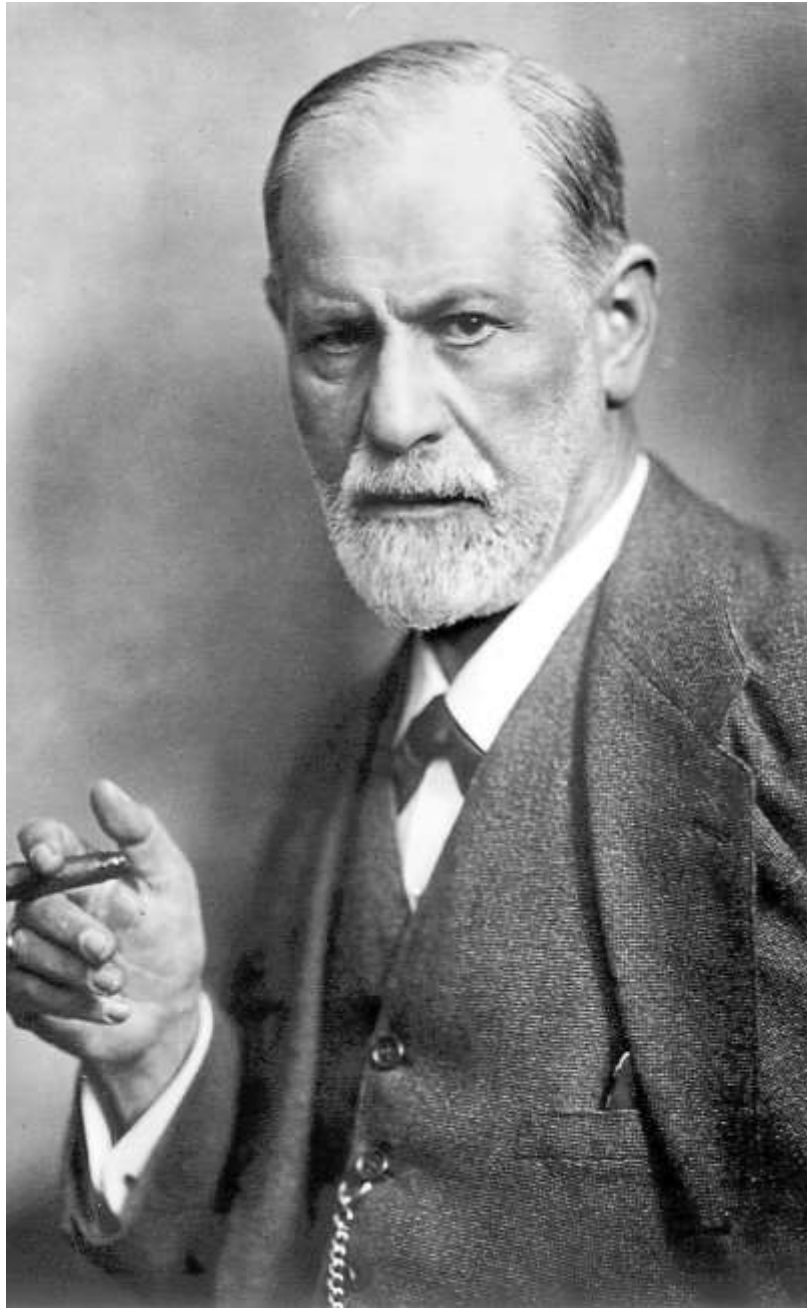




Martha Nussbaum:
Feeling, Fragility,
Flourishing

5. The Therapy
of Desire



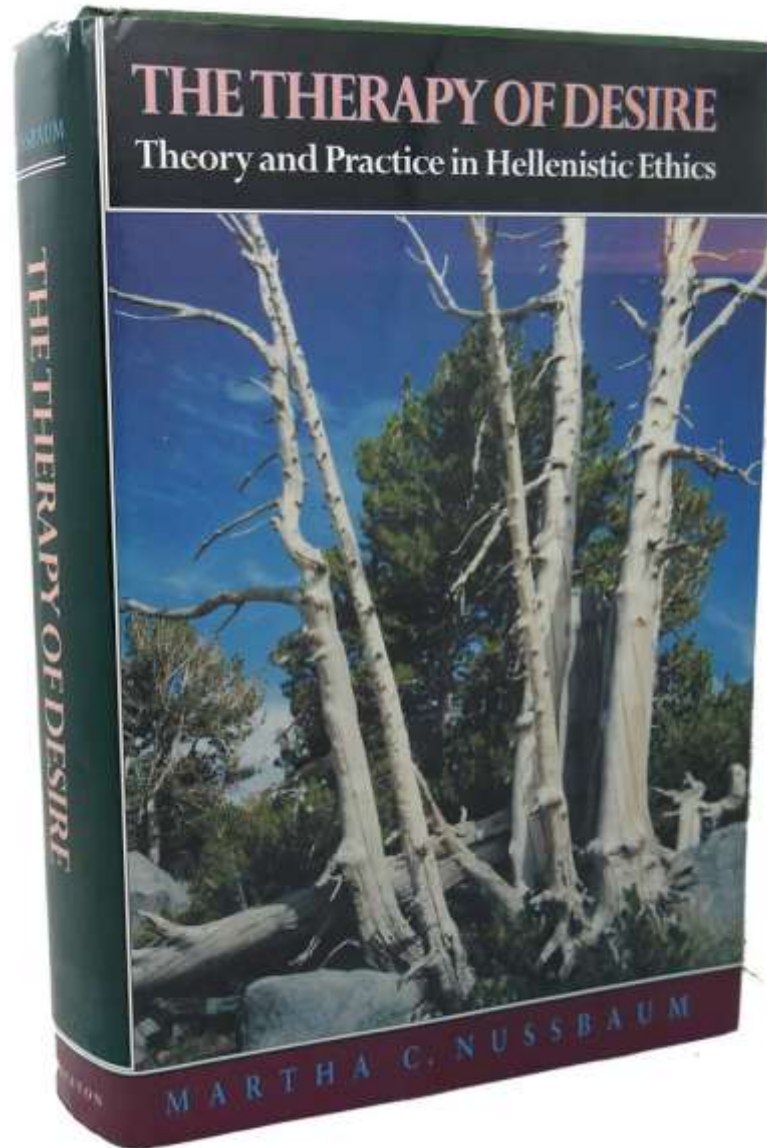


‘Don’t return to philosophy as a task-master, but as patients seek out relief in a treatment of sore eyes, or a dressing for a burn, or from an ointment.

Regarding it this way, you’ll obey reason without putting it on display and rest easy in its care.’

– Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*





‘The point of saying that philosophy should be therapeutic is not to say that philosophy ought to subordinate its own characteristic commitments to some other norms (e.g., flourishing, calm); it is, rather, to say that you can get the good things you are searching for (flourishing, calm) only through a lifelong commitment to the pursuit of argument.

Other figures in the culture – soothsayers, magicians, astrologers, politicians – all claim to provide what people want, without asking them to think critically and argue. The philosophers say: no, only in the life devoted to reason will you really get what you want.’ (xi)



‘Empty is that philosopher's argument by which no human suffering is therapeutically treated. For just as there is no use in a medical art that does not cast out the sicknesses of bodies, so too there is no use in philosophy, unless it casts out the suffering of the soul.’ – Epicurus

‘It is not true that there exists an art called medicine, concerned with the diseased body, but no corresponding art concerned with the diseased soul.’ – Chrysippus

‘There is, I assure you, a medical art for the soul. It is philosophy, whose aid need not be sought, as in bodily diseases, from outside ourselves. We must endeavor with all our resources and all our strength to become capable of doctoring ourselves.’ – Cicero

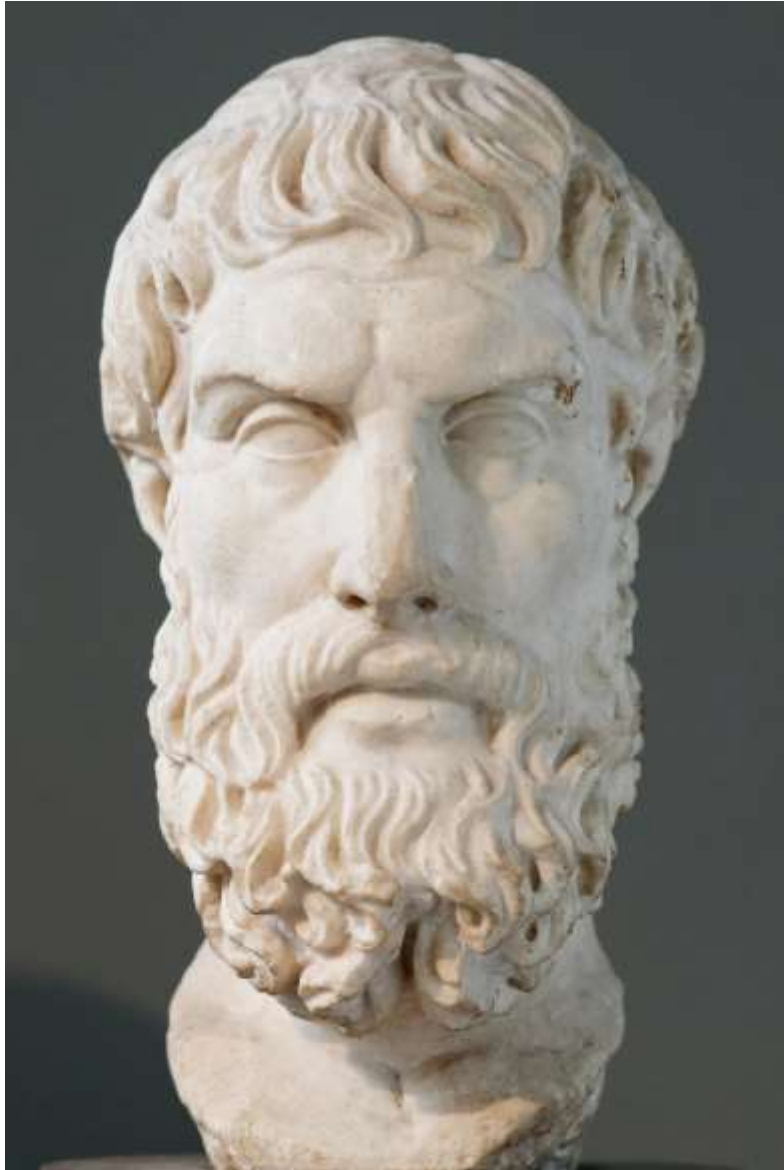
‘The Hellenistic philosophical schools in Greece and Rome – Epicureans, Skeptics, and Stoics – all conceived of philosophy as a way of addressing the most painful problems of human life.

They saw the philosopher as a compassionate physician whose arts could heal many pervasive types of human suffering. They practiced philosophy not as a detached intellectual technique dedicated to the display of cleverness but as an immersed and worldly art of grappling with human misery.

They focused their attention, in consequence, on issues of daily and urgent human significance-the fear of death, love and sexuality, anger and aggression – issues that are sometimes avoided as embarrassingly messy and personal by the more detached varieties of philosophy. They confronted these issues as they arose in ordinary human lives, with a keen attention to the vicissitudes of those lives, and to what would be necessary and sufficient to make them better.’ (3-4)

The Therapy of Desire (1994)

- On the back of *Fragility* and *Love's Knowledge*, Nussbaum turns to Hellenistic philosophies – Epicureanism, Stoicism
- Philosophy as part of a way of life, but also a therapy...
- In particular: their 'practical commitment' and 'combination of logic with compassion', for detachment and freedom from disturbance
- 'Philosophy heals human diseases, diseases produced by false beliefs. Its arguments are to the soul as the doctor's remedies are to the body. ... Correctly understood, it is no less than the soul's art of life (14)



Epicurus (341-270 BCE)

The four-fold cure (*tetrapharmakos*):

‘don’t fear God, don’t worry about death; what is good is easy to get, and what is terrible is easy to endure’

But fear is everywhere...

‘Wherever we look, people are profoundly ignorant of what they believe and what motivates them’ (103)

We are dominated then by empty desires, which make our anxious minds impervious to reason



Epicurus as doctor

- Pains not of the body, but the soul
- Disturbances arise from false beliefs and empty 'boundless' desires – wealth, luxury, power, immortality
- The doctor seeks: *ataraxia*
- Keeping in view a 'natural' guide – the child, unaffected by corrupt social teachings
- Two forms of desire: natural vs empty.



Over to you

‘Send me a little pot of cheese, so that I may have a luxurious feast whenever I like’ – Epicurus

Throughout the chapter, Nussbaum uses Epicurus’s distinction between natural and empty desires.

What did you think of this distinction?

And what does Nussbaum want us to learn from Epicurus’s thinking?

Natural desires

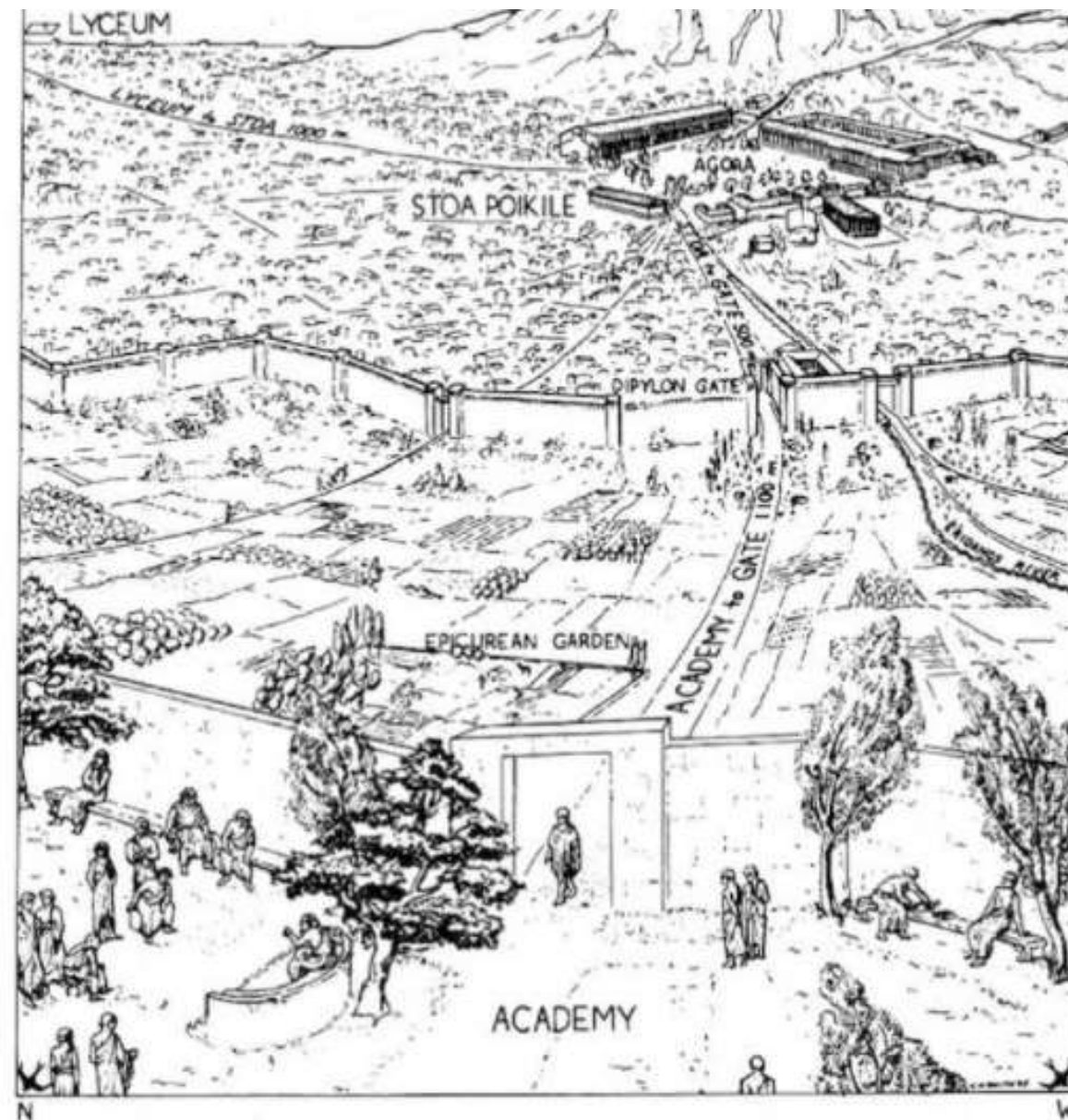
‘Every animal as soon as it is born pursues pleasure and delights in it as the chief good, while it flees pain as the chief evil and pushes it from itself as far as possible. And it does this when not yet perverted, with nature herself doing the judging in an uncorrupted and unblemished way.’ – Cicero

‘Frugal meals deliver a pleasure that is equal to that of an expensive diet, when once all the pain of need is removed; and bread and water give the very summit of pleasure, when a needy person takes them in’
– Epicurus

Natural desires

‘Correct apprehension of the fact that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life enjoyable, not by adding on some limitless time but by taking away the passionate longing for immortality. For nothing is fearful in life to the person who is genuinely convinced that there is nothing fearful in not living’

‘It is not drinking and continual feasting, nor is it enjoyment of young men, or women, nor of fish and the other things offered by a luxurious table, that make the pleasant life; it is sober reasoning that searches out the causes of all pursuit and avoidance and drives out the beliefs from which a very great disturbance seizes the soul.’ (113-114)



The philosophical schools of Hellenistic Athens: locations and distances. © Candace H. Smith 1987

‘He seems to you lacking in education. The reason is that he thought no education worthy of that name unless it contributed to our training for happy life. ... Was he to occupy himself, like Plato, in music geometry, arithmetic, and astronomy, which, starting from false premises, cannot be true and which, even if they were true, would not help us live more pleasant, and therefore better, lives?

Was he, I say, to study those arts and neglect the great art of living, which requires so much effort and is correspondingly so rewarding?’

- Torquatus (Cicero)

But does Nussbaum come to side with Epicurus?



Reason undermined

‘He invites us to look at ourselves, at our friends, at the society in which we live. What do we see when we look, and look honestly? Do we see calm rational people, whose beliefs about value are for the most part well based and sound?

No. We see people rushing frenetically about after money, after fame, after gastronomic luxuries, after passionate love – people convinced by the culture itself, by the stories on which they are brought up, that such things have far more value than in fact they have.

... Do we, then, see a healthy rational society, whose shared beliefs can be trusted as material for a true account of the good life? No.’ (103)

Political consequences of Epicurus

- Who does the dialectic benefit? Not most folk.
- Aristotle excludes most people from the right to a 'liberal education', and remember Plato with his philosopher-kings...
- The values and ideas of the elite become the status quo, which philosophers then defend and represent.
- Meanwhile, those who would most benefit from being able to understand their own minds are excluded from taking part
- Instead, Epicurus offers arguments that 'act as *causes* of good living' (120)
 - 'Go over these things ... and you will never be disturbed, walking or sleeping, and you will live like a god among humans'



Epicurus vs Aristotle

- A therapy that takes the power to heal out of the patient's hands...
- 'We are not under a king. Each one claims his own freedom' (Seneca)
- But: whereas the Aristotelian seeks to unearth truths through critical dialogue, this process is too superficial for the Epicurean. Our real loves, desires and emotions are under the surface.
- 'Epicurus, in short, discovers the unconscious – a discovery after which Aristotelianism cannot ever look the same.' (133)
- Epicurus less interested in argument, more in establishing the conditions of ataraxia among a small group of individuals.
- *Does this undermine the initial power and value of critical thinking?*

Don't the Hellenistic schools, by contrast, promote what is claimed to be well-being by simply lowering people's sights, denying that material conditions have importance, and renouncing the political work that might effect a broader distribution of these conditions?

Epicurus urged a complete withdrawal from the life of the city, Skeptics an uncritical obedience to forces of existing convention. Even among the Stoics, whose commitment to the intrinsic value of justice is plain, we hear less about how to alter the political fact of slavery than about how to be truly free within

... In all three schools, the truly good and virtuous person is held to be radically independent of material and economic factors: achieving one's full humanity requires only inner change. But isn't this in fact false? Isn't the inner world itself at least in part a function of social and material conditions? (10-11)

What do you think?



Diogenes of Oenoanda

‘But since, as I said before, most people are sick all together, as in the plague, of false opinion concerning things, and since they are becoming more numerous – for on account of their reciprocal emulation they get the disease from one another like sheep – in addition to the fact that it is benevolent [*philanthropon*] to help strangers who pass by the way – since, then, the aid of this piece of writing goes out to many, I have decided, using this *stoa*, to put out in public for all the drugs that will save them’



‘Some die to get a statue and a name.
And often too, crazed by the fear of death,
Such hate of life and light possesses them
That their own deaths they plan, with sorrowing heart,

Forgetting that this fear begets their woes.
For we, like children frightened of the dark,
Are sometimes frightened in the light—of things
No more to be feared than fears that in the dark
Distress a child, thinking they may come true.

Therefore this terror and darkness of the mind
Not by the sun’s rays, nor the bright shafts of day,
Must be dispersed, as is most necessary,
But by the face of nature and her laws.’

- Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*

Apatheia and Ataraxia

- Eudaimonia... for the Stoics through virtue and inner freedom, achieving *apatheia*, a state without suffering
- For the Epicureans through moderating pleasure and reduced pain, achieving *ataraxia*, a state of undisturbedness
- For the Stoics, our passions are not merely automatic, but result from a judgement, where we give our assent to an impression or motivation
- Epicurus called for the reduction of pain by non-involvement in political life, and developing close friendships...
- While the Stoics find virtue in social obligation and activity

Rounding up – a therapy of responsiveness

- Lucretius confronts erotic love, the fear of death and anger
- ‘death is nothing to us’; Eros, ‘an intense desire for intercourse, accompanied by anger and distraction’ (141, 201)
- But Lucretius and Epicurus fail to ‘yield to human life’, they try to close up human neediness and vulnerability by instead striving to become a ‘self-sufficient god’ (191)
- Love is not about complete union, but responsiveness, recognising and developing an intense awareness of their specialness of their difference
- Ending ‘looks with mercy at the ambivalent excellence and passion of a human life’

Next week... *Upheavals of Thought*

- We turn to an important work for Nussbaum, in which she starts to leave behind her work on the classics and makes a distinct contribution to the philosophy and psychology of the emotions in themselves
- We will read *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (2001)
- Please read Chapter 6, “Compassion: Tragic Predicaments”
- What is the role and use of compassion for morality? Does it extend or restrict our ethical awareness? What use can it serve politics?
- You might also find it useful to read the Introduction, and if you enjoy the material, read on to Chapters 7 and 8, which continue on compassion
- Questions and thoughts to Dan.Taylor@marywardcentre.ac.uk