or is it simply a new form of the disease that Lucretius' therapy was supposed to cure?' (191) Because of the deep connections of anger with love, Nussbaum finds the project of extirpating the passions to be largely a failure (509). She does not shrink from an assessment of 'some of the potentially more problematic methodological consequences of using therapy as a norm' (491). None of the three major schools is immune to this critique.

One innovative aspect of Nussbaum's approach is to envision the education, in each school in turn, of an imaginary ancient: a woman (and a courtesan) named Nikidion. This characteristically *nußbäumlich* device is intended to 'make readers attentive participants, until her encounters become their own' (45). By virtue of her gender and social class (both of which will change, although I will leave it to the reader to discover how and why!), Nikidion's tutelage becomes an index of how, and to what extent, the Hellenistic approach to philosophy achieves its therapeutic goals.

Nussbaum carefully explains her rationale for the translation of technical vocabulary (e.g. 15 n. 5, 102 n. 1, 269 n. 37, 310 n. 47, 317 n. 2, 319 n. 4, 495 n. 12). The book is finely printed and bound, and less expensive than many others its size. I noticed few misprints, particularly for a book of this size. On pp. 5-6, for *techniques du soi* read *de soi*; on 45, for 'until her encounters become her own,' read (as I think, and have printed *supra*) 'their own'; on 49, the reference to *Iliad* 9.503 should actually be to line 507; on 119 n. 37, *Lathê Biôsas* should have *Lathe*; on 295, read 'then<, > burdened'; on 483, read 'then<, > I retell'; on 522, for *Exercices spirituels*, read *Exercices*. Karl Marx's doctoral dissertation, listed on 524 as Marx 1841 and on 121 n. 41 as Marx 1854, dates from 1841 but was apparently not published until 1927.

Overall, then, this book is a weighty achievement, worthy to take its place with the other volumes of the august Martin Classical Lectures series, and, I think, likely to play a significant role in the rehabilitation of Hellenistic philosophy in our time.

## NOTES

- [1] The standard comprehensive introduction is still A. A. Long's *Hellenistic Philosophy* (Berkeley 1974, 2nd ed. 1986). The two-volume general sourcebook edited by A. A. Long and D. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge 1987 1988), will be indispensable for a long time to come, but there is also an attractive selection (in translation) entitled *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings* (Indianapolis 1988) edd. Brad Inwood and Lloyd Gerson. Two related subfields that have received attention recently are epistemology and the philosophy of mind: e.g. M. Schofield et al. (edd.), *Doubt and Dogmatism: Studies in Hellenistic Epistemology* (Oxford 1980); J. Annas, *Hellenistic Philosophy of Mind* (Berkeley 1992); J. Brunschwig and M. C. Nussbaum (edd.), *Passions and Perceptions: Studies in Hellenistic Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge 1993); and some of the essays in S. Everson (ed.), *Epistemology* (Cambridge 1990). The interested reader will also want to consult J. Barnes et al. (edd.), *Science and Speculation: Studies in Hellenistic Theory and Practice* (Cambridge 1982), and the (mostly newly-translated) *Papers in Hellenistic Philosophy* of J. Brunschwig (Cambridge 1994). I see too that Garland Publishing has announced an eight-volume series of hefty essay-collections under the editorship of Terence Irwin, the eighth of which is entitled *Hellenistic Philosophy*.
  - [2] *The Monist* 73.1 (January 1990), edd. John Hospers and John Cooper.
  - [3] Martha C. Nussbaum (ed), *The Poetics of Therapy: Hellenistic Ethics in Its Rhetorical and Literary Context* (*Apeiron* 23.4 [December 1990]).
  - [4] The topic had been previously explored by Werner Jaeger, 'Aristotle's Use of Medicine as Model of Method in His Ethics,' *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 77 (1957) 54-61.
  - [5] John T. Kirby, 'The "Great Triangle" in Early Greek Rhetoric and Poetics,' *Rhetorica* 8 (1990) 213-228, now reprinted as pp. 3 15 of Edward Schiappa (ed.), *Landmark Essays on Classical Greek Rhetoric* (Davis 1994).
  - [6] Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore 1974).
  - [7] The reader may be amused, or bemused, to learn that hydroxyzine hydrochloride, which is prescribed both as an anti-pruritic and as an anti-anxiety agent, is marketed by Roerig/Pfizer as 'Atarax.'
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