
In this book, another very substantial volume indeed following on from her The Fragility of Goodness (1986), Nussbaum offers a lengthy and detailed presentation and assessment of some of the central ideas of the three major Hellenistic schools, the Epicurean, Stoic and Skeptic. She concentrates particularly on the areas of their respective conceptions of: the functions of philosophy; the value of human life and its goods; the nature of emotions and their rôle in human life. The whole account is structured round a "medical model of philosophizing in ethics" (p.16; see also pp. 45-6), in which we should consider philosophical ideas, arguments and the actual processes of philosophical inquiry and debate (both public and inward) as directed, in various ways and measures, towards achieving amelioration of the human condition, relief of pain, distress and other misfortunes - quite particularly those pains and distresses that faulty or misguided thinking can bring upon us or leave us struggling with. Philosophy, if well done with a receptive client, can be understood as a form of therapy which should at least bring some easing, and may even bring enlightenment, peace and salvation.

Nussbaum begins by setting out this governing conception of philosophy as therapy, and then works through, first, some aspects of Aristotle's ethical and political ideas and his analysis of emotions, but then proceeds to concentrate the great bulk of her study on Epicurean, then Skeptical and finally Stoic ideas. In all cases we are given a pretty extensive and detailed exposition of the primary material, shown its application through the various elements of the "medical model" to the relief of the suffering soul, and offered some critical appraisive comments by Nussbaum herself. She finds none of these "therapies" wholly satisfactory, not so much because of their
efficacy (or otherwise) as therapeutic procedures, but rather because of the values which undergird and inspire them (I'll return to this below). There are, in addition, one or two "set piece" chapters in which Nussbaum delves in particular depth into particular passages of text, or plays, and gives extended readings of these (I think here particularly of Chapter 5 on Lucretius; and Chapter 12 on Seneca's Medea). Much of the progress on the whole is carried through the figure of one Nikidion (see p. 45) who, we are to understand, seeks therapeutic relief through submitting herself to the ministrations of emblematic practitioners of each of these Schools. This rather arch device has, I would say rather fortunately, pretty well dropped away by the time we get towards the end of the book, and Nussbaum reverts to straightforward exegesis and critical comment.

Specialists will, beyond question, find much to be interested in, much to take issue with, in the details of Nussbaum's accounts, readings and strictures. I shall here concentrate on some rather broader features of the book and try to say why, in the light of these, I am rather uneasy with the whole thing.

First, and most straightforwardly, it is I think rather unclear to whom the book is addressed. A lot of the expository material covers pretty familiar ground and those reasonably versed in these texts will find Nussbaum's pretty expansive and leisured accounts a bit overdone. It is true that some of the book began as lectures (the Martin Classical Lectures at Oberlin College), and this kind of presentation is often proper to drawing a lecture audience into the issues and their setting. But a certain level of economy when writing this up for this book would have been welcome. Nussbaum makes really quite large claims on her readers. This book has 500 pages of text (compared with a mere 400 in the Fragility) and I think we need pretty strong assurance that the very substantial investment of time and concentration which giving oneself to the work requires is really merited. But if it is the reader who needs drawing in who is centre stage, they will be