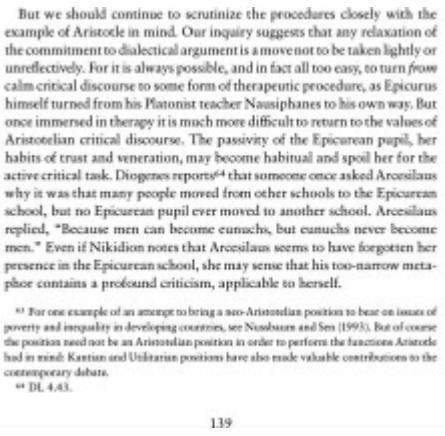
Nussbaum (Martha) - "Therapy of Desire"

Post by “Cassius” of February 1, 2018 at 9:13 PM

Martha Nussbaum's "Therapy of Desire" is a widely known book with much commentary on the implications of Epicurean philosophy for psychology. These comments are not a review of the book and I do not intend them too be taken too negatively. However I think that a reader can more fairly assess the claims Nussbaum makes about Epicurean philosophy earlier in the book if the reader is aware of the ultimate negative conclusions she draws at the end. Here are several excerpts, mostly from the final chapters:

I am not sure how thoroughly I will be able to go through this tonight but Nussbaum seems to regularly describe herself as an Aristotelian (?)



But we should continue to scrutinize the procedures closely with the example of Aristotle in mind. Our inquiry suggests that any relaxation of the commitment to dialectical argument is a move not to be taken lightly or unreflectively. For it is always possible, and in fact all too easy, to turn *from* calm critical discourse to some form of therapeutic procedure, as Epicurus himself turned from his Platonist teacher Nausiphanes to his own way. But once immersed in therapy it is much more difficult to return to the values of Aristotelian critical discourse. The passivity of the Epicurean pupil, her habits of trust and veneration, may become habitual and spoil her for the active critical task. Diogenes reports[64] that someone once asked Arcesilaus why it was that many people moved from other schools to the Epicurean school, but no Epicurean pupil ever moved to another school. Arcesilaus replied, "Because men can become eunuchs, but eunuchs never become men." Even if Nikidion notes that Arcesilaus seems to have forgotten her presence in the Epicurean school, she may sense that his too-narrow metaphor contains a profound criticism, applicable to herself.

[63] For one example of an attempt to bring a neo-Aristotelian position to bear on issues of poverty and inequality in developing countries, see Nussbaum and Sen (1993). But of course the position need not be an Aristotelian position in order to perform the functions Aristotle had in mind: Kantian and Utilitarian positions have also made valuable contributions to the contemporary debate.

[64] DL 4.43.

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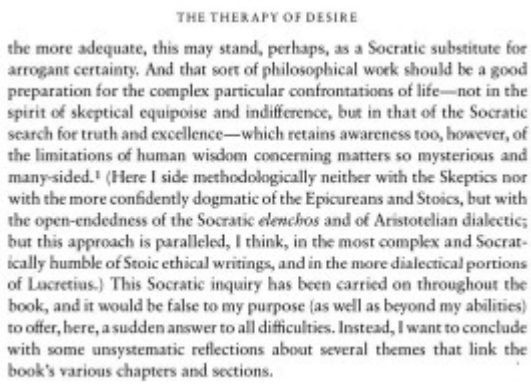
"Here I side with the Socratics and Aristotelians..."



THE THERAPY OF DESIRE

the more adequate, this may stand, perhaps, as a Socratic substitute for arrogant certainty. And that sort of philosophical work should be a good preparation for the complex particular confrontations of life—not in the spirit of skeptical equipoise and indifference, but in that of the Socratic search for truth and excellence—which retains awareness too, however, of the limitations of human wisdom concerning matters so mysterious and many-sided.[1] (Here I side methodologically neither with the Skeptics nor with the more confidently dogmatic of the Epicureans and Stoics, but with the open-endedness of the Socratic *elenchos* and of Aristotelian dialectic; but this approach is paralleled, I think, in the most complex and Socratically humble of Stoic ethical writings, and in the more dialectical portions of Lucretius.) This Socratic inquiry has been carried on throughout the book, and it would be false to my purpose (as well as beyond my abilities) to offer, here, a sudden answer to all difficulties. Instead, I want to conclude with some unsystematic reflections about several themes that link the book's various chapters and sections.

I do not agree that Epicurean philosophy slights development of critical thought, nor do I consider the Stoics to be superior in any way, or the Epicureans "authoritarian"

Epicureans place the emphasis, here, on the role of the wise teacher, who demands the pupil's trust and "confession," and sometimes uses techniques (such as memorization and repetition) that do not require the pupil's own critical activity. Skeptics go much further, engineering the methods of philosophy to cut away the pupil's active cognitive contribution, leaving her more and more in the grip of motivating forces that do not involve belief.[8] Of all the schools it is the Stoics, I think, who most effectively combine recognition of depth in the soul with respect for the pupil's active practical reasoning, producing a picture of philosophical friendship that combines intimacy with symmetry and reciprocity, a picture of self-scrutiny that supplements, and does not displace, dialectical philosophical procedures. (Lucretius seems to capture this combination in many of his arguments, both forming that sort of friendship with the reader and making friendship an end in itself; he may to this extent diverge from the authoritarianism of what seems to have been the common Epicurean procedure.)

Nor do I agree that Epicurean philosophy subordinates truth and good reasoning to "therapeutic efficacy" (she presumably is referring to the goal of living pleasurably) nor would I consider the Stoics and Aristotelians superior in this department.

6. We now must confront some of the potentially more problematic methodological consequences of using therapy as a norm. First of all, I have been troubled throughout by the possibility that the schools, in their passion for health, might *subordinate truth and good reasoning to therapeutic efficacy*. I argued that it was not unreasonable to define ethical truth (to some extent at least) in terms of the deepest needs and desires of human beings. All ethical theories make the connection between truth and desire somehow. In the case of an extreme form of Platonism, the link is contingent, through recollection. But in the case of Aristotle's theory, an ethical proposal will be rejected as false if it is too far out of line with the deepest wishes and desires of the participants in the inquiry. I argued that it is still appropriate to speak of truth here—in part because of the insistence of such a theory on broad consistency and fit, in part because the demand for consistency will also constrain the ethical theory from without, as it fits itself to results in psychology and physics. The Stoic theory clearly meets these constraints, and it seems perfectly appropriate for it to claim truth. In fact, as I argued in chapters 9 and 10, the Stoic theory is in a sense less anthropocentric and more externally realist than the Aristotelian theory, since human desires are good guides just in case they are the ones that harmonize with the rational order of the universe. (However, for those

Certainly not a high assessment of Epicurus in this paragraph:

The case of the Epicureans is, on this point, the subtlest, the most difficult to describe correctly. For on the one hand the Epicureans do offer powerful and compelling arguments in favor of their positions. The quality of the arguments is important to them, and the arguments do construct a comprehensive view of the universe, or at least of all those aspects of it that bear on any question pertaining to our *ataraxia*. On the other hand, it appears that this reasoning is given a purely instrumental value, albeit a very high instrumental value. And scientific inquiry here, by contrast to Aristotle's school, is pursued only for the sake of an ethical end. It is not altogether clear, then, that physics can offer ethics the independent support that seems important if we are to think of ethical truth as a (partly) desire-independent notion. The broad coherence and fit of Epicurean ethics and physics may themselves suffice to give the view a claim to truth, especially when we add to this the (alleged) correspondence of the view to the deepest of human needs and desires. But the instrumentality of reason remains a troubling element in the Epicurean procedure, compounded by the procedure's failure to consider the opinions of the "many and the wise" in Aristotelian dialectical fashion. *Ataraxia* is somewhat dogmatically put forward as an end; and this end is then used to shape other arguments, and even to determine which judgments and arguments will be considered. (Some of Lucretius' arguments fared better in this regard.)

I reject this paragraph in totality:

The Epicurean community has, as well, some disturbing aspects. The pupil is encouraged to mistrust herself and to rely on the wisdom of the teacher, the saving power of the Epicurean doctrine. Separated from the city and its cognitive influence, subjected to a daily regimen of memorization, repetition, and confession, denied the evenhanded consideration of alternative views, the pupil does not have very much autonomy. Nor is autonomy recognized as a valued end by the Epicurean doctrine. It is striking that in Roman Epicureanism things seem to be subtly different. Arguing with Romans who are deeply attached to their own integrity, who live, moreover, at Rome with other Romans, Lucretius moves his interlocutor gradually to a position of greater autonomy and maturity. His attitude to opposing views is still contemptuous and shrill, far from dialectical. But he asks the pupil to take on himself the job of arguing and assessing. For this pupil will not live in a tranquil Epicurean community, celebrating the hero-feast of Epicurus and relying on the support of Epicurean friendship. He must go home to his family and friends, and play his role as a political and military man in a world in which most people he meets will be non-Epicureans. Lucretius does not leave him unprepared.

The Stoics, I think, solve these problems in the most attractive way. For, first of all, they recognize that they will not always be dealing with pliant Stoic or pre-Stoic pupils. Thus, though they are happy to expound their

Now I see why in the past so many Stoics I have run into like Nussbaum so much:

I suggested in discussing Epicurus that the open-endedness of Aristotelian dialectic stood in contrast to the dogmatism of Hellenistic "medical" thought, and that no thoroughly medical conception could have Aristotle's flexible capacity for self-scrutiny and self-revision. The Stoics call this into question. For while their method is, to be sure, not officially dialectical and in fact quite dogmatic, they are so deeply committed to the integrity of practical reason that they deny the pupil the shelter that dogmatic authority would afford. Nothing is reliable, except (insofar as one is rational) oneself. Thus it is not surprising that out of that procedural commitment we get the examples of self-questioning and apparent revision of Stoicism that we have found in chapters 11 and 12; no surprise that in Seneca we find not the inflexible announcement of a creed, but a resourceful and deeply personal grappling with ongoing problems.

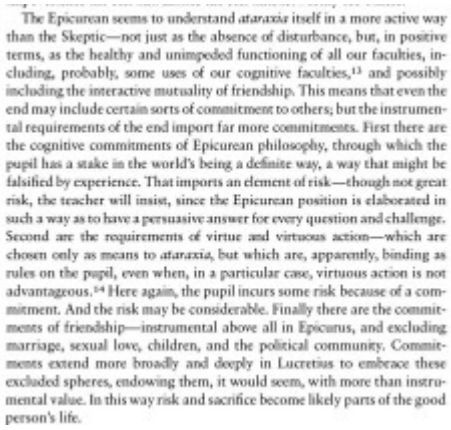
More anti-Epicurean assessment:

The Epicureans face a very complex tension, which is a version, really, of the tension in their whole position on questions of friendship and love. Unlike the other schools, they do not repudiate *all* emotion, so they can and do permit some compassion (cf. chapter 7); and their view of the human goal, which allows them to believe that in general pain and disturbance are bad, gives a basis for compassion, when another's pain is encountered. On the other hand, the end for each person is supposed to be his or her own *ataraxia* and *aponia*, and, as we saw, the good of others comes into it above all instrumentally, though possibly also via the intrinsic worth of certain sorts of interaction with friends (cf. chapter 7). This does not seem sufficient to explain why Epicurus runs his school, and leaves a will providing for its future; why Diogenes of Oenoanda erects an elaborate inscription aimed at strangers and people of the future; why Lucretius wishes to leave behind for others a work on which he has expended much labor. Even if all altruism to the living could be explained as based upon the (largely, but not entirely) instrumental principles of Epicurean friendship, that will not explain any sort of concern for strangers and people of the future. And yet

So Nussbaum considers Seneca "an advance of major proportions" over the Epicureans

The Skeptics do not concern themselves with the distinction between moral judgment and mercy, preferring the limitless flexibility of the teacher who suspends all judgment. In Epicureanism things are more complex: to some extent the distant asymmetrical relation of moral judgment prevails (though with greater mutuality in Lucretius); at the same time, however, compassion for human weakness is an approved sentiment, and one that guides the teacher's practice. The Greek Stoics appear to have opted for distance and austerity of judgment. But it remained for Seneca—drawing, probably, on both Aristotelian and Roman traditions—to develop the idea of mercy, connecting it with a perception of one's own imperfection and the intractability of the "circumstances of life." I think that this is an advance of major proportions for moral philosophy, both substantively and (as the end of chapter 12 argued) methodologically.

I don't agree that Lucretius contradicts Epicurus, and I don't agree that Epicurus excluded marriage, sexual love, children, and political community



The Epicurean seems to understand *ataraxia* itself in a more active way than the Skeptic—not just as the absence of disturbance, but, in positive terms, as the healthy and unimpeded functioning of all our faculties, including, probably, some uses of our cognitive faculties,[13] and possibly including the interactive mutuality of friendship. This means that even the end may include certain sorts of commitment to others; but the instrumental requirements of the end import far more commitments. First there are the cognitive commitments of Epicurean philosophy, through which the pupil has a stake in the world's being a definite way, a way that might be falsified by experience. That imports an element of risk—though not great risk, the teacher will insist, since the Epicurean position is elaborated in such a way as to have a persuasive answer for every question and challenge. Second are the requirements of virtue and virtuous action—which are chosen only as means to *ataraxia*, but which are, apparently, binding as rules on the pupil, even when, in a particular case, virtuous action is not advantageous.[14] Here again, the pupil incurs some risk because of a commitment. And the risk may be considerable. Finally there are the commitments of friendship—instrumental above all in Epicurus, and excluding marriage, sexual love, children, and the political community. Commitments extend more broadly and deeply in Lucretius to embrace these excluded spheres, endowing them, it would seem, with more than instrumental value. In this way risk and sacrifice become likely parts of the good person's life.