

# The Pleasure of Knowledge

## Reassessing Nussbaum's Interpretation of Epicurean Therapy

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*A Contested Influence. Hellenistic Philosophy and Modern  
Thought from Nietzsche to Nussbaum*

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“Epicurus has been alive in all ages and lives now, unknown to those who have called and call themselves Epicureans, and enjoying no reputation among philosophers. He has, moreover, himself forgotten his own name: it was the heaviest burden he ever cast off.”

Nietzsche, *The Wanderer and his Shadow* 227

Some common criticisms of Epicurus' doctrine:

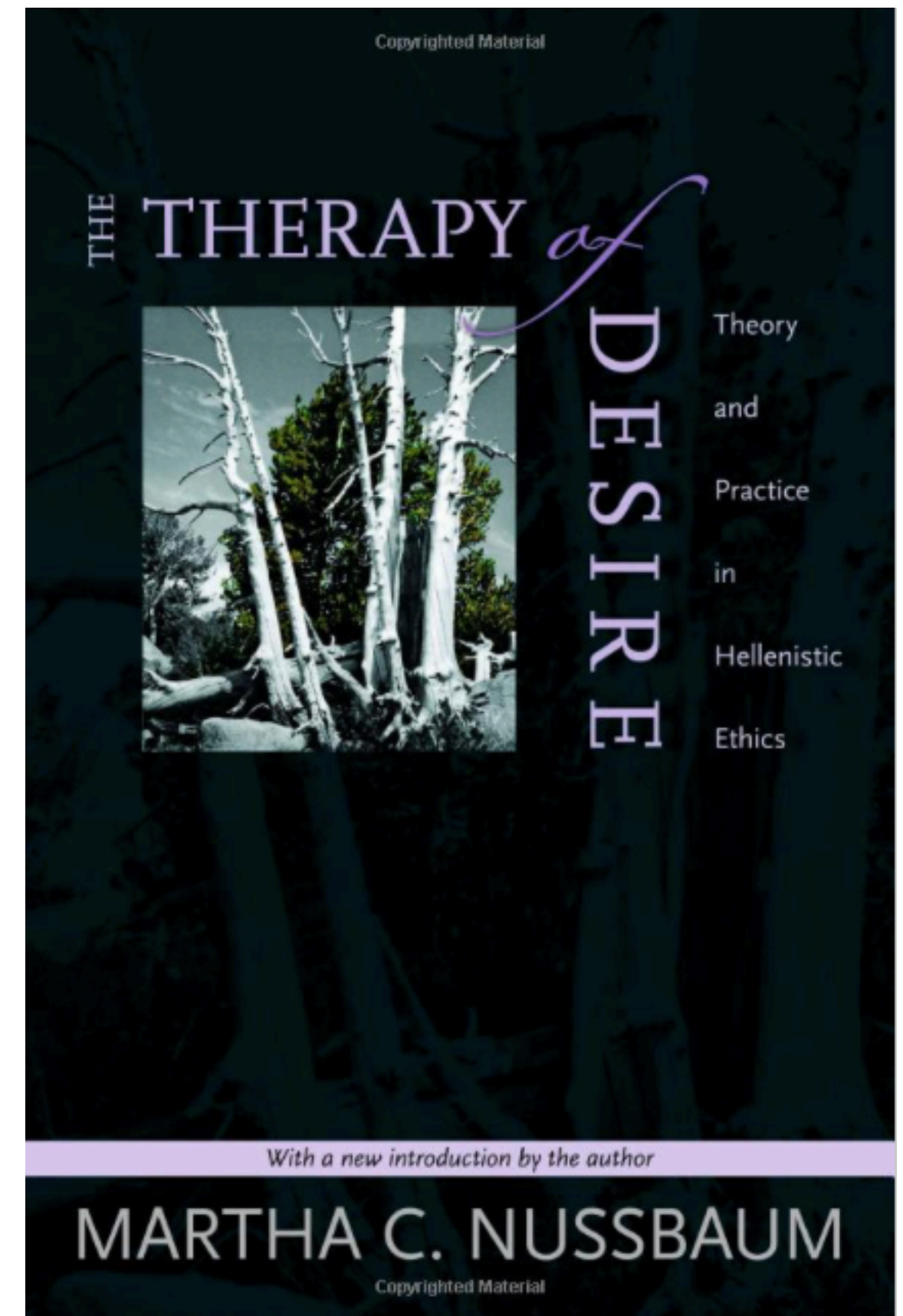
- Reductionist materialism
- Anti-providential/anti-finalistic view
- Hedonism
- Political disengagement
- Epicureanism as 'mere' therapy, not 'real' philosophy



Martha Nussbaum

*The Therapy of Desire. Theory and  
Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*

1994



## Ch. 4: Epicurean Surgery: Argument and Empty Desire

“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, if it does not throw out suffering from the soul.”  
(Us. 221 - Porph. Ad Marc. 31, p. 209, 23 Nauck)

“For Epicurus, every branch of philosophy must be assessed for its contribution to practice. If it makes none, it is empty and useless. **Nor does he seem to believe, as does Aristotle, that theoretical reasoning, undertaken for its own sake, can be practical simply by being an intrinsically valuable constituent part of the best human life.**” (p. 121)



## The Epicurean pupil only needs to be ‘converted’

“Thus this ethical view is pragmatic in some of the same ways that Aristotle’s is. But there are some differences that make the use of pragmatic constraints in Epicurus’ case seem more disturbing. ... The difference seems to be ... that Aristotle shows respect for and seriously investigates his pupils’ full experience of value, viewing all that as material toward the ethical truth. We feel that it is an open question what conception they will choose. This seems less clearly the case with Epicurus. **Nikidion is there not to pursue an inquiry but to be converted.**” (p. 123)

“The physical theory of Epicureanism has a lot of internal elegance and some brilliant argumentation; but **there seems to have been no attempt to test it against observed nature with an open mind in the Aristotelian way. The point is to convince people of its truth;** and its practical contribution is again and again brought forward as a reason for our commitment to it... **It is not altogether an accident that all and only the disturbing views of the universe turn out false.**” (p. 124)

## **Epicurean therapy numbs its pupils' intellect and critical thinking**

**“The Epicurean pupil is not encouraged to bring objections of her own against the system, or to argue dialectically; and as she becomes more dependent on the text and doctrines of the master, she may be less adept at reasoning for herself” (p. 136)**

**“The passivity of the Epicurean pupil, her habits of trust and veneration, may become habitual and spoil her for the active critical task.” (p. 139)**

## Is this 'real' philosophy?

“For our account has led us into areas of psychological interaction that do not look much like the give-and-take of philosophical discourse ... **Furthermore, we must also insist that what all argument is, in this community, is therapy...** But if we feel that there is something more than a little odd about calling the whole of this therapeutic interchange philosophy, and its tools arguments, we will not be wrong.” (p. 127-128)



According to Nussbaum, in the Epicurean community...

**1. Theoretical knowledge, practical reasoning, and critical thinking have no *intrinsic* value**

- Learning, understanding, judging and knowing are mere *instruments* to attain pleasure.

**2. There is a stark **asymmetry** of roles**

- The Epicurean pupil simply needs to be **converted**: (s)he is not allowed to reason by herself/himself, but only to trust his/her master.

**3. Epicureanism is not 'real' philosophy, but 'mere' therapy**

## Back to the original texts...

### Epicurus, *Vatican Sayings* 27

ἐπὶ μὲν τῶν ἄλλων ἐπιτηδευμάτων μόλις τελειωθείσιν ὁ καρπὸς ἔρχεται, ἐπὶ δὲ φιλοσοφίας συντρέχει τῇ γνώσει τὸ τερπνόν. οὐ γὰρ μετὰ μάθησιν ἀπόλαυσις, ἀλλὰ ἅμα μάθησις καὶ ἀπόλαυσις.

For other pursuits the reward arrives with some toil once the pursuit is complete. But in the case of philosophy the joy comes hand in hand with knowledge; for the pleasure does not come after the learning but pleasure and learning are simultaneous.

- **Knowledge** and **pleasure** come about simultaneously: the pleasure occurs as soon as something is known.
- It is not necessary to wait for that **knowledge** to lead to some later pleasure: it is **pleasant all by itself**.

# Philosophy as (kinetic) Pleasure

## Epicurus, *Vatican Sayings* 41

γελᾶν ἅμα δεῖ καὶ φιλοσοφεῖν καὶ οἰκονομεῖν καὶ τοῖς λοιποῖς οἰκειώμασι χρῆσθαι καὶ μηδαμῇ λήγειν τὰς ἐκ τῆς ὀρθῆς φιλοσοφίας φωνὰς φιέντας.

We must laugh at the same time as we philosophize and do our household duties and employ our other faculties and never cease proclaiming the sayings of the true philosophy.

## Sextus Empiricus, *Against the professors* 169 (Us. 219)

ἐπαγγέλλονται γὰρ τέχνην τινὰ περὶ τὸν βίον παραδώσειν, καὶ διὰ τοῦτο Ἐπίκουρος μὲν ἔλεγε τὴν φιλοσοφίαν ἐνέργειαν εἶναι λόγοις καὶ διαλογισμοῖς τὸν εὐδαίμονα βίον περιποιοῦσαν.

Epicurus used to say that philosophy is an activity which **by arguments and discussions** secures the happy life.

## Diogenes Laertius 10.22 (Us. 138)

Ἦδη δὲ τελευτῶν γράφει πρὸς Ἰδομενέα τήνδε ἐπιστολήν: “Τὴν μακαρίαν ἄγοντες καὶ ἅμα τελευταίαν ἡμέραν τοῦ βίου ἐγράφομεν ὑμῖν ταυτί. στραγγουρία τε παρηκολουθήκει καὶ δυσεντερικὰ πάθη ὑπερβολὴν οὐκ ἀπολείποντα τοῦ ἐν ἑαυτοῖς μεγέθους. ἀντιπαρετάττετο δὲ πᾶσι τούτοις **τὸ κατὰ ψυχὴν χαῖρον ἐπὶ τῇ τῶν γεγονότων ἡμῖν διαλογισμῶν μνήμη.** σὺ δ’ ἀξίως τῆς ἐκ μεираκίου παραστάσεως πρὸς ἐμὲ καὶ φιλοσοφίαν ἐπιμελοῦ τῶν παίδων Μητροδώρου.”

Here is the letter to Idomeneus which he [Epicurus] wrote on his deathbed: “I wrote this to you on that blessed day of my life which was also the last. Strangury and dysentery had set in, with all the extreme intensity of which they are capable. **But the joy in my soul at the memory of our past discussions** was enough to counterbalance all this. I ask you, as befits your lifelong companionship with me and with philosophy: take care of the children of Metrodorus.”



# The Pleasure of Knowledge in Lucretius

## Lucr. 1.146-8

hunc igitur terrorem animi tenebrasque necessest  
non radii solis neque lucida tela diei  
discutiant, sed naturae **species ratioque**.

This terror of mind therefore and this gloom must be dispelled, not by the sun's rays or the bright shafts of day, but **by the aspect and law of nature**.

➤ *i.e.*, the understanding of the outer view and inner law of nature

## Lucr. 3.28-30

his ibi me rebus quaedam **divina voluptas**  
percipit atque **horror**, quod sic **natura** tua vi  
**tam manifesta patens ex omni parte resecta est**.

Thereupon from all these things a sort of **divine delight** gets hold upon me and a shuddering, because **nature** thus by your (*i.e.*, Epicurus') power **has been so manifestly laid open and uncovered in every part**.

# Epicurean Practical Reasoning

## Epicurus, *Ep. Men.* 129–30

[1] ταύτην [sc. ἡδονήν] γὰρ ἀγαθὸν πρῶτον καὶ συγγενικὸν ἔγνωμεν, καὶ ἀπὸ ταύτης καταρχόμεθα πάσης αἰρέσεως καὶ φυγῆς, καὶ ἐπὶ ταύτην καταντῶμεν ὡς κανόνι τῷ πάθει πᾶν ἀγαθὸν κρίνοντες. [2a] καὶ ἐπεὶ πρῶτον ἀγαθὸν τοῦτο καὶ σύμφυτον, διὰ τοῦτο καὶ οὐ πᾶσαν ἡδονήν αἰρούμεθα, [2b] ἀλλ' ἔστιν ὅτε πολλὰς ἡδονὰς ὑπερβαίνομεν, ὅταν πλεῖον ἡμῖν τὸ δυσχερὲς ἐκ τούτων ἔπεται. [2c] καὶ πολλὰς ἀλγηδόνας ἡδονῶν κρείττους νομίζομεν, ἐπειδὴν μείζων ἡμῖν ἡδονὴ παρακολουθῇ πολὺν χρόνον ὑπομείνασι τὰς ἀλγηδόνας. [3] πᾶσα οὖν ἡδονὴ διὰ τὸ φύσιν ἔχειν οἰκείαν ἀγαθόν, οὐ πᾶσα μέντοι αἰρετή· καθά περ καὶ ἀλγηδὼν πᾶσα κακόν, οὐ πᾶσα δὲ ἀεὶ φευκτὴ πεφυκυῖα. [4] τῇ μέντοι συμμετρήσει καὶ συμφερόντων καὶ ἀσυμφόρων βλέψει ταῦτα πάντα κρίνειν καθήκει. χρώμεθα γὰρ τῷ μὲν ἀγαθῷ κατὰ τινὰς χρόνους ὡς κακῷ, τῷ δὲ κακῷ τοῦμπαλιν ὡς ἀγαθῷ.

[1] For we have recognised this [pleasure] as the first and natural good, and we begin every choice and avoidance from this starting point and we return to it when we judge every good by feeling, like a yardstick. [2a] And since this is the first and connate good, for this reason we also do not choose every pleasure, [2b] but on occasion we pass over many pleasures when the discomfort to us which follows from them is greater, [2c] and we consider many pains to be better than pleasures, when a greater pleasure over a long period comes to us after undergoing those pains. [3] So every pleasure is a good because it has an appropriate nature, but not every pleasure is choiceworthy. Just so, every pain is also a bad, but not every pain is always by nature to be avoided. [4] However, it is right to judge all of them by comparative measurement and by the recognition of both advantages and disadvantages. For we sometimes treat the good as a bad, and conversely the bad as a good.

## Philodemus, *On Choices and Avoidances* XI.5–20 (PHerc. 1251)

[ὁ | διὰ] τὰ π[ε]ρὶ τῶ[ν] τετάρω[ν εἰ|  
ρ]ημένα λέγεται, το[ῦ] τῇ[ν περί]|ληψιν  
τὴν περὶ τῶν κυρι[ωτ]ά|[τ]ων καὶ τὴν  
μνήμην π[ολ]|λὰ συμβάλλεσθαι πρὸς τὰς |  
οὔσας αἰρέσεις καὶ φύγας οὐ|κ ἴσου  
τιθεμένου, καθάπερ | ἐξεδέξαντό τινες  
γροί|κως, τῷ τινος ἀναφέρεσ|θαι τῶν  
αἰρέσεων καὶ φυγῶν | ἐπὶ τὰς περὶ τούτων  
τα|ραξίας, ἀλλὰ τῷ κ[α]τορθοῦσ|θαι μὲν  
αὐτὰς τοῖς τέλεσι | τοῖς τῆς φύσεως  
παραμε|τρ]ούντων . . .

This is said because of what has been stated about the four cardinal principles; for the thesis that **the understanding and the memorisation of the cardinal tenets contribute greatly to actual choices and avoidances** is not equal to claiming that some choices and avoidances are traced back to the states of tranquillity concerning them [sc. the cardinal tenets] – as some have clumsily stated – but to claiming that they [sc. the choices and avoidances] are accomplished successfully when **we measure them by the ends laid down by nature . . .**



## Conclusions

- (Theoretical) knowledge is *intrinsically* pleasant and *therefore* valuable.
- The asymmetry of roles, within the Epicurean community, did not prevent Epicurus and his followers to encourage their pupils to use **practical reasoning** and **critical thinking**.
- The **therapeutic treatment** goes hand in hand with the **philosophical inquiry**.
- The medical analogy makes philosophy less comparable to surgery, but rather to a lifelong healthy lifestyle: **Epicureanism as “a way of life”**



## SV 54

οὐ προσποιεῖσθαι δεῖ φιλοσοφεῖν, ἀλλ' ὄντως  
φιλοσοφεῖν· οὐ γὰρ προσδεόμεθα τοῦ δοκεῖν  
ὑγιαίνειν, ἀλλὰ τοῦ κατ' ἀλήθειαν ὑγιαίνειν.

One should not pretend to philosophize, but  
actually philosophize. For what we need is not  
the semblance of health, but real health.



## Essential bibliography (secondary literature)

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