PHILOSOPHICAL THERAPY AS
PREVENTIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL MEDICINE

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What contribution was made to the treatment of mental illness in antiquity by philosophical essays on the therapy of emotions? To what extent can we—moderns—recognize in these essays a credible response to mental illness? In this discussion, I explore both these questions, in the belief that each of these lines of enquiry may illuminate each other. A key point, bearing on both questions, is the suggestion that the philosophical essays were intended to function as a psychological analogue for ancient medical regimen, or what we call ‘life-style management’ or ‘preventive medicine’. I begin by developing this suggestion in general terms before relating this idea to the emergence of a distinct genre or body of writings on the therapy of the emotions in the Hellenistic and Roman Imperial periods. Next, I analyse the core strategy of this kind of philosophical therapy, identifying four key recurrent themes. I illustrate this schema, referring especially to Galen’s newly found essay, Avoiding Distress, taken as representing a Platonic-Aristotelian approach, on the one hand, and to Seneca’s On Peace of Mind, representing the Stoic approach, on the other. I then return to the idea that such works are designed to function as preventive psychological medicine, and ask whether they embody an approach to psychological health-care that we could find useful under modern conditions.

Ancient Philosophy as Preventive Medicine

First, I consider whether we can take seriously the thought that philosophical essays on the therapy of the emotions were seen in antiquity as a credible and potentially effective way of helping people cope with psychological illness or disorder. This is distinct from the question how far this ancient practice corresponds to modern methods of psychological care; but trying to correlate it with current methods may help us to make better sense of the function of these practices in their original setting. Some earlier scholarship has proposed that we should see the function of these ancient works as comparable with modern cognitive psychotherapy. The relevant point of
comparison is that the patient is addressed as a responsible agent, capable
in principle of understanding the causes of her own current distress and
of relieving this by a deliberate programme of actions or thoughts.¹ This
approach can be contrasted with psychoanalysis or other modern methods
of psychotherapy which focus on trying to detect the unconscious roots of
current disturbance, on the assumption that doing so, in itself, holds the
prospect of psychological cure. Another relevant modern practice is coun-
selling, which can be seen as a less technical version of cognitive therapy.²
Although this comparison provides a starting-point for understanding the
ancient genre, there are limitations to the analogy. For one thing, mod-
ern cognitive therapy and counselling are offered to people who already
feel distressed and in need of some external support or guidance of this
kind, whereas this is not necessarily the case with the ancient methods.
Also, at least some ancient thinkers, certainly the Stoics and to some extent
the Epicureans, characterize as mad or psychologically sick people who
would not regard themselves in this way. These points of difference cre-
ate what are, on the face of it, significant difficulties for the comparison
between ancient philosophical therapy and modern cognitive therapy or
counselling.³

However, I would like to offer a response to this problem, and one which
also throws light on the function of this kind of writing in the ancient con-
text. A first move is to explore the significance of the parallel with (body-
based) medical treatment which is such a prominent feature of this ancient
philosophical practice.⁴ In the modern context, we tend to identify med-
cal treatment with responses, through drugs or surgery, for instance, to ill-
ness or injury that has already occurred. These responses also correspond
to well-marked branches of ancient medicine. But another, and very impor-
tant, part of ancient medical practice was *diaita* or regimen, ‘life-style man-
agement’, as we might say, especially as regards diet, exercise, and choice
of environment.⁵ In fact, regimen or preventive medicine also plays a role
in modern Western medical and socio-cultural practice (as it has in some
non-Western medical traditions); and many people think it should be given

² See Gill 2010a, 355–357.
⁴ On this analogy, see Pigeaud 1981 for a comprehensive treatment; also Gill 2010a, 295,
301–302.
⁵ On this aspect of ancient medicine, see Jouanna 1974, 232–253, Wöhrlé 1990, Nutton