

A MODERN MALAISE AND GREEK PHILOSOPHICAL  
TRADITIONS – PLATONISM, EPICUREANISM, AND  
STOICISM

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I, Chien-Ya Sun, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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# Abstract

This thesis starts by considering modern understandings of well-being, particularly those that emphasise choice and personal fulfilment. Desire and its satisfaction, in the sense that these terms are used in these modern models, is taken to be an indicator of well-being and in general something to be maximised. The focus on personal satisfaction increases tensions not only between the individual and others, but also within the individual herself, while ‘discovering the self’ becomes of paramount ethical importance. Inspired by Martha Nussbaum’s work on desire and therapy in ancient Greek philosophical traditions, this thesis investigates the thinking of three ancient Greek philosophical schools (the writings of Plato, Epicureanism and Stoicism) on issues related to desire, particularly passionate desire such as love (*erōs*). In all three schools, desires are considered to be potentially problematic and to require careful examination and transformation. In the light of their respective concepts of happiness (*eudaimonia*), each school provides methods for *differentiating* desires and for *transforming* problematic ones. These traditions afford critical insight into modern therapeutic practices because of the ways they contrast with or diverge from them. This thesis also suggests that there are some virtues in these traditions that tend to be overlooked today, in an intellectual atmosphere where the virtues of independence, autonomy and rationality are so strongly emphasised. These virtues include kindness, compassion, toleration and a kind of other-regarding love.

The aim of this thesis is to explore the significance of these ancient Greek philosophies for today's world. With the recurrence of interest in the ancient medical (or therapeutic) model of philosophy, it attempts to shed light on the tradition of philosophy as a way of life.

# Impact Statement

In 2012, the United Nations introduced the notion of ‘Gross National Happiness’ (GNH) to attempt improving social policies and encourage a more ‘holistic’ way of living. This notion and the principle of enhancing happiness and well-being, which have been so widely adopted in international and national policies, need to be considered in the light of the growing number of people who suffer from depression (in the UK, the Office of National Statistics shows 9.7% population suffering from moderate to severe in 2019, and the number grew significantly during the pandemic in 2020). How to live happily and enhance (mental) well-being has become an important issue.

This thesis puts the concepts of well-being and happiness in question. It examines the notion adopted in different approaches and explores ancient Greek philosophical traditions, from which much prevalent modern understanding of happiness has derived. It considers the notions of happiness and the good life (*eudaimonia*) as they are understood in these traditions and reflects on modern practices.

The work of this thesis is beneficial in various areas. *For the discipline of philosophy*, the ancient way of philosophising – philosophy as a way of life – urges us to consider the nature of philosophy, particularly the nature of moral philosophy, so that it is undertaken not just as a scholarly activity but as part of the endeavour to live well. This line of thought exposes the problems in some branches of philosophy and urges a more engaging and action-inspired approach. *For the practice of therapy*, this thesis provides a vision of a philosophical therapy with potential development in three directions: (1) a philosophical counselling whose methods and aims are based on the ancient philosophical schools in question, (2) a psychotherapeutic approach that takes its understanding of emotion and aim from these schools, and (3) a new (non-clinical) discourse and context for understanding and attending to emotion in light of these schools. *For the discipline of education*, the thesis demonstrates how the virtues of de-centring and attention-giving encourage a new discourse on well-being that is more inclusive and encourages moral attention to other people, to community and to the environment.

Some of the findings of this research have been presented at conferences in the UK and other countries, including Poland and Japan. Versions of some parts of the thesis have been published as journal papers:

- Sun, C. (2017) 'Translating Desire and Frustration', *Ethics and Education*, 12 (1), pp. 62-72.
- Sun, C. (2019) 'The Virtues of Unfulfilment: Rethinking Erōs and Education in Plato's Symposium', *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 53 (3), pp. 491-502.
- Sun, C. (2020) 'Being-in-the-World: to Love or to Tolerate. Rethinking the Self-Other Relation in Light of the Mahāyāna Buddhist Idea of Interbeing', in Lewin D. and Kenklies K. (eds) *East Asian Pedagogies*, pp. 51-62. Dordrecht: Springer.

In terms of practitioner engagement, I have twice spoken in the House of Parliament in Interfaith Forums and presented in Cardiff University and London FGS temple on issues related to Buddhism and Philosophy. I intend to develop the ideas in this thesis in further publications in the fields of philosophy of education (the *Journal of Philosophy of Education*; *Ethics and Education*), comparative philosophy (*Philosophy East and West*) and psychotherapy (the *Journal of Clinical Psychology*). I hope to develop interdisciplinary projects, particularly with people who work in the fields of therapy and education, including clinical therapists, psychologists, teachers and social workers. I also propose to conduct comparative projects based on this research in order to increase mutual understanding between different traditions.

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# Chapter 1 Philosophy, Desire and Therapy

The idea of therapeutic philosophy is fascinating for many, particularly in modern times when therapy is such a popular idea and many aspects of life are understood in its light. These activities range from clinical practices that target those who suffer from mental illness, to more general or even leisure pursuits for everybody, such as yoga, mindfulness, or things like spa or ‘retail therapy’. At a time when all sorts of therapies are already everywhere, is there a real need to talk about one more potential approach to this area? A more serious doubt about therapeutic philosophy may come from people who are concerned with the distinctive aim of philosophy itself. The worry is that something important might be lost if we read philosophical texts primarily in terms of their therapeutic function. People might ask whether we *should* talk about philosophy as therapy at all. This unease was articulated by Philip Rieff (1973) who observed as well as predicted what he called ‘the therapeutic age’, which started in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the rise of psychoanalysis and various psychotherapeutic theories. Therapy, he said, had become a dominant preoccupation in modern culture. The popularising of therapeutic values jeopardised some more ‘traditional’ ones, since the former were ‘rooted in nothing more than the individual’s search for personal well-being’ (Meserve, 1977:77). Philosophy, amongst all the disciplines, particularly should be concerned with ‘traditional’ values, both individual and social, which go beyond merely easing psychological pain and making one feel better.

This resistance to philosophy’s being seen as therapy may have a point. It can be argued that philosophy should not involve itself only with easing people’s pain and making one feel better as some therapies do. Philosophy, historically, is a discipline that has been concerned with how one should live, including, for instance, ethical aspects of life (the idea of a good life as one of virtue or flourishing); the role and meaning of wisdom; epistemological issues such as how one knows and arrives at ‘truth’; and ontological issues about the very nature of



human existence, etc. From a certain perspective, to get involved with therapy would be to downgrade philosophy – it would be to avoid more serious and substantial questions.

However, the idea of philosophy as a therapy has, in fact, existed in many philosophical traditions. In the history of western philosophy, this can be traced back at least to the classical Greco-Roman period. The theme of ‘healing’ has taken different forms, some of them are associated with easing the individual’s psychological problems or pain, some are associated with a normative idea of human nature as capable of attaining excellence, and others are associated with examining the nature of the good life for humankind in general. Critics of the overuse of the idea of therapy in modern times are concerned about a view of life that is narrowed to focussing on the comfort or the pleasure of the individual, that may in some ways discourage reflection on other significant questions, such as communal affairs, social responsibility, wider values and the environment etc. But this narrow view of therapy is exactly the reason one needs to talk about therapeutic philosophy more widely – at any rate if we are to understand a sense of therapy that aims not only to promote the individual’s well-being, but to broaden the individual’s understanding of the self and the world in general. By this means the individual is not only freed from his own suffering, but is also able to reflect and choose a life that is more meaningful both for himself and others. In fact attaining such a meaningful life through the healing of excessive passion and suffering was the central goal of much of the philosophy of the classical Greek period.

Such ‘classical’ philosophy and its therapeutic function have been the centre of interest for many philosophers and some therapists in the last couple of decades. In these approaches, the later Hellenistic period tends to have been neglected and its richness as a source for western understandings of emotion, as well as a practical philosophy, in 20th century philosophy in Europe and North America, has been missed (Nussbaum, 1994). According to Nussbaum, this started to change due to several influential philosophical writings. These include Michel Foucault’s *The Care of the Self* (1976), Pierre Hadot’s *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (1987/1995),<sup>1</sup> and Martha Nussbaum’s own *The Therapy of Desire* (1994), just to name a few here. These thinkers brought Hellenistic ethics as well as its therapeutic theme back to the focus of attention. In fact studies of philosophy as therapy or philosophy as spiritual exercises, often based on Hellenistic philosophy, have expanded greatly in recent years. Apart from many valuable theoretical works, Hellenistic ideas of philosophy as therapy

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<sup>1</sup> It was first published in French in 1987, and translated into English in 1995.

have also influenced some clinical psychologists or philosophers who seek to engage with practical therapy. One group have engaged with Stoicism, for example, in order to seek philosophical roots and enhance their understanding of existing clinical approaches such as cognitive therapy or cognitive-behaviour therapy (CBT).<sup>2</sup> A second group is exemplified by organisations such as *Stoicism Today* (later the name was changed to *Modern Stoicism*), which has held an event called ‘Stoic Week’ since 2014, and been exploring different ways to apply Stoic philosophy to modern-day problems.

### **The purpose of the thesis and some difficulties**

In this classical period, particularly in the Hellenistic schools, excessive desire and emotion were generally believed to be the main reason for suffering and unhappiness. Ancient philosophical therapy, therefore, consisted of treatments that targeted problematic desires and aimed to alter or even extinguish them. The purpose of this thesis is to explore the type of therapy these philosophical traditions offer in tackling problematic desires – the philosophical ideas that support the therapeutic works, the key principles, attitudes and techniques that are designed to facilitate the process, as well as the ideas of a good life that these therapeutic efforts aim to promote – and to seek the significance of these ancient Greek philosophies for today's world.

When one explores these ancient philosophical therapies, three things come up. First, they are based on an understanding of desire and emotion as cognitive, or, at least, having strong cognitive elements. Desire and emotion are, therefore, subject to philosophical treatment, which consists of reasoning and other intellectual activities, such as reading, listening, imaging and meditating.<sup>3</sup>

Second, though the therapeutic works have the effect of easing pain and soothing suffering, the work of liberating the individual from her passion has an ultimate goal of a flourishing life (*eudaimonia*). Although *eudaimonia* is defined differently in each tradition, such philosophical therapy is concerned with genuine freedom, which is to be found in the ideal life. Easing mental pain is not the ultimate goal. This may be quite different from what we think of as therapy today in several ways. One is that in many modern therapeutic approaches, decreasing negative emotions and increasing positive ones are the main goal of

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<sup>2</sup> Donald Robertson (2010).

<sup>3</sup> Meditations used in ancient Greek philosophy may be quite different from how they are in other philosophical /religious traditions or the activities in vogue today. They are activities of reason (Hadot, 1995:59).

the therapeutic work. Another is that it seems to be problematic if the therapist has a set of values (what is good and what life is a good life) that she has to lead her patient to accept in the therapeutic process. The tension that may arise from making students to accept these values will be discussed in the thesis, particularly in chapter 6 and chapter 7.

A third, related to the second, centres on the role of argument in therapy (this will be the main topic in chapter 6). The main tool of philosophical therapy is considered to be argument or discourse. This involves persuasion, and the role is usually expected to be taken by a philosophical teacher who has superior knowledge. She is supposed to teach the student, through the tools of argument, to think in a certain way. Again, this is quite different from what we may think that psycho-therapy is. This kind of philosophical therapy, if it mainly consists of intellectual persuasion, would probably be considered to be better described as something else than therapy. The authoritarian element in this process (to some extent the philosophical pupil is supposed to give up his own thinking, even just temporarily, in order to understand the teaching) may even be questionable in what we think of as philosophy today.

Through exploring the theme of therapy in these traditions, this thesis attempts to bring useful reflections to bear on both the field of philosophy and the field of therapy. For the field of philosophy, the ancient idea of philosophy has a strong practical element. Learning to philosophise was not just a matter of theory acquisition. It was a commitment to live in a philosophical way, which involved attitudes and practices that were to be seen in everyday activities and interactions with people. For the field of therapy, the fact that the therapeutic endeavour aimed to achieve *eudaimonia* may provide an indication of the importance of a theoretical foundation, in which ideals of wisdom and concepts of the good life were discussed. Therapeutic works that simply aim at easing psychological anguish, although they may be extremely useful and fruitful at certain points, may also be limited in providing understanding at a deeper level. At times, therapeutic works may even appear trivial, if some higher sense of purpose related to an ethical good life is lacking. But these wider philosophical traditions invite people who are concerned with the idea of therapy to reflect on the idea of health as embracing ethical and normative elements, which then may provide a richer image of what a cured patient may be like. The thesis also has the aim of providing insights that may help to establish new practices in philosophical therapy.

With this purpose in mind, the thesis focuses its exploration of these ancient traditions on the medical or curative aspects. In each tradition, the problems of human desire and the

treatment of unhealthy desire will be studied. Even within the limitations of this theme, difficulties in choosing the materials still have been faced. On the one hand, the scope of the three traditions chosen is very wide. In terms of place, these traditions ranged from Greece to the expanse of the later Roman Empire; in terms of time, they started in the 4<sup>th</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE and continued to be developed until the 3rd CE. On the other hand, there is the problem of language. The philosophical texts were originally written in Greek and Latin. The thesis relies on English translations and commentaries which are limited: they are themselves interpretations and perhaps inevitably distorted in some degree. For the purposes of this thesis, my method is inevitably synoptic. I hope nevertheless to have approached the material in question with sufficient attention and rigour to make its bearing on our modern circumstances vivid. My approach will, I hope, demonstrate the relevance of these traditions to the field of therapy today and provide some useful insights.

### **Chapter outline**

Chapter 2 investigates three modern approaches to well-being: positive psychology and the happiness movement, desire theory, and authenticity. The purpose of this chapter is to sketch a picture of the modern culture of self-fulfilment in terms of satisfaction or fulfilment of the individual's happiness, personal desire, or inner voice. This investigation by no means exhausts modern theories of well-being. However, one may find the root of many modern views of the ethical goal of life, or the concept of well-being used in daily life or in official policy, within these three approaches. In bringing this connection out, the chapter also attempts to highlight some problems in some modern understandings of well-being

In Chapters 3 to 5, three Greek philosophical traditions will be examined, with the focus on desire and therapy. Chapter 3 will be on Plato, particularly Plato's ideas regarding *erōs* and its remedy as shown in the *Symposium*. This chapter attempts to examine the psychological torment presented, particularly in two of the participants' accounts of love (*erōs*), which is seen largely in terms of lack and lack-fulfilment. Socrates' account will be read as the potential therapy for this psychological torment. Chapter 4 will examine themes of desire and therapy in the Epicurean tradition. Two themes in Epicurus' ethics will be examined in some depth. Epicurus, as one of the alleged earliest hedonists, in fact had relatively modest views on desire satisfaction and pleasure. Along with Epicurus' short surviving texts on sex and love, a part of the poem on love by the Roman Epicurean Lucretius will be discussed in terms of a therapy to remedy the distortion and illusion frequently

attached to objects of desire. Chapter 5 will consider Stoicism. The Stoics' attitude towards desire is often understood as purely hostile: all desires are seen to be bad, and the goal of Stoic philosophy is to help the follower to achieve a state where the person has no desire at all. Such a goal can be questioned and criticised as being inhuman. But In this chapter, I hope to show that this understanding of the Stoic sage, or the cured person in Stoic therapy as inhuman, is mistaken.

Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 will discuss some general questions on the nature of ancient philosophy and therapy that come out of the discussion in the previous three chapters. These questions are related to different interpretations of the particular traditions and deserve further discussion for two reasons: the first is for the sake of getting a proper understanding of these philosophical traditions; the second is for the sake of making use of these philosophies in today's world, particularly in relation to therapy.

The two main thinkers, whose interpretations of the ancient traditions have greatly influenced this thesis are Martha Nussbaum and Pierre Hadot. Despite the substantial degree of similarity in their interpretations, Nussbaum and Hadot do appear to suggest different accounts of the nature of philosophy. Their differences, though subtle, are significant in terms of, first, how to read ancient philosophical works, second, what the role of philosophers is both on the individual level and on the social level, and, third, their contrasting conceptions of the purpose of philosophy as a curative project. They also suggest different implications for retrieving the philosophical model of therapy in modern times. In these two chapters, I will suggest a way of highlighting and comparing the possible different ways of interpreting ancient philosophical materials, the underlying assumptions, and the tensions generated within and between their perspectives. In chapter 6, I will discuss 'the role of argument' in ancient philosophy. This is discussed by Nussbaum as 'therapeutic argument' and by Hadot as 'philosophical discourse'. Chapter 7 focuses on 'the role of the philosopher and philosopher doctor'. By questioning the 'less philosophical techniques' used by some Hellenistic masters, such as memorisation or repetition, and the 'godlike' image Epicurus presents of himself in his school, 'the Garden', Nussbaum reveals her worry about the authoritarian element in Hellenistic philosophy. Related to this, Isaiah Berlin's account of the philosophical approach, in which an individual is asked to suspend her own thinking and just obey the teaching in name of some future benefit, also reveals the danger of such an approach. If we are to accept that ancient philosophy can provide us with some useful models of practical and therapeutic philosophy, we have to confront this tension between authority

and autonomous thinking that is now considered to be central to philosophy. In this light the practical question we need to ask when adopting philosophy as a therapeutic project is: 'when it comes to practice, just what is the role of the philosopher in this?' I hope my review of some ancient practices will not only raise questions but shed some light on such deep issues.

## Chapter 2 The Culture of Self-Fulfilment

There are only two tragedies in life: one is not getting what one wants, and  
the other is getting it. – Oscar Wilde

### **What it means to be me...**

I am original. I am the real deal.

Nothing about me is a piece of a puzzle belonging to someone else. I do not replicate and I do not show-off. What I am is genuine and I cannot be compared to anyone.

I do not strive to be someone else, nor do I buy into materialism that justifies my inclination to a persona.

What I do allows me to stand out and always be remembered. I cannot but allow myself to be anything but me.

My greatest sin lies in the temptations of jealousy and the frailty of my mind. My greatest flaw is my flair for emotion and drama. My biggest downfall is nothing but my expectations of others.

My real criticism comes only from true friends, the liars and the frugal in emotion are my enemies... They want me more than they need me as a friend.

My being screams at insults, but my meaning comes from deep in my heart.

They earn attention; I garner admiration.

Little are my fans, but they are my family stitched with iron in a stone-clad bond.

Close are my family; my enemies, my friends.

I am but an intelligent being with a fullness of everything I have.

With God as my witness, I am His creation. And in His image, like his work, I am original in mine.

My actions burn the jealous. My choices hurt the haters. My excellence in my passions set me in the sights of my enemies.  
I am anything and everything but a relative polymerisation of random organic I am an artist! One with true feel, and they know it.

— Gordon Pereira SpazticOrange<sup>4</sup>

### Striving for ‘the real me’

In the poem above, the author utters an urge to be ‘the real me’. ‘The real me’ is portrayed as something original; it belongs to no one else but myself, and it is not a replicate and cannot be compared to anything else. This real me, if real enough, is self-sufficient – it does not expect things from others to complete itself and the meaning (of me and of things) comes from deep inside. Such an idea of a true self is probably very familiar for most people living in the modern times, as least those in western and westernised societies. Explicitly or implicitly, it is something people value and even fight for, especially when they feel that it has been lost or is in conflict with what others expect it to be. Expressions of this appear in modern poetry, drama, music, and literature, usually when the individual is confronted with some great dilemma or frustration.

The value of living according to one’s true self seems to be embraced widely in academic field. Much research, for example, has attempted to demonstrate the relation between authenticity, psychological health and well-being. A recent study by Sander Thomaes and his colleagues (2017) claimed to show that authenticity enhanced adolescents’ subjective well-being (the problem of what ‘authenticity’ means is addressed later in this chapter). Authenticity in this research is given a strongly subjective accent and is defined as the feeling of being oneself; this means not being affected or controlled by others. The connection can be seen in the questions designed to measure the level of authenticity: I feel that ‘I am true to myself in most situations’, and that I am ‘in touch with and acting on [the true self], and relatively immune to others’ views and influences’ (*ibid.*). The level of the

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<sup>4</sup> This poem is published in an online poetry website in 2013. The yearning expressed by the author for being a free, authentic artist whose true self cannot be discovered by replicating others is a good example of what is to be discussed in this chapter.



individual's authenticity is believed to be positively related, directly or indirectly (for example, as a mediator between well-being and autonomy), to the individual's well-being. In this way, as the researchers state, the research outcome has significant educational implications, i.e. strategies or interventions that help to raise adolescents' authenticity are likely to have positive impact, so that educators should encourage and enhance authenticity as a means to increase the pupils' well-being.

The term 'authenticity' in both popular culture and the academic field has been a placeholder for many diverse ideas. It is sometimes found in expressions of 'doing your own thing'. It is also there in more rebellious ways of behaving, as in punk. And it is often implicit in the idea of turning one's life into a work of art (as the poem above expresses – something which is more influenced by Nietzsche),<sup>5</sup> as well as the general idea of 'speaking your own truth' or 'sincerity'. It can also be found in the idea of making decisions on your own, which is often underlined by an idea of the individual as a rational, autonomous and independent agent. The term is multifaceted, and the ideas popularly involved are often found to be rather thin, or in conflict with each other. The purpose of this chapter is to explore this idea in modern culture. I realise that this is a big topic, and the approaches below by no means exhaust the discussion. But, in an attempt to get a clearer picture of the problems surrounding the idea of authenticity, I will look at: a popular approach in the field of psychology (where the ideas have been widely adopted in popular culture); a strand in modern philosophy; and a well-known contemporary analysis in philosophy, given by Charles Taylor, on the idea of authenticity.

### **Happiness - in positive psychology and the happiness movement**

'Positive psychology' as a branch of psychology was established in the late 1990's by Martin Seligman. Seligman was (and is) critical of the exclusive focus in the field of academic psychology on the negative sides of human psychology, for example, theories on pathology, mental illness, and abnormal behaviour. It addresses little of the 'positive sides' of human psychology. Seligman believes that the historical development of psychology has resulted in an incomplete study, as it were, which offers mostly perspectives on 'how to be normal' and little on 'how to live well'. Positive psychology, on the other hand, has developed with the aim of 'completing' the subject. It has drawn lots of interest both from

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<sup>5</sup> David Cooper (1983) lists two inadequate models associated with this development, which he terms 'Polonian' and 'Dadaist', and analyses the problems of them. He argues that these models are self-defeating and 'allow one to escape the very issues it was designed to deal with' (11).

academics and the public since its establishment. For instance, in the field of academic psychology, significant growth in studying the positive sides of human psychology has been taking place. These include ‘scales of optimism, virtues, life satisfaction, hope, creativity, meaning, and flow’, which were less within the focus of study before the upsurge of this movement (Diener, 2009:8). For non-academics, teachings about positive thinking have also become popular. The book *Who Moved My Cheese*, first published in 1998 and translated into 37 languages having sold more than 26 million copies worldwide, is a classic example. A given circumstance is that ‘the cheese is gone!’. It is faced by four characters who have got four different attitudes and subsequent different reactions to the same situation. The book suggests that it is the basic attitude of a person that decides the future for the individual, given that there are uncontrollable factors in the actual circumstance. A similar teaching is found in another bestseller, *How Full Is Your Bucket*. The volume of the bucket is a metaphor for the positive or negative emotions that a person has. The perception of an empty bucket makes the person sluggish, inactive, and depressed, whereas the idea of a full bucket does the opposite. It is an important task for ourselves and for other people to increase the content of the bucket, by holding positive attitudes, saying positive things, and acting in positive ways.

In this way positive psychology offers not only a compensational element for human psychology so that we have a fuller picture; what it claims to offer is a theory of well-being – a theory of what makes life worthwhile and how to achieve it. The first significant book of Seligman’s (2002) to illustrate the discipline of positive psychology, *Authentic Happiness*, makes this clear:

Positive Psychology takes seriously the bright hope that if you find yourself stuck in the parking lot of life, with few and only ephemeral pleasures, with minimal gratifications, and without meaning, there is a road out. This road takes you through the countryside of pleasure and gratification, up into the high country of strength and virtue, and finally to the peaks of lasting fulfillment: meaning and purpose. (15)

Positive psychology, Seligman hopes, provides the theory of a fulfilled life – what it is and how to achieve it. And when it claims to be ‘the science of happiness’, that is, a theory of happiness and well-being that is based on so-called scientific evidence, it fastens on the idea of happiness as the underlying theme of its theory of well-being. As illustrated in Seligman’s answer to the question ‘why bother to be happy’, positive emotion is found to be linked to apparently life-enhancing states of life, such as friendship and loving relationships; and

qualities, such as openness to new things and creativity. These contribute to happiness, and happiness is considered to contribute, directly and indirectly, to the individual's well-being.

While it may resemble a historic hedonist approach to the good life, the idea of *happiness* used in positive psychology seems to have an unusually unequivocal definition. In a survey that is used to gain an understanding of the scale of happiness, the questions include: 'In general, how happy or unhappy do you usually feel?' and 'Consider your emotions a moment further. On average, what percentage of the time do you feel happy? What percentage of the time do you feel unhappy? What percentage of the time do you feel neutral (neither happy nor unhappy)?' (Seligman, 2002:35-36). In other questionnaires, the concept of happiness is converted into other apparently measurable variables, sometimes distinct from feelings. Generally, however, this concept of happiness is converted into such measurable variables, such as positive emotion, positive feeling, or positive affect. In the study conducted by Thomaes and colleagues (2017) mentioned above, for example, a focus on 'high levels of positive emotional experience and low levels of negative emotional experience' is taken to be the working definition of well-being (1045). In another study, well-being is measured on a scale of overall life satisfaction considering the balance of positive affect and negative affect (Kifer et al., 2013). In all of this, whether it is feeling happy, positive emotional experience, or amount of positive affect, the term happiness, which is taken to be the central indicator of well-being, refers ultimately to the feeling of pleasure.

The similar claim is made by Richard Layard, the author of *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*, and the main figure behind the so-called 'happiness movement'. Layard, a well-known economist, observed that people did not become happier as the societies got richer. What Layard questions in this observation is the ethical problem of what makes life worthwhile. Layard appeals to Jeremy Bentham's utilitarianism and suggests that happiness, as in the utilitarian tradition, is the 'common good' that society today needs to re-attend to. Happiness is essential to the good life (as opposed to what many have come to focus too much in modern capitalist society – wealth). Layard (2005) gives a particular definition of happiness: 'happiness is feeling good' (6). For Layard, the difficulty with the issue in philosophy is its subjective nature, and hence the difficulty of measuring it. But the new science of psychology, with neuroscience and biology, Layard claims, will 'give us real insight into' the old issues, as the ideas can now 'be at last applied using evidence instead of speculation' (*ibid.*).

Influenced by Layard, in Britain courses aiming to teach techniques that promote happiness have become rather popular and clearly have some ethical significance. Anthony Seldon has introduced a curriculum at Wellington Academy which aims to teach students how to be happy (or at least happier); while in social policy now the level of reported happiness of people is often taken into account. Similarly the UN introduced the World Happiness Report in 2012, co-edited by Layard, designed to measure the development of countries not just by the long-established indicator GDP, but taking into account a new index of ‘national happiness’.

In both movements, to conclude, happiness is conceptualised as a mental state – the feeling of joy at a given time. And it is taken to be central to well-being. With these characteristics, they can be seen as modern versions of a hedonist approach to well-being, which has a long history of development. The ‘new science’, while claiming to be able to give real insight into the old issues, also seems inevitably to reduce the complexity of the mental state of pleasure by converting it into such measurable variables. Therefore, the predicaments faced by historical hedonists, such as the Utilitarian, or even the Epicurean, in perceiving the greatest balance of pleasure over pain as well-being, are not encountered in these happiness movements. For example, is it possible, James Griffin (1986) asks, to ‘find any one state in all that we regard as having utility – eating, reading, working, creating, helping’ (8)?

Another problem with such movements in their definition of happiness as feeling good is that, in spite of such apparently measurable variables, it is inevitably subjective - not only in the sense that the self-report represents something only from the person’s own perspective, but also in the sense that the ‘feeling’ that is measured is ego-centric. It is my feeling, not other people’s feelings, that alone accounts for my well-being. Well-being thus conceptualised, therefore, is sometimes referred to as subjective well-being. Admittedly, those who advocate these movements, including Seligman, Layard, and Seldon, all propose something else intended to improve the concept of well-being. Seligman (2011), for example, in his later book *Flourish*, amends the definition of happiness by adding meaning, relationships, accomplishment to the initial definition. But the association of well-being and how ‘I’ feel remains, when happiness, defined and measured by feeling good, stays as a crucial factor in any such approach to well-being.

## **Desire-satisfaction**

The second idea we will be examining is desire-satisfaction. Desire-satisfaction is held by some thinkers to be better than happiness as an approach to well-being. Such an approach to well-being focussed on desire-satisfaction is termed 'desire theory' or 'desire-fulfilment theory'. The main principle of it has been articulated by Chris Heathwood (2015):

What is good in itself for people and other subjects of welfare is our getting what we want, or the fulfilment of our desires, and what makes things go worse for us is our wanting something to be the case when it is not or does not become the case (135).

Getting what one wants, that is, satisfying one's desire, is believed to be good in itself, and is the primary indicator when it comes to the welfare of the person. The content of desire-satisfaction as a well-being concept does overlap in some ways with those of 'happiness' and 'pleasure'. One benefit of getting what one wants is that it brings pleasure to the person. Desire-satisfaction and pleasure often occur simultaneously. However, desire-satisfaction does not always bring pleasure to the person and desire-satisfaction may be considered to be valuable for a reason other than pleasure, e.g. it may give a sense of achievement. Thus advocates of the desire theory differentiate themselves from the hedonists. Heathwood suggests that many things other than simple pleasure, such as friendship, love, truth, and freedom are of great value in life. The implication is that even when satisfying desire clashes with pleasure, as in where desire-satisfaction brings no pleasure, or even causes pain, desire satisfaction is to be chosen over pleasure fulfilment.

Desire theorists, despite attempting to include a wider range of values than pleasure in their concept of well-being, face similar difficulties to the hedonists. For example, while getting something brings short-term satisfaction, it may lead to long-term suffering. It may result in being really different from what the person had expected. A person may have conflicting desires and so find they cannot get all of them satisfied. Different reformed accounts of desire theory are raised to confront these issues. Henry Sidgwick (1962), for example, suggests that one 'identify [a person's good] not with the actually desired, but rather with ... what would be desired ... supposing the desirer to possess a perfect forecast, emotional as well as intellectual, of the state of attainment or fruition' (110-111). In Sidgwick's account, desire is associated with well-being when the desire is 'what would be desired' when the person has sufficient knowledge related to the situation, instead of 'what is

desired'. Griffin (1986), following Sidgwick, argues that only 'informed-desire' is relevant to well-being. He explains that some of our desires may 'rest on mistakes of fact':

I make my fortune, say, only to discover I am no better off because I was after people's respect all along and mistakenly thought that making a fortune would command respect. Or I want an operation to restore me to health, not realizing that some pill will do just as well. (12)

Griffin points out that our desire for an object can turn out to be wrong or bad, due to a misconception of the object, or the wider situation around it. These desires, though genuine, are not valid – we would stop desiring the same object if we knew more about it or the relevant situation. Desire of this kind has been called 'ill-informed' desire, and satisfaction of it does not contribute to well-being. Not all desire matters, and not all satisfaction is good. What is essential is an understanding of 'what makes life go well' (13). Some other reformed desire accounts attempt to circumscribe the desire relevant to well-being in different ways (for example, any 'ideal-desire' account).

The premise shared by all of these accounts is that what the person wants matters for the person's well-being. This leads to two features: the first one is that, similar to the happiness movement, the desire theory embraces a plural concept of well-being. The second is the presupposition of the correlation between desire and well-being. In this way, desire satisfaction, as described above, is seen as good in itself.

It is interesting to see that proponents of the desire theory dwell very little on justifying the relation between desire and well-being. For them it seems almost a truism, and bears little need for explanation. Heathwood (2015) says that it 'simply seems right' that to say something is valuable for a person, the person needs to, in some way, feel it (140). This example offered by Heathwood (2014) explains the intuition of 'seeming right':

Henry reads a philosophy book that makes an impression on him. The author defends an objective theory of well-being that includes many of the items on our sample list above. Henry wants to get a good life, and so he goes about trying to acquire these things. For example, to increase his knowledge – one of the basic, intrinsic goods of life, according to the author – Henry reads a textbook on entomology and acquires a vast knowledge of insects. Henry finds, however, that this new knowledge, as he puts it, 'does nothing for me.' He pursued it only because the author recommended it, and he can muster no enthusiasm for what he has learned, or for the fact that he has learned it. He in no way cares that he has all this new knowledge, and he never will care. It has no practical application to anything in his life, and it never will. (203)

Heathwood appeals to the counter-example to demonstrate the importance of some internal enthusiasm for a goal. In this case, Henry experiences non-satisfaction in achieving a goal that is deemed good by others. The objective good – knowledge – is claimed to be beneficial, but it seems wrong to say that it increases the person's well-being when it fails to engage the person in any significant way. The kind of alienating feeling directed towards an alleged good goal is not uncommon. Most people can probably recall a situation in their experiences where something good is introduced when no internal feeling of good corresponds to it. The child who is not interested in studying is told by parents about how good the university is. A smoker is told by a doctor about how good a healthy life style is. When the objective good does not correspond to my feeling, in Heathwood's term, it does 'nothing for me' (*ibid.*). Arguing against such objective goals for well-being, Heathwood is convinced that some sort of feeling from the individual is essential when it comes to what is good for her. But the fact that some objective good, such as wisdom or virtue, can fail to strike some people as essential for their good life does not in itself demonstrate that subjective positive feeling towards an object thereby makes that object valuable. In other words, Heathwood's case shows the flaw in an objective theory of well-being, but it does not give the reason why subjective feeling is more reliable.

What Heathwood displays here is articulated in a slightly more sophisticated way by Peter Railton, whose argument is followed by Heathwood. Railton (1986) uses the term 'internalism'. Some 'internal resonance' is essential for a person to make a judgement (of value) about an object (47). Railton explains:

It does seem to me to capture an important feature of the concept of intrinsic value to say that what is intrinsically valuable for a person must have a connection with what he would find in some degree compelling or attractive, at least if he were rational and aware. It would be an intolerably alienated conception of someone's good to imagine that it might fail in any such way to engage him. (*ibid.*)

Thus the 'connection' between the subject and the object is regarded as essential to the value of the object. It is worth noting that intrinsic value, which Railton discusses here, is distinguished by him from so-called moral or aesthetic value. Intrinsic value, for Railton, is the kind of value that often becomes a problem 'when disputes occur about what an individual's or group's good consists in, ... or about what is desirable as an end in itself' (43). Let us imagine an example. If someone thinks smoking is not good and tells me not to do it, because it is not good, but I enjoy smoking, and will suffer a lot if I stop, then;

according to Railton, not to smoke may have a moral value, in the way that it is good to my health; but it does not have intrinsic value *for* me, because it is not itself a desirable end for me. If the definition of intrinsic value is what is desirable for me, then it seems to be a tautology to say that what I desire is of value for me. What is still missing is the justification for saying something is valuable merely because I desire it.

It seems that some beliefs that underlie the desire theory are either considered to be a truism and needing no explanation or are not fully recognised. L. W. Sumner (1996), suggesting that the desire theory has come to dominate the modern theories of welfare, proposes several explanations for the phenomenon of the increasing association of personal desire and well-being. One is that it seems to fit what most people intuitively feel: ‘my life is going well for me when I am in the way of achieving my aims’ (122). Another reason is that it gives an account of well-being that admits multiple sources for ‘the good’. Also, Sumner suggests that it is ‘in tune with the liberal spirit of the modern age, which tends to see human agents as pursuers of autonomously chosen projects’ (123). Sumner seems to be pointing out that, to some extent, the cultural framework in which the desire theory thrives is the reason for its popularity. The blooming of desire theory relies on, and simultaneously enhances, a modern understanding of being human. In Sumner’s words:

Unlike objective theories, on which the sources of our well-being are dictated by unalterable aspects of our nature, the desire theory offers us the more flattering picture of ourselves as shapers of our own destinies, determiners of our own good. In this way it internalizes within a conception of welfare the paradigmatically liberal virtues of self-direction and self-determination. (*ibid.*)

Such liberal virtues as autonomy and self-determination support the idea of the individual being in charge of her own life by making independent choices based on her desires. This ‘flattering picture’ of the individual understands human beings as self-determining agents. On the one hand, it affirms the individual’s power of rationality and responsibility for her own life. On the other hand, it strengthens the sense of I and mine, whereby the person successfully keeps her life in good shape. In magnifying the power of I in my well-being, the theory of well-being also diminishes the role others play in my well-being. In this way the ‘me’ culture, along with the ideas of autonomy, agency and freedom, nurtures the development of the desire theory, while the desire theory reinforces the sense of ‘I’ in modern understandings of well-being.



## Authenticity

The last idea I will look at is the idea of ‘authenticity’. To be authentic, as in ‘being real’ or ‘being true to oneself’, is widely taken to be a valuable thing to do. As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, expressions of the longing for being oneself can be found in poetry, drama, songs and many other types of literature. Similar to happiness and desire satisfaction, the idea of authenticity places the individual at the centre of the idea of well-being. While happiness takes the individual’s *feeling* and desire satisfaction focuses on the individual’s *desire* as the focus of attention, the idea of authenticity often focuses on who the individual really is, and this is often discussed in association with the concept of self.

In philosophy, along with what is seen in pop culture and the field of psychology, the idea of authenticity, viewed as ‘being in contact with one’s true self,’ has been seen as contributing to some ‘Ultimate Good’ or the good life. In modern history, influential philosophers who have explicitly explored the idea of authenticity in depth include Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre, and De Beauvoir. More recently, Alessandro Ferrara, Charles Taylor and Somogy Varga have discussed the general idea of authenticity and its relation to modernity. Before further investigation of this, however, it is worth noting that the idea of being in touch with one’s inner self or one’s true nature is by no means a new one that is exclusively celebrated in modern times. In one form or another, it has been endorsed as a core value in many philosophical traditions in history. In ancient Greece, for example, a number of philosophical schools had ‘living in accordance to human nature’ as the goal in their philosophical practices. In Chinese philosophy, Mencius, the fourth century BCE Confucian philosopher who was thought of as the ‘second sage’, expresses the Confucian ethical goal of wisdom through the idea of recovering the ‘lost heart’. In Buddhism, the true self is understood as Buddhahood, which everyone is innately endowed with; to be in contact with one’s Buddhahood is the goal of Buddhist practices. Being in touch with one’s own nature, in its various expressions, has thus been widely taken as the ultimate goal of a philosophical and ethical life in the past.

But the question we are asking here concerns the *modern* understanding of authenticity in relation to well-being, and its distinctive characteristics. Are there distinctive characteristics of the modern understanding of authenticity, compared to those pre-modern understandings of being in touch with one’s own nature which are seen in many ancient traditions? Lionel Trilling (1972) views the modern concept of authenticity as a replacement

for the old concept of sincerity which signifies one's being true to, and honest with, others. Trilling points out that the antecedent concept of sincerity had a stronger association with the person's social role. Authenticity, on the other hand, emphasises more one's relation to oneself. In other words, as a moral attitude, sincerity requires more reflection on the self-other relationship while authenticity focuses on the individual self. Ferrara (1993) argues that authenticity, along with rationality and autonomy, is partly what constitutes the 'subjective turn' in modern ethics. Ferrara argues that authenticity is a better ethical ideal than rationality or autonomy as it helps one to accomplish this 'subjective turn', because 'although it includes the notions of autonomy and rational reflection, [modern notions of authentic subjectivity have] this additional dimension of singularity or uniqueness' (Cooke, 1998:572). Both Trilling and Ferrara see authenticity as the core value in the modern concept of well-being, with the whole idea of authenticity considered as one amongst other key values that have been developing since the enlightenment period.

Taylor (1992) also acknowledges the role that authenticity plays in the modern idea of well-being. He uses the term 'subjective turn' to refer to the transition of the search for moral sources from authorities in the external world, e.g. religion or social values, to the internal world – one's inner voice; and he argues that the ideal of authenticity is grounded in the enlightenment affirmation of inwardness. Taylor, in attempting to retrieve something of the richness of this ideal, traces it back to particular trends which arose at this time. Below I will focus on Taylor's account of modernity and authenticity in terms of this 'subjective turn'.

In Taylor's view, the 'subjective turn' in ethics and in relation to authenticity, can be understood as passing through several stages. The first expression of it is marked by the affirmation of a moral sense arising from within. Taylor (199) explains that the belief grows that: 'human beings are endowed with a moral sense, an intuitive feeling for what is right and wrong' (26). This development happened against a background where questions about morality were normally answered with reference to some external source of authority – 'God', or 'the Idea of the Good' (*ibid.*). Francis Hutcheson, in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, was one of those promulgating this belief. On this view, human beings are capable of their own moral feelings from which moral judgements can be made. So a person does not have to be told by the priest, the bible, or the teacher to *know* that, for instance, harming others or lying is bad. The ability to *know* it is innate. At this time such a 'form of inwardness' in approaching moral issues was, so Taylor suggests, new. He explains that human beings start to see themselves 'as beings with inner depths' (*ibid.*).

At this initial stage, values deriving from external sources *are* deemed to be compatible with one's inner voice as the source of morality. The affirmation of the inner depth of the individual does not negate the validity of external moral sources; they are both credible. But Taylor points out that, in the following development, the notion of inner voice is taken further in two different directions. One is Jean Jacques Rousseau's influential idea of 'self-determining freedom'. Taylor explains that the idea is 'that I am free when I decide for myself what concerns me, rather than being shaped by external influences' (27). The external world is posited as a place that *competes* with the inner world in terms of the factors that affect decision-making. The conflicts sometimes seen between 'what I want to do' and 'what other people expect me to do', or 'what I naturally incline to be' and 'how I have become under the influence of the people around me and the society' are highlighted. The negative effect that the external influence may have on my inner voice – diminishing it, or distorting it – is thus stressed.

A second notion coming to be associated with authenticity, which in Taylor's account is of great significance in the course of this development, is originality. Taylor suggests that Johann Gottfried Herder is a key figure who promoted this. According to Taylor, Herder suggests that 'each of us has an original way of being human. Each person has his or her own "measure" in his way of putting it' (28). This development is crucial for the modern ideal of authenticity in Taylor's view. In his words:

Before the late eighteenth century no one thought that the differences between human beings had this kind of moral significance. There is a certain way of being human that is *my* way. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else's but this gives a new importance to being true to myself. If I am not, I miss the point of my life, I miss what being human is for *me*. (28-9)

The understanding of what being human is as articulated by Herder, in Taylor's analysis, enhances the significance of 'originality', as well as 'uniqueness' in finding one's way of being human. The former leads to a potential negation of imitation as the way to personal well-being. The latter stresses the differences amongst individuals and their unique inner voice.

To sum up: the inner voice in Taylor's account first develops with an emphasis on believing in one's innate moral capability. Then the emphasis shifts to originality and uniqueness. As Taylor describes it, there is some sense of anxiety in this pursuit of being

authentic if authenticity is believed to be the way of being human, since now one can have no external authority to rely on; the individual herself has to find ways to be original and to be unique. Taylor also explains this idea by seeing it in terms of self-fulfilment as the ultimate goal here: ‘in articulating [my originality], I am also defining myself. I am realizing a potentiality that is properly my own’ (29). The individual’s self-fulfilment relies on her realising her potentialities.

The modern idea of authenticity, in Taylor’s account, therefore, has several characteristics. Firstly, in terms of the role for an external voice, the idea of authenticity is developed against a former background where the external authorities had the decisive power to judge when it comes to moral issues. The appeal to the inner voice affirms a human being’s innate moral ability. However, while the external authorities are considered to be not the only source of morality, their potential negative influence is pointed out and criticised. The external world’s influence in one’s moral decision is lessened, and it is sometimes thought to be something a moral agent should avoid. Secondly, in terms of the goal of life that is associated with it – self-fulfilment – the ideal life is a life that has a greater focus on what the individual as such values, as well as the issues that relate to the *discovery* of what the individual’s values, which involve issues of self-identity and self-understanding.

### **Taylor’s criticisms**

Taylor’s historical account of the ideal of authenticity shows how liberal values, such as autonomy and self-determining freedom, are interwoven in the modern understanding of authenticity. Such an ideal of authenticity is a complicated one; and it is, from Taylor’s perspective, a valid and valuable moral ideal. While I am convinced of many aspects of the moral value of authenticity that Taylor has presented, I have reservations about some of the problems this ideal has incurred. These problems are related to the quality of self-centredness. This quality and its problems are to be found not only in the ideal of authenticity in Taylor’s account, but also in the two other approaches to well-being discussed in the chapter, which focus on happiness and desire satisfaction. Moreover, this quality seems to be particularly prominent in modern times, as Taylor shows, as it fits well with the image of the modern individual as a rational and independent agent. In this section, I would like to look at Taylor’s criticisms of this quality in relation to the modern ideal of authenticity, many aspects of which, I believe, apply to other modern approaches to well-being as well.

It should be noted, firstly, that Taylor does not condemn the quality of ‘self-centredness’ as a whole in the modern culture. From Taylor’s perspective, this ‘centring of the self’ is bad when it is *excessive*. The flaw is manifested in the neglect of ‘external moral demands’ and ‘serious commitments to others’ (55). In the 1970s and 1980s, many thinkers expressed criticisms about this quality of self-centredness in the individual. Taylor points out that thinkers including Alan Bloom,<sup>6</sup> Daniel Bell<sup>7</sup> and Christopher Lasch,<sup>8</sup> condemned much of contemporary American culture as narcissistic. Taylor agrees with these thinkers in recognising these aspects of narcissism, self-centredness and self-indulgence in the culture. However, he believes that these down sides of the culture are not themselves inevitable concomitants of the ideal of authenticity; they are, instead, the result of a *misconception* of the ideal of authenticity. In other words, Taylor is convinced that authenticity is a valid moral ideal, but that the misconception has to be identified and avoided.

This misconception is explained by Taylor in terms of the failure to see the individual in the context of wider ‘inescapable horizons’ and ‘the need for recognition’ (*ibid.*). Taylor explains that while modern individuals are expected to develop their opinions, beliefs, preferences or values ‘to a considerable degree through solitary reflection’ (33), the necessary condition for such reflection to be possible is often forgotten. Taylor uses the term ‘horizons of meaning’ to denote frameworks of thought and significance which are pre-existent in whatever society the individual is born into. They refer to shared views about the significance or non-significance of things. These views may change over time, and may be agreed by some and disagreed by others. The point here is not how true or correct a particular view is, but to acknowledge the pre-existence of such views as the milieu human beings inevitably live in. We ‘don’t reason from the ground up’, and when we talk to people, the interlocutor is always someone who recognises certain background demands (32).

When we come to understand what it is to define ourselves, to determine in what our originality consists, we see that we have to take as background some sense of what is significant. Defining myself means finding what is significant in my difference from others. (35-6)

Such ‘horizons of meaning’ have been articulated by many philosophers of language in different terms. The idea mainly is to point out the ‘background’ against which thoughts are developed, like the screen in the cinema, without which the images cannot be seen. This

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<sup>6</sup> *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987).

<sup>7</sup> *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976).

<sup>8</sup> *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979).

background is taken for granted and becomes invisible for many. Taylor argues that while people think they can, and should, define themselves only through solitary reflection and self-determination, they neglect, even deny, the existence of the background. The result of this denial, Taylor warns, is that such moral ideas as self-determination, freedom and authenticity, either become self-defeating, or become trivial and incoherent.

Taylor further illustrates this 'background' from another perspective in terms of 'the need for recognition'. Taylor points out that, when the modern individual strives for coming up with an identity that is defined by herself (as opposed to other people), it is sometimes forgotten that 'the acknowledgment that our identity requires recognition by others' (45). Taylor explains this as follows:

My discovering my identity doesn't mean that I work it out in isolation but that I negotiate it through dialogue, partly overt, partly internalized, with others. That is why the development of an ideal of inwardly generated identity gives a new and crucial importance to recognition. My own identity crucially depends on my dialogical relations with others.' (47-8)

He appeals to the idea of the 'significant other' which was developed by George Herbert Mead originally to signify those who are 'internal to my identity' (34). We define ourselves 'always in dialogue with' others, whether in agreement or disagreement with them. Even in circumstances where we 'outgrow' our significant others, 'the conversation with them continues within us as long as we live' (33).

What Taylor attempts to shed light on is that such recognition is indispensable when it comes to identity. The way I think about myself makes sense when it coincides with the views of people who know me well. For example, if Amy sees herself as an optimistic person, we would expect her close friends and family to see her in a similar way. She *can* identify herself as very different from how her significant others see her, e.g. Many of Amy's close friends think her of a pessimistic person while Amy sees herself optimistic. In this case, however, it still makes sense if Amy gives reasons for her way of seeing herself, e.g. she appears to be pessimistic in her speech, but deep down she never loses hope. In either case, the optimistic self-identity is made against the background where optimism and pessimism make sense to Amy, and where other people in her circle recognise these attitudes.

One dilemma faced by the modern individual is the difficulty, or impossibility, as Taylor would argue, of achieving full 'liberation'. One way to interpret the freedom the individual has is to see it as freedom from external influences when making decisions. Others' influence

on us is to be resisted, and the thoughts and expectations that come from others, though affecting us intellectually and emotionally, have to be recognised and excluded. Taylor describes the dilemma as follows:

We can never liberate ourselves completely from those whose love and care shaped us early in life, but we should strive to define ourselves on our own to the fullest degree possible, coming as best we can to understand and thus gain some control over the influence of our parents, and avoiding falling into any further such dependencies. We will need relationships to fulfil but not to define ourselves. (34)

This constant striving seems to be taken as what it is to try to be authentic (or to be yourself). The goal is to define oneself on one's own 'to the fullest degree possible'. If I catch myself finding that my desire to be a teacher is also my parent's expectation, then I need to question whether this is what I really want, or am I just conforming, and fitting in with another's expectation. If I am moving because my partner gets a job in another city, I have to question whether this is really something I want. What is powerfully pointed out by Taylor here is a fundamental predicament of being human – the dependency on others. The predicament has been discussed by thinkers throughout history. But for the modern individual, who prizes autonomy and authenticity, it is a particular kind of predicament. On the one hand, we are encouraged to develop our own opinions; on the other, any opinions can only be developed against the background of a pool of opinions, different or similar - the latter is the condition for the former to be possible. In other words, the opinion of 'the other' is, in a sense, necessary for the formation of 'our own'. It is not possible to have a 'pure' opinion of my own. Any ultimately independent thought or opinion is impossible.

To sum up, Taylor's view on the problematic characteristic of 'self-centredness' in the ideal of authenticity is two-fold. On the one hand, Taylor agrees with solitary reflection and affirms its positive effect on the individual's self-creation and self-identity. On the other hand, Taylor defends the significance of the place for others in one's life. His criticism of *excessive* self-centredness rests on what he sees as a mistaken view of the human condition, which he terms a 'monological ideal of authenticity'. That refers to the wrong idea that the individual can, and should, define herself through some sort of purely solitary reflection. Instead, Taylor argues that human life is in its nature 'dialogical'. Only when this is recognised, can the ideal of authenticity be achieved.

Taylor's attempt to include others in the ideal of authenticity, by appealing to the dialogical character of human life is, I think, positive. However, Taylor does not offer convincing reasons for behaving in a 'less self-centred' way. While Taylor brings the 'background', against which the individual's decision makes sense, into the scene of self-fulfilment, his refined account of authenticity ultimately leaves it to the individual's personal motivation when it comes to conflicts between external demands and the pursuit of self-fulfilment. There are not enough good reasons given, in Taylor's account, as to why the individual should, for instance, 'sacrifice' his career in order to take care of his children and 'fulfil' the children's good life, rather than just fulfilling his own. Taylor's argument that others are internal to one's identity seems to be too weak to account for such compassionate or 'other-centred' behaviour.

### **Self-centredness at issue**

#### *The necessity of self-centredness*

I would like to draw attention to two things that are related to the characteristic of self-centredness seen in the modern conceptualisation of well-being that I am questioning in this chapter. The first issue is raised by L. W. Sumner. Sumner's (1996) comment on the 'flattering picture of ourselves as shapers of our own destinies' (123) that the desire theory offers was mentioned previously in this chapter. The shape of a life is not decided solely by mere self-choices – it involves circumstantial elements that the individual does not have full control over. Sumner, however, still believes in the importance of self-determination and the necessity of self-regard. Decisions on significant questions like 'what to work at, whom to marry, where to live' have to be made 'primarily with a view to [one's] own well-being' if one is to avoid future regret (1). In this sense:

A certain degree of self-centredness is an indispensable condition for being a person or a subject in the first place. Falling below this minimum, having too little regard for one's own good, is not a virtue but a pathology, not altruism or saintliness but debasement or servility. (1-2).

Sumner points out the risk of *too little* self-centredness. Here Sumner suggests the possibility of a pathology disguised as a virtue, debasement in the guise of altruism or saintliness. In some circumstances, it is possible to think too much about others' interests or opinions. It is particularly noteworthy that, as Sumner suggests, such a tendency to think too little about one's own good or one's preferences may be a more serious matter among people in



disadvantaged positions than those in privileged positions if one is thinking in terms of gender, class, race and social status. It is important to bear in mind that it was *against this sort of constraining background* that the idea of an inner moral voice developed, and it is against this background that any consideration of the self still matters. Excessive self-centredness is not to be tackled by depriving an individual of the very sense of self.

The second thing I want to take note of is the *sense of struggle* in the moral ideal raised by Taylor. In Taylor's defence of the ideal of authenticity, he attempts to retrieve the richness of the ideal. The endeavour to be authentic, however, does not guarantee *success* in achieving the ideal. In Taylor's terms: 'the struggle ought not to be *over* authenticity, for or against, but *about* it' (73). With a deeper understanding, we can know where the battle really is and try 'to lift the culture back up, closer to its motivational ideal' (*ibid.*). The way Taylor sees the process of pursuing authenticity is that 'people can sink lower as well as rise higher; nothing will ever ensure a systematic and irreversible move to the heights' (77).

If the best can never be definitively guaranteed, then nor are decline and triviality inevitable.

The nature of a free society is that it will always be the locus of a struggle between higher and lower forms of freedom. Neither side can abolish the other, but the line can be moved, never definitively but at least for some people for some time, one way or the other. (78)

This can be understood on a social level – the lower forms and the higher forms of a culture can both be derived from the ideal of authenticity. On the individual level, the individual can be sometimes too self-centred, and at other times, not enough. The fact that the ideal provides a locus of struggle, not a guaranteed state that is achieved by grasping certain ideas or truth about it shows that authenticity as a moral ideal is a coherent and complex practice in the sense that Alasdair MacIntyre has defined the term<sup>9</sup>. It also shows the existence of its considerable double-edged characteristics if one is to regard it as a moral ideal.

With regard to self-centredness in modern conceptions of well-being, Sumner's and Taylor's remarks show us: (1) the necessity of self-centredness to some degree if one is a responsible moral agent; (2) the possibility of debased forms with regard to too much or too little regard for the self; and (3) that in Taylor's account, one's approach should take account of and adjust to horizons of significance within the wider community. In short, they both

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<sup>9</sup> See Alasdair MacIntyre (1981), *After Virtue*.

recognise the problems of self-centredness especially *excessive* self-centredness, and defend self-centredness where it is reasonable in amount.

### *Moral conflicts*

As Taylor notes, moral conflicts between external demands and personal development have perhaps always existed. However, the modern idea of well-being, conceptualised as happiness, desire satisfaction, and authenticity, does seem to encourage the prioritisation of self-fulfilment over satisfying external demands, and discourage behaviour that prioritises *other's* interest over the person's own. In the concluding section of this chapter, I would like to highlight the problem of modern ideas of well-being as manifested in moral conflicts of this kind. The questions raised here about the characteristic of self-centredness and its relation to the good life are, to some extent, what the rest of this thesis aims at finding satisfactory answers for: Is self-centredness good for one's pursuit of a meaningful and worthwhile life? To what extent should one be self-centred? Is being self-centred equal to being selfish? What is the role of others in a good life that based on individualistic values? And how is one to think of matters that demand that the individual give up the pursuit of something good for herself in favour of the good for others, including close family members, friends, or even mere acquaintances or strangers? Is there space for such acts in this modern concept of individual well-being?

Let us look again at the moral conflict the father in our earlier example faces: to pursue his career or to stay to take care of his children. The value of the decision to stay - to choose others' interests over the individual's own - is not altogether denied. According to positive psychology, it is due to the person's attitude and mental approach that an event or a decision ultimately comes to mean one thing or another to him or her. Therefore, if the father comes to think negatively about his decision, positive psychology may offer him techniques to change his thinking and feel more positive about the situation. However, if the techniques fail to work, and the father gets lots of pain as the consequence of this decision, it is still difficult to convince him that the choice *is* ultimately good for his own well-being. I think positive psychology is limited in such cases, for it cannot support such altruistic acts, for the ultimate aim is the pursuit of the individual's personal sense of well-being or happiness.

Similarly, the ideal of authenticity, even the one defended by Taylor, as mentioned above, does not seem to provide a satisfactory reason for the father to sacrifice his career for his children's well-being. If the job provides a good opportunity for the father to realise his

potential and actualise his originality and creativity, and if, admitting the importance of family, the father decides that that is a life opportunity, the renouncement of this can hardly be seen as anything other than a waste. In terms of well-being according to desire theory, if the father truly wants to go for the job, fulfilling the desire will likely be ‘what makes life go well’, in Griffin’s terms as mentioned above (1986); on the contrary, not getting it will cause the frustration of his desire and therefore damage his well-being. And when it comes to conflicting desires, a rational individual is expected to evaluate the amount of satisfaction and frustration that comes along with each decision, and choose the one that brings the most satisfaction. To illustrate this in utilitarian terms, both decisions may satisfy utility; for the best decision is the one that brings the greatest happiness. To sum up: all these considerations support the father’s choice for prioritizing his work, *if* work is what the father genuinely wants and it brings greater happiness than staying for the sake of his children.

It is worth noting that some advocates of desire theory or utilitarianism do give reasons to support the father’s choice of staying, even when it involves giving up a great amount of happiness. It is argued that there is no ‘self-sacrifice choice’, as some may suggest, as is claimed that as long as one’s choice is (1) voluntary and (2) informed (Heathwood, 2015), this choice *is* in his best interest, no matter what the person may think or feel from time to time. In such a self-sacrificial act, this person will ultimately get satisfaction, and it is his own decision after all. Such an argument suggests that self-determination itself is of value, whatever the content, and can be self-justifying – it brings me satisfaction because I choose it. But this is exactly what Taylor criticises concerning how the ‘horizons of significance’, against which decisions only make sense, can be neglected.

The modern concept of well-being, then, does presuppose human beings as independent agents. On the one hand, the individualist conception of well-being enhances a diverse and plural understanding of well-being, in which the principle of ‘what is good for X is not necessarily good for Y’ is pivotal. It allows the good life to take different forms, and encourages creativity and an attitude of tolerance. On the other hand, the individualist idea of well-being strengthens distinctions between the individual and others. One individual’s well-being is in principle different from another’s. To talk about well-being is often to talk about *someone’s* well-being. And the tailored well-being for one individual requires a clear boundary between ‘I’ and ‘others’, or ‘mine’ and ‘others.’ This is clear when it is stated by Roger Crisp (2017) that we should resist the temptation to say ‘your well-being is part of mine’, just because ‘you are my friend.’ It is explained that ‘your well-being concerns how

well your life goes for you, and we can allow that my well-being to some extent depends on yours without introducing the confusing notion that my well-being is constituted by yours.' If my friend gets a good job, or recovers from serious illness, I may well be happy for him. My well-being, one may say, is improved compared to when I was worried about it. My friend's well-being does affect mine. However, a friend is another independent individual, and even if what benefits him ends up benefiting me, it would be wrong to say his well-being is *integral to* mine. The idea here is that his *self* is metaphysically different from my *self*. What is good for my *self*, on this basis, would be in some ways at odds with what is good for his *self*. A recognition of the metaphysical separation between individuals is considered to be necessary if one is to fully appreciate the idea of well-being in the individual case.

But the characteristic of self-centredness in the modern concept of well-being does not necessarily mean that the individual acts merely for his own interest, or, so to speak, selfishly. It means that well-being, thought of as the good life, is generally considered from the individual's perspective, in terms of his happiness, satisfaction or fulfilment, in which *others* are seen as potential aids or obstacles; and that, ultimately, the interests of others' are to be evaluated in the light of their potential contribution to the individual's well-being.

## Chapter 3 A Reading of Plato's *Symposium* – *Erōs*, Lack and Socrates' Remedy

How easily, if fate would suffer it, we might keep forever these beautiful limits, and adjust ourselves, once for all, to the perfect calculation of the kingdom of known cause and effect. –

Ralph Waldo Emerson

There is an image of lovers that is well-known in the modern world, and it has its origins in the *Symposium*: lovers are 'two halves of an original whole' and the individual in love longs to be united with 'the other half'. Lovers feel complete only when being with each other. The feeling of content and joy the union brings is beyond the physical – it involves affection, friendship and love. The passion, both physical and psychological, is strong, and the reason for it can be mysterious even to the lovers themselves: 'it is such reunions as these that impel men (*sic*) to spend their lives together, although they may be hard put to it to say what they really want with one another' (192c1-c3). This myth is recounted by the comedy writer Aristophanes in Plato's dialogue *The Symposium* as his praise to *Erōs*<sup>10</sup> – the god of love. The myth points to an aspect of the experience of love – strong passion and the craving for being with the beloved. This explanation of the origin of such passion may match the common experience of not being able to give a reason about why the passion is towards this rather than that person. We are told in the *Symposium* that love is the desire that seeks to return to the natural human state of completeness or wholeness.

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<sup>10</sup> *Erōs* – the theme of the *Symposium* – refers to (a) the god of love and (b) erotic passion, which is usually used to describe the kind of love experienced in a sexual, or to some extent, romantic relationship. In ancient Greece, there were different terms to signify the affective feelings which the modern English term 'love' may contain: *philia* indicates love between friends; *agape* is unconditional love or love of God; *philautia* refers to self-love. Love that is praised in the *Symposium* is one particular kind.

Together with some sense of original wholeness, a sense of lack is simultaneously revealed as part of the experience of *erōs*. It is implied that the individual who is not with his other half is partial and incomplete. If we carry on asking, in terms of Aristophanes' sense of lack, what kind of satisfaction it is that Aristophanes' lovers can get, it is, of course, the event of reunion – when the two halves find each other. But what is next? In the myth Aristophanes recounts, Hephaestus offers to melt the two lovers into one so they will never have to be separated from each other. If this happens, the two halves of the whole will stay complete and never have to be partial or feel they are lacking again. But in the non-mythical world we live in, setting aside the difficult question of what counts as union, two separate individuals cannot be with each other at all times. Temporary union may be possible, but even in that case, on some level, the two remain separate entities with separate minds. Union in the sense of becoming one is hard to achieve in reality. Aristophanes' idea of completion seems only to exist in myth. Since in nature there is no permanent fulfilment to be attained for Aristophanes' sense of lack, it has been suggested that his *erōs* is a longing for the impossible.<sup>11</sup> This ontological lack, if I may use the Lacanian term, and fallacious beliefs about the possibility of a permanent remedy for it (the belief that 'the lack can be filled') are the main sources of suffering when we feel the force of *erōs*.

The sense of lack at the core of the experience of love will be reinforced later in the dialogue by Socrates. However, as we shall see, his account reveals different aspects of the sense of lack in *erōs*. Socrates admits the premise that *erōs* is a desire for something the lover does not have. The origin of the lack, which is explained by Aristophanes as part of a *human's* nature, is explained by Socrates as due to the god's nature, that of *Erōs* (Socrates appeals to the role of the parents of *Erōs* to explain that part of *Erōs* comes from poverty and lack). Socrates will disagree with Aristophanes, however, about the object of *erōs* – the object which the lover is lacking. In Aristophanes' account, *erōs* is the desire for the other individual, whereas in Socrates' account, *erōs* is ultimately a desire for the good. *Erōs* signifies a lack in the individual, but what the object of lack is differs in these accounts.

Is the lack in Socrates' account more 'fillable'? In a sense the answer is yes. Socrates' account of *erōs* is understood as the ascent of love, in which the object of *erōs* goes through several stages of transformation, from the beauty of one individual as such to beauty itself. At the final stage, the satisfaction of the desire comes from the contemplation of the *Form of*

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<sup>11</sup> See Martha Nussbaum (1986) and Leo Strauss (2001).

Beauty. The attainment of Socrates' object of desire does not rely on people's circumstances or personal emotions – their infatuated feelings and thoughts, even their health or luck in escaping horrible accidents. In terms of satisfying a lack, the attainment of Socrates' object of desire is, in this sense, more achievable.

There has been some debate about whether Socrates' ascent of love is to be read as a proper remedy for *erōs*. Is it still *erōs* that we are talking about if it does not involve love of other people (or, at least, if that kind of love is not at the centre of it)? If Socrates' ascent of *erōs* is argued to be *erōs* proper, is there something valuable missing in the course of such a remedy? Reservations about this have been articulated by many commentators in recent decades. Gregory Vlastos (1981) famously critiques Socrates' ascent of *erōs* on the basis that the individual is seen merely as 'a placeholder for predicates' (26). Following Vlastos, Martha Nussbaum (1986) sympathises with the real-life lover, Alcibiades, in the *Symposium*, in depicting the 'cured' Socrates as a 'stone' (196). Some argue that Socrates' ascent of love is motivated by an egoistic concern – it is for the person's own good; and, to this end, others become merely instrumental and disposable, as they are only loved in so far as they exemplify the *Form* of Beauty. This debate (which has revolved around earthly love, represented by Aristophanes and Alcibiades' account, and Socrates' love of the *Form*), as Frisbee Sheffield (2012) points out, has dominated interpretation of the *Symposium* since Vlastos. But is it true that love of the individual person is dismissed in Socrates' account of *erōs*? Is it correct to read Socrates' ascent of love as a technique, or a therapeutic mechanism, that one can adopt and internalise, so that one becomes immune to frustrations from loving particular persons?

In order to determine whether it is correct to read Socrates' remedy in this way, we have to examine the role of interpersonal love in Socrates' ascent of love. This chapter attempts to address this issue and to clarify what exactly it is that will be transformed in Socrates' ascent of love? That is, if it is interpersonal love, *how* is it transformed? And if it is not, *what* is to be transformed?

Interpersonal love, and the sense of lack in it, will be explored in detail, firstly, through Aristophanes' and Alcibiades' speeches. Socrates' account of the ascent of love, particularly in respect of love as the spirit mediating between the individual and the object of desire, will also be examined. It will be followed by a discussion of the role of interpersonal love in his account.

## Interpersonal love

Aristophanes' myth of ancient human beings goes as follows. Ancient humans were different creatures from what we are now. There were three genders: male, female and hermaphrodite. (The latter, he states, does not exist today). The ancient humans had a round body shape, four arms and four feet, one head with two faces. They walked erect both backward and forward, depending on how they felt. When they wanted to run, they 'simply stuck their legs straight out and went whirling round and round like a clown turning cartwheels (190a5-6). They had both 'strength and energy' (190b4). They were also self-sufficient. Their arrogance eventually annoyed the gods and incurred punishment, so all of them were split into two.

When the work of bisection was complete it left each half with a desperate yearning for the other, and they ran together and flung their arms around each other's necks, and asked for nothing better than to be rolled into one. (191a5-8)

Aristophanes said that these half-beings would stay in the state of hunger and inertia, as they did not want to do anything without their other halves. Their main task in life, since the bisection, was to find the other half. Sometimes, with bad luck, they will never find their other half, or in some cases the other half dies, and one half will 'wander about questioning and clasping in the hope of finding a spare [half]' (191b3-4). But the half-creature's life will never be complete again without their original other half. Aristophanes continues, stating that when the two halves do fortunately find each other: 'they are both so intoxicated with affection, with friendship, and with love, that they cannot bear to let each other out of sight for a single instant' (192b7-c1).

The nature of humanity now, as Aristophanes' myth implies, is partial, incomplete, and in a state of lack. Aristophanes, in a sense, invents a cause (or a reason) for the lover's passion. It is due to this sense of lack that the individual is driven to find a mate. And to fill the lack is the aim of *erōs*. It presupposes an ontological state of humans as being naturally and constantly in this state.

The fictional lover who longs for union with the beloved and gets saddened and tormented when he cannot have it is exemplified later by Alcibiades' expression of his own love for Socrates. We will see, in Alcibiades' account, the sense of lack in a lover's experience that Aristophanes has illustrated with his myth, as well as the craving for union. We see in Aristophanes the torment a lover suffers, which can only end in a state of inert



contentment when union is finally achieved; but Alcibiades will show us other aspects of such torment. Alcibiades' account will also reveal something we do not see in Aristophanes' speech: how the lover actually perceives the beloved person. Just *how* one falls in love with another still remains rather mysterious in Aristophanes' account. In Alcibiades' speech, however, we will be able to gain a more down-to-earth sense of what creates the passion. Alcibiades' speech is the only non-theoretical one in the *Symposium*.<sup>12</sup> And it is the speech in which we see the most vivid and realistic suffering in the experience of love.

Before looking at the speech, the plot of the dialogue may be worth noting. Alcibiades arrived at the banquet late and was drunk. He entered when Socrates was just finishing his speech – the ascent of *erōs*. Aristophanes was about to respond and was interrupted by Alcibiades' entering. He was invited to join what the participants had been doing – praising the god *Erōs*. He accepted but requested that he be allowed to give his discourse on *Erōs* by praising one, and only one, person – that was, Socrates. 'Will you have a very drunken man as a companion of your revels?' 'Will you laugh at me because I am drunk? Yet I know very well that I am speaking the truth, although you may laugh.' So a drunken man came in claiming to tell the truth about love, which was to be revealed not in an abstract and theoretical form, but through praising just one person. Nussbaum believes that these arrangements, including his being the last one to talk, the only one in the dialogue to claim to tell the truth, and the general literary and poetic manner of speaking, should be read as Plato's objection to Socrates' theory of love. Nussbaum argues that Alcibiades, although appearing to be drunk is, ironically, actually the one who has a genuine clear mind about love.<sup>13</sup>

Before the speech started, Alcibiades came to sit between Socrates and Agathon, and then he crowned Socrates. Socrates in turn asked Agathon to protect him in case Alcibiades became violent. Socrates said that he would abuse him if he got jealous. The readers are invited to imagine a history of passionate love before the scene. Alcibiades starts his praise of Socrates with two similes. The first one drew on the figure of Silenus – a half man and half beast creature who was known for his drunk appearance and his wisdom. Alcibiades says that 'they're modelled with pipes or flutes in their hands, and when you open them down the middle there are little figures of the gods inside' (215b2-4). Socrates resembled Silenus in

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<sup>12</sup> Alcibiades' speech is poetic, according to Strauss (2001).

<sup>13</sup> 'The speech, disorganized and tumultuous, moves from imaging to describing, response to story, and back again many times over. It is precisely its groping, somewhat chaotic character that makes it so movingly convincing as an account – and an expression ... of love' (Nussbaum, 1986:187-8).

that he appeared to be flippant but actually had great wisdom inside. Then Alcibiades said that Socrates was like Marsyas, who invented the music of the flute. His flute-playing in legend was so beautiful that it turned the listeners frantic. But he died tragically in a contest with the god Apollo because of his hubris. Alcibiades compared Socrates with Marsyas in three aspects: their looks, their hubris, and the magic power they both had over their listeners. Alcibiades only elaborated at length on the third aspect, though some commentators believe that Socrates hubris is central to the speech (e.g. Strauss, 2001). Here we will focus on the power of Socrates' speech, which reveals the effect Socrates had on Alcibiades. For Alcibiades, Marsyas' music had the magic power to bewitch human beings. And Socrates' speech had just the same effect, while he did not need any instrument to achieve that. Alcibiades described his bodily reaction when hearing Socrates speak: his heart jumped into his mouth, tears started coming into his eyes, and there was the feeling of being smitten with a kind of sacred rage.

We see, in this description, not just what Socrates was like, but what Socrates was like in Alcibiades' eyes. We see Alcibiades' perception of Socrates. This was of one who was wise and good at speech. Alcibiades believed that Socrates had some valuable qualities and he felt drawn to him because of this. This perception of Alcibiades will be questioned by Socrates later. But here let us explore further the effect of Socrates' speech on him.

The other great orators ... never turned my whole soul upside down and left me feeling as if I were the lowest of the low. ... [Socrates] makes me admit that while I'm spending my time on politics I am neglecting all the things that are crying for attention in myself.' (216a4-6)

For Alcibiades, Socrates had the power to make him see what he had not seen before. He gained a new perspective and new insights from him. The historical Alcibiades was a young and beautiful man, who was at that point very successful in politics. He was well-respected, and considered to be a superior man by many. But Socrates turned his comfortable life upside down – he made him see living in this way was not worthwhile; he had neglected something far more important. Socrates' influence on Alcibiades was, on the one hand, positive – Alcibiades came to be aware of the flaws in his life and what was of real value. On the other hand, it made Alcibiades understand his own inferiority when he saw right in front of him a person who possessed wisdom that was far greater than his own. This realisation was both enlightening and unbearable. And he experienced emotions both of anger and shame because of this.

Alcibiades, whose soul was strongly stirred by Socrates' speech, sought for intimacy with him. He told the audience of his experiences of attempting to seduce Socrates through exercising and dining together. He said that Socrates left immediately after dinner the first time. Alcibiades got more prepared the second time and eventually managed to make Socrates stay overnight. But still, we are told by poor Alcibiades that Socrates rejected his intimacy. What Socrates said on this was interesting: if Alcibiades was right in believing that Socrates was beautiful, there was no way Socrates would agree to exchange Alcibiades' 'semblance of beauty' for 'the (real) beauty' that Socrates prized. Socrates said 'look again, sweet friend, and see whether you are not deceived in me. The mind begins to grow critical when the bodily eye fails, and you have not come to that yet.'

Lots of commentators criticise Socrates' view of what lovers want as an exchange, and see his rejection of this as arrogant and egoistic. We will come back to the issue of exchange later. Here, I would like to focus on Socrates' comment on the possibility of deception in *erōs*. This was expressed above by the beloved himself when stating that he might be mistakenly perceived. There is no evidence that Socrates *was* actually deceiving Alcibiades. And here it should be read as a comment on the likelihood of wrong perception occurring in *erōs* in general. In Alcibiades' eyes, Socrates was wise and charismatic. The comparison of Socrates with Silenus and Marsyas the Satyr showed not what he *was* like but what he was like in his beloved's eyes. Alcibiades changed his view of Socrates over time. Firstly, Socrates appeared to be ugly, both because of his looks and his arguments; but over time, he saw the beauty inside and fell in love with him. He also saw him as the source of his failure and humiliation, and wanted him to die. This view of Socrates, again, was from a lover's perspective. But which view was real? Or were they all false? Or perhaps all partly true? 'Sweet friend, look again and see whether you are not deceived by me?' Socrates' question suggests the possibility of the lover seeing something not real, perhaps as the result of a desire which may limit his perspective – the lover sees what he wants to see in the beloved. In other words, the lover may only be the object of desire as the result of a distorted perception.

Another pressing question raised in Alcibiades' account is: what is the aim of the desire? Alcibiades wanted to 'captivate' Socrates. When the aim failed to be achieved, Alcibiades experienced humiliation, anger, shame, jealousy and sadness. He felt completely at a loss:

I could not help wondering at his natural temperance and self-restraint and courage. I never could have thought that I should have met with a man like him in wisdom and endurance.

Neither could I be angry with him or renounce his company, any more than I could hope to win him. For I well knew that if Ajax could not be wounded by steel, much less he by money; and I had failed in my only chance of captivating him. So I wandered about and was at my wit's end; no one was ever more hopelessly enslaved by another. (219d2-e5)

Alcibiades felt hopeless and in a slavish state when his aim failed. But we need to ask how would the aim be achieved? Is it by Socrates' returning his love? We can look at Aristophanes' couples again for an answer. At first, when being asked, they could not answer what they wanted. Then they were offered the chance of being melted into one: none of them would be able to deny 'this becoming one instead of two' was their deepest desire. Becoming one, however defined, might be what the aim of the desire was. But in Alcibiades' account, as tragic as it was, we do not have a chance to see just how it is that the aim can be truly achieved. That is, if the beloved returns love and agrees 'to be one' with the lover, will the sense of lack be really satisfied? Aristophanes' and Alcibiades' accounts invite us to dwell on these fundamental human questions.

Alcibiades represents Aristophanes' lover in his longing for union with Socrates and his torment of not getting it. His experience admits the sense of lack that lovers experience – and what he feels can satisfy the lack is a particular person. But is it true? In Alcibiades' case, he got rejected by Socrates, and the longed for union could not be achieved. The lack remained a lack. But when reflecting on Aristophanes' myth, there are further questions. As I have suggested, even if a lover's request is answered, a genuine and lasting complete union is impossible. But then what does it mean if one is to fill the lack? In the following section we will look at Socrates' account of love in more detail, and see whether there is a more secure way of attaining satisfaction and thus coming to terms with this sense of lack. But we will also see, perhaps, a different way of looking at love itself.

### **Socrates' account of the ascent of love**

Socrates' speech, the fifth one out of the six in total, is generally seen as the climax of the *Symposium*. This speech starts from a series of questions to the previous speaker, Agathon, on the object of love; it then evolves in several different directions. In this discussion, I will focus on three parts of the speech: the first is the initial probing cross-examination (or 'elenchus'); the second discusses love's character as being intermediate; and the third focuses on Socrates' account of the *ascent* of *erōs*.

#### *The initial elenchus*

The previous speaker, Agathon, has just praised *erōs* by recognising *erōs* as ‘the loveliest and the best of all the gods’ (195a11), one who inspires ‘every branch of what I may define succinctly as creative art’ (197a3-4), and ‘the father of delicacy, daintiness, elegance, and grace’ (197d7). In this way Agathon attributed many virtues to *erōs*. Socrates starts his speech with an elenchus directed at Agathon. The first question was: ‘Do you think it is the nature of Love to be the love of somebody, or of nobody’ (199c-d)? Socrates brought attention to an ambiguity that was implicit in the language of the previous speeches. *Erōs* was praised as the god who embodied desire, the erotic force, and the kind of virtues that were shown in the praise of lovers themselves. Socrates asked the interlocutor to consider love as something that could only exist if there was an object of love. He suggested that love was a term like ‘mother’ and ‘father’. A father must be somebody’s father. Terms of this kind were used to signify one thing in terms of its relation to others. They were, as Leo Strauss (2001) explained, *relational* terms that did not work like ‘tree’ or ‘stone’, which were sufficient alone to signify things.

The following questions were asked: ‘Does he long for what he is in love with, or not?’ ... ‘And does he long for whatever it is he longs for, and is he in love with it, when he’s got it, or when he hasn’t got?’ (200a) Love was the love of *something*. After this clarification about the existence of an object, Socrates now shed light on the ownership of the object. The interlocutor, Agathon, had to agree that love did not have what he longed for (against what he said in his praise earlier). The condition of love was confirmed now: it had an object, it wanted the object, and it did not have the object.

Through this series of questions, Socrates expressed his conception of *erōs* as a condition of lack. Then Socrates carried on describing the object of *erōs*, with a particular reference to Aristophanes’ speech. He used the example of arms and legs of a person and suggested that the person would be happy to get rid of them if they were sickly: ‘love never longs for either the half or the whole of anything except the good’ (205e). Socrates makes a distinctive and new claim about the object of *erōs* here – *erōs* was the desire for *good things*.

#### *Erōs as an intermediate*

Socrates, at this point, told the interlocutors that he had learnt about the nature of love from his teacher, Diotima. He recited the teaching of Diotima that ‘love was neither mortal nor immortal’. As taught by Diotima, Socrates explained that *erōs* was not in fact a god because he himself did not possess ‘the good’ as all gods should do. He was, instead, a spirit

(*daimon*) and was intermediate between the divine and the mortal. This was caused by his birth. The tale said that *erōs*' father was a god, *Poros* (Resourcefulness), and his mother was a mortal being, *Penia* (or Poverty). *Erōs* inherited both these traits from his parents:

He is always poor, and far from being tender and beautiful, such as many believe, he is rough and squalid and shoeless and homeless, always lying on the ground and without bedding, sleeping at doorways and on roads under the open sky, with the nature of his mother, always keeping house with neediness. And in turn, in conformity with his father, he is a plotter against the beautiful and the good, being manly, impetuous, and intense, an uncanny hunter, always weaving some devices, as desirous of understanding as capable of supplying it, philosophising throughout his whole life, an uncanny magician, sorcerer, and sophist. (203c6-204d8)

*Erōs* was half god and half mortal. He had a character resembling both his parents – guile and contrivance, as well as poverty and distress. He was never fully one of them, but rather, flew between the two states, contrivance and poverty: ‘sometimes in the same day he flourishes and lives, whenever he is resourceful, and sometimes he dies, and again he lives again on account of the nature of his father’ (203e1-2). Because of his state of being in between, he could strive with great resourcefulness and cunning, even wisdom. It was believed by Diotima and Socrates, that if one stayed at either of these extremes that there was nothing to strive for – the gods were already wise: they were satisfied with what they were and had no desire to become wise; and the ignorant also had no desire to become wise because they did not recognise the need to be so: ‘what makes their case so helpless is that, having neither beauty, nor goodness, nor intelligence, they are satisfied with what they are, and do not long for the virtues they have never missed’ (204a5-8).

These traits of *erōs* were taken to be the marks of the true philosopher, who is represented here by Socrates. A crucial point made about philosophy (*philo-sophia*, love of wisdom) and particularly by Socrates generally was the importance of being conscious about one's own ignorance, as well as the existence of greater wisdom yet to be learnt. In fact this understanding of both wisdom and ignorance motivates one to philosophise in the first place. Regarding the character of lack in *erōs*, which is our focus here, the sense of lack is the source of pain as well as acting as a spur for flourishing: in other words, while the lack is seen and its pain felt, one might also see it as motivating a desire for pursuit and change. The individual might not have the desire to change, like the gods, if the lack was never felt.

*Socrates' account of the ascent of erōs*

Finally, we will look at the account of *erōs* that consists of a course of transformation. Socrates' speech reaches its peak in recounting this ascent of *erōs*, which he has learnt from Diotima. The ascent proceeds through several stages, and in each stage, the lover, under the guidance of the teacher, comes to appreciate the object of *erōs* in a way he was not able to before. This ascent is not an account of love that describes what *happens* to lovers, like some other accounts have done; but instead, it presents an account of a love that is *in a state of change* and is *able to change*. The ascent of *erōs*, is, one might say, an educational process, in which erotic love serves as a drive to lead the person ultimately to see the true beauty as the ultimately worthwhile object of love.

The ascent starts with love for one beautiful body. We should note that this starting point was based on the previous teachings of Diotima about: (1) love being love of the good and beautiful rather than love of any and everything, and (2) love ultimately being a love not for the ephemeral and fading, but for more permanent, enduring or 'Immortal' qualities. The lover, guided by a teacher to see this, would at the initial stage see his love as love for the sheer beauty that is revealed in the beloved's body, and be ready to take on the journey. In the second stage, the lover is led to see the similarity between the physical beauty shown by his beloved body and that of other individual bodies. This stage, according to Ian Crombie (1962), represents an understanding that passes 'from beauty of form to the form of beauty' (184). This is a stage that involves abstraction – seeing the same quality being carried and revealed by different bodies.

In the third stage, the lover will come to see the beauty of the soul, a spiritual loveliness (perhaps shown through the artistic gifts of the person). Once such spiritual beauty is seen, he will realise that bodily beauty is nothing compared to the beauty of the spirit. He would be released from the restriction of seeing the objects of love only on the physical level. Then the lover will see beauty not so much in particular human individuals any more. But from the beautiful spiritual actions and nature of the person, the lover comes to see a related beauty shown more widely in creation itself. The beauty of laws and institutions would be what can be comprehended firstly, then the attention is to be led away from institutions to the arts and sciences, where every kind of knowledge can be found. In the final stage, the lover will come to see beauty itself - the very *Form of Beauty*. This is described as:

[Something beautiful] that in the first place always is and neither comes into being nor perishes, neither increases nor diminishes, and in the second place, is not in one respect beautiful and in another ugly, nor sometimes is and sometimes is not, nor in respect to one thing is beautiful and

in respect to another ugly, nor here beautiful and there ugly, as being beautiful to some and ugly to some. Nor in turn will the beautiful appear to him as an illusion (*phantasthesetai*), such as a face or hands or anything else in which body partakes, nor any logos nor any science, nor anywhere in something other, such as in an animal or no earth or in heaven, or in something else, but alone by itself with itself, being always of a single species, and all other beautiful things partaking in it in the sort of way that everything else comes to be and perishes, while that does not become anything more or less or undergo anything. (210e6-211b5)

The *Form* of Beauty is eternal, changeless, complete, and absolute. This idea of the *Form* may appear to be alien to many, in the sense that it is very difficult to comprehend, or may even seem strange in that it seems to *deny* ultimate validity to the kind of beauty seen in individual beings that most people are familiar with. A similar idea, however, appears in a lot of spiritual and religious practices.<sup>14</sup> *Erōs* was conceived by Socrates as a daimon or spirit in between the divine and the mortal. The *Form* therefore signifies a form of divine existence, which can probably only be comprehended through spiritual practices. Hadot (2002) suggests this idea of ‘divine existence’ was developed by the Roman Platonist, Plotinus, who merged it into the idea of ‘the union of the divine Intellect’ (163). The existence appears as a sudden vision, and can only be comprehended through continuous spiritual practices.

### **A Socratic remedy - *erōs* in a wider sense**

One way to read Socrates’ account as a remedy for *erōs* is to read it as providing a way to eliminate sufferings caused by so-called ‘interpersonal love’ (which is represented by Aristophanes’ and Alcibiades’ accounts) by transcending it with ‘love for Beauty’ in its ideal form. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, many recent scholarly readings of the *Symposium* have centred on such a theme. The main issues in the debates around such a Socratic remedy include whether this is a proper reading of the *Symposium*; and if so, what is the role of interpersonal love in Socrates’ account of *erōs*? Here I would like to lay out two different views in relation to these questions.

First I would like to illustrate Nussbaum’s view on this. Nussbaum believes that Socrates’ account is not supposed to be read as ‘the remedy’ that Plato wants to promote to cure passionate interpersonal love, or at least, not a remedy that is to be taken without

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<sup>14</sup> In the Buddhist text *Heart Sutra*, there is a resemblance of the nature of all phenomenon to the *Form* described here: ‘there true nature is the nature of no birth and no death, no being and no non-being, no defilement and no purity, no increasing and no decreasing’. In spite of these echoes in the thought, a crucial difference is that in Buddhism there is no idealisation of timelessness, and questions of being show up in a quite different way.



question. Nussbaum (1986) argues that Plato *arranges* the plot of the dialogue so that after Socrates' speech (the climax of the dialogue) Alcibiades comes in drunk, claiming to tell the truth about love. This arrangement shows that Plato believes that something important will be missing if one is to follow Socrates' (and Diotima's) teaching literally:

We now begin to understand Plato's strategy in constructing this dramatic confrontation. Through Aristophanes, he raises certain doubts in our minds concerning the erotic projects to which we are most attached. And yet the speech of Aristophanes still praises *erōs* as most necessary, and necessary for the success of practical reason itself. He then shows us, through Socrates and Diotima, how, despite our needy and mortal natures, we can transcend the merely personal in *erōs* and ascend, through desire itself, to the good. But we are not yet persuaded that we can accept this vision of self-sufficiency and this model of practical understanding, since, with Vlastos, we feel that they omit something. What they omit is now movingly displayed to us in the person and the story of Alcibiades. We realize, through him, the deep importance unique passion has for ordinary human beings. (197)

The value of a 'unique passion' for one person is the thing that will be missing when one follows Socrates' teaching. These two kinds of love, if we can say so – love for one individual and love for 'the good' or for beauty – are believed to be mutually excluded in Socrates' account according to Nussbaum: 'we cannot simply add the love of Alcibiades to the ascent of Diotima; indeed, that we cannot have this love and the kind of stable rationality that she revealed to us' (*ibid.*). This mutual exclusion is further explained by Nussbaum in more detail:

I can choose to follow Socrates, ascending to the vision of the beautiful. But I cannot take the first step on that ladder as long as I see Alcibiades. I can follow Socrates only if, like Socrates, I am persuaded of the truth of Diotima's account; and Alcibiades robs me of this conviction. He makes feel that in embarking on the ascent I am sacrificing a beauty; so I can no longer view the ascent as embracing the whole of beauty. The minute I think 'sacrifice' and 'denial', the ascent is no longer what it seemed, nor am I, in it, self-sufficient. (198)

Nussbaum believes that, as the dialogue goes, Socrates presents us with a 'higher' version of *erōs* in terms of its object of love. It appears to be great, valuable and meaningful for our life. But Alcibiades' account reveals critical flaws in such a vision of *erōs*. It shows that an indispensable element in love – loving a particular person, seeing the uniqueness that is and can only be revealed by a real person – is what makes *erōs* *erōs* and what makes humans humans. Without that, we are just like 'stones', however 'self-sufficient' and immune to luck

and vulnerability we have become. After being presented with these accounts, a rational reader, as Plato hopes, will make the decision not to accept Socrates' remedy without reservations, since it will be at the cost of losing another significant element of being a human being.

Nussbaum's attitude towards Socrates' remedy is neither for it nor against it completely. For her, the *Symposium*, as Plato's dialogues in general, presents the reader with a difficult choice, rather than a straightforward solution. On the one hand, there is Socrates' account of love that embraces the beauty in a wide range of things. A lover of this kind is self-sufficient, in the sense that she does not rely on any factors or persons that are beyond her rational outlook and control. On the other hand, there is Alcibiades' love (and Aristophanes') that values individuals and their uniqueness. A lover of this kind values attachments, without which humans are not humans anymore. She rejects the idea of making other people instrumental to a way of climbing up to the gods' level and avoiding human vulnerability.

From another perspective, Nussbaum explains this in terms of the choice between philosophy and poetry or literature. The *Symposium* has suggested that these two - 'philosophy and poetry – cannot live together or know each other's truths' (199). If one is to choose to philosophise, or to be a philosopher, in the way Socrates is, one has to give up literature and 'its attachment to the particular and the vulnerable... But that would be to leave its own truths behind' (*ibid.*). In short, philosophy (the kind Socrates does) excludes attachments to particularity (and real human beings, each of which is a particular being), denies the truth in it, and rejects the human vulnerability associated with it.

Nussbaum seems to believe that philosophy of this kind is dangerous. It leads us to somewhere beyond our real existential predicament and so, in a sense, to beyond being human: our souls are to be 'turned to statues' (*ibid.*). She sympathises with Alcibiades' love, even if that inevitably brings sadness. There was a hope for philosophy and *erōs* to live together (a better kind of philosophy for Nussbaum), but it died with Alcibiades, and we never get to see what philosophy of this kind might be like. The *Symposium*, at best, presents us with a difficult choice – neither of them are perfect; and at worst with a tragedy.

From Nussbaum's perspective, Socrates' remedy, if there is one, is seriously flawed. In a narrow sense, it may 'cure' lovers of their passion for one person, but the treatment comes at a huge price – the lover has to give up love in a significant sense. *However*, there are commentators who are more optimistic about Socrates' remedy. Sheffield believes that

Socrates' account is undervalued in the debate that has centred on Nussbaum's concern. A key idea that is missed is that Socrates' account talks about desire for 'the good'. Sheffield argues that Socrates' account of *erōs* should not be read just as an upgraded version of love from interpersonal love – it should be read as a separate account of *erōs*, which has a different aim – to reach for 'the good' and happiness in life generally.

This reflection suggests to Socrates that people are mistaken to suppose that *erōs* refers to sexual desire exclusively; it is happiness quite generally that is desired, and sexual desire is just one way (a pretty poor way, he will argue) in which this broader aim is manifested. (205a; Sheffield, 2012:124)

Sheffield appeals to the usage of the term *erōs* in Greek literature to suggest that it refers to 'any intense desire aroused by the stimulus of beauty' (122). *Erōs*, therefore, includes different kinds of passionate desires, those for food, sex, persons, or even war (122). This 'misuse' of the term is explicitly pointed out in Socrates' speech. Remembering the premise that Socrates establishes in his conversation with Agathon in the beginning of his speech, Sheffield suggests that Socrates' account of *erōs* should be read as an account of desire for what is good in the sense that it brings true happiness, not a continuation of the previous speeches which focus on a desire for one person.

I think Sheffield's argument is plausible. If this is the case, the accusation of overlooking or even denying the value of the individual becomes inappropriate. However, two questions about Socrates' account of *erōs* remain here: (1) What is the relation between desire for the good and desire for persons, if it is not a continuation or two opposite ends of a spectrum? This is also a question about the role of the uniqueness of the individual in Socrates' account of *erōs*, if there is one. And (2), can we still read Socrates' account as a remedy for *erōs*? If so, how does it make sense?

The point, I take it, is this. If you ask most people why it is that they desire a certain person or thing, they will, eventually, answer that they pursue such things for the sake of happiness. Socrates is still explaining the very same phenomenon as his peers, desire – of which sexual desire is a central case – but he is placing it in a larger explanatory framework by arguing that the real end of this desire is a desire for good things and happiness. And this is just to say that when we experience intense desires, for example, sexual desire for a person, we are groping towards the kind of good that will satisfy our desire for happiness, and we believe this to be found in another person. (125)

To put this into the wider context of Platonic thought, The idea of *eudaimonia*, as Plato and Aristotle use it, frequently carries connotations of a state of ‘happiness’ based on what it means to live ‘well’. In other words it embodies normative elements implying a state of human flourishing, thriving, or fulfilment - as opposed to any wider idea of happiness in the sense of mere pleasure, which might imply just accumulating a host of pleasurable sensations. The *Symposium* is no exception to this understanding. In its exploration of *erōs* – a part of human life – this dialogue is essentially concerned with ‘the life which a human being should live’ (211d; Sheffield, 2012:126).

In this light the relation between desire for happiness and desire for the beloved individual in Socrates’ account, Sheffield explains, is that in most cases, the former is the final end of the latter. The larger framework, in which Socrates understands the phenomenon of *erōs*, is that the ultimate end of most human activities is happiness as defined above. From this perspective, there is an assumption that lies behind the desire for one person in the case of an erotic relationship – the lover believes the beloved will bring her what is good and, therefore, also happiness. Sheffield believes that, with this framework, Socrates wants his interlocutors to realise at least two things: the first is that the ultimate end of all activities, including *erōs*, is happiness – although this may not be clear on some occasions: the lover may be *blind* to it; and secondly, it is irrational to expect any single person to satisfy one’s desire for happiness.

The advantage of envisaging *erōs* as pointing to the ultimate end of striving as happiness is that an educational force in love becomes prominent. The lover, acknowledging the goal of happiness in the activities of *erōs*, is not only in a position not to be enslaved by her excessive passion and attention toward the beloved, but also able to lead the beloved to the proper end of their erotic relationship – happiness. Happiness as the end, as opposed to completeness that is to be achieved by unifying with each other, brings a different perspective to lovers’ behaviour. Sheffield claims that the nature of happiness, or *eudaimonia*, is the underlying theme in many of Plato’s dialogues:

The fact that erotic relationships had this educational dimension, and that the symposium was an important forum for such relationships, goes some way towards explaining why Plato wrote this dialogue. As we might expect from a philosopher whose works consistently focus on the nature of the good life and how it is achieved, Plato has much to say here about the sorts of values that lovers should transmit to their beloved as they pass the wine cup (*ibid.*).

If we follow Sheffield's argument, we can understand the relationship between the lover and the beloved in Socrates account of *erōs* as, ideally, an educational one. The lover leads the beloved to 'the good'. The two parties and the common end they have form a triangular relationship. The educational relationship has been discussed by others and I will not explore it in depth here. Instead, I hope these two ways of reading, provided by Nussbaum and Sheffield, give us some insights to our questions: 'is Socrates' remedy a valid one?' and 'if so, what does it cure?'

Both Nussbaum and Sheffield agree that Socrates' account of *erōs* is an account of desire for the good. Nussbaum reads it as a proposal to replace the desire for the individual, from which her serious concerns about instrumentalising the individual and denying individuality any real value arise. In this sense, Nussbaum also reads Socrates' remedy as a way of avoiding human vulnerability. Socrates' remedy is not so much a healthy remedy, but more like a defensive mechanism, in which a degree of denial is present. By appealing to Sheffield's account, I hope to have shown that this is not necessarily a fair interpretation. The relationship between a 'desire for the good' and a 'desire for the individual' is not, as Nussbaum suggests, one of two mutually exclusive things. The relation between them can indeed be seen as, in a sense, hierarchical. Ideally therefore, desire for the individual can serve as a force to motivate the lover herself and the beloved to pursue 'the good'.

In short, in envisaging 'the unique passion' and 'desire for the good' as mutually exclusive, Nussbaum seems to be convinced that the individual's value is not seen as of any worth in Socrates' account of *erōs*. Being worried about the denial of individuality and of understanding in practical matters, Nussbaum thinks that Socrates account is problematic when it comes to solving dilemmas faced in interpersonal love. That is, it is not a good remedy. However, Socrates, as I tried to show, with the focus of what one can and should *aspire to*, provides a perspective that invites the lover to *re-consider* what is lacking. The lover is encouraged to overcome the sense of lack by reaching out for what is good, and not just for the other person, since the latter is often driven by problematic desires. Nevertheless, the beloved and his value *does not have to be excluded or denied altogether* in this change of perspective. The positive role of such lack in Socrates' account will be discussed further in the next section.

## Affirmation of lack

Another aspect of this debate on Socrates' remedy is related to how to conceive of the role of lack in *erōs*, and, more generally, in human life. If we accept that a sense of lack as lack of a particular person is presented in Aristophanes' and Alcibiades' accounts and it is a main source for suffering, a question we need to ask about a Socratic remedy is just what it has to offer here. This aspect overlaps with the issue we discussed in the last section – the relation between the 'desire for one person' and 'desire for the good' (the latter provides a perspective, from which the lover is motivated to seek the good, ideally with the beloved, and the focus is not on just being in union with the beloved). Nevertheless, there are more questions relating to the role of lack in Socrates' remedy that deserve to be further explored. Two questions that will be asked in this section are: firstly, is the aim of Socratic remedy a kind of lack-filling? And secondly, is lack a bad thing? I will, again, examine Nussbaum's interpretation, and try to show that she misses a significant element in the Socratic remedy: an active affirmation of the experience of lack.

In Nussbaum's reading of Aristophanes' and Alcibiades' accounts of *erōs*, lack is a central theme. This has been shown earlier in this chapter. It is worth pointing out that, in terms of the possibility of lack-filling in these two speeches, Nussbaum's interpretation sends out a pessimistic message. Aristophanes' cut-up beings, Nussbaum suggests, rely on 'sheer chance' – 'his or her other half is somewhere, but it is hard to see what reason and planning can do to make that half turn up' (174). The lovers are powerless to control whether they meet the lost piece of themselves. Alcibiades, as it were, does not have Socrates' love in return. He does not have any power over whether his lack is overcome or not - just like Aristophanes' lovers.

Nussbaum, however, argues for the value of staying in this 'lacking state' even though it may make the lover miserable. First of all, in loving Socrates, Alcibiades comes to see something he does not see before:

The presence of Socrates makes him feel, first of all, a terrifying and painful awareness of being perceived [as he really is]. He wants, with part of himself, to 'hold out', to remain an *eromenos*. His impulse... is to run away, hide, stop up his ears....But he senses at the same time in this being seen and being spoken to, in this siren music, that rushes into his body in this person's presence, is something he deeply needs not to avoid. (188) (My bracketed insertion.)

This seeing is not altogether pleasant. In fact, it causes a lot of pain. Alcibiades wants to avoid it, but at the same time, believes that he should not because there is something deeply valuable there. Nussbaum presents Alcibiades' persistence in loving Socrates as a kind of courageous act, as opposed to Socrates', which is, on some level, a kind of avoidance.

Alcibiades displays a valuable 'openness' here. In doing this, Nussbaum further suggests:

Alcibiades appears to want to claim something more controversial and anti-Socratic than this parallelism. With his claims that a story tells the truth and that his goal is to open up and to know, he suggests that the lover's knowledge of the particular other, gained through an intimacy both bodily and intellectual, is itself a unique and uniquely valuable *kind* of practical understanding, and one that we risk losing if we take the first step up the Socratic ladder (190).

Loving one individual is a *kind* of love that is distinctive. There are things that can only be seen and known and learnt in this kind of love. Alcibiades' account shows that, in between these two choices (for an individual or for abstract beauty), a lover may decide not to take Socrates' route, in order to keep something valuable. The valuable things that Socrates' account dismisses, in short, include the lover's knowledge of the particular other, the possibility of being led to see the lover's own flaws, and to see something of wisdom and beauty through the beloved's own qualities.<sup>15</sup>

The main problem I want to highlight in Nussbaum's interpretation is her dichotomous understanding of these accounts, and the problematic associations in the dichotomy. She associates Socrates' ascent of *erōs* with self-sufficiency, by which she means that the individual is 'in need of nothing from without to complete the value and goodness of his life' (381). This then is associated with one being closed off from the power of external objects or people. Nussbaum provides a list of 'two normative conceptions of human practical

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<sup>15</sup> Many of these valuable things Alcibiades sees in loving Socrates, one can argue, are there because the beloved is Socrates. Socrates, if indeed wiser than Alcibiades, is capable of showing Alcibiades wisdom and beauty. Will it be the same (the lover comes to see that the way he used to live is meaningless, that he has been neglecting genuine worthwhile matters in life, and that the beloved opens his perspective), if the beloved is in significant ways inferior to the lover? While Nussbaum praises Alcibiades' 'openness' to love and argues that it should be adopted by all lovers, what the lover is open to depends heavily on who the beloved is (this uncertainty is part of what this model embraces). In other words, a lover may see completely different things, less enlightened and less inspiring, than what Alcibiades sees in loving Socrates. Nussbaum does not discuss the different effects caused by different beloved persons. But it may be a question that one wants to explore when arguing for the good about particularity in Alcibiades' account of loving Socrates. It is, after all, a particular case and Alcibiades' insights and feelings in being 'open' are also particular.

rationality’ as a tool to comprehend Greek philosophy and literature. In this list A is seen as self-sufficient and B as more dependent on others (20).

Model A	Model B
Agent as hunter, trapper, male	Agent as plant, child, female (or with elements of both male and female)
Agent as purely active	Agent as both active and passive/receptive
Intellect as pure sunlight	Intellect as flowing water, given and received
Solitary good life	Good life along with friends, loved ones, and community

Nussbaum believes that Socrates' model is in the first category. Plato, on the other hand, is in a more ambiguous position, in terms of how he presents the dialogue. Nussbaum suggests that ‘Plato, finding the risks involved in B intolerable, develops a remarkable version of A, and then himself criticizes it as lacking in some important human values’ (20-21). An agent who follows the Socrates’ model of *erōs*, Nussbaum believes, desires to be self-sufficient. This is described by Nussbaum as a state of not needing external objects to complete the goodness of one’s life. Such a self-sufficient agent, we can assume, does not have a lack that is to be filled by others. She either does not experience a feeling of lack or she feels it but is able to pursue filling it all by herself. In either case, the individual is ultimately immune to the sense of lack or loss that is caused by external objects and people.

This reading of Socrates’ account as a way to guarantee a sense of completion or lack-filling, I think, is mistaken. Socrates’ account should not be read as a way to avoid the sense of lack, or to guarantee the goal of lack-filling. This can be illustrated by the following considerations. Firstly, Socrates’ account suggests that the *recognition of one’s state of being in lack* is the premise for wisdom. In the *Apology*, Delphic oracle showed that Socrates was the wisest person. After investigating, Socrates came to the conclusion that although he still believed in his own ignorance, but he was in fact the wisest person because *he knew* that he was ignorant, when most people who were considered to be wise in the ancient Greek world, politicians, poets, and artisans, actually knew nothing but thought themselves to know everything. In the myth or *erōs*’ parentage, Socrates illustrates this two-fold character of *erōs*. On the one hand, he is not complete and not content as the gods are; on the other hand, he



always strives for resourcefulness. Socrates conceives of lack in *erōs* not as a flawed character. It is the very state *erōs* is in (between lack and resourcefulness) that makes *erōs* strive for the good. It is a similar state (in between ignorance and wisdom) that makes *philosophers* pursue wisdom. It is not lack itself that is bad, it is *not knowing* one's state of being in lack. Hadot (1995) explains this significant function of the Socratic dialogue:

Thus, the Socratic dialogue turns out to be a kind of communal spiritual exercise. In it, the interlocutors are invited to participate in such inner spiritual exercises as examination of conscience and attention to oneself; in other words, they are urged to comply with the famous dictum, "Know thyself." Although it is difficult to be sure of the original meaning of this formula, this much is clear: it invites us to establish a relationship of the self to the self, which constitutes the foundation of every spiritual exercise. To know oneself means, among other things, to know oneself *qua non-sage*: that is, not as a *Sophos*, but as a *philo-sophos*, someone *on the way toward wisdom*. (90)

As Hadot points out, 'to know oneself *qua non-sage*' means that one is on the way toward wisdom. Socrates' remedy, in terms of lack in love, is to, firstly, make the lover be conscious of her 'lack'. It wakes the interlocutor from the state of 'certainty' to the state of 'uncertainty' – the interlocutor realises that she is lacking knowledge or wisdom about the thing she was sure about, in this case, what erotic love is and what object *erōs* is seeking. The individual is invited to re-evaluate what is in fact lacking and to scrutinise some assumptions that may be held: for example, the lack is caused by the beloved, and the beloved is able to make her complete. Calling these into question, the individual is in a position to examine these beliefs associated with the desire.

This leads to the second aspect of lack in Socrates' account – that is, a potentially positive role it plays in human flourishing. Hadot explains this in the following account of the 'demonic' impulse in *erōs*:

As an ambiguous, ambivalent, indecisive element, the demonic is neither good nor evil. Only mankind's moral decision can give it its definitive value. And yet, this irrational, inexplicable element is inseparable from existence. The encounter with the demonic, and the dangerous game with *Erōs*, cannot be avoided. (165)

Lack itself is neither purely bad, nor is it purely good, it depends on how the person deals with it. The wish that one person, or any particular objects of desire, can make this feeling go away, and make one feel complete is unrealistic. The individual who thinks this and persists in this pursuit has, on this reading, ultimately an irresponsible attitude to her own moral life.

To return to the basic difference between the interpretations I have been concerned with here, it seems that Nussbaum believes in the mutual exclusion of accepting (and loving) an imperfect individual and the pursuit of perfection. Socrates, in Sheffield's and Hadot's accounts, is more receptive to individuals as they are, while acknowledging their lack and imperfection. Socrates' lovers would probably accept Hephaestus' offer to melt them into one; for, in the end, what we want is for people to be 'happy and flourish as human beings' (Sheffield, 2006:225). With the ultimate goal as happiness, the beloved does not have to be excluded, *but* he has to be seen *as one part of* a happy life. Therefore, to conclude, I believe that Socrates' ascent of love should *not* be read, as Nussbaum contends, as a treatment that prevents lovers from valuing particular objects or individuals in order to be an active, controlling, self-sufficient agent. In Socrates' account, there is a sense of open acknowledgement about one's own state of lack, and about desire for one's beloved, but in the context of the potential to progress to what is ultimately good. A Socratic remedy is valid, not in terms of its ability to fill the lack, but in terms of its ability to enable the interlocutor to face the lack, seeing it for what it is, and setting one on the path towards wisdom and the good.

## Chapter 4 Epicurus and Desire

Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind  
Cannot bear very much reality.

– T. S. Eliot

In the previous chapter, on Plato's *Symposium*, we saw Socrates and his interlocutors exploring aspects of the erotic desires of human beings. Speakers praise the beauty of *erōs* in turn, each revealing aspects of the challenges a lover may face. Socrates' speech on the ascent of love directly responds to the difficulties resulting from this passion (particularly when it is excessive) and considers its relation to the good life. *Erōs* as a kind of passionate love towards a particular person seems not to be considered by Socrates as entirely positive, at least in the sense that it is not the ultimate end which we should pursue. Such love is strong and powerful, but it can also be destructive. When *erōs* is manifested as a desire for becoming one with a particular person, it brings suffering as well as pleasure. Regarding the aim of living a good life or flourishing (*eudaimonia*), Socrates' speech seems to suggest that it is reasonable to avoid the potential state of suffering we could be stuck in when having this erotic passion for some particular individual, by transforming the object of one's passion from a particular person to things that are less dependent on a realm outside our own control, such as knowledge and the truth. In the following chapters, I plan to look at responses from other ancient Greek thinkers to similar issues – passion and the good life. While there are, of course, different schools in ancient Greek philosophy, many of them share similarities (for example, with regard to the value to the role of reason in seeking the good life). I believe that an exploration of these different schools can help to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the relation between passion and reason. Inspired by Martha Nussbaum's book *The Therapy of Desire*, I would like to discuss some thinkers categorised as Hellenistic

philosophers and their proposals, particularly their proposals concerning what part philosophy can play in understanding ‘bad’ forms of desire and the suffering that follows from them. First, I would like to look at Epicurus.

Epicurus was born in 341 BCE, several years after Plato’s death. He is one of the most influential philosophers of the Hellenistic period. Along with other thinkers of his time, Epicurus is concerned with the question of what a good human life is like, and how it can be achieved. His idea of the good life, however, is distinctive in terms of his highly positive attitude towards *pleasure*. He holds it as a self-evident phenomenon that human conduct naturally aims at pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain. And to have a good life is to follow this natural tendency we innately have. Holding pleasure as the highest good, he is therefore considered to be one of the earliest hedonists in the western philosophical tradition. However, the hedonist view of the good human life that Epicurus develops is different from most modern forms of hedonism, where the final outcome (of pleasure) generated by actions (however they are measured) is the aim. His theory of pleasure is developed within an ethical framework, where, behind the seemingly highest good, *pleasure*, a moral ideal is at work. Epicurus’ idea of pleasure, as Julia Annas (1993) points out, is ‘tailored to meet the demands of any theory of happiness – that is, of our final end’ (335). What is more crucial, for the purpose of this thesis, is the difference between Epicurus’ idea of pleasure and the idea that tends to be held by many in our modern culture of self-fulfilment, especially in those forms of this culture that involve egoism or some kind of moral laxity. The idea of pleasure in these modern forms is often associated with the sovereignty of personal choice which is thought to legitimate what is pursued. The pursuit of pleasure, though being a general tendency that appears in every single human, is to be achieved in different ways because the objects that can lead to pleasure are different for every single human being. In other words, the object of desire varies from person to person. The very existence of this variation undermines the legitimacy of condemning any desires an individual may have. But Epicurus’ idea of the pursuit of pleasure does not, as it were, put this emphasis on *individual* personal desire. I do not intend to make a comprehensive comparison between Epicurus’ idea of desire and that of our culture of self-fulfilment. But I do think that there is something missing in the culture of self-fulfilment that Epicurus’ theory can offer us – that is, the need to *doubt* and *control* our desires.

## **Frustrations in fulfilling desire**

In the interests of clarity, I would like to put forward a problematic statement and take it as a starting point for the following discussion. The statement is as follows: as long as we are free from restrictions on pursuing what we want, we are able to embark on actions to pursue our desire (whatever it is); and if we take these actions and succeed in achieving the goal (i.e. obtaining what is wanted), we can then be happy. This is a simplified line of thought, and one does not need to be a philosopher to be able to spot flaws in it. I list three obvious ones.

First, we do not always go after what we want even when nothing is preventing us from doing so. Suppose that a person likes the food in a particular restaurant. This may not be sufficient to cause her to go there: there are other factors at work. For example, she may think the food there is not healthy; or she may want to save money. While there is another desire (the desire for health or for saving money) that is in conflict with the desire for the food in that restaurant, one particular desire (for that food) does not always lead to the action of acquiring it. One can simultaneously have desires that are in conflict with one another. Desire-satisfaction, then, is not a simple process of pursuing whatever is wanted, because satisfaction of one desire may lead to failure to satisfy another.

Secondly, even if the person does decide to pursue what is wanted when she is free to, the pursuit can eventually fail for various reasons. She wants to go to the restaurant when she is free and she does go. She then may find that the restaurant is not open at all or that it is full. Apart from the person's action of pursuing what is wanted, there are other factors that may affect whether the pursuit will be successful; and more importantly, these factors are often beyond the realm of the person's control. These uncontrollable factors make fulfilling the desire a matter that is beyond the agent's own will and ability.

Thirdly, when she is free to go, and she does go successfully and have the meal there, she may discover that she does not feel as happy as she expected beforehand. This may be because the last time when she had the same food, she happened to be very hungry. And if that was the first time she had gone to this restaurant and ordered that particular dish, she would perhaps have been not only satisfied but surprised. On the present occasion she expects to experience the same feeling of satisfaction, but somehow it does not happen, even though all the external factors seem to remain the same. The desire for that particular food is fulfilled, but the expected satisfaction does not come. Satisfaction (or we may want to push it further to the idea of pleasure) does not necessarily accompany desire-fulfilment. This flaw is

to do with complex subjective feelings of satisfaction. Most of the time our desires work in a more complicated way than the desire for a particular food, as in the example here. And the failure to fulfil our desires can become a cause of great frustration.

The three flaws listed above are all caused by the failure of desire-fulfilment as a simple aim. They show the problems that can arise not because of lack of freedom, but rather because of other factors that play a role in our subjective feelings of satisfaction. They show that there is no guarantee of achieving the end of feeling satisfied, just because we are free to and do go on the journey. This possible failure, however, does not imply an objection to the legitimate desire to start the journey if the destination is considered to be desirable. That is, if one believes that the satisfaction of a desire is of value, the possible failure she may face in the process should not constitute a reason for not doing so. Questions about the balance of the potential satisfaction and the potential frustrations have been discussed by various thinkers. Some try to develop ways of measuring these factors. This idea is normally held by utilitarian thinkers who believe the maximizing of pleasure overall, rather than instant or immediate pleasure, for example, is and should be the aim of human conduct.

The possible failure of desire-satisfaction does not imply that we should not pursue our desires. If satisfaction of a desire is considered to have ethical worth, or it is considered to be necessary from a biological or psychological perspective, then *prima facie* one should try to achieve this end. The real question here is whether pursuing the satisfaction of desire is genuinely of value.

### **Epicurus on desire**

I will now consider what Epicurus thinks about the role that desire plays in the pursuit of a happy life. Firstly, Epicurus senses strongly the frustrations and pains that result from failure to satisfy desire. He thinks human souls are mostly in a state of pain or fear, and that this state can be as violent as a storm (*LMen*, 128).<sup>16</sup> Frustrations and pains are to be avoided if one is to have a good life. We are told constantly to examine our desires:

Keep in mind that some desires are natural whereas others are groundless; that among the natural desires some are natural and necessary whereas others are merely natural; and that among the necessary desires some are necessary for happiness, some for physical health, and some for life itself. (*ibid.*)

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<sup>16</sup> *LMen*: *Letter to Menoecus*.

By saying ‘keep in mind’ at the beginning, Epicurus seems to be suggesting that it is easy to forget that desire is not always to be trusted and, in trying to fulfil our desires, unpleasant results that are different from what we expect may be brought about. So when a desire arises, we need, firstly, to scrutinise the desire before embarking on its pursuit. We are told that there are three types of desires: natural and necessary ones, natural but unnecessary ones, and groundless ones. I would like to explore each of these categories and their relation to a happy life in the light of examples offered by Diogenes Laertius’ in his note in the book *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* (in which most of the original surviving texts of Epicurus are to be found). In the following, Diogenes illustrates these types of desires:

Epicurus regards as natural and necessary desires which bring relief from pain, as *e.g.* drink when we are thirsty; while by natural and not necessary he means those which merely diversify the pleasure without removing the pain, as *e.g.* costly viands; by the neither natural nor necessary he means desires for crowns [i.e. status symbols] and the erection of statues in one’s honour. (Diogenes Laertius, principle doctrines xxix, 149; my bracketed insertion)

The first type of desire is natural and necessary, such as the desire for drinking. Desire of this type arises naturally. One does not *learn* to have the desire for liquid or for food. The desire arises out of a natural biological function. When this desire is not fulfilled, there will come unavoidable pain. To experience this pain is not optional. The inevitability of pain is the characteristic of this type of desire. If we do not have the desire, our life will be in danger. Desire of this kind cannot and should not be repressed. It is necessary to fulfil such desires if a good life is to be had.

The second type of desire also arises from natural needs, but it is a variation of natural desire. The example given is the desire for luxurious food. It is natural in the way that the first type of desire is, because it arises out of natural needs. However, there is a crucial difference between it and the first type of desire – it is to do with whether, if the desire is not satisfied, it will cause unavoidable pain. If we are hungry and in physical pain or discomfort due to lack of food and nutrition to maintain bodily functions, we long for food so that we can get rid of the pain. For people who are at war, for example, when food is scarcely sufficient to sustain life, bread, and perhaps bread only, may well be what is wanted and what will bring great satisfaction. But for those who do not suffer from insufficient food, food of different kinds or of better quality, is likely to replace bread as what is desired. Epicurus thinks that ‘bodily pleasure does not increase when the pain of want has been removed; after

that it only admits of variation', as here in the case of different foods (PD 18)<sup>17</sup>. Variety is then seen, in this case, as one of the ways of achieving some satisfaction. And we must not forget that there are various ways of achieving this. An important characteristic of desire of this type is that when it is left unsatisfied, it does not cause unbearable pain: when we only have bread but not luxurious food, we may experience some disappointment, but we do not suffer from pain. And the disappointment, as Epicurus teaches us, is easy to dispel.

The third type of desire is groundless desire. It is considered to be both unnatural and unnecessary. We are given the example of the desire for symbols of power and status. If we consider desire along the lines that we have been following, which is to see desire as what motivates us to avoid pain and pursue pleasure, it is not difficult to admit that desire of this kind is not necessary. It is not essential for maintaining life. Therefore, if we think about the situations where desire for wealth or some kind of social status is in conflict with desire for life, that is, where we risk losing life or being in serious pain in order to gain wealth or status, we may well just decide to give up the pursuit of the latter. The desire for status is unnecessary in the sense that it is not something that helps us to be rid of unavoidable pain. We may be reminded here of the well-known theory of human motivation, developed by the humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow. Maslow (1970) proposes a pyramid with five levels to explain human needs. He suggests that the basic needs of human-being, including eating, drinking, safety, and love, have to be satisfied for one not to be in pain. It is the condition under which higher goals of life can be attended. The similar human psychology of needs is in Epicurus' theory of desire. However, one may question whether even if most people behave in the way as the psychological theory describes, it proves that the higher-up desires *are* unnecessary for a good life. It just explains a contextual factor about the existence of a desire. We have to, therefore, bear in mind that these teachings of Epicurus aim at a good life that is defined by *freedom from disturbances and promotes tranquillity*. Pleasure is only needed 'when we are in pain caused by its absence' (*LMen*, 128). Therefore, as long as it is not essential for getting rid of pain, a desire cannot be counted a necessary one. This will be made clearer in the later discussion of two different kinds of pleasures in Epicureanism.

Another question I would like to raise about the third type of desire is: 'how is a desire unnatural?' It is, in a way, difficult to imagine that any desires *can* be unnatural as, after all, our desire always arises from us and in us, and is experienced by us. Even for those desires

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<sup>17</sup> PD: Principle Doctrines (in Diogenes Laertius *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*)



that seem to be ‘acquired’ (e.g. the desire to win a prize in a school competition), how can they be developed and experienced, if there is no root in our nature? To answer this question, we have to first acknowledge that the term is used here by Epicurus to inspire a practice that aims at *eudaimonia*, rather than in a value-free way. The unnatural desire does not refer to a desire that is biologically impossible; rather, it signifies the kind of desire that *ought not to be* had if one is committed to living a good life. A desire for power or status is unnatural not because it is a desire one has through learning, but because it is the desire that may prevent the person from living a good life. It is not clear how Epicurus thinks about the role of learning in desire development (e.g. whether it is an unavoidable factor, or whether it can be of value in any respects). Nussbaum (1994) argues that Epicurus seems not to oppose external influences in terms of living naturally; nevertheless, he does not seem to hold them to be of positive value either. What we need, to appeal to for knowing what is truly desired, has been embedded in our constitution since we were born:

Some people who come from the school of Epicurus like to say that the animal feels pain and pursues pleasure naturally and without teaching. For as soon as it is born, when it is not yet a slave to the world of opinion, as soon as it is slapped by the unaccustomed chill of the air, it cries out and bawls. (Sextus M<sup>18</sup> 11.96; cf. PH 2.194-85; quoted from Nussbaum, 1994:106)

Epicurus believes that the primary principle of human conduct is to avoid pain and to pursue pleasure. All human beings and animals are innately endowed with this nature. Living naturally understood in this way is, in some ways, similar to reacting towards our surroundings instinctively. All desires are to be examined according to whether they correspond to this primary principle. If a desire brings a result that is in conflict with this primary principle – i.e. the fulfilling of the desire turns out to bring pain – to pursue it is therefore unnatural behaviour.

What happens to a person so that he comes to have an unnatural desire? Two characteristics of desire of this kind in Epicurus’ account are, according to John Cooper (1999): (1) the desire causes frustration and pain when it is left unfulfilled; and (2) it is not easy to dispel when a situation does not allow it to be satisfied. Nussbaum suggests something similar, that is, unnatural desire is the desire that is ‘puffed up’ and ‘excessive’. It seems that it is not the way in which the desire arises (endowed or learned), nor the objects of the desire, that decides which category a particular desire belongs to. It, I believe, can be

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<sup>18</sup> Sextus M: Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Professors (Adversus mathematicos)*.

understood in this way: unnatural desire comes out of natural (and unnecessary) desire, but with some qualitative transformation. Obsession and commitment, along with ‘false belief’ (which is considered to be the ground of desire of this kind by Epicurus) about the object of desire is involved in this transformation. If we take the desire for love as an example, it can be a natural desire when it is not excessive, or, it can *transform* into an unnatural desire when it gets excessive. It makes the person in love focus too much on the pursuit of it, and forget about the fact that the object of the desire (love returned from a particular person) is not something we have to have in order to sustain life in its natural state. It stops the person from pursuing other ‘more important’ desires, such as the desire for food or drink, if something goes wrong. It can make the person feel that life as a whole is valueless, when it fails to be fulfilled; whereas the truth, in Epicurus’ view, is that there are many other people, or things, which can bring us similar satisfaction. Love of or from a particular person is only one way, among all the other ways, to satisfy our desire for love. Desire for luxurious food is another example. We may have the image of a wonderful Saturday night in Soho having food in a fancy restaurant. We can come to believe that things in this image are of importance, so that when they are not obtained, we feel great loss. The desire for love or luxurious food turns into an ‘I-must’. They are thought to be of irreplaceable value so that one may feel life is incomplete when the desire is not fulfilled. What makes it more difficult is that this type of desire is insatiable, it ‘requires unlimited filling’ (VS 59).<sup>19</sup> It is not like natural desire, which can be satisfied and can free us from a disturbing situation when what is lacking is obtained. What it aims at reaches into infinity. We always want more, always unsatisfied, and always in a disturbing and unsettled state. Disturbance and distress causing pain for the soul is exactly what we want to avoid. Epicurus tells us to stay away from desire of this kind, which will lead to the opposite of what our nature really needs.

Epicurus invites us to examine the nature of our desires and where the pursuit of them leads. He shows us that not all desires are to be accepted and followed if we want to have a *happy* life. But is a happy life really a life with the least pain, as Epicurus sees it? Apart from pain and pleasure that is experienced at a basic animal level, we also have pleasure from accomplishing work that we think worthwhile, such as making an art work. And it may take a lot of effort, even pain, to achieve such accomplishments. This is one criticism that this philosophy has been subject to since Epicurus’ time.

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<sup>19</sup> VS: Vatican Sayings (a collection of quotes of Epicurus and other Epicureans preserved in a 14<sup>th</sup> century manuscript from the Vatican Library).

## Epicurus on pleasure

Epicurus' attitude to desire, as we have seen above, is far from one encouraging self-indulgence. It is central to Epicureanism that not all desires are good and to be satisfied. In fact, an Epicurean will constantly ask herself whenever she experiences a longing or a craving: 'is this desire necessary and in accordance with the Epicurean idea of nature?' In order to better comprehend the Epicurean idea of nature and natural desire, we can now investigate what pleasure, *hēdonē*, really means when Epicurus praises it as the highest good in life. First to be noted when one explores Epicurus' teaching is that there are two kinds of pleasure, between these two there are subtle but significant differences, and one is higher than the other (hence, the highest good actually refers to one particular type of pleasure). The two pleasures are, respectively, *kinetic* pleasure and *katastematic* pleasure. *Kinetic* means moving, or movement. So *kinetic* pleasure is associated with movement – pleasure that is gained from *doing* something. The activities from which it arises may be, for example, eating, drinking, taking a bath, playing a game, reading a book, sex, engaging in an interesting conversation etc. Any pleasure that is experienced in doing and acting is in this category. *Kinetic* pleasure is, indeed, regarded as important for living a good life – it is, for Epicurus, something to be enjoyed if one can. The pleasure one obtains in participating in entertaining activities contributes to this. His affirmation of *kinetic* pleasure can be found in the following passage from Diogenes Laertius' book:

I have no idea what I should consider good, if I take away the pleasures of smell, take away the pleasures of sexual intercourse, take away the pleasures of sound, take away the pleasures of beautiful shapes. (DL 10.6)

Epicurus confesses that a life that is devoid of (*kinetic*) pleasure is impoverished – it would be hard to imagine that a person who lives a life without any of this pleasure can know what a good life means. But we have to be careful about what is and is not claimed here. It suggests that this kind of pleasure does *contribute* to the good life. But what is *not* suggested is that this pleasure is *sufficient* for the good life.

Robert Brown (1987) cogently explains Epicurus' *kinetic* pleasure as a kind of embellishment. It is something that can be enjoyed, but only given a prior condition, just as the existence of a house is the condition for embellishment to be added. But this kind of pleasure itself is 'incapable ... of producing the pleasant life' (107). The particular condition, in Epicureanism, under which *kinetic* pleasure is to be enjoyed, is one of *katastematic*

pleasure. In other words, comparing the two, *katastematic* pleasure is of the first importance. *Katastematic*, meaning ‘established’ or ‘settled’, implies a constant state of being. Pleasure of this kind arises when one is in a state of feeling no urge to *actively pursue* something to be happy. It is a state of contentment:

When once this [sc. Freedom from pain and disturbance] is secured for us, the entire tempest of the soul is undone, in that the animal does not have to go off as if in search of something that is lacking and to look for something further with which to fill up the good of the body (*LMen*, 128)

If we, again, read this passage with Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, which suggests that the lower type of need is to be fulfilled so that the individual is not in pain and able to consider higher-up needs. Epicurus seems to be suggesting the similar point. But Epicurus, unlike Maslow, tries to bring attention to *the moment* when the (basic) needs are satisfied – the moment when one is content and is not in pain. The moment is usually transient – human beings develop one desire after another, and because of false belief, we tend not to really enjoy the moment of satisfaction. The moment is often soon replaced by a feeling of lacking something else. The result of this slippage, or even complete lack of notice, is that one never genuinely enjoys such pleasure, even when one is *at the moment* of enjoyment. While *katastematic* pleasure, the pleasure associated with not doing, but a settled state, is the pleasure that arises in the moment of contentment, and is the result of lack of bodily and mental pain, as Cooper (1999) rightly points out that it is a misunderstanding to consider this state of being content as one of being purely ‘inactive’ or ‘quiet’ (512). While it is possible that when one is not doing anything, the mind is being inactive, one aspect of the term *katastematic* is a sense of ‘belonging to the natural constitution’ (*ibid*). And this does involve a certain active element – some *feeling* for the natural state for the organism.

There is a question about Cooper’s interpretation of *katastematic* pleasure. Cooper sees it as a condition of lack in pain, as we discussed above. And he understands it as a ‘constant’, ‘secure’ and ‘uninterrupted’ condition. The Epicurean aim of life, according to Cooper, is then to make sure the time is prolonged when one enjoys such *katastematic* pleasure. However, I have not found the evidence to support this interpretation, i.e. that an effort of ‘prolonging’ the pleasure is encouraged by Epicurus. The effort itself seems to contain a potential conflict with the state of contentment. When one is trying to achieve or grasp something, one has departed from the state of contentment. Contentment is more something to be *relaxed* into, rather than to grasp. And relaxation is the fundamental attitude to hold

when one practices Epicurus' teaching. We can, then, draw a conclusion from the discussion above that Epicurean pleasure is of two kinds: one comes from doing, and the other *not* from doing (what one does or what happens is irrelevant). And between the two, the latter is higher than the former. *Katastematic* pleasure, absence of pain, is the one we should really aim at; and *kinetic* pleasure can be enjoyed, as long as it does not conflict with the former.

### **Epicurus on love**

As we have seen above Epicurus distinguished different types of desire, and saw the highest good as pain-free pleasure. In prioritising self-contentment and tranquillity, however, Epicurus, in many people's eyes, seems to be quite cold-blooded when he speaks unsympathetically about some values that many people hold dear, such as love, marriage and child-rearing. His philosophy on these matters has incurred much criticism since antiquity. In the rest of this chapter, I would like to examine Epicurus' attitude to love, and to argue that there is a significant value within Epicurus' teaching on this that is often misunderstood or overlooked.

Scholars of Epicureanism have found difficulties in determining Epicurus' exact opinion on the matter of love.<sup>20</sup> One significant factor related to this difficulty is the lack of surviving texts of Epicurus' work. In Diogenes Laertius' third-century BCE book, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, it is recorded that Epicurus completed over 300 written works, in the forms of books, doctrines and letters. However, most of these works are now missing so the extant works, from which the modern readers are able to draw directly to understand Epicurus' philosophy, are limited. These resources include the remaining texts of Epicurus' himself, the quotes or descriptions that appear in Epicurus' followers, and passages about Epicurus' philosophy written by his rivals. Moreover, the extant texts of Epicurus are sometimes found to contradict each other.<sup>21</sup> For these two reasons, scholars hold diverse opinions on Epicurus' stance on love. However, it is generally agreed that Epicurus had a hostile attitude to it. The desire closely related to love – sexual desire – however, seems to be more accepted. We shall draw on some texts below to explain these two closely related desires.

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<sup>20</sup> See, for example, John B. Stearns (1936), Tad Brennan (1996), Robert Brown (1987), and Geert Roskam (2020).

<sup>21</sup> Nature in ancient Greek philosophical texts and the seeming 'incoherence' found by later thinkers are discussed by Hadot (1995).

## *Sexual desire*

Sexual desire, in Epicurus' categorisation, is placed in the category of natural and unnecessary desire. Similar to the desire for luxuries, sex desire is considered by Epicurus to be something we can pursue so long as its gratification does not bring harm. Sexual desire is *natural* as it arises because of biological, and not social, factors. It is, however, *unnecessary*, in the sense that the absence of it does not lead to bodily or mental disturbance. This discussion on sexual desire is, overall, twofold. On the one hand, it is recognised as a source for pleasure. This passage mentioned above is helpful in seeing that:

I have no idea what I should consider good if I take away the pleasures of smell, take away the pleasures of sexual intercourse, take away the pleasures of sound, take away the pleasures of beautiful shapes. (DL 10.6)

Sexual pleasure, as well as the pleasures of other senses, is what makes the idea of 'good' possible to be envisaged. What is suggested here is that 'good' would be hard to imagine if all these pleasures are absent. Sexual pleasure, like all other pleasures, is not bad in itself and is potentially good for *eudaimonia*. Epicurus, therefore, is not against sexual desire and sexual pleasure. In Epicurus' *Symposium*, Brown (1987) points out, he 'discussed the best time for sex and recommended that it takes place before dinner, in order that the digestive process may be least disturbed' (109). Brown also draws on a report that 'Epicurus and his disciples are ... to have consorted sexually with the courtesans who frequented the Garden' (*ibid.*). We may draw a conclusion that Epicurus is not against 'a healthy appreciation of sex' (*ibid.*). Sexual pleasure *can* be enjoyed, though it is not sufficient for the good life (that is to say, if the essential ingredient for the good life is missing, Epicurus would not say the person has a good life, even if he had obtained a great deal of sexual pleasure).

On the other hand, sexual desire is easily turned into something else that is then a source of pain. This can be explained in three ways. Firstly, sexual intercourse is incapable of enhancing physical well-being. In fact, in many cases, it is harmful to the body. In the same passage in Epicurus' *Symposium*, sex after eating and drinking is said to be potentially harmful as it disturbs the body's atoms. Thus, physical harm may be caused by intercourse. Secondly, sex with particular people may be forbidden by the society. This kind of sexual relationship, therefore, 'may have unfortunate practical consequences' (110). This may in turn bring suffering or disturbance to a person's life. Thirdly, when sexual desire becomes 'an

irrational craving', it, again, causes unwanted, and often uncontrollable, mental turmoil.

These effects are explained by Epicurus himself in the following passage:

I understand from you that your natural disposition is too much inclined toward sexual passion. Follow your inclination as you will, provided only that you neither violate the laws, disturb well-established customs, harm any one of your neighbours, injure your own body, nor waste your possessions. That you be not checked by one or more of these provisos is impossible; for a man never gets any good from sexual passion, and he is fortunate if he does not receive harm. (VS 51)

The pitfalls sexual intercourse involve are many. Epicurus, though not against it, emphasises that the potential harm can outweigh the potential pleasure (and tragedies that develop starting from sexual desire are plenty in ancient Greek literature). That is why Epicurus suggests that with sexual desire it is better to stay away from it if possible. To sum up here, Epicurus is definitely not a vulgar hedonist towards sex and other unnecessary desires, e.g. the desire for luxuries. He is, however, not ascetic. His focus is not on how much *kinetic* pleasure one should obtain, but rather, on how to secure *katastematic* pleasure.

### *Love*

Epicurus' attitude towards love is more unequivocal and more hostile, compared to that towards sexual desire. Love is put in the category of bad desire. It is important for us to clarify what our subject here includes. As discussed in chapter 3, in ancient Greece the term *erōs* often referred to the kind of obsessive emotion that is aroused by one particular person. Here we have to bear in mind that not all kinds of 'love' that can be referred to by the modern English term are the targets of Epicurus' condemnation. The kind of love between friends, for example, is indeed praised by Epicurus. One can argue that in romantic relationships there can be friendship and the kind of love that friends show. Here I will not look into whether Epicurus recognises friendship in romantic love and whether he approves of this element in love. But overall, the kind of romantic love that involves obsessive passions for one person seems to be altogether rejected in Epicurus' teachings.

All bad desires, as we have seen above, are bad because they are not natural or necessary. Love, in this category, would be *unnecessary* – for which the criterion is that it is not requisite 'at the most basic level' for maintaining physical well-being and mental tranquillity (Brown, 1987:115). And it would be *unnatural*, for which the criterion is that its arising is based on certain kinds of empty opinion or belief, instead of the need for basic

physical and mental wellness. The question that arises here is what is an ‘empty opinion’ for Epicurus? Brown suggests that Epicurus’ empty opinion can be understood from at least two perspectives. Firstly, an empty opinion is the kind of opinion that is not in accordance with the teaching above. That is, it is a mistaken view on the necessity of a desire. This mistake can happen with all unnecessary desires, natural or unnatural.

Those natural desires which entail no pain when unsatisfied, though pursued with an intense effort, are also due to groundless opinion; and it is not because of their own nature they are not got rid of but because of man’s groundless opinions. (KD 30)

The failure to satisfy an unnecessary desire does not lead to pain. The desire should be ‘easily dispelled when they are seen as difficult to fulfil’ (KD 26). When one comes to believe that lack of the things one craves and their satisfaction in life will be intolerable – in other words, to believe in the necessity of these things for a good life, and be intensely eager to pursue them – these are false opinions.

Secondly, one can hold ‘empty opinions’ about the person one loves. When being in love, one often sees a lover as ‘uniquely beautiful’ (Brown, 1987:113). This reminds us of Plato’s *Symposium*, where the uniqueness of the beloved suggested in Aristophanes’ myth is disputed by Socrates, who argues for the view that the lover can be led to see the universality of such Beauty. Epicurus, similarly, would see the view of Aristophanes as wrong. Such wrong perceptions, and illusions,<sup>22</sup> are discussed at length in Lucretius, which we will discuss in the next section.

Brown suggests an understanding of a crucial difference between Epicurus and Plato, in terms of their ‘treatment’ to love, whose problematic nature is recognised by both of them, in the following passage:

For Epicurus, love is merely a mental exacerbation of the normal sexual desire, which, far from assisting the soul in its quest for truth, befogs its judgement and immerses it in painful anxiety. Love, moreover, has nothing to do with friendship, the one being a disruptive influence, the other a valuable source of security and pleasure (perhaps including sexual pleasure in the right circumstances). (118)

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<sup>22</sup> Brown (1987) argues that Lucretius’ discussion of illusions in love, though undoubtedly based on Epicurean principles, is original: ‘it would appear that no Epicurean had incorporated the subject of sex and love with that of illusion before Lucretius, and herein lies the chief originality of his treatment.’ (122)



For Epicurus, then, love is a corrupted variation of the natural desire for sex. It is altogether, in Epicurus' teaching, a bad desire. Brown, citing Plato's *Symposium*, points out that Epicurus does not discern and try to preserve the good elements that love may include, such as friendship. Moreover, it is not considered to be a potential drive that urges one to improve (in Plato's *Symposium*, the love to one person is to be *transformed* to be a better kind of love). Love, in short, is a result of empty opinions and a source of pain. For Epicurus, Brown concludes, love 'calls for eradication not sublimation' (115).

With a similar vein, Simon May (2011) accuses Lucretius, who is generally considered to be a devoted Epicurean follower, of seeing love as entirely associated with potential damage, and none of its potential merits: 'far from being a harbinger of virtue, it is a harbinger of ruin.' He continues to say that 'the art of love', in Epicurean teaching, 'is to live this impulsive and heedless instinct without being harmed by it' (69). Love, as well as sex indeed, in Epicurus' philosophy, seems to be understood as almost a malicious impulsive that we are unfortunately born with. The best we can do with it is to have it under control and not causing problems.

In the ancient world, Greek and Roman, it was a commonplace to warn of love's madness, including its tendency to idealise and, when disappointed, to demonise. But Lucretius regards these ills of love as merely in need of remedies, rather than as symptoms of a drive that, properly channelled, can bring us in touch with great ethical and spiritual goods. (71)

May is convinced that there is no transcendent value contained in the Epicurean idea of love.<sup>23</sup> It is not considered to be of any *use* to one's ethical improvement. This is similar to Brown's interpretation above that the desire for love 'calls for eradication not sublimation'. May further appeals to Christianity to support the argument that Epicurean love is lacking in spirituality. He suggests that the Epicurean treatment for the ills of love:

is a less demanding, less spiritual, method of transcending sexual desire than most approaches in Western history, which tend to involve passionate attention to a reality conceived as

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<sup>23</sup> It is worth pointing out that the concept of love here refers to the kind of love seen when 'two people [are] erotically besotted with each other' (69) – that is, exclusive erotic passion. May did not particularly differentiate different types of love that are commonly known in Greek terms in his discussion; and his comments on Lucretius love (*erōs*) with reference to love in Christianity (in which is closer to *apape*) may be inappropriate. However, I think even when these two types of love are different by nature, they overlap. Even in the Epicurean understanding presented here, which encourages one to focus on ordinary life rather than a transcendent realm – they both encourage a genuine attention to and care for others, and for the world as it is right now.

supremely valuable, as in Plato's search for the essence of beauty, or the Christian's devotion to God. (72)

Love in both Plato and Christianity, as May tries to show, although potentially damaging, bears the power to drive the person to move towards something better, to see something he could not see before. The passion experienced in love is not to be eliminated, but to be channelled to a better world – towards a reality that is 'supremely valuable.' May suggests that 'misshapen human relationships' are to be transcended or sublimated through the 'ascent stories' offered. Both Plato and Christianity, according to May, offer these 'ascent stories', so that human beings have the chance to be freed from their misshapen love relationships, and see another world – one which was not seen before, and which is of supreme value. In short, in both Brown and May's understanding of Epicurus' love, love is (1) a corrupted sexual desire (Brown discusses the nuances between the two desires, while May does not); (2) altogether bad, and needing to be eliminated; and (3) lacking in transcendent value.

While I agree with both thinkers in that love itself is not discussed as being of much positive value in itself in Epicurean texts, and, in their interpretation, lacking 'transcendent value', there are two reasons I disagree with their blunt criticism of Epicurus' teaching on love. The first is that there is evidence showing that Epicurus himself 'had the warmest regard for his parents and for other members of his family', and the same is found in the records of his disciples' life (Stearns, 1936:346). Furthermore, despite his teachings where he seems to be *against* marriage and child-rearing, 'his favourite disciples were married' and he himself 'was fond of children' (*ibid.*). Presumably, Epicurus is not against all forms of life that involve marriage and child-rearing. Stearns argues that this evidence shows us that Epicurus' life was in fact 'in accord with a belief in the value of love and marriage' (347). The extant texts, which rarely directly shows us Epicurus' own opinions on these subjects, are not enough to prove that Epicurus dismisses all value in love and marital relationships. Secondly, while we do not find many texts left by Epicurus that illustrate what is to be seen when one is practicing Epicurus' teaching on freeing oneself from empty opinions, we do get more light shed on this 'reality' in Lucretius' poem. The reality is not one seen as 'supremely valuable' in the Platonic or Christian sense, as May puts it. It nevertheless represents a rather new way of seeing things, and this could be of great value in allowing one to *attend* to the reality in a new light. There is a non-transcendent version of love, which Lucretius tries to put in place of the ill-version of love; and this is of value, especially in the sense that it allows 'the otherness' in the other to be recognised, accepted, and attended to.

## Lucretius' attack of love and love's non-transcendent value

In the following section, I would like to draw to Lucretius'<sup>24</sup> poem *De Rerum Natura*, translated as *On the Nature of Things*, particularly the part where he discusses illusions in love and a kind of disillusionment as a cure. Lucretius' attitude to love is considered, in general, to be in accordance with Epicurus' and his theory on perception follows Epicurus' teaching. However, his combination of love and illusion is seen as a further development within the Epicurean school.<sup>25</sup> In Lucretius' explanations of illusion, he draws attention to the potential harm that accompanies love. This appears to give one reasons to avoid love and is thought by many to be more evidence for the negative Epicurean attitude to love. However, as explained above, it is doubtful that Epicurus himself is against love and marriage in an absolute sense. In Lucretius' exploration of this issue, we see another aspect that illuminates the matter of love, aside from a pure avoidance. That is, an understanding of what can be achieved by love that is free (at least freer) from illusions and closer to reality.

The arguments related to love are to be found in book IV. This book is often labelled as Lucretius' 'attack on love.'<sup>26</sup> Despite the label, the related issues only appear at the very end of book IV. The first two thirds of the book explore the mechanism of perception, particularly visual perception. It is important to point out that the explanation of this mechanism and the fallibility of it is highly related to the later part of the book where Lucretius *attacks* love.<sup>27</sup> However, for the purpose of this chapter, I will not explore the mechanism of perception in detail.<sup>28</sup> I will recite one aspect of its fallibility here and focus the discussion on illusions related to love. Lucretius points out in the following passage that the result of perception is associated with the state the viewer is in:

Have you not seen how eyes, when they begin to look at some delicate object, strain and prepare themselves, and how, without that, it would be quite impossible for us to see things clearly? Even with objects openly in view, you can still notice that if you do not turn your mind

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<sup>24</sup> Lucretius is a Roman poet and philosopher, lived about two hundred years after Epicurus in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC. He created this epic poem with the purpose of explaining Epicurus' philosophy.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Brown (1987).

<sup>26</sup> See Diskin Clay (1983); Robert Brown (1987); Martha Nussbaum (1994).

<sup>27</sup> Nussbaum (1994) suggests that the first two thirds is to be read as preparation for readers (along with Memmius to whom Lucretius' addresses) to accept his harsh attack on love, which most people value tremendously.

<sup>28</sup> Some key ideas about perception in Epicureanism: (1) human beings come to know the world through senses, and human senses are limited in what they can perceive; (2) perception is the combination of sensory experience and judgement; and (3) sensory experience, though limited, is not itself fallible; however, the judgement that often comes with the sensory experience to form the perception is fallible. Discussions of the problems of sensory perception can be found in Robert Brown (1987), David Sedley (1998), Daryn Lehoux (2013).

to them, then it is as if things were not near you all the time, but remote and far away.

Therefore, why is it so strange if the mind overlooks all other things apart from those where it has focused its attention. (808-815)

Sometimes it is imagined that 'seeing' is a mechanical process, in which a body or substance is projected onto one's eyes and a visual perception is formed. In the passage, Lucretius tells us one factor other than the biological mechanism that indeed affects whether the seeing forms a perception or not. This factor is one's preparation and disposition to see. This remark highlights the less obvious, but important, elements related to the person's biological or psychological states in the matter of 'seeing'. What we *see* partly depends on what we are *ready to see*.

As a result, lovers are often 'blind' in that their seeing is highly distorted, or they altogether fail to see something. They misshape the image of the person they are in love with and attribute beautiful qualities to the beloved, which the beloved does not really possess. In the lover's eyes, Lucretius says:

a dark woman is 'honey coloured,' a filthy one who stinks is 'unpretentious,' one who has grey eyes is 'small Athena,' a sinewy one who looks like wooden sticks is 'a gazelle,' a squat, dwarfish girl 'one of the Graces,' 'all genuine charm,' a large and lumpy one 'impressively imposing,' 'dignified.' If she has a stammer and cannot talk she 'has a lisp,' if mute, she is 'modest.' (1160-8)

The man in love sees his beloved woman through a certain lens. While some of such double-sided descriptions seem equally fine (e.g. dark skin can be a sign of beautiful as honey-coloured is), or they seem equally legitimate (the skin colour can be described as dark as well as honey-coloured without necessarily an aesthetic or ethical value attached to the description), it is important to know that the cultural and linguistic context plays a role in what we associate with these terms. Here our focus is not on the particular values of these double-sided descriptions; rather, the focus is on the way a person *sees*, or a person *wants* to see, in the context of love. The phenomenon Lucretius points out here is that the lover sees in a particular way (in favour of portraying the beloved as wonderful). The lover may, therefore, (1) prefer the nicer way of interpreting a character (so the image of the beloved is glorified); (2) neglect some quality he does not want to see (so the image of the beloved is partial); or (3) project some good qualities onto the person (so the image of the beloved is not true).

Lucretius does not tell us here how to verify the truthfulness of the perception;<sup>29</sup> he does, however, point out a familiar experience of lovers – when the passion changes, he will ‘curse his foolishness’ and ‘see he had bestowed on her more than is right’ (1185-6).

The distorted view of a lover may hold of the beloved is displayed further in this fictional scenario Lucretius provides us as follows:

Let her face even be as lovely as you wish, and let the power of Venus radiate from every limb, nonetheless there are surely other women, as well, surely we lived without this one before; surely she carries out all the same things ugly women do—and we know she does.

The woman drenches her miserable self with disgusting odours. Her slaves run off some distance and laugh at her in secret. But the tearful lover who is shut out buries the threshold with frequent flowers and garlands, and with scent of marjoram anoints her haughty doorposts, plants kisses on the doors, the miserable fool, and yet if once he were let in and just one whiff hit him as he entered, he would seek out decent reasons to be gone. (1177-81)

A man is kept outside the door, and his beloved woman is hidden inside the house. On the one side, we see the man experiencing desperation, by being told of his tearfulness and seemingly mad acts like kissing the plants and anointing the doorposts. The threshold, doorposts, and plants are not just plain objects for the man, as we can imagine – they are endowed with unusual meaning, due to their relation to the special woman. On the other side, a woman is hiding – there is something of her she does not want to be discovered. She may be experiencing some feelings of shame and fear: shame about herself and fear lest a particular part of her be seen. The maids here see both sides and find it laughable. The huge discrepancy between what the woman is like in the man’s mind, which can be guessed through his behaviour, and what the woman really is appears ridiculous.

An unequivocal illusion is revealed here: the woman has a deadly flaw which the man does not see. The image of her in his mind is, therefore, wrong, or distorted, we can say. But what is remarkable here is not just a piece of missing information of a person. After all, it is almost impossible to know *everything* about any one person, no matter how close we are to them (one can say that we perhaps do not know everything even about ourselves). What is remarkable here is the fantasising involved in the lover’s perception. The poet tells us something is concealed, as it were, *backstage* by the woman. This backstage implies the presence of an upstage. And the upstage is created both by the lover, and the beloved. On

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<sup>29</sup> On the criteria of truth in Epicureanism, see Andree Hahmann (2015), Alexander Bown (2016).

love's stage, the beloved wants to present merely the beautiful sides of her and hide the ugly and dirty ones. This is how the beloved one builds and maintains the stage, by hiding. And the lover, more interestingly, also designs a stage for his beloved to perform on. In the lover's mind, staging allows him to *see*, and perhaps only see, what he wants to see - the beautiful and the good. Staging also allows him to *see what is not seen*. It allows him to project what is in his mind about a good lover onto this woman. And what happens after often, as the poet shows us, is the frustration of discovering what the lover does not want to see. The projection, or fantasy, creates an object of longing, which exists only in imagination. Adam Phillips (2012), from the Freudian perspective, illustrates the psychological process of fantasising and being frustrated:

You begin by hallucinating, that is, fantasizing, and you end up trying to get the wished-for meal in the real world, which will at best be only an approximation of the one you wanted, but has the advantage of being one you can actually eat. It is the failure of the anticipated satisfaction, its non-arrival once fantasized, that is crucial; it is disillusionment that leads the desiring individual to reality. (22-23)

Longing for the object that is forged in one's fantasy is longing for the impossible. Phillips, following Freud, suggests that the inevitable frustration incited by the impossible pursuit leads one to *turning to* the reality – the only place where any real satisfactions can occur. Freud terms this pattern of psychological process 'the reality principle', which, in his theory, works along with 'the pleasure principle' as the two fundamental principles of mental functioning. Fantasizing is what we all do, as both Lucretius and Freud recognise. In the breaking of fantasy, whether it is willed or not, it is *reality* that one has to turn to.

Let us look back at Lucretius' lover. Lucretius tells us that hiding will be in vain in the end, as the dark thoughts can occur in the lover's mind, just as the beautiful fantasy does:

Our Venuses are not unaware of this, and so they use their utmost efforts all the more to hide all that goes on behind the scenes of life from those they wish to keep bound up in love. All in vain. For in your mind you can drag everything into the light, search all smiles, and if her mind is good and free from spite, then, for your part, let her go, and pardon those features which make her a human being. (1184-91)

The way to go in overcoming the inevitable frustration, Lucretius says, is to 'overlook all this in your turn, and yield to human life'. The illusions created in the mind need to be acknowledged and broken. After this, the more real human life, and indeed the person herself,

is to be seen. It is in this very sense that May (2011) suggests that Lucretius' love is not to be 'transcended or sublimated' (80), in that it does not involve 'passionate attention to a reality conceived as supremely valuable, as in Plato's search for the essence of beauty, or the Christian's devotion to God' (72). Lucretius' reality after disillusionment does seem like, as Nussbaum (1994) comments, a disappointing denouement. But what May does not see is the value that is contained in this very reality. What is taught by Lucretius is that we have the tendency to either fail to notice, or have no courage to face, the less dazzling part of life. We should neither stick to the fantasy, nor merely embrace disenchantment, but find the way to attend to the reality without being adversely affected by the bias one holds, and try to attend to the person with all the qualities she has. Thus the readiness of the lover to see in an illusion-free way makes genuine attention possible. This then makes a genuine human relationship possible.

What one does when following Lucretius' (and Epicurus') teaching on love, and desire in general, is, we can say, neither eagerly pursue desire satisfaction, nor maliciously avoid it. On the one hand, from the Epicurean categorisation of desire, we learn that Epicurus' attitude to desire is not a vulgar-hedonist one – maximising *kinetic* pleasure is not the aim; rather, the Epicurean sense of *eudaimonia* is one that requires one to relax into *katastematic* pleasure. On the other hand, as we have seen in Lucretius' rich explorations of illusion, such Epicurean teaching encourages us to attend to reality in a genuine way, through examining our desires and the wrong beliefs and fantasies involved. The problematic desires are of value in this sense. They are not simply to be dismissed and avoided. In fact they offer a rich source for self-improvement and the wisdom to see.

## Chapter 5 Stoicism and Desire

If you can, show them the better way. If you cannot, remember that this is why you have the gift of kindness. The gods too are kind to such people, and in their benevolence even help them achieve some ends – health, wealth, fame. You can do it too. Or tell me – who is stopping you?

– Marcus Aurelius<sup>30</sup>

In the last chapter, I examined how Epicurean philosophy works as therapy to treat disturbances caused by desire. In this chapter, I will explore desire and therapy in another Hellenistic school – Stoicism. Similar to Epicureanism, Stoicism takes the medicine analogy seriously. Stoicism shares with Epicureanism a view that sees human emotions as having important cognitive aspects. In the arising of an emotion, sadness, jealousy or joy, a corresponding belief or judgement can be found. Both schools believe that the cure of emotion lies in the correction of such belief. Stoicism also shares with Epicureanism the belief that tranquillity is the highest good.

But Stoicism takes a different route to achieve tranquillity. In respect of treating desire, the Stoics take a more disciplined attitude. The stereotype is that an Epicurean is self-indulgent, and a Stoic is ascetic. In both cases the stereotype is not correct. The Epicurean idea of pleasure is often misunderstood. The misunderstanding of the Stoics, however, is subtler and more difficult to deal with. One of the most common misunderstandings of Stoic philosophy is the assumption that it has a purely negative attitude towards desire and emotion. According to such a perspective, all desires and emotions are understood as bad, and the ultimate goal of Stoic teaching is to help its followers achieve a state where the person has no desire at all. That goal is questioned and criticised as being inhuman. In this chapter, I would like to argue that the understanding of the Stoic sage, or of the person cured

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<sup>30</sup> *Meditations (Med.)*, XI:11.



by Stoic therapy as inhuman, is mistaken, and that there is a role for good emotion and desire in Stoicism.

In order to do this, as well as to explore how Stoic philosophy is relevant to people today and to modern therapy, I will examine two particular themes within Stoic philosophy: *the discipline of assent* and *the understanding of emotion*. Before that, however, I would like to say something about the problems we face in accessing and understanding the original Stoic texts.

### **Studying Stoic thought**

Problems about the authenticity of the surviving material will be encountered immediately by anyone who wants to study Stoic philosophy. First of all, like Epicureanism, most written texts by the early founders of the school (to the extent that they did write at all) are not available to modern readers. The works of the first three heads of the Stoic school, Zeno of Citium (c.344 BCE – c.262 BCE), Cleanthes (c.330 BCE – c.230 BCE) and Chrysippus (c.279 BCE – c.206 BCE), are mostly missing. Only titles and some fragments are left today. Most Stoic works left by Stoic philosophers are from Roman times – works of Seneca (4 BCE – 65 CE), Epictetus (c.55 – c.135) and Marcus Aurelius (121 – 180). But even though their works are alleged to be more complete, they may not be as complete as one who intends to grasp a ‘Stoic thought system’ may hope. Epictetus, for example, never wrote down his thoughts. The works we have nowadays to study his philosophy are *The Discourse* and *Enchiridion (Handbook)*, which were written by his disciple Arrian of Nicomedia in the form of notes taken in class. Although probably more historians would agree on the authenticity of Arrian’s report of Epictetus’ teaching, even those books do not lay out in a straight-forward way the ‘system of thought’ of the Stoic school. The works of Marcus Aurelius are more complicated. The abundant notes or passages written by Marcus which survive were collected and edited into several books. But whether Marcus intended to write those books is still widely disputed. It also seems that Marcus, when writing the passages, did not have an idea of their being a part of a bigger work – a systematic book about Stoic philosophy; nor did he have titles for these texts. Most historians tend to agree that these notes were meant to be kept for himself simply as his reflections on practising Stoic philosophy. These two examples, however, do exemplify the character of Stoic philosophy as being practical more than purely theoretical. The character of such commitment to the practical use of philosophy and the tension between this commitment and building an

intellectual system of philosophical ideas have been widely discussed.<sup>31</sup> It is generally agreed that Stoic philosophy as a philosophy may be quite different from what philosophy nowadays looks like. Hadot (1998) aptly describes it as ‘a way of life’, and as consisting of ‘spiritual exercises’.

Another difficulty one comes across in studying Stoicism concerns the long time-scale of it. Stoicism in antiquity, similar to other Hellenistic philosophical schools, was developed throughout more than six centuries in two different political, geographical, and linguistic areas. With regard to this difficulty, some scholars believe that the historical and literary context in which each particular philosopher wrote needs to be fully attended to if one wants to genuinely understand their particular thoughts in a tradition. This will require one to learn the language the philosopher wrote in, and the social contexts, the conventions, rituals, other contemporary thought, etc. Others try to be more biographical in the sense that, when they discuss ‘Stoic thoughts’, they focus on one philosopher at one time, tracing who they learned from, who they had converse with, and which texts they read. Pierre Hadot, for example, belongs to the latter group. Both approaches demand much work.

As I have mentioned, Hadot (1998), in his approach points out that the distinctiveness of Stoic philosophy when compared to modern philosophy, lies in its being ‘a way of life’. He reminds us that doing philosophy in antiquity is not about coming up with new ideas:

Ancient philosophy had nothing in common with our contemporary philosophers, who imagine that philosophy consists, for each philosopher, in inventing a ‘new discourse’ or new language, all the more original the more it is incomprehensible and artificial. In general, ancient philosophy was situated within a tradition, and attached to a school. (73)

Hadot tells us that doing philosophy in this sense, perhaps to the surprise of many of us, required one first to choose a school, then to commit oneself to learning the dogmas of the school. The originality of the philosophical content was *not* the goal of philosophising. The disciples, who were supposed to learn the same disciplines, however, may come up with different thoughts and difficulties during their own practices although the central dogmas in each school often remained unchanged throughout many centuries. If we agree with Hadot’s main account of the nature and the task of philosophers in Greco-Roman times, we may be justified, in attempting to give a coherent and synthetic Stoic account of desire, in drawing on some Stoic principles and fragmented thoughts, despite of their incompleteness in some

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<sup>31</sup> For example, A. A. Long (2002; 2006), and John Sellars (2003).

respects. In this chapter, I will focus on one particular Stoic discipline – the discipline of assent.<sup>32</sup> It provides an account of the mechanism of human judgement, in which there are restrictions on human thinking, and the space to break the restrictions. In understanding this mechanism, and where freedom lies, issues about how to deal with desire will naturally follow. Before continuing, however, I believe that it is worth investigating further what Hadot means by understanding philosophy as a 'way of life', as it involves something we need to know in order to be able to understand Stoicism as an actual human 'discipline', rather than what it may superficially appear to be.

### **Philosophy as a way of life**

For modern readers, it may be very difficult to imagine what it means to do philosophy in the way that Hadot describes, for in the Hellenistic period 'to philosophize is to choose a school, convert to its way of life, and accept its dogmas' (60). The dogmas, Hadot adds, are 'not open to discussion' (*ibid*). Philosophising, after choosing a school, is a task that requires the pupil's faith in the school. A task like this may be imagined more easily in a religious context for modern readers – a person chooses to place faith in a religion, and wholeheartedly practise whatever advice the religion offers. The action of 'believing' is, almost by definition, in conflict to what many understand by 'philosophising' nowadays. Believing, as it were, is defined by accepting the truthfulness of something that you do not have evidence of, whether it is true or not. One has, at least partly, to put aside the faculty of questioning, which seems to be so fundamental now in exercising human agency. But faith seems to be a key when one is embarking on the Stoic journey of philosophy.

Hadot himself does not use the term 'faith'. His attitude towards it may be similar to that towards the term 'religion', when it comes to its association with Stoic philosophy. He explicitly rejects adopting the term when illustrating philosophy as a way of life as the term may bring 'vague and imprecise implications, both social and mythical' (309). However, he does talk about acceptance, in an unusual and almost extreme way (which I will discuss as 'radical acceptance'). This does, I think, resemble an attitude close to faith. Whether faith, or religion, is a good term to be used here, it is important to bear in mind that a 'radical acceptance' is required in practising, and perhaps truly understanding, Stoic philosophy. To

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<sup>32</sup> The discipline of assent is one of the three disciplines (the other two are the discipline of desire and the discipline of action). These were firstly structured by Roman Stoic Epictetus as a way to remember Stoic practices, and then were adopted by Marcus Aurelius. Hadot suggests that such a structure was not seen in the Stoic texts before Epictetus.

learn Stoic philosophy, one cannot cherry-pick, as John Sellars, one of the founders of *Modern Stoicism*, points out. While our judgement is a target these practices aim at changing, a way of learning through adopting certain aspects and rejecting or neglecting others as one likes may lead to failure, and perhaps even, reinforce the problematic judgements one already holds.

But the difficulties go deeper than the tendency of people today to just cherry-pick when deciding what their ‘philosophy’, or ‘life philosophy’, is. A trickier difficulty, alluded to above, lies in the ‘setting aside’, or what is sometimes viewed as ‘giving up’, one’s faculty of reasoning. Nussbaum (1994) expresses this worry about giving up one’s power of thinking rationally, with a description of a dilemma her fictional character Nikidion, a philosophy pupil in Hellenistic period, faced:

For that school (Epicureanism), it seems, did not respond to her intuition that active practical reasoning is something of intrinsic worth and dignity, something essential to her humanity... And its asymmetrical structures of authority in reasoning encouraged her, as pupil, to receive with passive trust and to retain within her the dogmatic teachings of the master, rather than to reason actively on her own (321).

The authoritarian character of the philosophical school makes it seem suspicious to Nikidion. It did not encourage her active reasoning, something she deemed as essential to her humanity. Instead, the dogmatic teaching encouraged just receiving it passively and ‘with trust’. Nussbaum continues:

Nikidion feels that to give up the aim of taking charge of her own life, by her very own thinking, is to give up something too deep and too essential; she feels she would not survive without it... She wants to become more, not less, of a distinct self, healthier and stronger, thinking only her own thoughts, and thinking them actively, rather than being a passive vessel for the dogmas of another. (*ibid.*)

Nikidion’s worry is perhaps also Nussbaum’s worry – one is rooted deeply in modern culture, where the distinctness of the self, the power of one’s taking charge of one’s life, with the capacity of reason being active rather than being passive, are so essential that any thinking system that ignores, or even discourages, them would be perceived as a threat to one’s humanity. Nussbaum’s worry does not come from nowhere, but from this very worry about wanting to hold on to what she, as her fictional pupil Nikidion, deems as essential to humanity: ‘a sense of self’ and the self’s ability to be active, to be reasoning. This may

prevent her from seeing an important point behind what constitutes Stoic philosophical exercises despite her extraordinary understanding of Stoicism. The failure to see this – I would like to call it the ‘spiritual part’, in which ‘radical acceptance’ is required – leads to a dilemma that she found in Stoicism, and in fact, in almost all Hellenistic schools: the dilemma between living life in a strictly ‘virtuous’ and self-sufficient way in which a sense of happiness (*eudaimonia*) is supposedly guaranteed, and living one's life in a more humane way, in which one retains such valuable elements as personal relationships and openness to vulnerability.

To relinquish a particular sense a self may be what is crucial in starting to understand what philosophy as a way of life in antiquity means. This task, however, seems rather counterintuitive; it is difficult to achieve, since any effort that is aimed at denying or weakening an idea of the self seems to have the tendency to immediately enforce the idea. The attempt to do this and its difficulties have been expressed by Hadot in his objection to Michel Foucault's adoption of his work, in the process of which Foucault changed it into dealing with ‘techniques of the self’. Hadot himself insists that ‘spiritual exercises’ is a more adequate term. The idea of the self will be discussed further later in this chapter, and the questions arising from the terms Foucault uses will be considered again in chapter 6. Here I would like to come back to the idea of philosophy as a way of life that Hadot (1995) tries to show:

Each school, then, represents a form of life defined by an ideal of wisdom. The result is that each one has its corresponding fundamental inner attitude... and its own manner of speaking... But above all every school practices exercises designed to ensure spiritual progress toward the ideal state of wisdom, exercises of reason that will be, for the soul, analogous to the athlete's training or to the application of a medical cure. Generally, they consist, above all, of self-control and meditation. (59)

The philosophical school had an ideal of wisdom which is sometimes embodied by a sage. Choosing to be a pupil of a particular school is choosing to devote one's life to achieving the ideal. This task involves commitment and never-ending practices. The pupil will be taught particular methods in order to achieve the end state. These tools include right attitudes to hold, principles to guide everyday life, and exercises to practice to prepare for all situations in life. It is worth noting that the whole process is, as Hadot insists on calling it (despite its unpopularity in modern times) spiritual. The practices are to be done in order for a spiritual transformation to take place. Hadot (1998) explains: ‘dogmas are not mathematical rules,

learned once and for all and then mechanically applied. Rather, they must somehow become achievements of awareness, intuitions, emotions, and moral experiences which have the intensity of a mystical experience or a vision' (51). The importance does not lie merely in the person's acting according to what she was told, though being able to act in the right way has its intrinsic significance. What is more important in the practice is one's awareness of one's own way of thinking and behaviour, and often this is more easily to be encountered in a situation when one finds difficulties in following the rules.

### **Stoicism and therapy in antiquity and today**

Before examining the discipline of assent and the Stoic understanding of emotion, I would like to look at the relation between Stoicism and therapy. The Stoics took the metaphor of medicine seriously, but we have to be careful in understanding the term 'Stoic therapy'. The therapeutic character in ancient Stoicism cannot be understood without the idea of *eudaimonia*: to cure a diseased soul it is not merely enough for the person to feel better; the idea is to help the person to live well, or to live fully in the Stoic sense. The passage written by one of the founders of Greek Stoicism, Chrysippus, shows the therapeutic consideration in the early development of Stoic philosophy: '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. Nor is it true that the latter is inferior to the former, in its theoretical grasp and therapeutic treatment of individual cases' (quoted in Nussbaum, 1994:14). Along with the Epicureans and other contemporary philosophers, the Stoics explicitly articulated their practical and therapeutic commitment. And in fact, according to Nussbaum (1994), the metaphor of philosophy as medicine and philosopher as surgeon was used in Stoic texts much more than in all other Hellenistic schools.

It is worth noting that the relation between Stoicism and therapy is distinctive in that Stoicism, among all philosophical schools of this period, has been appealed to the most in recent decades in therapeutic practice. Stoic philosophy and ideas are adopted in dealing with the stress that people experience in daily life, and as a kind of therapy for mental problems in general. Stoicism has also been appealed to when 'philosophical foundations' are sought for modern psychotherapeutic practices, particularly in the cases of cognitive-behaviour therapy (CBT), founded by Aaron Beck (1976), and rational emotional therapy, founded by Albert Ellis (1962). Moreover, Stoic philosophy has been treated as a rich source for understanding emotion and human psychology. On this subject I would like to point out the relation between

emotion and beliefs – a relation which is fundamental both to Stoic philosophy as therapy and to modern CBT. Due to the purpose of this chapter, I will not discuss the difference between CBT and Stoicism, nor the practical application of Stoic philosophy, such as how to correct wrong beliefs.<sup>33</sup> What I will discuss in this chapter is what the goal of Stoic therapy that appears in the Stoic texts, in terms of ‘the cured person’, may look like.

Examples of the influence of Stoicism in modern practices can be found in the so-called ‘Modern Stoicism Organisation’, which was developed in 2012, following a workshop that involved both Stoicism and Psychotherapy. One of the main activities they have been doing since 2014 is named *Stoic Week*. The number of participants has grown rapidly every year. In 2014, a course, SMRT (Stoic Mindfulness & Resilience Training), was also designed to establish a systematic Stoic therapeutic practice. Sellars (2017), one of the founders, explains the aim of the organisation as two-fold: one is ‘to see if we could test the efficacy of Stoic practices and exercises reported by Roman Stoics’; and the other is ‘to introduce Stoicism to a much wider audience’.

It seems that what Sellars hopes, when stating the aim of testing and making Stoicism more widely known, is to develop a better understanding of its therapeutic aspects. In his observations, however, he distinguishes two ways that Stoicism offers ‘therapy’ in modern times. The first type he calls ‘first aid’ therapy. It is to offer ‘immediate help for emotional disturbance’. These are when Stoic suggestions are useful for people who are ‘in the grip of an emotion’. These do not have to be adopted together with other Stoic ideas such as its cosmological or ethical ones. They work on their own. The second type is more ‘narrowly Stoic.’ It involves central ideas of Stoic philosophy, including ‘their theory of value and their psychology.’ In other words, the second type may require more *being* a Stoic (or a Stoic philosopher). The first type, it seems, is open to a wide range of people in the sense that it simply provides pieces of advice from Stoic philosophy for people to take up as they choose. It is not ideal, Sellars suggests, but it is fine as long as it offers practical help. Sellars believes that some Stoic ideas from antiquity may strike one as strange or ‘out of date’ for today, such as the notion of Providence; and, hence, may not be easily accepted even by those who feel a certain sympathy with the Stoics.

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<sup>33</sup> Discussions of Stoicism as the root for CBT and the future developments can be found in Robert Montgomery (1993), Edward Murguía & Kim Díaz (2015), Donald Robertson (2016), Andrea Cavanna (2018) and Christopher Crawford and Benjamin Helm (2019).

The same point is made by Jean-Baptiste Gourinat (2009), who suggests, in *Stoicism Today*, that although Stoicism is still a living philosophy, some of the ideas are outdated and unacceptable for modern human beings. Gourinat suggests that although some Stoic principles have proved to be useful, they *go too far*, for many of our contemporaries, and so are unappealing, or in his terms, intolerable. One principle Gourinat has in mind when he articulates this ‘outdatedness’ is one of the core principles of Stoicism which it inherits from Platonic ethics – that virtue is the only good, and vice is the only real evil. Gourinat, while not voicing disagreement with the proposition, criticises the step that the Stoics then take in claiming that ‘virtue is also sufficient for happiness’ (506). It is this step, he says, that makes Stoicism out of date because it dismisses two things that modern people treasure so much that it appears to be almost impossible for them to accept any ethical claims that exclude these elements. One is individuality, and the other is a sense of happiness that cannot be envisaged *without* the idea of individuality. In Gourinat words:

Virtuous life is based on the conviction that one's individuality is unimportant and must be subjected to the perspective of the universe as a whole. And this is certainly the element that is easiest to identify as the central feature of Stoic ethics: to bear the misfortunes of life in the light of the conviction that we ourselves are unimportant in comparison with the universe, and that ordinary goods are precarious and indifferent since they do not lie within our power. Paradoxically enough, even though Stoicism takes happiness as its goal, it seems to be a philosophy more suitable for protecting us from the suffering and resentment generated by the misfortunes of life than one that is capable of making us positively happy. But the way in which such a stance of detachment is attained may also strike us as unacceptable: it seems that Stoic ethics attempts to force us to renounce our emotions and affections, and this may appear to be an inhuman or intolerable position. (*ibid.*)

The concept of happiness that excludes the very things that make us *happy*, e.g. health, money, and love, and requires us to dismiss our own *individuality* and admit that we ourselves are insignificant small parts from the perspective of the universe is, as Gourinat believes, inhuman. Being human, for Gourinat, who, it seems, holds an idea of humanity highly influenced by enlightenment thoughts, cannot be anything if the ‘human’s subjectivity’, including personal properties, characters, and even emotions, which *belong to* this subjectivity, is not recognised.

Such criticism of the Stoics for being ‘inhuman’ does not only come from those who hold a post-Enlightenment perspective on what counts as being human, e.g. the quality of



autonomy, rationality, self-determinacy and individuality. It comes from others with more general ideas about what counts as a human being, and what counts as a happy life. The different answers to these very issues, for example, account for disagreements between different philosophical schools in Hellenistic times. However, the accusation of an inhuman element in Stoic thought, especially due to their ‘extirpation of passions’, seems to be of particular relevance to our discussion in this chapter which aims to explore the Stoic discipline of desire and its therapeutic philosophy. In a similar vein, one finds the Stoics often depicted as being cold and unloving. It is difficult to imagine that such a philosophy can offer a good model for living one's life either in general or on more specific occasions. More seriously, perhaps, there is the question raised forcefully by Nussbaum (1994; 2009) about the Stoic concept of *eudaimonia*. That is: to what extent can an idea of a good life become too impoverished to be held? In what follows I will attempt to find some answers to these questions.

### **The discipline of assent and Stoic freedom**

Apart from the idea of the individual self, there are other ideas that are either loaded with meaning that were not there in antiquity, or taken for granted by modern readers in a way that the original deeper meanings and implications are overlooked. In this section, I will discuss the idea of freedom. It should be noted that being free, or becoming free, is one of the aims of Stoic philosophy, though, paradoxical as it may seem, many Stoic disciplines appear to be restricting one's freedom. The Stoic teaching, which, as we have seen above, often takes the form of dogmas (which are to be ‘followed’, not to be discussed or argued), may strike us as something closer to restraining than to liberating. However, for many it is not an unfamiliar idea that in order to be free, some rules are necessary, either on an individual or a communal level. In his well-known essay ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’, Isaiah Berlin (one of the most influential figures in modern history to contribute to a concept of freedom) also recognises the necessity of restrictions in order to maximise individual freedom. The paradox between freedom and discipline in Stoicism is, however, not my focus here. I do not intend to prove that freedom is possible through discipline. Nor do I want to focus on how to achieve freedom for a Stoic follower. No doubt both are issues of significance in Stoicism. Here, instead, I would like to focus the discussion on something that is often dismissed quickly, because it seems to be obvious and merely taken for granted – that is, restrictions that arise as a result of conventions or habits. While the idea is widely accepted that some sort of freedom is possible no matter what the external circumstance one is in, it is less recognised, and a less

popular idea that it is almost impossible to *be rid of* restrictions that arise from conventions. Certainly, freedom for the Stoics is often not pursued by trying to completely get rid of restrictions; rather, freedom is most of the time experienced while such restrictions are present.

Neglect of the power of such conventions and habits, I believe, leads to a false idea of freedom. This false idea is reinforced by the idea of ‘power of choice’ and gives a wrong sense of ‘radical freedom’, which is associated with an individual’s desire to change an undesirable circumstance by changing the situation actively. This misconception of freedom, which is linked with the power of choice, can put an inappropriate emphasis on the ‘active’ action, and encourages the reader to overlook an important goal of Stoic practice, which I would like to call a ‘radical acceptance’ (this is not the same as the interpretation of the Stoics’ attitude to so-called external objects which is interpreted by Nussbaum as ‘radical detachment’). Such Stoic ‘acceptance’ is articulated by Marcus Aurelius in the following passages: ‘to be disposed, with regard to those who are angry with you and offend you, in such a way as to be ready to respond to the first call, and to be reconciled as soon as they themselves wish to return to you’ (*Med.*, I:7), and ‘I must therefore joyfully accept and love that which happens to me as a consequence of them’ (*Med.*, VI:44, 3). Marcus takes an attitude of ‘acceptance’ as a reaction to the different possibilities of how a person may act to him or how an event will evolve.

### *The discipline of assent*

To get to a deeper understanding of this ‘radical acceptance’, it is necessary to examine Stoic theory on the mechanism of judgement, or mechanism of assent (*sunkatathesis*). This mechanism is explained by Epictetus as follows:

These representations of the soul, which the philosophers call *phantasiai*, by which a person’s spirit is momentarily moved, at the first glimpse of the thing which presents itself to the soul: they do not depend upon the will, and are not free. Rather, by means of some kind of force which is peculiar to them, they throw themselves upon people, in order to be known... Assents, by contrast, which is called *sunkatathesis*, by means of which these representations are recognised and judged, are voluntary and take place through human freedom.

*Phantasiai* can be translated as representations or images. The soul encounters *phantasiai* from the external world. The image does not depend on the soul or the will; rather, it *throws itself into the soul*. This encountering has a characteristic of passivity from the soul’s point of

view. *Sunkatathesis*, on the other hand, is *an action of the soul*, which includes two main elements: recognition and judgement. It needs to be made clear that this recognition and judgement do not emanate from *the object* itself, but are due to the mind's faculty of representation: its impulse to form an image of what is being perceived.

Hadot (1998) draws on the historian Diogenes Laertius' words, to further explain this psychological mechanism: 'the *Phantasiai* comes first, and then reflection (*dianoia*) which enunciates what it feels as a result of the *Phantasiai*, and expresses it in discourse' (102). The mechanism, therefore, may be understood in three stages.

- (1) Stage one: *phantasiai* (the representation). At this stage, the perception is primary, with no values attached. As explained above, the soul (or the person) is receiving what comes to her through her senses. She is a passive receiver at this stage. In other words, when an image or a sound is presented within the range of receiving by the senses, there is an 'effect' upon the soul.
- (2) Stage two: *dianoia* (the reflection). This stage, which was not explained in detail in the earlier passage by Epictetus, is significant. This is the soul's *reaction to the* representation, usually in a form of an *inner discourse*. It is based on feelings or thoughts about the image, a value-laden discourse, or expression, arising in the soul. Hadot tells us the Stoics see it as 'an activity of the guiding part of the soul' (*ibid.*). It is actively conducted by the soul. In this stage, the soul produces another *phantasiai*, which is the combination of the image it receives, and an inner discourse attached to the image.
- (3) Stage three: *sunkatathesis* (the assent). This stage is crucial for a judgement to become official. It is when the person gives the assent to, or to rejects, the judgement formed in stage two. It requires, as mentioned above, recognition of the judgement, and a decision about whether the judgement should be kept.

The perception that occurs in stage one is passively formed (in the sense that the person's will does not take part), and neutral concerning value. For example, when the sound of a train comes into our ears, there is a sound perception formed. This stage serves as the basis on which the judgement will be developed. With the activity of stage two – the formation of an inner discourse as a reaction to the perception – the perception turns into a judgement. For example, an inner discourse that comes along with the sound of the train may be 'it is horrifying', or 'I do not like it'. The crucial thing to notice here is that even if the formation of an inner course is an action of the soul, it does not necessarily mean that it is

*voluntary*, in the sense that it is controllable. This is forcefully argued by Nussbaum, and this is also why, according to Nussbaum, people are so difficult to cure. The inner course is formed from the conventions and beliefs one has learnt. If one is unaware of them, it would seem impossible to become detached from them. Even if we *are* aware, they can be so deeply rooted that removal or correction of them is very difficult.

Stage three is significant in this *mechanism of assent* in which the whole possibility of freedom lies. The differentiation between stage two and stage three lies in what Stoicism enables us to be aware of regarding both the restrictions that are placed upon us, and the possibility of a path towards freedom. Epictetus tells us that the inner discourse itself is not final; it requires *a recognition* of such discourse to make a judgement final. The person recognises that a judgement has taken place, and either goes with it or does not go with it. When the thought ‘the sound of the train is horrifying’ appears in one’s mind, and the person affirms the thought as the *judgement* of the sound, the person gives assent to the inner discourse formed earlier. In other words, the person does not just objectively perceive a sound, and objectively come up with this idea ‘it is horrifying’. Because of the affirmation that happens in an inner discourse, there is a possibility to reject the judgement of the discourse and to form another one. The example of the sage, who heard a terrifying sound, given by Epictetus illustrates this possibility.

This is why, when a terrifying sound is heard – whether it comes from the heavens or from the collapse of some building, or whether it announces some kind of danger, or anything else of that nature – it is necessary that the soul of the sage, too, be also slightly moved and constricted and terrified; not because he judges that some form of evil is present, but because of the rapid and involuntary movements, which usurp the proper task of the mind and of reason... The sage, however, does not give his assent immediately to such representations which terrify his soul; he does not approve them, but brushes them aside and rejects them, and it seems to him that there is nothing to fear from such things. This is the difference between the sage and the foolish person: the foolish person thinks that things are as they appear to the first emotion of his soul – that is to say, atrocious and frightful, and the foolish person approves by this assent these first impressions, which appear to justify his fear. (quoted in Hadot, 1998:102-3)

For the foolish person, the judgement as the combination of the sensual perception and an inner discourse is taken as *the* judgement. The power of assent that resides within the person, and the work of it, may not be even recognised. In other words, the foolish person does not know the possibility of ‘disagreeing’ with the judgement formed in the second stage, which is

likely to be just the result of social conventions that the person internalised. Such *recognition*, therefore, is the first step the foolish person will take in learning to become a Stoic sage. Stoic freedom depends on this recognition which is realised in an action which follows – either in assenting to or denying the second-stage judgment. The recognition of this space for assenting is the first step in becoming free, and continuous exercises of this sort form the path to achieving genuine freedom.

### *The Stoic idea of Freedom*

The discipline of assent is the path to personal freedom. The Stoic idea of freedom focuses on one's mental and inner status. This can be contrasted with an idea of freedom that focuses more on the person's physical and external conditions. Freedom in this latter sense belongs to those, for example, who are not in jail, or are not slaves. One example of freedom in this sense is the concept of 'negative freedom', which has been developed since the eighteenth century in western history and was famously articulated by Berlin in the 1950's. Negative freedom, or negative liberty, designates the space that the individual is given in deciding for her own life, without constraints or interference. Berlin (1969) illustrates it as follows:

If I am prevented by others from doing what I could otherwise do, I am to that degree unfree; and if this area is contracted by other men beyond a certain minimum, I can be described as being coerced, or, it may be, enslaved ... Coercion implies the deliberate interference of other human beings within the area in which I could otherwise act. (169)

Freedom in this sense is defined by the lack of constraints and coercion in doing what one wants (especially constraints as results of human actions). A modern ideal of human beings as rational, self-determining agents is underlined in defence of this 'minimum (negative) freedom'. The rational agent, if given the space, is assumed to be capable of knowing and pursuing what she wants. Believing in this human capacity, J. S. Mill claims that 'unless the individual is left to live as he wishes in "the part [of his conduct] which merely concerns himself", civilisation cannot advance.... there will be no scope for spontaneity, originality, genius, for mental energy, for moral courage' (quoted in Berlin, 1969:174). Based on this assumption, the space for a person to decide goals for herself, and to pursue them, is almost sacred. For the defender of freedom, things in the way of a person's pursuit of a goal are considered to be obstacles, and need to be removed.

Here Berlin acknowledges the difference between the freedom to pursue a goal, and the necessity of its happening. He gives the example of a lame person not being able to run, and differentiates the inability of achieving something from the constraints placed upon oneself by other human beings. In this sense, Berlin explicitly claims that the negative freedom defended is a kind of political freedom, and acknowledges that freedom in other senses may refer to different things, such as social freedom or economic freedom. But from the political perspective, if the constraints on the path of an individual's pursuit of her goal are caused by other people, a just political system should aim at removing them. This principle is agreed by many thinkers, although it is debatable where the boundaries should lie between the area in which the individual is left with no interference and the area where the government or the community should intervene.

It seems that even when Berlin discusses negative freedom as a type of political freedom, he does think that it has ethical implications. That is, on a personal level, the individual should try to remove the obstacles that block her path: 'in the case of non-human objects, by physical action; in the case of human resistance, by force of persuasion, as when I induce somebody to make room for me in his carriage, or conquer a country which threatens the interests of my own' (187). Such 'negative freedom' is seen by Berlin as a type of political freedom which has ethical implications for us all. Attempting to remove obstacles, in Berlin's view, is necessary. The result is an 'increase of ... personal freedom' (even if the means is unjust). He therefore condemns approaches to freedom, which when confronting 'obstacles', encourage a response of 'non-action'.

If one identifies freedom with lack of physical and external constraints, and identifies fighting for freedom with action, like Berlin does, one may find it difficult to accept the kind of freedom that the Stoics tried to achieve as legitimate. Berlin criticises Epictetus' approach to freedom – by extinguishing his own wishes and embracing the life a tyrant had invented for him, he 'feels freer than his master' – as an 'antithesis of political freedom' (186). He also criticises Marcus Aurelius' approach to liberation (from desires) as a 'strategic retreat into an inner citadel' (182). What the Stoics did, with no actions to make changes to the conditions they were in, i.e. to remove the obstacles that kept them from getting what they wanted, was an act of escape: 'I have withdrawn into myself; there, and there alone, I am secure' (*ibid.*). Berlin mocks the Stoic strategy as follows:

It is as if I were to say: 'I have a wound in my leg. There are two methods of freeing myself from pain. One is to heal the wound. But if the cure is too difficult or uncertain, there is another

method. I can get rid of the wound by cutting off my leg. If I train myself to want nothing to which the possession of my leg is indispensable, I shall not feel the lack of it.' (*ibid.*)

The example shows the absurdity of the work of so-called 'deliberate self-transformation', in which one persuades himself that the thing he wants, but cannot get, has no value. Achieving real freedom for Berlin means *taking action* – action to choose, action to change, and action to pursue. On this view, the Stoics' inner freedom is an act of self-denial. We will come back to the Stoic's idea of inner freedom later.

### **Stoicism on emotion – is a successful Stoic follower emotionless?**

Freedom in the sense of negative freedom focuses on external restraints, and positive freedom focuses on a person's ability to achieve a certain goal. We have seen that Stoic freedom is different from both concepts. But what does Stoic freedom focus on? Some commentators of Stoicism argue that the goal of Stoic teaching is to achieve a state where one is free from all emotional disturbances.<sup>34</sup> An image of a successful Stoic follower, therefore, would be of a person who is always calm – even to the extent that an event usually regarded as tragedy happens, e.g. when losing a family member or suffering from illness. The image of a proper Stoic is therefore of someone who is almost emotionless, or even inhuman. Other commentators argue that the Stoics would not be against *all* emotions.<sup>35</sup> They believe that in Stoic theory, though most emotions are seen as harmful, there *are* good emotions, although there is some disagreement among these thinkers about the role that such emotions would play in the good life. Some believe that they make a positive contribution to it, while others believe rather that they are neutral – neither harmful nor beneficial. People who believe in a role for 'good' emotions would argue that good Stoics are not emotionless, and it is not the purpose of Stoic teaching to be rid of all emotions.

Nussbaum (1994) forcefully argues that the Stoics *would* be against all emotions. She is convinced that what the Stoics wanted to achieve ultimately is not an adjustment of emotions, but the extirpation of them. Although she holds Stoicism in high regard in many ways (including its commitment to tackling urgent human needs and troubles, its individualised therapeutic techniques, and its contribution to the development of the concept of emotion in Western philosophical and psychological history), she has deep reservations, especially when

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<sup>34</sup> For example, Adam Smith (1976), and Martha Nussbaum (1994).

<sup>35</sup> For example, Lawrence C. Becker (2004), Tad Brennan (2005), Margaret R. Graver (2007), and Christopher Gill (2013; 2016). Some of these will be discussed below.

it comes to the endpoint of Stoic philosophy and Stoic therapy. This can be seen in the way she imagines ‘the cured person’, as not having much ‘happiness where she is accustomed to find it’ (400); instead, she is left with a so-called ‘joy’ experienced as the result of ‘the change from suspense and elation to solid self-absorption, from surprise and spontaneity to measured watchfulness, from wonder at the separate and external to security in that which is oneself and one’s own’ (401). Similarly, when it comes to marriage, ‘the cured person’ is someone who takes Epictetus’ suggestion: ‘Stop wanting your husband, and there is not one of the things you want that will fail to happen’ (*Dis.* 2.19.22).<sup>36</sup> The cured person, who is also referred to in Stoicism as the sage or the wise person, is described as someone who is guarded and closed-up. A quote from Cicero shows that: ‘If the wise man should be open to distress, he would also be open to anger ... and also to pity and envy’ (Cicero, *TD* 3.19-20;<sup>37</sup> quoted in Nussbaum, 1994:388).

Her arguments about the closed-up Stoic sage develop along several lines. The first one concerns the mechanism of emotion in Stoicism. In Stoicism, Nussbaum suggests, emotions experienced as positive ones, such as joy, and those as negative ones, such as anger, may be aroused by the same source. The feeling of hope for something good to happen, for example, is bound to coexist with the feeling of fear that the same thing may not happen, or that something bad may happen. The suggestion of the Roman Stoic Seneca - ‘you will cease to fear, if you cease to hope’ (Seneca, *Ep.* 5.7-8;<sup>38</sup> quoted in Nussbaum, 1994:388-9) – shows the underlying premise: that care for the future is the cause for both emotions, one desired and the other is less desired. Thus what is pointed out is that while positive and negative emotions may be experienced as opposite, they are, in a sense, two sides of the same coin. The duality of emotional experience in relation to the same cause is also expressed by Adam Phillips (2012), the contemporary psychoanalyst: ‘if someone can satisfy you they can frustrate you. Only someone who gives you satisfaction can give you frustration’ (14-5). Phillips points out that, while most of us tend to concentrate on getting or not getting what is wanted as the cause of satisfaction and frustration, the important fact that is often overlooked is that both experiences are only possible when the thing or the person *matters* to you. The implication for one possible therapeutic approach is that one should stop all such caring and desiring.

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<sup>36</sup> Epictetus, *The Discourse (Dis.)*.

<sup>37</sup> Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations (TD)*.

<sup>38</sup> Seneca, *Moral Epistles (Ep.)*.



Nussbaum believes that this is the Stoic solution for the therapy of emotion – to tackle the root or the *cause* of the emotion. This brings us to another argument Nussbaum develops to support her image of the emotionless Stoic sage. Most items that evoke our daily emotions have no intrinsic value, and therefore should not be cared about at all. Nussbaum’s argument is based on the Stoic classification of values. In the Stoic classification, there are three types of things in terms of their value to human life. These three types are ‘the good’, ‘the bad’ and ‘the indifferent’. The criterion for classification is ‘whether or not it is in our control’. This passage from the opening of Epictetus’ *Encheiridion* illustrates this:<sup>39</sup>

Some things in the world are up to us, while others are not. Up to us are our faculties of judgment, motivation, desire, and aversion – in short, everything that is our own doing. Not up to us are our body and property, our reputations, and our official positions – in short, everything that is not our own doing. Moreover, the things up to us are naturally free, unimpeded, and unconstrained, while the things not up to us are powerless, servile, impeded, and not our own. ... Next, examine it and test it by these rules that you have. First and foremost: does it involve the things up to us, or the things not up to us? And if it involves one of the things not up to us, have the following response to hand ‘Not my business.’ (1)

The key to this classification of values is the notion that goodness and badness are entirely properties of people’s minds, characters and actions – not properties of external nature or external events (*Ench.* 6, 19, 31). Things are good, or deserve the name of good, in relation to *eudaimonia*, because they are what we can achieve if we make an effort. Similarly, things are bad and deserve the name of bad because they are what we can and should achieve but do not. The Stoic classification of values circumscribes the realm of what we can do, and therefore, what we should devote ourselves to. Certain actions are supposed to bring release, but we should not work on things we cannot change.

This classification, however, leads to a radical ethical view: it puts lots of things that are valued deeply by most people into the category of ‘the indifferent’. These things include family, friendship, love, health, social position etc. Friendship, for example, involves things that are not within our control. They include a person’s personality, their preferences, whether they are compatible with ours, and a person’s very willingness to be a friend of ours. Further there is the fact that the person may need to be separated from us geographically, or may even die; and no matter how much we treasure this person, the friendship will end if it

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<sup>39</sup> Epictetus, *Enchiridion* (Handbook) (*Ench.*).

happens. All these things are not within our control. Whether or not we are able to have this friendship established and sustained is simply not what *we* can decide. The Stoic classification suggests that such things are indifferent, in the sense that having them or not should not be our main concern.

This ‘indifference’, however, is taken by Nussbaum (1994) as equivalent to ‘being cold’ and ‘turning our back’ on such things. She interprets this as implying that we should therefore train ourselves to be emotionally cold to them, and tell ourselves that these things do not affect us in any way:

To cherish something, to ascribe to it a high value, is to give oneself a basis for the response of profound joy when it is present; of fear when it is threatened; of grief when it is lost; of anger when someone else damages it; of envy when someone else has it and you don’t; of pity when someone else loses such a thing through no fault of his or her own. (370)

For Nussbaum, ‘to value something’ is at the opposite end of the spectrum to ‘to deny[ing] something’. On the one side, there is the person who ‘gives value’ to, say friendship. On the other side, there is the person who ‘denies the value’ of friendship. The first person, in giving value to the things that are not within his control, is making himself vulnerable – exposing himself to the danger of losing what he treasures. This person is open to the external world, and other people. But at the same time is open to luck, misfortune and danger: to all the horrible things that can come to hurt him from the external world.

The second person, in Nussbaum’s view ‘the proper Stoic’, is closed. He denies the value of external goods. Therefore, he retreats to his inner world, where everything is within his own control and therefore, secure. He has a ‘good and happy’ life in this inner world. The way Nussbaum interprets the Stoic ‘indifferent’ category would make it identical to what a modern psychologist would term ‘in denial’.<sup>40</sup> Nussbaum herself seems to think so too. One example Nussbaum gives to illustrate this is mourning. Nussbaum contrasts ‘the Stoic way of mourning’ with another way, which she calls ‘the mourning of time’. ‘The mourning of time’ is the method that is used by most people. It is to let the time heal. The death of a loved one brings sharp pain when it first happens, but it causes less and less pain as time passes. Emotion – grief – in this case, diminishes. If this can be called a healing or therapy, time is the tool. One’s judgement, in this case, Nussbaum says, does not change. The judgement here

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<sup>40</sup> A similar interpretation of becoming less attached to a beloved person as a kind of being ‘in denial’ is discussed in Chapter 3 in Socrates’ ascent of *erōs*.

is ‘the loved one is dead’. And what is also contained in this judgement is that the unique loved one is dead’ and ‘the same love will never happen again’. The fact that the judgement does not change, Nussbaum suggests, means that the person remains embracing the idea of the uniqueness of her past love, and hence, leaves herself open to a future sense of loss and vulnerability.

The Stoic way of mourning, on the contrary, involves ‘changing judgement’. The positive results of it are two: the shorter time of grief, and the prevention of the future vulnerability. The changing of judgement, again, lies in the value given to the external goods. The correction of judgement is a process in which the individual goes from valuing external goods such as love and friendship, to giving little value to these external goods. This correction involves a kind of closing-up: ‘if the wise man should be open to distress, he would also be open to anger... and also to pity and envy’ (Cicero, *TD* 3.19-20; quoted in Nussbaum, 1994:388). The closing-up that the correct judgement seems to entail goes well with another image of the Stoic view of passions that Nussbaum depicts – the need for the complete extirpation of them.

‘It is often asked,’ writes Seneca, ‘whether it is better to have moderate passions or none. Our people drive out the passions altogether [*expellunt*]; the Peripatetics moderate them. They must be pulled out root and branch. We must, that is, not only cut out the external manifestation but also tear out the roots of the passion that go deep into the soul since they are beliefs, and not organic parts of our innate constitution, they can be so extirpated ... ‘What is all this? I brought you into the world without longing, without fear, without religious anxiety, without treachery and these other plagues; leave the way you came in.’ (389)

Nussbaum, however, questions Stoic arguments that the wise man, or healthy man, is a person who does not have passions. According to Nussbaum, the problematic Stoic arguments are as follows. Firstly, judgements, with which the passions are associated, can be wrong for the reason given above: that external goods have no intrinsic value. Secondly, passions are not indispensable in order to motivate virtuous action. Thirdly, passions are mostly felt to be painful, and even the allegedly positive emotions bring disturbances, and can spontaneously bring the possibility of upset:

In making the case for seeing the passions as sick conditions of the personality, their underlying dispositional bases as forms of chronic illness, the Stoics like to point out that, after all, passions are felt, more often than not, as violent pains and upheavals of the organism;

moreover, the person subject to them feels herself to be in a chronic condition of weakness and lassitude. (393)

Nussbaum criticises the Stoics, who, in order to persuade people to make the decision to get rid of passions, often describe the painful phenomenology of them. Nussbaum is convinced that a lot of these turn out to be circular arguments – the passions, positive or negative, bring disturbances and painful feelings, therefore they should be got rid of. Nussbaum finds this argument not satisfactory. In her words: ‘for unless Nikidion is already convinced of the ethical value of freedom from disturbance and anxiety, she will be less than overwhelmed by the obvious fact that passions are disturbing’ (394).

In short, Nussbaum finds the Stoics' arguments for why we should get rid of passions unsatisfactory. They assume that to live without passions is better than the other way round, and what they focus on is ways of getting rid of them. If Nussbaum is correct in this respect, one can say that for those who have not made their minds up about whether to get rid of passions altogether, the Stoics do not seem to offer convincing arguments.

### **Not all emotions are bad**

Nussbaum's understanding of the mechanism of emotion makes it an all-or-nothing choice. For Nussbaum, to be open to any emotion is to give value to something, and to give value to something is to allow that thing to evoke negative emotions. Nussbaum believes that the Stoics' choice is to have none; therefore, the solution lies in not giving value to anything that is not up to us, including friendship, love, family, and health etc. One's actions, to correspond, have to be closed to these external goods. Nussbaum's Stoics, thus depicted, seem to be cold and inhumane. This is, however, not the only way to understand Stoic practice. If one accepts the mechanism of emotion and Stoic classification of values, it does not necessarily follow that a person should close himself up once he accepts that many things are not within his control. The key lies in the presupposition that to give something value means that *we will be upset* when things go wrong.

People who argue for a more humane view of Stoicism claim that not all emotions are considered bad in this philosophy. Christopher Gill (2016), for example, suggests that ‘the wise emotions’ are, along with ‘the foolish ones’ and ‘other motivational responses (including parental love, *philostorgia*, and *erōs*)... sometimes presented in Stoic sources as part of the affective repertoire of the wise life’ (146). In another article, Gill (2013) also defends the place of *erōs* in Stoicism. According to Gill, *erōs* is, on the one hand, a motive

for the development of virtue; and, on the other hand, itself a ‘derivative’ of virtue (150). In Stoic terms, it is indifferent to *eudaimonia* – which suggests that it is *not* a necessary element; but this does not mean that it needs to be avoided completely, because it is not evil in itself. Lawrence C. Becker (2004), argues that emotions in Stoicism are not to be eliminated, but to be made appropriate to the occasion, or to be ‘made good’ (251). Both Gill and Becker are convinced that, in Stoicism, there are good emotions (*eupatheia*) that are not to be condemned or eliminated.

This brings us to the fundamental question: what is emotion in Stoicism? Or what do emotions include? The term discussed here is in Greek, *pathos* or *pathe*. Nussbaum suggests that what *pathos* includes are emotions, passions, and desires in modern English. The so-called good emotions (*eupatheia*), for thinkers including Gill and Becker, are not considered by Nussbaum to be what modern English readers would think of emotions – they are too dry, and inhumane. Margaret R. Graver (2007), however, has a different understanding. Graver reads *eupatheia* as affective but it is an affective response *based on* correct belief and judgment.

To avoid confusion, Graver speaks of the ‘affective response’ as including a good form of emotion (*eupatheia*) and a bad form of it (*pathos*). Beside these two, Graver draws attention to the initial physical responses of feeling. She terms these ‘pre-emotions’, or ‘below-threshold responses’ (4). The key element that differentiates these three aspects of feeling is ‘judgement’. Pre-emotions are responses that occur ‘without any judgment’ (*ibid.*). The bad form of emotion (*pathos*) is due to false judgement, whereas the good form is accompanied by correct judgement. We will look in more detail at the three ‘types’ of emotions.

#### (1) Pre-emotion

One example of pre-emotions, Graver explains, is that when a storm arises, it is possible for a stoic philosopher to reveal symptoms of pale complexion and trembling hands. These physical symptoms are the results of mental impressions which are caused by the external events or objects. In the Stoic mechanism of emotion, this is the first stage – an object that comes to the person’s perception and strikes the person with an image, or impression (*phantasiai*). These mental impressions, before given assent (judgement), remain pre-emotions. Pre-emotions are neither bad nor good. As discussed above, they are involuntary,

and therefore not subject to being so categorised. Therefore, they do not affect morality, responsibility, or *eudaimonia*.

(2) The bad form of emotion (*pathos*)

The bad form of emotion (*pathos*) is what Nussbaum, along with most commentators, refers to when using the term ‘emotion’ in Stoicism. An emotion of this form is an affective response that is based on false judgement. In the previous discussion of the mechanism of emotion, we have seen that – an emotion is formed over three stages. It is only at the final stage, when the affective response comes along with some inner discourse and there is *assent to* the inner discourse, that it becomes a ‘bad’ emotion. In the storm example, pale skin and trembling hands are involuntary feelings. They stay pre-emotions, in Graver’s term, before any judgements occur. However, in most people’s experience, if someone then thinks that ‘the storm is scary’, ‘it is bad’, or ‘I do not like it’, the response to the storm becomes a fully fledged emotion. The difference between an ordinary person and a Stoic wise man lies in whether the judgement as exemplified above is recognised and assented to. The wise man ‘maintains the state and strength of his opinion ... about an impression of that kind, namely, that they are not at all to be feared but alarm us by false appearance and empty fright’ (86).

(3) The good form of emotion (*eupatheia*)

Graver, like Nussbaum, agrees that it is the Stoic attitude to become free from all *pathos*. But what is crucially different is that she argues that it is the nuances of meaning she discerns regarding *pathos* and *eupatheia* that are important: ‘not everything we now call an “emotion” was considered by Stoics to be a *pathos* and subject to elimination’ (210). Graver considers that *eupatheia* is part of what in modern English the term ‘emotion’ includes. They are emotions that are value-laden, different from bodily feelings. But they are based on correct judgements.

There are several characteristics of these good forms of emotions. The first is that they belong to wise people. This sounds like a circular argument – the good emotions are those of the wise person, and the wise person’s emotions are good – but this does not elucidate *the content* of good emotions. Moreover, it may give the impression that the emotions that ordinary people have, which are most of us, are bound to be bad. So ordinary people have bad emotions, and will never achieve the state that the wise can reach. This is, to some extent, true. Stoic sagehood is considered to be very difficult to achieve. Some commentators even argue that it is not a state that can ever be achieved. But what use, then, is it to ordinary

people to teach about the wise person's emotions if they can never be achieved? Graver suggests that 'to see what the wise person would do or feel' in Stoic teaching is like a 'thought experiment' (174). The good emotions that are experienced when one has wisdom are not something that is deduced from observation, but 'from careful reflection on the nature of intellectual and moral excellence' (*ibid.*). In other words, the teaching designed by Stoic teachers, none of whom have self-declared as a wise person, is in the form as a kind of personal reflection on Stoic wisdom. Such teaching invites the ordinary person to examine their present experiences in the light of the wise person's version of them. Then, in this light, some 'new significance' will be shed on the individual's own 'imperfect versions' (*ibid.*).

Another characteristic of *eupatheia* is that such emotions come with correct judgements, i.e. with no illusions or unrealistic expectations. This is associated with the principle Stoic attitude towards things that are not within our control. Correct judgements can only be made when one is clear about the distinction between things up to us and things not up to us. With things that are *not* up to us (a family member's welfare, their health, a friend's presence, a loved one's behaviour) the wise person has the wisdom to see them the way they are, without wanting to force them to be the way he might prefer. So emotions that are evoked when one can see with clarity a wide network of phenomena associated with a single event, and can focus on making effort within the realm of what is up to him, are 'good'. The emotions that are evoked by all the things that are not up to us, however, are considered to be bad.

The distinction between what is up and what is not up to us is often read as the evidence of Stoics turning away from family, friends and love. But Graver gives the example that the surgeons may do their job better when they are dispassionate. Affections sometimes blind people. While the Stoics recognise this, they do not suggest that on all occasions one should remain emotionless. This leads us to the next characteristic of *eupatheia*.

The third characteristic is the most significant one in relation to the purpose of this chapter. *Eupatheia* involves us in some affective engagement with the world. Graver points out that the claim about an innate 'other-orientated' tendency of human beings is at the heart of Stoicism. In the famous Hierocles' circle, it is seen as natural, and indeed desirable, that the person extends his area of concern gradually from the self, to those near to him, then to his community or city, and eventually to the whole world. The wise person, therefore, is 'companionable, tactful, encouraging, and in companionship is liable to seek after good intent and friendship' (quoted in Graver, 2007:179). In this more full-blooded sense, the Stoics

claim that ‘cherishing, welcoming and being friends belong only to the righteous’ (*ibid*). Friendship here refers to the ideal type – that is, practised with no illusions and wrong expectations. Graver believes that the interaction between friends as such, with the attitude of ‘cherishing’ and ‘welcoming’, is one of ‘warmth and affection’ (*ibid.*). For a similar reason, since it is natural for human beings to care about others, to act for the sake of others' interest, in fact the Stoics are open to love:

The person worthy of love is the one worthy of righteous love ... erotic virtue is knowledge of the pursuit after young persons of good nature, and is a protreptic toward virtuous matters and, in general, knowledge of how to love honourably, that is why they also say that the person of perfect understanding will fall in love. (quoted in Graver, 2007:187)

So the person of perfect understanding, that is, one who is wise, can also fall in love, and the wise are not emotionless. The difference between the wise and the ordinary person, in love too, is that one loves with correct perceptions and expectations and the other does so with erroneous ones. In this context Graver understands the teaching of detachment, or *apatheia* in Stoicism, is for the sake of wisdom:

The attainment of *apatheia* is not in itself the goal of personal development. For the founding Stoics the endpoint of progress was simply that one should come to understand the world correctly. The disappearance of the *pathe* comes with that changed intellectual condition: one who is in a state of knowledge does not assent to anything false, and the evaluations upon which the *pathe* depend really are false. (210)

Friendship and love, in Nussbaum’s understanding, are ‘external goods’ which are not within our control; therefore, a Stoic follower should learn to stop pursuing these, and even stop caring for them. But Graver’s suggestion shows that it is not friendship or love themselves that are to be dismissed or even avoided; it is the *bad form* of them. Attitudes to friendship, love for family and *erōs*, in other words, are to be examined and, if appropriate, refined.

### **The attitude of being open to the world**

If Graver is correct, the ultimate goal for Stoic freedom is *not* freedom from emotional disturbances or *apatheia*, but freedom from ignorance – and through acquiring wisdom one can make right judgements. It is through wisdom that a person can deal with the tragedies of life without being overwhelmed by sadness; similarly one can face the uncertainties of life without being overwhelmed by worries and anxieties; and one can accept unfair treatment without being overwhelmed by anger, etc. The wise mind ‘knows the beginning and the end,



and knows the ‘Reason’ which informs all of existence and governs the Whole in appointed cycles through all eternity’ (*Med.*, X:32). And thus when the mind understands with clarity the principles of nature, freedom from emotional disturbances follows.

The discrepancy between the two positions I have discussed leads to two different images of the Stoic sage. The first is this – the Stoic takes protecting one's mental tranquillity as the highest goal by becoming radically detached. This is what is presented in Nussbaum's account. And the second is this – the Stoic sage takes wisdom as the highest good, something which is reflected in his radical love of fate. The latter view is presented in Graver's as well as Hadot's accounts. The attitudes towards ‘external goods’ and the world in general are, respectively, being emotionally detached from things, and being accepting of them. I would like to term them as ‘radical detachment’ (this is Nussbaum's term), and ‘radical acceptance’.

In the last section I discussed Nussbaum's Stoic sage as emotionless, and radically detached. Detachment is achieved by denying value to people or things which are of tremendous importance for most people. In Nussbaum's (1994) words:

They are committed to denying the intrinsic worth of external worldly action and even, as they explicitly assert, the intrinsic worth of life itself (DL 7.102).<sup>[41]</sup> Not only traditional ‘external goods’ like wealth and honor, not only ‘relational goods’ like having children, having friends, having political rights and privileges, but also individual forms of virtuous activity, such as acting courageously, justly, and moderately, are held to be, strictly speaking, worthless, on the grounds that they can ... be cut off or impeded by accidents beyond our control. (362)

Nussbaum describes such people as beings who are cold and almost inhuman. Their radical detachment makes them *safe*, but it is a state that is generally not desired, and questionable as to its value for *human eudaimonia*. It is not only unattractive as an ideal for the life of the individual, but can also be upsetting if one is in the company of such a person. Nussbaum's sage reacts to ‘the news of a child's death with ... “I was already aware that I had begotten a mortal.”’ (Cicero, *TD* 3.30). It may be very frustrating if a friend, however wise, tells us that if such a tragedy happens to us.

I have tried to argue in this chapter that this is not what the Stoic sage is like, nor is it the aim of Stoic teaching – to close oneself up, to build a wall between oneself and the world, and make oneself impregnable in the sense that one will be unaffected by any event or person. The Stoics *are* strong, but not by being cold. In fact, the virtue of courage is only

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<sup>41</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* (DL).

needed when one has fear or finds a situation difficult. The following passage is from Marcus' *Meditations*:

Nothing happens to any creature beyond its own natural endurance. Another has the same experience as you: either through failure to recognize what has happened to him, or in display of courage, he remains calm and untroubled. Strange, then, that ignorance and pretention should be stronger than wisdom. (*Med.*, X:18)

No endurance needs to be talked about if there is nothing to be endured. Far from being cold and emotionless, 'nothing happens to any creature beyond its own natural endurance' shows that strong emotions may be experienced. Marcus, the practitioner Stoic, reflects that with an event that is capable of evoking great emotion, two kinds of people can remain calm. The first are those who do not know what happened. The second are those who *have courage*. Marcus may be talking to himself, while going through an emotional period: but he deals with it not by killing the emotion, by not seeing what happened or by pretending nothing happened, or that what happened does not matter; but rather by being courageous, and confronting it; by 'recognising' it; and by appealing to wisdom (seeing things from the perspective of the greater Whole). With this in mind, we can now look at Marcus' idea of an 'inner citadel' and its 'self-sufficiency':

Remember that your directing mind becomes invincible when it withdraws into its own self-sufficiency, not doing anything it does not wish to do, even if its position is unreasonable. How much more, then, when the judgement it forms is reasoned and deliberate? That is why a mind free from passions is a fortress: people have no stronger place of retreat, and someone taking refuge here is then impregnable. Anyone who has not seen this is short of wisdom: anyone who has seen it and does not take refuge is short of fortune. (*Med.*, XIII:48)

The retreat to an inner world is read by Berlin as an escape from an imperfect and unjust world. It shows a lack of responsibility as a citizen of a community. A retreat to the fortress is read by Nussbaum as an act of self-denial in order to protect one's self-sufficiency, but which sacrifices what are essential values for many people, such as family, friends, justice and love. To read the fortress around the inner citadel as the wall that separates the individual's self from people that surround him and the community he lives in, is, I think, the result of a misconception of the self in Stoicism, which stems from a failure to see that the individual self is seen by Epictetus and Marcus as essentially a part of, and in relationship with, a greater 'Whole' in which we are immersed, which includes other people and the wider community around one, and in fact, also the natural environment.

Recognising that affections are at the heart of Stoicism, Hadot relates the Stoic attitude to fate to Nietzsche's concept of '*amor fati*' or love of Destiny. Thus there can be a warmth in the Stoics when facing the external world, or 'external goods', to use Nussbaum's term. Hadot (1998) suggests that what Nietzsche said – 'to wish for nothing other than which is' – could have been said by Marcus Aurelius (144). Hadot is convinced that the same attitude is at the heart the Stoic discipline of desire: 'don't ask for things to happen as you would like them to, but wish them to happen as they actually do, and you will be all right' (*Ench.*, 8). Something very similar is seen in Marcus' words: 'I must therefore joyfully accept and love that which happens to me as a consequence of them (*Med.*, VI:44, 3).

It is when we understand Stoic exercises as a process leading to being open rather than closing up, that it makes sense to say that the Stoics do not *avoid*, although they do not pursue, external goods.

To be disposed, with regard to those who are angry with you and offend you, in such a way as to be ready to respond to the first call, and to be reconciled as soon as they themselves wish to return to you. (*Med.*, I:7)

The endpoint is not the termination of emotions, but the fostering of wisdom. The wise person, as we have seen, may still be affected; but he has the wisdom to deal with what is happening without being defeated. And he has the courage not to run away, even when an incident may affect him adversely. With wisdom and courage, a wise person does not chase after things, nor does he avoid them. He reacts with affection to whatever comes to him.

In this chapter I have examined the discipline of assent and understanding of emotion in Stoicism, particularly in light of the interpretations of Nussbaum, Hadot and Graver. Nussbaum's reading of Stoic teachings as aiming at extinguishing all emotions, rich as it is in so many respects, is in the end misguided as it suggests an attitude of a good Stoic follower, or a person cured by Stoic therapy, as closed-off from his surroundings in order to maintain mental tranquillity. To read Stoicism as having such an aim is to miss the 'open' attitude that Stoic disciplines actually help to cultivate. Graver, on the other hand, by arguing that Stoic texts express a positive attitude to good emotions (*eupatheia*), such as friendship and love, offers a reading of Stoic teachings that conceives the Stoic follower as 'affected' by people and events. The Stoic sage is strong not by being closed-off but by being wise and having correct beliefs and judgements. Stoicism, thus understood, is a great source of therapeutic techniques for those who believe in the values of such 'affection' and at the same time

recognise the problem of being influenced and crippled by strong and uncontrollable emotions. It is now appropriate to go on to consider further the topic of how far these ancient philosophies work as therapy, and some potential problems associated with this. This will be the subject of the next two chapters.

## Chapter 6 Ancient Philosophy as Therapy – The Role of Argument

Over the last two decades there has been a recurrence of interest in ancient philosophy and its therapeutic character. Nussbaum's book, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (1994), has undoubtedly played a significant role in the blooming of interest in ancient philosophy as therapy. As Nussbaum herself pointed out in the introduction to the first edition, Hellenistic philosophy had been unjustly neglected by Western philosophers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The neglect was unjust, Nussbaum believed, because from late antiquity through to modern times, a huge number of influential thinkers, including Descartes, Spinoza, and Kant, were in debt to the writings of the philosophers of antiquity, particularly when it came to the philosophical understanding of the emotions. The situation has, however, changed. By the time Nussbaum was writing another introduction, for the second edition of the book in 2009, Hellenistic philosophy had come to be studied extensively by scholars and it appeared in mainstream curricula.

*The Therapy of Desire* focuses on philosophy in the post-Aristotelian period. The idea of philosophy as therapy can be traced back further than the Hellenistic period,<sup>42</sup> and pre-Socratic thought is mentioned briefly. The philosophies of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle are discussed insofar as they help to provide the context against which the Hellenistic thought can be better understood. Although the concept of 'philosophy as therapy' in her book refers mainly to 'Hellenistic philosophy as therapy', since the philosophical traditions covered in this thesis include Platonism, Epicureanism and Stoicism, I include these under the phrase 'ancient philosophy and therapy'.

In the literature on ancient philosophy and therapy, some focus on ancient concepts of emotion, as in *Hellenistic Philosophy of Mind* by Julia Annas (1992), *Emotion and Peace of Mind* by Richard Sorabji (2000), and *Stoicism and Emotion* by Margaret Graver (2007).

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<sup>42</sup> Nussbaum discusses issues related to the theme of therapy in Plato and Aristotle's philosophy in *The Fragility of Goodness* (1986), without explicitly using the term.

Others focus on the philosopher as physician in general. Some attempt to connect ancient philosophy and modern psychotherapy, as in *The Philosophy of Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT)* by Donald Robertson (2010). And some try to develop a practical therapeutic model based on ancient philosophy, as in *How to Practice Philosophy as Therapy* by Eugen Fischer (2011), *Philosophical Therapy as Preventive Psychological Medicine* by Christopher Gill (2013), and *Philosophy as Therapy: Towards a Conception Model* by Konrad Banicki (2014). Amongst the scholarship on bridging ancient philosophy and modern psychotherapy, it is most common to find attention being given to the relation between Stoicism and cognitive approaches to therapy (including cognitive therapy, cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), and rational emotive behavioural therapy (REBT)), as discussed in Chapter 5. This may be because of the shared understanding of the cognitive character of emotion on both sides (the cognitive character of emotion is acknowledged in almost every tradition in ancient times, but the development of this theme is most prominent in Stoicism). Some also study mental illness in ancient philosophy: *Mental Disorders in Ancient Philosophy* by Marke Ahonen (2014) and *Mental Illness in Ancient Medicine*, edited by Chiara Thumiger and P. N. Singer (2018).

A related focus for scholars of ancient philosophy is on how to live well. A prominent representative of this focus is *Philosophy as a Way of Life* by Pierre Hadot (1995). John Cooper (2012) studies ancient traditions along the same lines in *Pursuits of Wisdom: Six Ways of Life in Ancient Philosophy from Socrates to Plotinus*. Other works include the collection in honour of Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Ancients and Moderns*, edited by Michael Chase, Stephen R. L. Clark, Michael McGhee (2013), and *Shaftesbury, Stoicism, and Philosophy as a Way of Life* by John Sellars (2016). Philosophy as a way of life as envisaged by Hadot focuses more on the practical as well as the spiritual aspects of ancient philosophy, whilst also recognising this therapeutic character as being at the heart of ancient philosophy.

The question of the relationship between ancient philosophy and therapy is very wide-ranging. Debates and related issues extend widely and cannot be discussed comprehensively here. I will concentrate on the works of two prominent figures in this area, Nussbaum and Hadot, whose works I have discussed in various parts of previous chapters. Despite the substantial similarities in their interpretations, Nussbaum and Hadot do appear to suggest different accounts of the nature of philosophy. Their differences, though subtle, are significant in terms of how to read ancient philosophical works, of what the role of

philosophers is, both on the individual level and on the social level, and of the purpose of philosophy as a curative project. They also suggest different implications for retrieving a philosophical model of therapy in modern times.

At this stage, I will not attempt to develop an argument in favour of either thinker. They both offer highly valuable accounts of this subject. What I would like to do, instead, is to offer a comparison to highlight the possible different ways of interpreting ancient philosophical materials, the underlying assumptions, and the tensions generated within and between their perspectives. I will discuss their similarities and differences by looking at two topics, one in each chapter. The first deals with their accounts of philosophical argument and its relation to philosophy. The second concerns the role of the philosopher and the philosopher-doctor.<sup>43</sup>

### **Nussbaum on philosophical argument**

The argument I am concerned with here is what is discussed by Nussbaum as ‘the therapeutic argument’ and by Hadot as ‘philosophical discourse’. In the following sections, therefore, I will examine the analysis and discussion of ‘therapeutic (philosophical) argument’ and ‘philosophical discourse’ respectively in the two thinkers’ works. In order to comprehend the idea of ‘argument’ and highlight its distinctiveness in ancient Greek philosophy, which these two thinkers attempt to reveal, I have chosen three points of comparison contained, explicitly or implicitly, in Nussbaum’s and Hadot’s works, and will proceed with discussion of them. The first is the comparison of what constitutes ‘argument’ in Hellenistic philosophy and in modern philosophy. There has been a focus on the practical element in the former, less so in the latter. The second is the comparison of philosophy and other ‘art of life’ disciplines in the Hellenistic period, in which ‘reasoning’ or ‘rationality’ serves as a criterion to mark the difference. The third is the comparison between Hellenistic philosophy and Socratic/Platonic philosophy, which is particularly significant for Nussbaum. I will start with Nussbaum’s views on these issues.

#### *Hellenistic philosophy and modern philosophy*

Firstly, *the practical* aspect of argument in Hellenistic philosophy is emphasised. This is highlighted by Nussbaum as an important aspect of philosophy that has been lost in modern

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<sup>43</sup> The term ‘doctor’ (to refer to a philosopher) is used by Nussbaum extensively in her discussion of Hellenistic philosophy as therapy (so is the term ‘patient’ to signify the pupil or follower of these philosophical traditions).

philosophy. The commitment to practice in Hellenistic philosophy is sometimes underestimated because of the suggestions that Hellenistic philosophy combines ‘theory and practice’, and that Hellenistic philosophy is an ‘applied philosophy’ – both of which make different assumptions about the nature of theory (as abstract) and practice (as empirical), – assumptions that did not exist in the same way in the Hellenistic period.

Nussbaum (1994) shows that the issues that are targeted are practical – issues such as anger, fear, love and sexuality. The arguments seen in Hellenistic philosophy are often arguments that are meant to provide new ways of thinking, often by challenging old ways of thinking, about disturbing situations. Moreover, the goal of philosophical arguments is practical. It is to help pupils get closer to *eudaimonia*. Both theoretical knowledge and elegant rhetoric are empty unless they motivate the listener to act accordingly: ‘a valid, elegant, but not causally effective argument has no more use in philosophy than a nicely coloured, fragrant, but ineffective drug has in medicine’ (120). The topics Hellenistic philosophy deals with, as Nussbaum puts it, are ‘avoided as embarrassingly messy and personal’ in more contemporary and detached philosophical traditions, in particular those found in the mainstream English-speaking philosophical world (3). In fact, arguments aiming at living well, which include easing disturbances, are seen more often today within psychotherapy than philosophy.

### *Hellenistic philosophy and other ‘art of life’ disciplines in the Hellenistic period*

Secondly, Nussbaum sees argument as the main tool of Hellenistic philosophers. Argument is what differentiates philosophy from other ‘art of life’ disciplines that provide similar services, such as disturbance-easing or self-shaping. Such services were provided by ‘religious and magical/superstitious movements of various types’, via means *other than* argument. Philosophy is unique in its approach because it uses arguments, and these require reasoning and involve a commitment to the truth. While it works as a therapy for suffering, it does not adopt any techniques that work *merely* to ease the symptoms. This distinctive character of philosophy for Nussbaum is crucial in two ways. One is that the ultimate goal of the process of therapy, through argumentation, is to realise what is truly ‘good’. This is contrasted with other therapies that aim at just reducing symptoms. Some modern psychotherapies are of this type. It can be argued that, in philosophy, the process of improvement, while it may take the form of symptom-easing, does not fully make sense if



there is no reference to an ideal of wisdom and to the prospect of getting closer to living in accordance with reason.

The character of philosophy as committing one to truth is crucial in another way. This concerns the possibility of attaining ‘freedom from the tyranny of custom and convention’ (5), for all humans who inevitably live in community with others. Nussbaum contrasts this concept of philosophy to the one proposed by Michel Foucault – philosophy as ‘a set of *techniques du soi* (techniques of the self)’ (*ibid.*). Foucault’s account of philosophy is both praised and criticised by Nussbaum and Hadot, for different reasons. The contrasts between the accounts of both thinkers and their criticisms of Foucault reveal, I believe, the central ideas of both thinkers.

With his idea of techniques of the self, Foucault’s account of philosophy may do justice to aspects of philosophising in antiquity understood as ‘the formation and shaping of the self’ (353), which are opposed to other accounts in ancient philosophy, such as merely ‘teaching lessons’. In other words, according to Nussbaum, Foucault recognises rightly the practical aspect of ancient philosophy, which involves activities in which the person is not just transformed but also formed. However, Foucault’s account of philosophy as a set of self-shaping techniques sees it as one of the arts of life that the individual adopts for self-formation. It fails to recognise reasoning as the most significant characteristic of philosophy, which makes it different from other arts of life, such as ‘religion, dream-interpretation and astrology’ (*ibid.*). For Nussbaum, the importance of this ‘commitment to reason’ is that it permits the possibility of attaining the truth and a kind of freedom from habitual ways of thinking and behaving, which is not possible for humans in Foucault’s account.

For Foucault, reason is itself just one among the many masks assumed by political power. For the Stoic, reason stands apart, resisting all domination, the authentic and free core of one’s life as an individual and as a social being. Argument shapes – and, eventually, *is* – a self, and is the self’s way of fulfilling its role as citizen of the universe. (354)

Argument qua reason, in ancient philosophy, Nussbaum believes, is not merely one of the discourses the individual takes to express themselves and make sense of the world, one that is ultimately no better or worse than other discourses available in the genre of literature, religion or other regimes of practices. Philosophical argument qua reason is a way, and, in fact, the only way, that the human individual can, as a member of society, possibly make changes to her ways of thinking, for these are deeply rooted in the conventions of society. It

is the means to a critical reflection that erodes convention, superstition and biased thinking by holding to the authority of truth as the ultimate authority. In this Nussbaum sees philosophical argument in terms of a kind of Enlightenment: as the crucial tool of critique against authoritarian power and its discourse.

Hellenistic philosophers contend that our ways of thinking and even feelings (since emotions are intimately related to beliefs and judgements) are formed in society, and most societies are corrupt in various ways. One example Nussbaum gives is that Indian women in rural areas living in poor conditions may think that their condition is just fine. Foucault's account of philosophy does not necessarily give us any tool that allows the individual to overcome the prevailing social and political discourses that make her think as she does. Nussbaum believes this is a huge mistake. Although the individual thinks with the very tool – discourse – that forms the individual, philosophy with its tool of argument *qua reason* is the way the human being finds fissures in the discourses that encompass us, and thus enable improvement.

#### *Hellenistic philosophy and Socratic philosophy*

This leads us to the third kind of difference Nussbaum casts light on – the difference between philosophy in the Hellenistic period and the philosophical tradition that starts from Socrates and Plato. The difference between philosophy in the Hellenistic period and that which starts from Socrates is subtler than the previous two types of differences. The Hellenistic philosophical schools do inherit significant elements from types of understanding that originate with Socrates and emphasise 'philosophical reason': and they all compete 'against other traditional forms of allegedly curative *logos*' (50). Due to the continuity of this key element – reasoning – Hellenistic 'philosophers were still very much philosophers', whose works should be read as descendants of the Socratic tradition (4). However, the difference between Hellenistic philosophy and Socratic philosophy is significant enough for Nussbaum to feel compelled to establish a case for viewing Hellenistic philosophy as a philosophy proper in its own right. Firstly, the approaches to health adopted by Hellenistic philosophers are more psychologically 'engaging', while the Platonic approach is more detached from what the individual pupil wants or needs. This can create tension between an individually-engaged method and the aim of philosophy as truth-finding. Secondly, some teaching methods adopted by Hellenistic schools appear to be authoritarian. The Epicureans, above all, are most prominent in this authoritarian tendency. This makes it questionable how

far their teachings can still be called philosophical. We will look at these two points Nussbaum makes in turn.

Firstly, in terms of philosophical argument, Nussbaum suggests that the type of argumentation Plato adopts often appears to be deductive. Platonic arguments ‘[derive] conclusions from first principles that are true, necessary, and primary’ (34). Nussbaum continues: ‘the philosopher’s intellect apprehends the first principles, and philosophical logic constructs the ensuing demonstrations’ (*ibid.*). Hellenistic argumentation, on the other hand, is more personally engaging. It is often devised for a particular person or situation, with consideration of the pupil’s temperance and ability: ‘some arguments, like drugs, are “bitter” or “biting”; some are gentle.’ (125). They are contextualised, and, in Nussbaum’s terms, value-relative. The assessment of a good argument depends on whether it helps to achieve the goal of *eudaimonia* as defined in each school: ‘all its truths must support its view of happiness.’ (124). The choice of different types of argumentation is related to the different approaches to health that are found in these traditions. Nussbaum argues that there exists a concept of health in the Platonic tradition that belongs in the realm of ‘heaven’. It is only to be found in gods; it is ‘out there’, transcendent, unaffected by human perceptions, desires, needs and disease. Nussbaum quotes a passage in Plato’s *Phaedrus*: ‘the soul “sees justice itself, it sees moderation, it sees knowledge – not the knowledge that changes and varies with various objects that we now call beings, but the genuine knowledge seated in that which really is”’ (247D; quoted in Nussbaum, 1994:17). The concept of health is not subject to change in terms of contexts. This, Nussbaum points out, is inherited by both contemporary religious (Christian) and strictly ‘scientific’ ethics, where concepts of the good are expected to be found in a realm independent of everyday reality. In contrast, the concept of health in Hellenistic philosophy cannot be separated completely from what the patient or pupil thinks, needs, or wishes. A ‘heavenly’ state of health may be something very unappealing. No matter how ‘good’ it is, a good doctor may not just impose that on the patient. Therefore, Hellenistic philosophy as therapy is psychologically engaging, it is a process that involves indirect and complicated interaction; it requires open-mindedness about what health may be for different individuals. The kind of health it aims at is ‘a more complicated view of the good’ that might emerge ‘through narrative, memory and friendly conversation’ (36).

Secondly, the tension between thinking critically and becoming a better person by following the master’s teaching is particularly prominent in Epicurean teaching. In Nussbaum’s description:

The Aristotelian pupil becomes a better Aristotelian by becoming better at taking charge of her own reasoning; the same, as we shall see, is true of the Stoic. 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 herself. (136)

The difference Nussbaum marks leads her to the question of whether Hellenistic philosophy really *is* philosophy.

Is a procedure so shaped still philosophy? And what are we asking when we ask that question? We seem to be asking, among other things, whether a procedure so committed to the world, and to change in it, can still be that reflective, critical and self-critical, intellectual activity that the intellectual tradition in Greece that began with Socrates and Plato called ‘philosophy.’ (36)

It is a significant question that Nussbaum tries to answer in her book. In persuading her reader that Hellenistic philosophy is as serious as any other philosophical tradition found in Western history, the concern of Nussbaum about what constitutes a serious, proper philosophy is revealed. In seeing a contrast between Hellenistic philosophy and Socrates’ philosophy, Nussbaum wants to highlight the tension between the purpose of human engagement and the purpose of finding the truth.

I think these are the key terms for understanding Nussbaum’s view of what philosophy has to be. The list of attributes Nussbaum lays out contains the implication that it is not seriousness but ‘reflective, critical and self-critical intellectual activity’ that makes philosophy philosophy. For Nussbaum therefore, Hellenistic philosophy must have these attributes . Just being interested in making people live a more comfortable life is not good enough. A tension between the two goals of Hellenistic philosophy is revealed: on the one hand, it aims at healing; on the other, it commits one to finding the truth. If the process of healing, whether understood as merely coming to feel better or in terms of an idea of *eudaimonia*, requires the patient to ‘let go’ of her own critical thinking (for example, as seen in dogmatic teaching by way of methods of memorising, repeating or imaging from a certain perspective), is not this process against the aim of searching for the truth, which requires the person’s exercise of her reasoning? An issue related to this is the role of authority and the extent to which authoritarian teaching can be included in philosophy, if at all. Isaiah Berlin, mentioned in the previous chapter, considers the danger of authoritarian teaching in the name of promoting some particular idea of the good life (in chapter 5, Berlin’s idea of ‘negative freedom’ and his criticism of the promotion of freedom attained through a change of attitude

instead of changing the external world was discussed. The related issues on authoritarianism will be discussed further in the following two chapters). Nussbaum's concern shares aspects of Berlin's criticism.

### **Hadot on philosophical discourse**

In Hadot's idea of philosophy as a way of life, philosophical discourse is also seen as important. In studying his idea of philosophical discourse, one can also find the differences between Hellenistic philosophy and modern philosophy, and between Hellenistic philosophy and other arts of life, but he has less to say about differences between Hellenistic and Socratic philosophy. I will discuss these aspects in turn.

#### *Hellenistic philosophy and modern philosophy*

Firstly, Hadot emphasises the practicality of Hellenistic philosophical discourse, which is not a dominant component of modern philosophy. Hadot also emphasises more than Nussbaum the analytical, non-pragmatic intellectual trend of philosophy as a discipline in today's university. Philosophical discourse in antiquity, in contrast, was mainly geared to changing the listener's attitudes and actions. Philosophical discourse can be differentiated into two kinds, in terms of whether it is developed in a particular context, or relates to a particular person (particular persons) and as an answer to particular questions. Hadot's effort in displaying the contexts in which the teachings of Socrates, Plato, Epicurus and the Stoics took place, and showing that most of the surviving texts should be read as a complement to oral teaching, was meant to show that most of the texts were articulated orally (and later recorded in written form), or written as a response to a particular question. Thus these texts as philosophical discourses are contextualised.

There were also texts that were *less* contextualised. We can call them theoretical discourses. Discourse of this kind can be abstract and purely intellectual. It, however, also 'can have a practical aspect', when 'it tends to produce an effect on the listener or reader' (Hadot, 2002:4). In other words, theory is not necessarily opposed to practice; a theory can have a practical consequence when it has an effect on the attitudes, feelings or actions of the reader.

Hadot, however, makes a distinction between what he calls 'theoretical' (which 'derives from the Greek *theoretikos*') and 'theoretic' (which 'derives from the Greek *theorikos*') (293):

We must not, however, confuse the term ‘theoretical’ with ‘theoretic.’ ‘Theoretic’ is a word of Greek origin but does not appear in Aristotle. In a non-philosophical context, it meant ‘referring to processions.’ In modern parlance, ‘the theoretic’ is opposed to ‘the practical’ the way the abstract and speculative is opposed to the concrete. From this perspective, then, we may oppose a purely theoretic philosophical discourse to a practical, lived philosophical life. (80)

The key difference between theoretic and theoretical discourse lies in their relation to practice, rather than in the extent of their abstraction, conceptualisation or theorisation of knowledge. While both theoretic and theoretical discourses *can* be purely speculative, one of them bears little relation to practice, while the other one can have some practical effect. The distinction Hadot makes between these two discourses has implications for both ancient and modern philosophy. For ancient philosophy, it is important for the modern reader to recognise the practical aspect that is inherent, even in seemingly pure knowledge. For example, Hadot (1995) explains that theory and practice are not located in different parts of philosophy, e.g. theory in physics and practice in ethics. In each part, there are aspects of both theory and practice:

There is a theoretical discourse concerning logic, physics and ethics, but there is also a practical or lived logic, a lived physics, and a lived ethics... This lived logic consisted in ‘not giving one’s consent to what is false or doubtful’. ... the discipline of physics included not only a theory, but a lived physics, a true spiritual exercise, which involved a way of seeing the world, a cosmic consciousness, and procured pleasure and joy for the soul. (24)

This is counter-intuitive for many modern readers. Hadot thinks this is important because fundamentally, theories, even those of physics and logic, are in service to practice. That is, the theories are developed to support a philosophical way of life. Theoretical discourse has to have some causal power in one’s way of living.

### *Hellenistic philosophy and other ‘arts of life’ in the Hellenistic period*

‘The commitment to reason’, we have seen, is the key for Nussbaum in differentiating philosophy from other arts of life in the Hellenistic period. Nussbaum criticises Foucault for his failure to recognise this. Hadot would agree with Nussbaum on Hellenistic philosophy’s commitment to reason and criticism. However, there are differences in their accounts of the distinctiveness of philosophy in comparison with other arts of life, especially in terms of how they view aspects of spirituality. Firstly, Hadot notes the difference between philosophy and other more mystical approaches to cosmology and ethics. An account of the overall context

here is given by Hadot (2002) revealing that the pervasive narratives in cosmogony involved ‘personified entities’ (10). Against this background, the Greek thinkers before Socrates started to search for an alternative, rational, explanation of the world. Hadot notes this attempt as ‘a milestone in the history of thought (*ibid.*). Plato follows these thinkers in developing an account of ‘cosmogony through rigorous demonstration, based on argument acceptable to everyone’ (11). This shift of ideas regarding the origin of humankind and the world, and its attempt to take control of fate, is a ‘radical transformation’ (10). This marks the distinctive role of rationality at the start of the philosophical tradition. It is because of this that Hadot contrasts philosophy with the culture of shamanism that is contemporary with the start of the Greek philosophical tradition. By expressing his objections to the view of shamanism as the origin of some exercises in philosophy, Hadot points out that the characteristic of philosophical exercises in ‘[responding] to a rigorous need for rational control’ marks an unnegotiable departure of philosophy from shamanism. Here again, Hadot’s view on the central role of rationality in Greek philosophy is made clear.

However, rationality in Greek philosophy seems to have different meanings for Hadot, compared to Nussbaum. While Nussbaum emphasises the intellectual aspect of Hellenistic philosophy, Hadot stresses the importance it attaches to spiritual exercises. Some aspects of what is implicit in the idea of spiritual exercises are what, it seems, Nussbaum has difficulties with. Hellenistic philosophy involves the ‘entire psychism’ (Hadot, 1995:82). In participating in philosophical activities, an individual is expected to make changes not only to their way of thinking, but to all dimensions of life. To be a philosopher means to *live in a philosophical way*. Due to this multi-dimensional character of philosophy, Hadot suggests that other terms, including ‘thought exercises’, ‘intellectual exercises’, ‘moral exercises’ and ‘ethical exercises’, cannot fully grasp what Hellenistic philosophy involves. They either lose the sense of ‘imagination and sensibility’ or ‘the therapeutics of passions’ that are central in the tradition. The term ‘spiritual’, however, does admit some space for activities that appear to be not so intellectual, or critical, sufficient for them to be included in philosophy (as traditionally conceived) – activities such as memorisation, imagination, or habit-forming.

Another point to be made here is that Hadot (2002) makes a distinction between philosophers and Sophists that is not emphasised by Nussbaum. The Sophists are amongst the growing body of thinkers and intellectuals flourishing in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE as a result of ‘the flourishing of Athenian democracy’ (12). They are known for their skills of argumentation. Their techniques of argumentation form part of the intellectual context in

which Socratic philosophy starts. However, the difference philosophers make between what they and the Sophists are doing reveals an important aspect of philosophy:

Traditionally, people who developed an apparently philosophical discourse without trying to live their lives in accordance with their discourse, and without their discourse emanating from their life experience, were called ‘Sophists.’ (174)

While Nussbaum notices the commitment to *action* of Hellenistic philosophers, Hadot’s idea of Hellenistic philosophy as a way of life pushes further the central role of the experiential aspect of philosophy. Philosophical discourse alone, while playing a significant role in philosophy, is not philosophy. Those who only make efforts in discourse development without living accordingly are, at most, Sophists: ‘once these Sophists have gotten up from their chairs and have put down their books and manuals, they are no better than the rest of mankind “in the real acts of life”’ (174-5). A Sophist, according to Hadot, takes the disembodied spiritual forces of the true philosopher and disconnects them further from any previous role as part of understanding how one should live. For Hadot’s Hellenists, philosophy is about *living* philosophically. Its nature, therefore, is fundamentally different from the nature of pure philosophical discourse, despite the intimate and reciprocal relationship between these two. The typical Sophist rejects this, and seeks to find philosophy in just the form of reason and its judgments, which may be disconnected from any art of living. This will lead to a discrepancy between Nussbaum and Hadot’s views on the role of non-discursive exercises: Nussbaum seems to see the Hellenists as closer to the Sophists in respect of their understanding of the role of reason and argument than does Hadot.

### *Hellenistic philosophy and Socratic philosophy*

The two problems pointed out by Nussbaum in her contrasting of Hellenistic philosophy and Socratic philosophy – to what extent philosophy can be psychologically engaging without losing its goal of truth-searching, and to what extent following the master’s teaching uncritically is to be regarded as part of philosophy, one of whose aims is cultivating critical thinking – are less prominent in Hadot’s readings. In particular, the underlying question of whether Hellenistic philosophy is still philosophy seems not to bother Hadot. A fundamental difference between Nussbaum and Hadot over what philosophy is seems to be revealed here. Above all, Hadot believes that the Hellenistic schools follow the tradition that starts from Socrates and Plato in seeing philosophy as ‘a way of life’. Philosophy is the love of wisdom and the search for it; but most importantly, wisdom is not an intellectual achievement. For



both Socratic-Platonic and Hellenistic traditions, wisdom is ‘a certain way of life’ (102). Wisdom-searching is the aim of Socratic philosophy, and it is also the aim of all the Hellenistic schools. Hadot notes that ‘whether or not they laid claim to the Socratic heritage all Hellenistic philosophers agreed with Socrates that ignorance is the source for human suffering, misery, and evil’ (*ibid.*).

In terms of the ideal of wisdom and the means to it, however, the schools may differ. First to be noted is the historical context. Hadot (1995) reminds us that philosophy was a very different phenomenon in antiquity from what it is now:

In this period, to philosophize is to choose a school, convert to its way of life, and accept its dogmas. This is why the core of the fundamental dogmas and rules of life for Platonism, Aristotelianism, Stoicism, and Epicureanism remained unchanged throughout antiquity. (60)

The Platonic, as one of the philosophical schools, itself has this dogmatic characteristic, just as other schools. ‘The dogmas and methodological principles of each school’, Hadot tells us, ‘are not open to discussion’ (*ibid.*). To imagine that reasoning and questioning in Plato’s Academy is with no restrictions, whilst it *is* authoritarian in Epicurus’ Garden, is mistaken.

Argumentation takes different forms, such as dialectical, rhetorical, dogmatic, deductive, systematic, and aporetic. Dialogue is used by Plato and Aristotle (Nussbaum identifies Platonic argumentation as deductive and Aristotelian as dialectic). From this perspective, philosophical discourse may be thought to be ‘purely critical’ (105). However, it is not the only way, perhaps not even the best way. In terms of ‘the purpose of philosophy’, the quality of argumentation is to be assessed by the power to ‘produce an effect on the soul of the auditor or reader’ (107). Philosophy is a way of life or of living philosophically.

Argumentation is ultimately the tool of this sort of philosophy. Hadot suggests that all schools have a missionary characteristic, including those adopting more ‘critical’ forms of teaching. All teachings involve a particular ideal of wisdom, a particular ideal of *eudaimonia*. And this is not open to discussion. Does that mean that ‘reasoning’ that is supposed to occur in participating in argumentation is not itself the end (even in Platonic tradition)?

‘Reasoning’, if it does happen, is in order to move the person who reasons to attain a certain attitude, to act in a certain way, to live a certain life. The question to be asked is, then, ‘does reasoning not have intrinsic value?’ and ‘what if the ideal of wisdom turns out to be wrong?’ These questions are in some ways similar to Nussbaum’s questions.

I will not investigate the answers fully here. With regard to the first question, at least in the Platonic, the Aristotelian, and the Stoic traditions, reasoning is seen to have such intrinsic value. However, the individual's ability to reason needs to be refined. In all these schools, there is an idea of reasoning on a higher level – something that individual reasoning *can* attain. Reasoning that has such intrinsic value is a particular sub-set of the reasoning the individuals happen to have, because most of us are heavily affected by all sorts of flawed ways of thinking in society. And this is not to do with individuality, originality, or uniqueness. A related phenomenon that Hadot (1995) remarks on is the stage or level one has reached with regard to such reasoning:

Epicurus, too, leaves the discussion and study of points of detail to the more advanced students, and much later the same attitude will be found in Origen, who assigns the 'spiritual ones' the task of seeking, as he himself says, by way of exercise, the 'hows' and 'whys' and of discussing these obscure and secondary questions. (61)

Discussion of questions, instead of just memorisation or repetition, is the method saved for more advanced students, who have experience of more basic practices. These students are supposed to have the abilities required to be able reason in a worthwhile way. Nevertheless, discussion takes place based on the premise of agreeing with the fundamental principles of a school. According to Hadot's explanation, this kind of reasoning, if it can still be called reasoning, is still restricted from a modern perspective. Hadot's argument about the Hellenistic teaching of reasoning under particular conditions makes it clear that the development of reasoning *is* encouraged in Hellenistic schools, but only under certain conditions. For less advanced students, a large degree of learning by memorisation and repetition is still needed; and even for more advanced students, some fundamental principles are never open for questioning.

### **Authority and philosophical thinking**

The phenomenon of various fascist political movements that emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century bears on the discussion of the role of philosophy and philosophers. While Nussbaum asks 'whether Hellenistic philosophy as such is still philosophy', an underlying concern is the nature of philosophy and the role of philosopher, particularly when it comes to social and political issues. After all, is it not philosophy as an intellectual and critical activity, above all disciplines, that we can rely on to find a way to change things when a social or political system goes wrong? Is it not the philosopher, among all thinkers from different disciplines,

one from whom we can expect wise insights about what goes wrong in a society? If philosophers are to be capable of being ‘the wise’, who can give advice in a sick society, it would, at least in part, be because they think critically and independently. One might, therefore, expect philosophy and philosophers as such to be against ways of thinking that have authoritarian tendencies. An unquestioned authority in philosophy, as Christopher Coope (2009) argues, should not exist: ‘in the nature of the subject ... everyone has to be his own judge’ (183).

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, this role of philosophy and philosophers as the gatekeepers of ‘freedom of thinking’ was highlighted by Berlin. Berlin (1969) believes there is a problematic association, found in recent political history, between ‘a prescribed (better) form of life’, which in the history of thought has been articulated by thinkers from Socrates through to various modern rationalists, and ‘the nationalist, fascist and totalitarian movements’. Berlin criticises the failure of modern scholastic philosophers to recognise the potentially dangerous ‘power of ideas’ in political realms, and the possibility that ‘concepts nurtured in the stillness of a professor’s study [may destroy] a civilisation’ (167).

The concept of ‘the two selves’ in one individual, Berlin suggests, is the key for understanding the ‘vicious transformation’ that can be exercised by a despot. In Berlin’s terms, one ‘self’ is identified with ‘reason’, the ‘higher self’, the ‘ideal self’, and the ‘true self’; the other ‘self’ can be a prey to ‘irrational impulse’, ‘uncontrolled desire’, or ‘lower nature’. The higher and lower selves are envisaged variously, but the basic idea can be found in many ethical theories that involve self-perfection and self-transformation as the aim. Berlin himself draws on Plato, Epicurus and Marcus Aurelius with their various arguments on the close relation between true freedom and the higher, transformed self.

In theory, the ‘higher self’ is not achieved fully by most people. It may be even unknown to many. Even for those who know it on an intellectual level, it may be difficult, when one is in a lower state, to imagine what it is like and what kind of freedom is experienced. Therefore, in these theories, various forms of guidance from ‘wise people’ are required if one is to pursue self-perfection. However, in the process of learning to become a better self, presumably one will be required to abandon much of one’s old behaviour and ways of thinking in order for the new to be absorbed. A real vulnerability of the individual appears here. In forgoing *his own thinking* - if the individual is to accept that the old way of thinking is bad while, at the same time, that the good way is not yet seen and that all he can do is obey

the guidance of the wise – is he not susceptible to being deceived? What criteria are we left with to judge whether the wise *are* really wise?

In the name of realising true freedom, or the true self, people may be asked to obey ‘because they are blind or ignorant or corrupt’ and cannot see what is really good for them (179). A possible consequence is that ‘the unwise [is] dragged towards [the correct way of life] by all the social means in the power of the wise’ (198). They may be educated into thinking in the following way:

Only the truth liberates, and the only way in which I can learn the truth is by doing blindly today what you, who know it, order me, or coerce me, to do, in the certain knowledge that only thus will I arrive at your clear vision and be free like you. (*ibid.*)

Although Berlin’s analysis of positive liberty is multifaceted, he stresses that such authoritarian guidance may lead to ghastly consequences. Overall, because of the risks involved, Berlin seems to be in favour of political legislation that defends ‘negative liberty’, and which stipulates the individual’s right to be free from any ideological interference. Negative liberty aims at maximising the space the individual is left for herself, and minimising the influence external authorities might have to affect self-determination.

The defence of negative liberty and worries about positive liberty that Berlin articulated, apart from the fascist movements associated with the latter, are also related to the modern idea of individual freedom and, in Charles Taylor’s analysis, to personal ‘authenticity’. Taylor relates negative liberty to more general ideas on the value of individual rights, privacy, originality and non-conformity. That is to say, overall, negative liberty is preferred, and the unique individuality of the person is valued.

In the Greek period, when the ethical theories of self-perfection were being developed by philosophical schools, the political contexts and the social values were different from what they are now. However, these questions posed by Berlin about the nature of philosophy and philosophers are significant for our reading of Hellenistic philosophy, especially when they bear on responses to the horrible wars and slaughters that have happened in recent history, a cause of which some believe lies in the oppression of personal freedom and thinking under a despotic ideology proposed in the name of some future ‘good’. How do we understand this authoritarian element in Hellenistic philosophy? And are there criteria the individual can appeal to in making his or her own judgement about the actual truthfulness of the *claimed* truth in each school, even when the individual is not ‘wise’ enough to see?

## The role of argument

In this chapter, we looked at the role of argument in Hellenistic philosophy. The questions raised in the discussion will be examined further in the next chapter. These include the role of the philosopher and philosopher doctor in comparison to the 'sage', and the idea of the self's place in the cosmos in Hellenistic philosophy. To summarise, in terms of Hellenistic philosophy and modern philosophy, both Nussbaum and Hadot think that the practical aspect of Hellenistic philosophy does not exist in modern philosophy anymore. Both thinkers do not think this is a good trend in the discipline of philosophy. In terms of Hellenistic philosophy and other arts of life, Nussbaum focuses on philosophy's 'commitment to reason' and argues that this is at the core of Hellenistic philosophy, and she criticises Foucault for his failure to acknowledge this. This is of huge significance for Nussbaum, not simply because it is a special quality of philosophy. For Nussbaum, it makes philosophy *the* way human beings can discern the problems and injustices of the society they live in, and the way that they can search for effective ways to make improvement. Hadot also notices the differences between Hellenistic philosophy and other contemporary arts of life such as shamanism, stressing philosophy's commitment to rationality. However, among these arts of life, Hadot focuses more on the difference between philosophers and Sophists, rather than that between philosophy and religion as Nussbaum does. For him, philosophy is, in essence, a way of being and doing, not just philosophical discourse. With the concept of 'spiritual exercises', Hadot also reveals that his understanding of 'rationality' is broader than that of Nussbaum's, which has a strong emphasis on purely intellectual thinking. Finally, in terms of Hellenistic philosophy and Socratic philosophy, Nussbaum poses questions about the seriousness of any 'commitment to reason' on the part of Hellenistic philosophers. A normative idea of philosophy as an activity of reasoning seems to be revealed by this comparison. Hadot, on the other hand, once again presents a broader understanding of philosophical methods, which includes so-called dogmatic forms of teaching. However, this broader concept of philosophical teaching also generates a tension between authoritarian guidance and developing the ability to think critically, as illustrated by Berlin's warning of the dangers inherent in 'positive liberty'.

## Chapter 7 Ancient Philosophy as Therapy – The Role of the Philosopher

In the previous chapter, the role of argument in ancient philosophy as therapy was discussed. Nussbaum's concept of 'therapeutic argument' and Hadot's concept of 'philosophical discourse' share similarities, but also have differences. Both thinkers are sympathetic to the strong therapeutic character of Hellenistic philosophy. They agree that in all Hellenistic schools, human suffering was the main issue for philosophers to deal with, and argument was the tool for their therapeutic work. The nature of the relation between philosophical argument and philosophy itself is close in both Nussbaum's and Hadot's accounts. In presenting an account of Hellenistic philosophy, both thinkers highlight the loss of practical relevance in modern Western philosophy. However, Nussbaum and Hadot differ in respect of whether rational argument is a requisite for all activities worthy of the name of philosophising. Nussbaum believes that it is, whereas Hadot contends that a non-discursive element is crucial in ancient philosophy, as philosophy in antiquity is a way of life – i.e. strictly speaking, only when one is *living* in a philosophical way and enacting philosophy in one's life rather than talking about it can one really be considered a philosopher. They also hold different views on the role of personal reasoning and critical discourse in any normative idea of philosophy. Nussbaum argues that it is central to the Socratic tradition, but that it is at risk in philosophy in the Hellenistic period (this might be a movement of deterioration in Nussbaum's view). Hadot, on the other hand, does not differentiate between Socratic and Hellenistic philosophies in this respect. He does not consider that the value of reasoning lies mainly in individualistic 'critical and creative thinking'. Rather, through reasoning, the individual is to realise her being as part of a greater 'Whole'. Individuality in the activity of reasoning therefore is not an indispensable, constituent element, but something to be dissolved.

An issue that arises in the discussion is the role of authoritative figures in the discipline of philosophy. By questioning the ‘less philosophical techniques’ used by some Hellenistic masters, such as memorisation or repetition, and the ‘godlike’ image Epicurus presents of himself in his school, the Garden, Nussbaum reveals her worry about the authoritarian element in Hellenistic philosophy. Related to this, Berlin’s account of any philosophical approach in which an individual is asked to suspend her own thinking and obey the teaching in order to gain future benefit also reveals the danger such an approach may contain. If we are to accept that ancient philosophy can provide us with a model of practical and therapeutic philosophy, we have to confront this tension between authority and philosophy. Moreover, the practical question we need to ask when adopting philosophy as a therapeutic project is this: when it comes to practice, just what is the role of the philosopher?

### **Therapy for whom?**

How are the philosophical texts of the Hellenistic period to be read as guidance for healing? The historical context Hadot provides for the philosophical schools discussed in the previous chapter may be helpful. Hadot says that doing philosophy in this period is choosing a tradition and *practising* that tradition. Presumably, pupils who decide to go to a philosophical school in the first place already have tried to work on themselves. Perhaps they have already faced difficulties in life and want to appeal to the particular school to remedy their ills. Hadot tells us that many of the texts from these schools that survive have to be read with this context in mind: they are designed for disciples, people who have already adopted the ideal of wisdom of their particular chosen school. In this case, therapeutic texts or practices are given to those who search for ways of healing pupils or patients by a teacher figure. Based, then, on this structure of therapy as such, there is, on the one hand, a philosopher teacher or doctor, and, on the other, the pupil or patient; and from this Nussbaum develops her interpretation of Hellenistic philosophy. But there is another way these texts work as therapy. The texts also work for the philosopher herself as guidance for her practice. In other words, they are not just discourses devised for persuading or converting a pupil or a patient; rather, they are there for the philosopher’s own self-reflection and self-improvement: that is, for the philosopher’s own self-doctoring or self-mastery.

In the first scenario here, the philosopher is the expert amongst the two parties. In the therapeutic process, Nussbaum (1994) says three things are to be provided for pupils. They are: ‘a tentative diagnosis of disease’, ‘a tentative norm of health’, and ‘proper philosophical

method and procedure' (28-9). The philosopher is like the physician in this process. With the disease, the symptoms, and the ways of curing them, the philosopher is supposed to *know*. The medical metaphor of therapeutic philosophy, however, brings about problems. For example, in terms of the goal, what constitutes physical health involves fewer controversies and disagreements than what constitutes mental health, let alone what constitutes *the good life*. The idea of the philosopher doctor who *knows* what the good life is, who knows how to treat people who are not living a good life, and who adopts techniques to convert them, is therefore problematic in a way that the idea of the good doctor for physical ailments is not. In the second scenario, the philosopher himself is a learner and a pursuer of self-improvement. The philosopher may receive guidance from whoever he is learning from, but the relationship with the guidance and the teacher is an inward and personal one. These two types of doctoring – the doctor for others and the doctor for oneself – both exist in Hellenistic philosophy. Nussbaum, with the focus on the medical analogy used in compassionate philosophy, addresses mainly doctoring as it arises in the first scenario – the philosopher as a doctor who is, therefore, a *knower*. Hadot, with the ideas of 'philosophy as a way of life' and 'philosophy as spiritual exercises', focuses on doctoring as it arises in the second scenario – the philosopher as learner. Both thinkers, however, recognise the importance of the other scenario and allude to this. In the following discussion, I will focus on the second one, where the texts work as materials for self-reflection for philosophers. In doing so, I hope to explore 'the transformation' an individual goes through when taking on such philosophical practices. In a manner similar to the previous chapter, I will still focus on Nussbaum's and Hadot's interpretations of this issue.

### **The transformation of the self**

Some personal transformation is required in Hellenistic philosophy. As Nussbaum suggests: 'both Aristotle and Hellenistic thinkers insist that human flourishing cannot be achieved unless desire and thought, as they are usually constructed within society, are considerably transformed' (11). Hadot (1995) says: 'each school has its own therapeutic method, but all of them linked their therapeutics to a profound transformation of the individual's mode of seeing and being. The object of spiritual exercises is precisely to bring about this transformation' (83). These two thinkers, however, have different understandings about what 'the transformation' involves and the role that the philosopher plays in this transformation, which includes the activities both of transforming the philosopher himself and of transforming others. The goal of Hellenistic philosophy, *eudaimonia*, seems to be



understood by Nussbaum as intimately tied to the concept of self-sufficiency. And the concept of self-sufficiency that she conceives, as shown in the last few chapters, presupposes an opposition between the internal world and the external world. Along with this are the other oppositions, including those of controlling and accepting, active agent and passive receiver, impenetrable being and porous being, and the solitary good life and the good life in a community.

This understanding of Hellenistic *eudaimonia* is very different from that of Hadot's, which is represented by the concept of radical self-transformation. The concept of self-transformation does not presuppose a firm opposition between the internal and the external world or between the individual self and others. And Hadot's concept captures the aspect of *eudaimonia* as a never-ending pursuit for philosophers, by which a sense of living in accordance with reason in every single moment, is the most important thing for the philosopher. The role of the philosopher is conceived differently in these two ideas of *eudaimonia*. Both are presented as in between two poles – in Nussbaum's, the two poles are 'godlike' self-sufficiency at one end of the scale and human vulnerability at the opposite; in Hadot's, the two poles are the sage's wisdom and the ordinary person's ignorance. These two poles, in the two accounts, are again differently conceived in relation to Hellenistic ideas of *eudaimonia* and the role of the philosopher. The philosopher's role is, in Nussbaum's account, the contemplator whose main job is constantly to scrutinise alternative views and to achieve moral development through a rational process of dialectical thinking;<sup>44</sup> while in Hadot's account, the philosopher is the *doer* who strives to be closer to the sage who at all times possesses wisdom and acts accordingly. In the following section, these two concepts of *eudaimonia* and the role of the philosopher in relation to each will be discussed in more detail.

### **Nussbaum: *eudaimonia* as self-sufficiency**

In order to investigate the role of the philosopher in Hellenistic philosophy, we should first examine the goal the philosopher strives for. In Nussbaum and Hadot's works, the ultimate goal is conceived differently. Overall, Nussbaum believes that, albeit with nuances in their approach, Hellenistic philosophers were responding to a long lasting theme that had

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<sup>44</sup> While Nussbaum talks about the 'dialectical process' in ancient Greek philosophy, she does not exclusively discuss intellectual activities. However, there *is* an emphasis on the intellectual level in Nussbaum's understanding of the dialectical character in ancient Greek philosophy. This will be discussed further in the rest of this chapter.

been a focus for thinkers since pre-Socratic times, which she demonstrates with reference to the literature of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The theme is related to human vulnerability, luck, human agency and self-sufficiency. The philosopher's role in relation to the goal of self-sufficiency that Nussbaum identifies (citing Aristotle) is not that of someone who proposes an unshakable view on what self-sufficiency entails and what it excludes, but that of someone who learns diligently about different views, the complications and pros and cons that each of them involves, and seeks for moral development through this sort of intellectual dialectic.

### *Vulnerability and self-sufficiency*

Nussbaum (1986) portrays 'human vulnerability', which she believes concerns most Greek thinkers, by alluding to the image of the vine tree highlighted by the poet Pindar in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE. This image is like this: 'human excellence grows like a vine tree, fed by the green dew, raised up, among wise men and just, to the liquid sky' (1). A vine tree's growth depends greatly on elements that are not within the tree itself. Human excellence, parallel to the tree, also relies on various factors that are not within the individual. The things that are external to the individual considered to be a valuable part of a good life include health, wealth, family, love and friendship. They are external to the individual and their presence and absence are not fully under the individual's control. Nussbaum argues that contemplation of the place of external goods, whose presence relies partly on luck (*tuchē*), is a theme that penetrates early Greek literature through to the philosophical tradition of Plato and Aristotle. In *The Therapy of Desire*, Nussbaum continues to ponder on the role of external objects and luck in her reading of Hellenistic philosophy. These philosophers, on the whole, promote the value of self-sufficiency. That is, they all propose a certain idea of the good life that is immune to luck. To be self-sufficient, briefly speaking, is to be capable of being content and feeling complete, regardless of the situation one is in. The self-sufficient person does not rely on things outside herself to be happy. This requires one's acknowledgment of oneself as an independent being. It also requires one's understanding of flourishing as something that does not regard factors outside one's control as necessities. The concept of flourishing as self-sufficiency as such, Nussbaum (1994) suggests, contains a denial of 'the intrinsic value' of so-called external goods (361).

### *Detachment from external goods*

Plato and Aristotle, in Nussbaum's view, have relatively moderate proposals on the list of the external goods that should be excluded in the flourishing life. In Plato's *Symposium*,

love of Beauty, the pursuit of which is under one's own control, is proposed to replace love of a particular individual, the pursuit of which one does not have control of. However, the dialectic way in which Plato lays out the argument, and the fact that the dialogue finishes with a counter-argument to Socrates' account of the ascent of love, Nussbaum believes, demonstrates the reservation Plato has about any thorough denial of the intrinsic value of loving a particular person. Aristotle, more explicitly, includes some external goods in his account of *eudaimonia*: '[Aristotle's] best human life is a life rich in attachments to people and things outside the self – friendships, family loves, political ties, ties of certain sorts to possessions and property. Thus it is a life rich in possibilities for emotions such as love, grief, fear, and even anger' (42). But the Hellenistic schools, in Nussbaum's view, have a tendency to be stricter in their teachings of detachment. Epicurus attempts a 'complete removal of *tuchē*' (121). The Stoics proposes a 'radical detachment', in which values of 'external goods' (e.g. wealth and honour), 'relational goods' (e.g. children, friends, and political rights), and some forms of 'virtuous activity' (e.g. acting courageously) where the outcome is beyond our control, are all taken to be 'worthless' (362). Nussbaum concludes with Cicero's remark: 'the wise man must be self-sufficient; his life is always *eudaimon*, no matter what happens' (*ibid.*).

In all accounts of detachment, mild or severe, the external world is depicted as sharply separated from the individual's internal world. This is vivid in the image of a Stoic self well-protected within 'the inner citadel'.<sup>45</sup> Within the inner citadel, 'the Stoic self ... feels external happenings as things that merely graze the surface of his skin' (Seneca, *Ep.* 72).<sup>46</sup> The techniques of detachment help the Stoics to '[build] an impregnable wall around the self, fortifying it against all possible assaults of fortune' (82.5). Nussbaum (1994) explains that for the Stoic practitioner external objects 'can never penetrate to the core. He and his good are safely at home together' (395). In Nussbaum's account, this Stoic detachment is the most extreme of all schools. But, as Nussbaum portrays it, the wall standing between the self and the external world applies, I believe, to some extent to all schools when it comes to the self-world relationship, even with those that propose a milder version of detachment, such as Aristotle. Inside the wall is a self with a selfhood to be protected; outside the wall are the external objects with an uncertainty and contingency that is to be avoided.

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<sup>45</sup> This image is seen in Marcus Aurelius *Meditations*, then adopted by later Stoics.

<sup>46</sup> Seneca, *Moral Epistles* (*Ep.*).

### *The separate self*

Nussbaum's perspective on the self in Hellenistic philosophy sees it as a unit that is separated from other people and objects in the world. The separateness of the self and the external world, in Nussbaum's account, is necessary for therapeutic detachment to take place, though it may be hard to bear. Hadot shares this view, as we shall see later. However, for Hadot, in the therapeutic process, detachment, and the sense of separateness contained in it, is accompanied by a particular understanding of the self-other relationship. That is, the individual is seen as part of Nature or of a greater 'Whole'. The love, kindness, and a sense of openness that can be found in the wise person in Hellenistic philosophy cannot be conceived if the significance of this aspect of the self-other relationship, and the scope of it, are not appreciated properly. From Nussbaum's account of 'separation', and her reservations about it, it can be assumed that Nussbaum does not fully appreciate this aspect, and that she has an understanding of the self-other relationship that puts excessive emphasis on independence and separation.

This can be seen in two ways. The first in Nussbaum's illustration of the invasion of selfhood. The self perceived as inside the wall reflects, in Nussbaum's view, its very identity and selfhood. The self identifies itself with certain values. For example, the Aristotelian follower, in Nussbaum's account, would identify herself with the values of 'several intrinsically good ways of acting and living, and with the [type of] practical reason that arranges for the orderly enactment of these [good ways of living]' (394). When the pursuit of these values is impeded, the self will view it 'as a diminution and even an invasion of her sphere of selfhood, of her person' (*ibid.*). In a similar way, for a Stoic self, who identifies herself with the value of reason and an impenetrable self, love of someone 'is evasion'; it allows the existence of 'a dangerous hole in the self' (442). The undesired outcome, the invasion of the self, is described as follows:

The passionate life is a life of continued gaping openness to violation, a life in which pieces of the self are groping out into the world and pieces of the world are dangerously making their way into the insides of the self; a way of life appropriately described in the imagery of bodily violation, implosion, explosion, of sexual penetration and unwanted pregnancy. (*ibid.*)

Invading the self inside the wall is like bodily violation and sexual penetration. The mental assault is as violent as the bodily one. Nussbaum presents this horrifying image of violation of the inner peace of the self and the teaching that aims to protect it from external harm.

Given this image of a ‘cured person’ as such, Nussbaum then explains her reservations. ‘The separateness of the other person’, which one can never fully obtain and control, is an object to be hated and opposed in many Hellenistic schools (190), and their power over the individual is to be removed. External objects or people, however, Nussbaum believes, while being the source of risk, can also be at the same time the source of a kind of joy. Nussbaum does not agree with the treatment most Hellenistic philosophers propose, since: ‘what neither the sick patient nor the cured pupil have found, it seems, is a way in which being simply human can be a source of erotic joy’ (190-1).

### **Hadot: *eudaimonia* as self-transformation**

Nussbaum’s understanding of the Hellenistic concept of *eudaimonia* is formed as a response to issues stemming from the role of luck (*tuchē*) and the value of external goods in human life. The ideal life proposed in ancient philosophy in general, Nussbaum argues, is a kind of life that is free from the risk that contingency brings. The ideal life is achievable by the individual independently. It is a life of self-contentment or self-sufficiency. In a way similar to Nussbaum, Hadot believes that, for ancient philosophers in general, external objects are considered to be the main cause of suffering. Or, to be more specific, the desires and the emotions the individual develops towards external objects are the main cause of human suffering. The concept of *eudaimonia* in antiquity, according to Hadot, requires the individual to detach herself from external objects. However, the movement of detachment, termed ‘interiorization’ by Hadot (1995), is accompanied inseparably by another movement called ‘exteriorization’, which is the movement of *re-discovering* the relationship, or connection, between the individual and the exterior world (211). The concept of *eudaimonia* understood as consisting of these two movements turns out to be different from that of Nussbaum’s in a significant way.

#### *Concentration on the ‘I’ (and ‘detachment from external goods’)*

The process of detachment is discussed by Hadot (2002) as ‘concentration on the “I”’ (189). One’s sense of the ‘I’ is often bound to the things one values, that one owns, or that one desires. The sense of the ‘I’, therefore, is ‘conflated with the objects to which it had become attached’ (190). In all schools, Hadot suggests, there arises ‘a kind of self-duplication in which the “I” refuses to be conflated with its desires and appetites, takes up a distance from the objects of its desire, and becomes aware of its power to become detached by them’ (*ibid.*). In the sense of finding the distance between, on the one hand, the individual self or

the 'I', and, on the other, the objects it desires, Hadot offers a similar account to Nussbaum regarding what the ancient teaching of detachment includes. However, the movement of detachment, in Hadot's account, includes another element that Nussbaum addresses less fully. This is called 'concentration on the present'. The individual must learn to detach herself, not only from external objects or people, but also from her own thoughts and feelings that do not have an anchor at the present moment. Hadot (1995) suggests that this is one of the main themes repeatedly seen in the Epicurean and the Stoic teaching. Worries about the future, for the Epicureans, are useless; it is better to 'be prepared to bear them,' instead of merely imagining misfortunes (88). As for the past, some Epicurean teachings seem to admit the pleasure that memories of the past can offer. Hadot (2002) says that it is 'only insofar as we "reactualize" it,' that a memory 'can provide us stable pleasure' (195). But generally the present, for the Epicureans, 'is enough for happiness, because it allows us to satisfy our simplest and most necessary desires, which provide stable pleasure' (196). The past and the future, for the Stoics, belong to the realm that does not depend on us. Only the present moment is the moment we live in and can work on. Hadot concludes that the Epicureans and the Stoics exercise different techniques, following different supporting theories, in terms of 'concentration on the present'. For the Epicureans, the goal is stable pleasure and the spiritual exercise is 'an invitation to relaxation and serenity' (*ibid.*). For the Stoics, the goal is 'mental tension and constant wakefulness of moral conscience' (*ibid.*). However, for both schools, the exercises have the same aim - one's being able to live fully in the present moment: 'the present sufficed for happiness, because it was the only reality which belongs to us and depends on us' (Hadot, 1995:269).

### *Expansion of the self*

The second movement, called 'expansion of the self' or 'exteriorization' by Hadot, is crucial. Nussbaum, while acknowledging the thought, which arises in different forms in each school, that the individual is part of a bigger group, a community, Nature, or the Whole, does not, however, seem to include this picture of the individual (as part of the Whole) in her account of self-sufficiency. Hadot, on the contrary, elaborates extensively on this point. The teaching that one is essentially part of a greater Whole is proposed in such different schools as the following: in Plato's *Republic*, the individual is to "strive ceaselessly to embrace the whole universality of the divine and the human" and toward "the contemplation of the whole of time and of being" (Hadot, 2002:202-3). For the Epicureans, 'there is an expansion of the self into the cosmos, an expansion that provides us with the pleasure of plunging into the

infinite' (203). For the Stoics, the 'I' expands 'into the infinity of time, in which the same unfolding of events which constitutes the world repeats itself eternally' (204). Hadot (1995) suggests that, in all these philosophical schools:

There is a new way of being-in-the-world, which consists in becoming aware of oneself as a part of nature, and a portion of universal reason. At this point, one no longer lives in the usual, conventional human world, but in the world of nature. ... In this way, one identifies oneself with an "Other": nature, or universal reason, as it is present within each individual. This implies a radical transformation of perspective... Interiorization is a going beyond oneself; it is a universalization. (211)

The sense of the individual as part of the bigger Whole and of the commonality one individual shares with other individuals and the world is present in all schools, according to Hadot. The concept of what has been called 'cosmos consciousness' is used by the Epicureans and the Stoics to explain this universality.

This emphasis in Hadot's reading of ancient Greek philosophy can perhaps be better understood through his criticism of Michel Foucault's works. Hadot contends that the fashion of reading ancient philosophy as 'the care of the self', initiated by Foucault in 1976, may result in overlooking the aspect of exteriorization in Hellenistic philosophy. Hadot (1995) makes the criticism that, in Foucault's reading of Hellenistic philosophy, there is a potentially excessive focus 'on the "self", or at least on a specific conception of the self' (207). An example given by Hadot is Foucault's illustration of the exercise for obtaining 'Stoic joy' found in Seneca. Foucault interprets this as follows: 'access to the self is liable to replace this kind of violent, uncertain, and temporary pleasures with a form of pleasure one takes in oneself, serenely and forever' (*ibid.*). But, Hadot argues, Stoic joy is not simply a 'form of pleasure' – it is qualitatively different from pleasure by its nature (*ibid.*). Most importantly, the joy to be found in the self, is 'in the best portion of the self', 'a self that thinks and acts in unison with universal reason' (*ibid.*). Hadot notes that 'the feeling of belonging to a whole is an essential element: belonging, that is both to the whole constituted by the human community, and to that constituted by the cosmic whole' (208). Foucault's reading of Hellenistic philosophy, on the contrary, leads to an individualistic picture of philosophical exercises, and ultimately goes against what the exercises fundamentally are about. It is, therefore, in danger of being perceived as 'a new form of Dandyism' (211).

It is true that Foucault's work on Hellenistic philosophy is inspired by Hadot. He shares Hadot's views in significant ways, as Hadot himself admits and as many thinkers have

argued. Matthew Dennis (2017), for example, argues that the aspect of self-cultivation and the employment of so-called extra-philosophical methods – by which Dennis means practices or techniques that are generally less associated with the subject of philosophy today, such as meditation, daily self-examination and confession – are seen in *both* Foucault’s and Hadot’s works. Matthew Sharpe (2018), along similar lines, suggests that ‘Hadot remains much closer to Foucault than his criticisms of the latter might lead readers to suppose’ (129). However, Hadot’s criticism of Foucault’s reading is significant: it highlights a fundamental aspect of Hellenistic philosophy, the misconception of which may lead to a very mistaken picture of what it is about. Both Christoph Horn (2016) and Michael Chase (2019) argue this.

### *The character of ceaseless progress*

Hadot suggests that the Platonic idea of the philosopher is exemplified with reference to the god *Erōs* in the *Symposium*. *Erōs* has the character of both of his parents *Poros* (expediency) and *Penia* (poverty), and he is neither completely abundant nor completely poor. He is always in between the two. Similarly, the philosopher, characterised by *Erōs*, is always in between the wise (those who have already obtained wisdom), on the one hand, and those ignorant people who are not aware of their ignorance, on the other. The philosopher lacks wisdom but he knows how to acquire it. The ideal of wisdom depicted in the *Symposium* is, by its nature, inaccessible to human beings – it is ‘the representation of the absolute perfection, above and beyond all of its possible realizations’ (261). A similar depiction of real wisdom is found in Hellenistic schools. For the Epicureans and the Stoics, those exercises concerned with ‘concentration on the present’ referred to above aim at a way of life in which the philosopher fully lives in every single moment. This is not something to be known on the intellectual level, but something to be actively engaged in, or, in Hadot’s terms, something to be chosen in every instant in life. In other words, if a person is able to articulate all the merits of living in the present, but is constantly thinking about the past and the future, he is not a qualified philosopher by the standard of these schools. Real knowing has to be embodied in action. Therefore, Hadot concludes, ‘real wisdom does not merely cause us to know: it makes us “be” in a different way’ (265). This can be made clearer by looking at the distinction between the philosopher and the sage illustrated by Bernard Groethuysen (1980):

The sage’s consciousness of the world is something peculiar to him alone. Only the sage never ceases to have the whole constantly present to his mind. He never forgets the world, but thinks and acts with a view to the cosmos... The sage is a part of the world; he is cosmic. He does not



let himself be distracted from the world, or detached from the cosmic totality ... the figure of the sage forms, as it were, an indissoluble unity with man's representation of the world. (80; quoted in Hadot, 1995:251)

Hadot accepts Groethuysen's description of the Stoic sage. The sage's perspective – including having the Whole in his mind, acting with this in view, and not letting himself be detached from this totality – are what the Stoic philosopher practises. The difference between the sage and the philosopher is that the sage is able to think and act in this way *at all times*. The philosopher, on the other hand, may 'accede to [wisdom] in certain privileged moments' (265). In this sense, philosophers are part-time sages. In Hadot's account the goal of ancient philosophy as self-transformation must, therefore, be taken to be a state that cannot be fully achieved. It is a ceaseless process, a whole way of life that the philosopher commits his life to.

### **The sage and the philosopher**

The philosopher in antiquity, we have seen, strives for wisdom and *eudaimonia*. The goal of Hellenistic philosophy as such is discussed by Nussbaum in terms mainly of self-sufficiency and by Hadot in terms of self-transformation. Nussbaum's and Hadot's different points of focus in their understandings of the goal of Hellenistic philosophy result in different pictures of the person who commits to studying philosophy. The relation between philosophy and therapy – as well as the role of a philosopher as a teacher or as a doctor for the diseased soul – is also at odds in these two accounts.

#### *Nussbaum's view*

First of all, both Nussbaum and Hadot agree that the sage or wise person as described in each school serves as an exemplar and norm for the pupil. The sage, both in Epicureanism and Stoicism, is depicted as a being who is calm and tranquil, i.e. in a perfect state of *ataraxia*. And both schools recognised the sage to be in a state that no human being can ever achieve. Nussbaum argues that the perfection of the sage, by its very nature, means a lack of humanity. It is, therefore, a direction to strive for but not one to be embraced completely. This reservation about becoming a complete sage, as Nussbaum sees, is also found in these schools.

The Epicurean sage is actually represented by gods. Nussbaum (1994) draws on Lucretius' words to show the self-sufficiency represented by gods: 'The gods really dwell in

“tranquil peace” (1093),<sup>47</sup> living a “placid and serene life” (1094) – and they lack all interest in controlling the world of nature, or in using nature to punish us’ (252). They are exemplars of invulnerability and self-sufficiency (498). The Stoic wise person is presented as someone who is *radically detached*: ‘the detachment that greets slavery and even torture with equanimity, the detachment that receives the news of a child’s death with the remarkable words, “I was already aware that I had begotten a mortal” (Cicero, *TD* 3.30)’ (363).<sup>48</sup> This detachment is radical, for Nussbaum, in the sense that it is far from the way most human beings react to the world, even to the extent that it is considered to be inhuman. Nussbaum argues that this radically detached and inhuman picture of the sage is not to be read as an unquestionable ideal the philosopher is to strive for. In Epicureanism, ‘the finitist strain’ and human need for others that are seen abundantly in Lucretius’ poem are evidence for ‘a consistent anti-transcendence position’ and a suspicion of any whole-hearted ‘commitment to perfect *ataraxia*’ (498). Similarly, in Stoicism, Nussbaum argues, ‘the depth of ties to others in a truly reasonable and complete life’ is recognised, which is evidence for the Stoic position against moving completely towards the indifferent, self-sufficient sage life, and in favour of retaining some humane aspects in the ideal of a good *human* life (499).

Therefore, the ideal philosopher’s role for Nussbaum is the Aristotelian one. The Aristotelian’s position towards attachments is as follows: ‘the Aristotelian claims that you can have an acceptable amount of personal integrity inside a life of love. You can form passionate attachments and still regard yourself as your own to govern, your selfhood as inviolate’ (442). Compared to the ‘indifference’ to human need presented in the Epicurean and the Stoic sage, the Aristotelian ideal, Nussbaum believes, is more humane. Moreover, Aristotelian philosophers also see the value of dialectic in moral development. Nussbaum is convinced by the Aristotelian view here: ‘dialectic makes conjectures about things concerning which the philosopher seeks understanding’ (*Metaph.*, 1004b22-6).<sup>49</sup> The conjectures themselves have great significance. This is expressed by Nussbaum (1986) at the end of her discussion of Plato’s dialogue:

But I hope to have opened here an inquiry into the relationship between the Platonic dialogue form and the content of Platonic ethics, an ethical concept in which much of our ordinary

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<sup>47</sup> Lucretius, *De rerum natura*.

<sup>48</sup> Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations (TD)*.

<sup>49</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics (Metaph.)*.

humanity is a source of confusion rather than of insight, and our lives stand in need of transcendence through the dialectical activity of intellect. (135)

Nussbaum seems to suggest that, instead of having a clear and unquestioning view about what a good life is, gleaned from what is presented in a particular school, a philosopher's role is to understand the complexity of each, with its cons and pros. The philosopher is a 'professional human being': he is able to offer a 'clearer view of the target at which we were aiming at all along' and is able to '[describe] explicitly the principles that we use in assessing one another's inferences' (261). Nussbaum's ideal philosopher is good at discerning human behaviour and its goal, which most people may be unaware of, offering clear descriptions about different goals, and critically assessing these options. Nussbaum believes that 'through its depiction of the dialectical process the dialogue can show us moral development and change taking place' (128). The ideal philosopher is, in short, a critical thinker engaging in the intellectual exchange of ideas.

#### *Hadot's view*

Like Nussbaum, Hadot (1995) addresses the unattainability of sagehood in Hellenistic philosophy. The Platonic sage '[raises himself]... by [his] life of the mind, to the realm of the divine Mind itself' (58). The Epicurean sage 'watches the infinity of worlds arising out of atoms in the infinite void; nature is sufficient for his needs, and nothing ever disturbs the peace of his soul'. And the Stoic sage 'devotes himself freely to his thoughts ... [and] enjoys the happiness of being self-sufficient' (*ibid.*). The figure of the sage, Hadot explains, is a 'representation of absolute perfection' and is 'an inaccessible role model, whom the *philosopher* (he who loves wisdom) strives to imitate, by means of an ever-renewed effort, practiced in each moment' (261). The sage serves as the model for the philosopher to strive for. Sagehood, as understood in ancient Greek philosophy, however, is not actually achievable, for the state of perfection only exists as an ideal.

Similarly, Hadot notes the tension between being a sage and being a human. In human society, there are customs and conventions that are the source of suffering. The idolatry of money, for example, Hadot explains, causes misery for billions of people. From the sage's perspective, most of these valued objects for humans are not important. Seeing the world from a completely different perspective, the perspective of the whole, the sage is able to be free from disturbances brought about by these objects.

There is, then, a tension in Hadot's account that is revealed in the philosopher's position as in between the sage and the ordinary person. For a philosopher, who is *aware* of the problems with conventional views, in light of wisdom that is exemplified by the sage:

daily life, as it is organized and lived by other men, must necessarily appear abnormal, like a state of madness, unconsciousness, and ignorance of reality. And nonetheless he must live this life every day, in this world in which he feels himself a stranger and in which others perceive him to be one as well. And it is precisely in this daily life that he must seek to attain that way of life which is utterly foreign to the everyday world. The result is a perpetual conflict between the philosopher's effort to see things as they are from the standpoint of universal nature and the conventional vision of things underlying human society, a conflict between the life one should live and the customs and conventions of daily life. This conflict can never be totally resolved. (58)

As we have seen, the figure of the philosopher is in between wisdom, embodied by the sage, and ignorance, the state most ordinary people are in. The philosopher is a stranger to his fellow men living in the world, in the sense that he recognises imperfection and the problems it causes, and strives for improvement. The philosopher, however, being part of this human world, can never achieve any perfect state. This tension between the philosopher striving towards a completely self-sufficient sagehood, on the one hand, and the philosopher remaining a member of the society, on the other, is insoluble. Responding to Georges Friedmann's acknowledgement of the predicament of ancient philosophers, Hadot (2002) says, 'we must agree, for the "engaged" philosopher always runs the risk of letting himself be swept along by political passions and hatreds' (281). Therefore, similarly to Nussbaum, Hadot believes that the tension between completely devoting oneself to becoming a sage and being an 'engaged philosopher' was a basic predicament faced by the ancients.

Hadot, however, provides, I believe, a more positive picture of the role of the philosopher in this predicament. It is to be found precisely here, in daily life, in this world where the philosopher lives and makes improvements. Hadot suggests that:

ancient philosophy also teaches us not to resign ourselves, but to continue to act reasonably and try to live according to the norm constituted by the Idea of wisdom, whatever happens, and even if our action seems very limited to us. In the words of Marcus Aurelius: 'Do not wait for Plato's Republic, but be happy if one little thing leads to progress, and reflect on the fact that what results from such a little thing is not, in fact, so very little. (281)

Hadot's figure of the philosopher, depicted as such, is active and positive, despite the unattainability of his goal. The unattainability is accepted as a cost of remaining a part of this human world.

The main difference between Hadot's and Nussbaum's accounts of the philosopher lies, therefore, not in the understanding of the predicament and the tension between the sage and the human that the ancient philosophers face. The main difference lies in what this predicament *means* to the philosopher. In Nussbaum's account, the choice the philosopher has to make is between becoming inhumanly godlike and well-protected, and staying human by holding to human values at the price of being vulnerable. And the good philosopher is someone who seeks a better understanding of such conflicting values. In Hadot's account, the philosopher is someone who *acts*, despite the impossibility of being perfect. Reading ancient philosophy as practical exercises, Hadot believes the real problem a philosopher faces is not the problem of knowing this or that, but of *being* in this or that way. Hadot therefore does not find those teachings that do not involve critical thinking necessarily problematic. Critical thinking is just one of the techniques. Other techniques include attention, which 'is a continuous vigilance and presence of mind', and meditation, which 'allows us to be ready at the moment when an unexpected circumstance occurs' (Hadot, 1995:84-5). All these aim at concentrating on living fully in the current moment. This requires wisdom so that one will not be defeated when confronting an undesirable situation. Meanwhile, this also requires courage so one is willing to commit to living in the contingent world, knowing the risks it has. And it requires an openness – Hadot describes this as a 'joyful yes', in a Nietzschean sense, as the response to everything one meets in life.

In short, Hadot shares Nussbaum's view of the ideal of the sage – an ideal that can never be achieved in ancient philosophy. Two explanations they share are as follows: (1) the absolute perfection of the sage only exists as an ideal; (2) there is a tension between the pursuit of sagehood and actually living in the world. However, Nussbaum's account of the ideal philosopher is different from Hadot's in light of this tension in two ways.

First, Nussbaum's philosopher does not commit to any particular view. The role of the philosopher is to get a clear idea about each view, be able to think in a philosophical way and assess each argument. Moral development is expected to be gained in this process, and some kind of truth is expected to be revealed to him. Hadot, on the other hand, presents the figure of the philosopher as a living practitioner of his philosophy. The value of being a philosopher

does not rest on his *knowing* a view, or different views, but on his *being* and *living* according to the view, supported by philosophical reasoning.

Second, for Nussbaum, the tension between becoming a sage and staying engaged in the human world is an impasse. The more the philosopher learns to detach, the more he becomes a sage, and meanwhile inhuman. Conversely, the less the philosopher learns to detach, the less he becomes a sage, but stays a human being with feelings. Departing from this view of the tension, Hadot does see that there are positive elements in being unaffected by typical human concerns. The philosopher is able to appreciate more about what is happening here and now in a human way, and understand the people he is conversing with here and now, only when he is not occupied by thoughts and worries about the past and the future. These two aspects of what the philosopher is and does are, I think, the crucial differences between Nussbaum and Hadot's understanding of Hellenistic philosophy.

### **The philosopher doctor**

Holding the view of the ideal philosopher as the Aristotelian philosopher whose main job is fostering dialectical thinking, Nussbaum (1994) criticises those philosophical teachers or doctors in Hellenistic schools for sometimes not doing their job well enough. This is particularly so in the case of Epicureanism. The Epicurean 'wise teacher... 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' (490). The teacher's argument often aims at correcting the pupil's mistakes (*diorthōsis*). The relation between the Epicurean doctor and patient is, Nussbaum argues, asymmetrical. That is, it is presupposed that the philosopher is professional, like the doctor who has the knowledge that his patient does not have – of the symptoms of the illness and the effective treatment. The philosopher doctor is superior to the patient in terms of his knowledge, and is supposed to be obeyed in the process of therapy. This inhibits the possibility of the dialectical relationship that Nussbaum requires and is the reason she finds the Epicurean model to fall short of the best that she finds in Hellenistic philosophy.

On the other hand, Hadot's philosopher as practitioner, who strives for wisdom himself, is presented more like a companion on the journey of the pupil or patient. The philosopher knows more, if he knows anything, about the fact that he is ignorant. And he invites the pupils who do not even know this or do not understand what this involves to become a

philosopher like himself. The philosopher doctor appeals to ‘reasoning’ as the tool to do so. This is seen in Socratic teaching:

In order for a dialogue to be established which, as Nicias says, can lead the individual to give an account of himself and of his life, the person who talks with Socrates must submit, along with Socrates, to the demands of rational discourse – that is, to the demands of reason. In other words, caring for ourselves and questioning ourselves occur only when our individuality is transcended and we rise to the level of universality, which is represented by what the two interlocutors have in common. (Hadot, 2002:32)

Socratic dialogue is read as an invitation to participate in reasoning activity by the figure of Socrates, as a teacher, or a doctor, in therapeutic philosophy. The teacher, however, is not qualified to teach *only* because he has developed a personal, good way of reasoning. The pupil, similarly, is not expected to learn the technique and develop another personal way of reasoning. Hadot emphasises the ‘universality’, the common ground, that the teacher and the pupil share in thinking. What happens in the teaching is, therefore, not that the pupil acquires the ability to think in his own unique way, but also that the pupil improves his ability to think according to Reason, which is universally shared.

Hadot’s philosopher doctor as a practitioner is also presented as demonstrating her teaching in their actual behaviour. The Renaissance poet Petrarch, Hadot points out, ‘refused to apply the term “philosophers” to professors sitting in a chair, and reserved the word for those who confirmed their teachings by their acts’ (262-3). This was the same in antiquity. A philosopher doctor, therefore, has to be living with what they teach. The techniques they provide for their pupil or patient to learn are to be accepted when the pupil or the patient witnesses how the philosopher doctor lives, and wants to be living in the same way. The philosopher doctor demonstrates the philosophical life that strives for wisdom first and foremost by living it. In this light theory, argumentation and verbal persuasion become secondary.

# Chapter 8 Learning from Ancient Greek Philosophers – A Way of Being-in-the-World

Waste no more time arguing about what a good man should be. Be one.

– Marcus Aurelius<sup>50</sup>

Whoever then understands what is good, can also know how to love; but he who cannot distinguish good from bad, and things which are neither good nor bad from both, can he possess the power of loving? To love, then, is only in the power of the wise.

– Epictetus<sup>51</sup>

## Some major themes of previous chapters

In this thesis, I investigated the theme of what one might call ‘the therapy of desire’ in three philosophical traditions in the Greco-Roman period.

A Socratic way to respond to human passion was discussed drawing on *The Symposium*, in which the main focus was on love, particularly erotic love. The content of Socrates’ speech – the ascent of *erōs* – could be read as suggesting an ultimate solution to the difficulties often encountered by lovers. It points out the problems in the other speeches there and gives a counter discourse proposing a different and, according to Socrates, a better way of understanding the whole emotion of love. A more important aspect of Socrates’ speech, however, is the manner of it as itself illustrating the dialectic process. The character of *erōs* as struggling between poverty and resourcefulness epitomises the philosopher’s quest. Socrates

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<sup>50</sup> *Med.* X:16.

<sup>51</sup> *Dis.* II:108.



exemplifies the good philosopher himself in the sense that, firstly, he does not have real wisdom and he knows that he does not have real wisdom (the content of his speech was learnt from his teacher, Diotima);<sup>52</sup> and, secondly, he is on the path of learning to perfect himself.

In chapter 4, Epicurus' teachings on the typology of desire, along with the issues of illusion and unmasking in the Roman Epicurean poet Lucretius, were discussed.

In chapter 5, the Stoics' view on human desire, particularly how it is related to judgment, which was at the heart of their ethical ideas, was considered. These ancient philosophical schools, each defined by an ideal of wisdom and a concept of *eudaimonia*, developed different attitudes and disciplines according to their overall aims. However, they share similarities in thinking of philosophy as providing a path to living well, in relying on our human ability to reason, and in seeing humans as imperfect and in need of improvement.

Such qualities of philosophy in this period invite us to reflect on the nature of philosophy, including philosophy as a discipline is in today's universities. In chapter 6, the contrast between Hellenistic philosophy and modern philosophy made by Nussbaum and Hadot was discussed. In chapter 7, the discussion focuses on the role of the philosopher in the Greek classical period: the relations between the philosopher and those he learns from (the wise), and between the philosopher and those whom he teaches (the student). In contrasting Nussbaum's and Hadot's accounts on these issues, I hope, firstly, to have examined the implications that philosophy in this period has for modern times; and, secondly, to have shown something of the different stances these two thinkers have taken. I believe that further discussion of the relations – between the philosopher and his teacher and between the philosopher and his students<sup>53</sup> – is needed if we are to bring some useful philosophical exercises from this period into modern philosophical, therapeutic and educational practices.

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<sup>52</sup> In Chapter 3, it is brought out that Socrates gains his knowledge of love from his teacher, Diotima. The focus of the discussion is on the figure of Socrates as a learner, who exemplifies *both lack of knowledge and wanting to pursue wisdom*. So both characteristics exemplify the philosopher's situation. The characteristics of 'lack' and 'receiving' in such a philosophic figure is discussed in the section '*Erōs* as an intermediate'. The discussion alluded to the implications that Diotima presents in an indirect way: as female and as a priestess (both are unusual and controversial as part of the ancient Greek philosophical tradition). On this issue, see David M. Halperin (1990), Luce Irigaray (1993), Adriana Cavarero (1995) and Rachel Jones (2014).

<sup>53</sup> The two relations should not be reduced to one dominant one with the philosopher or teacher as the authority to whom the pupil listens submissively. The philosopher teaches, but in the context of helping the pupil to notice the point and change his thinking for himself. But this does not mean that the philosopher thinks that what he says authoritatively is the truth which allows for no doubt.

## **Philosophy and a good life**

But this thesis did not start by looking at Greek philosophy itself. One central question from which it took its start concerns how my action of choosing, ideally based on what I truly want, plays a key role in my personal fulfilment. I explored the concepts of autonomy and authenticity, as well as the philosophical and psychological roots of these ideas. I also investigated some modern therapeutic approaches and branches of psychology, such as positive psychology, which, from different perspectives, base their ideas of personal well-being on this sort of premise, as well as diagnosing when a person was *not* freely making a choice for herself, and suggesting treatments for such conditions. It is difficult to specify the reasons why this question troubled me so much. But I guess it was to do with some of the early life experiences I had.

I grew up in the 1980s in Taiwan. It was a time when Taiwan had just finished a long martial-law period lasting 38 years. The society started to get its democratic political system genuinely working and headed into a period of fast economic growth. The ‘progressive’ ideas and values that were celebrated in Western or Westernised cultures started to appear in Taiwanese society (which was, in some ways, still quite traditional) through films, dramas, songs and other media. The values of personal choice and satisfying personal desire were among those progressive ideas. There was a clash between these new ideas and the more traditional values, such as social adaptation, community harmony and a certain kind of frugality that were held by a lot of people then. While I was in high school, there was a well-known advertisement for a drink, which included the line: ‘as long as I like it, I don’t see why not!’

My grandmother who was a significant figure when I was growing up never went to school. She got married to my grandfather when she was twenty, and gave birth to my father a year later, and five other children over the next ten years. She never lived alone, and in her daily life, most decisions were made not based on what she personally wanted, but on what other people needed and wanted – where to go, what to cook etc. I was told that she would prepare lots of half-ready food in the freezer as grandfather often brought a group of friends home without notice, and this was a time while there was often not enough food around. She could always make a meal for those who came to eat. Did she not have a good life because she rarely made decisions for herself? Was her life not fulfilling because she never pursued a goal for herself based on what she personally wanted?

My thinking about how people should make decisions for themselves was enhanced after I went to university to study education. It was in the late 1990's, and ideas of progressive education were already being increasingly criticised in Western countries. But many of these ideas were still quite new for the society of Taiwan, including the educators there. They were certainly very new to me, and in a revolutionary way opened up my ways of thinking, as they were so different from the kind of education I had received. The idea was not to see the child merely as an unfinished adult, but as a person in her own right, with all her potentiality and personality there ready to unfold. Educators ought to allow and create a space for that potential to blossom in the process of maturation. This led me to be critical of the kind of Confucian values we were taught in school, but it did not happen without questions and doubts (I was, at the same time, studying in the department of Chinese, and reading Chinese literature and philosophy, including Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism). Aside from this, ideas in psychoanalysis about how personal desires are often suppressed, unconsciously or consciously, and the fact that suppression causes pain and long-term emotional problems, or problems in the personality, also fascinated (and sometimes shocked) me. There were years when I often reflected on my own early experiences with lots of resentment, or tried to find solutions to my current problems from recalling these early experiences. So this university learning, in a way, deepened for me the significance of personal choice for leading the life one wants; but it also aroused conflicts and questions.

The question of 'How do I know what I really want?' was one I thought had importance both for avoiding living a life (good or bad) as a result of just conforming to contemporary social values and the expectations of others, and for enabling actualisation of one's own personal potential. One direction I went in for answers was to search for a definition or representation of the 'I' as a subject with inner qualities, or, in other words, the study of the self. In reading the literature, I got the impression that a Cartesian understanding of the self as mind (as opposed to body), distinguished mainly by the ability to think, has been dominant over the last three centuries in Western ideas of what a human being is. Charles Taylor (1989), in his celebrated book *The Sources of the Self*, provides a rich analysis of the wider historical roots of the modern Western idea of the self. This work is complex and ambitious, and sheds light on how a wide range of philosophical ideas have come to be adopted during these centuries in relation to the formation of the modern idea of the self. Taylor's historical work on this implies that such a concept is, to a large extent, the result of social, philosophical, and linguistic developments. That is to say, the human self as an existential

entity is not an objective and universal fact which can be discovered or defined purely through scientific investigation. Rather, it is an idea developed within a particular socio-linguistic-cultural context. This then led me to consider that the idea of the self in Western society, broadly conceived, is different from that in an Eastern one, broadly conceived; and so to acquire a meaningful comprehension of the concept of self, for someone like me who grew up in Taiwan, it is necessary to study the related social-cultural values of the particular social context. The assumption behind that was that perhaps 'going for what the individual wants' is of significant ethical value in a certain society, while in another society where the idea of the self is understood more in relation to others, for example, to pursue personal fulfilment through pursuing satisfaction and the feeling of happiness is not the final ethical goal. So this seems to end up in a kind of relativism, but I don't want to stop exactly there.

It is beyond my capacity and the scope of this thesis to make a detailed comparison of Eastern and Western conceptions of the self in a short space of time. Without exploring the historical and conceptual background against which these ideas developed, as Paul Standish (2020) points out, the comparative project might risk 'clinging onto a framework of thought within which another way of thinking can be contained, weighed up and evaluated' (82). The result of such a project would be a failure to truly appreciate and reflect on the unfamiliar elements in another way of thinking. However, in exploring some of Plato's dialogues and the commentary of Martha Nussbaum (who makes it clear that the ancient Greek philosophical ideas on the nature of human being, and human excellence, desire, and emotions provide roots for the thought of many later thinkers), and the work of Taylor himself, I have found that these ancient sources shed an interesting light on universal human issues to do with ethical choice and what makes for a good life. In fact I ended up exploring the philosophy of this period in order to search for answers to, and gain a deeper understanding of, the sort of personal dilemmas about the self which I had been facing and described above. Two aspects of these ideas struck me as particularly significant: how one views the individual self, and how one manages one's desires.

### *Conceptions of selfhood*

Philosophy of this period approaches the question of who I am and issues of human desire in a very different way from the modern one that Taylor has depicted. It does not assume a separate, innate entity that is called the self, and hence, a good life that is personalised and based on particular qualities that that self has. The individual is understood

as essentially part of a bigger whole. The ancient philosopher, in working on ‘knowing yourself’, constantly contemplates his existence in relation to the cosmos of which he is a part and the universality of the divine. This kind of contemplation is not the same as some of contemporary collective movements which deny individuality in favour of a social or national whole, either. Misunderstandings may well arise if one sees the self in modern and ancient Greek times as immediately comparable. This by no means suggests that discussion of what makes us human, what makes an individual distinctive from others, and the role that different personalities may play in achieving *eudaimonia*, did not exist in the ancient Greek period. However, the difference in thinking about ethical goals (particularly in relation to personal subjectivity) between modern and ancient Greek times is significant. In fact (to put it in a simplified way) while modern philosophers are concerned about how one achieves self-fulfilment via discovering the true self, therapists about how one heals mental wounds through protecting or standing up for oneself, and educators about how to strengthen personal identity and enhance self-esteem, – these ancient philosophers were more concerned about the work of de-centring or ‘unselfing’, to use Iris Murdoch’s terms (I will look further at this below).

### *Managing desire*

Reflecting this conception of selfhood, philosophy of this period does not assume that the satisfaction of personal desire is essential to the good life. Desires are not to be satisfied without question. In fact the philosophy of this period is not directed towards living well through satisfying desire, whether it is another’s or one’s own. The question of how to live well is answered more, through ways of *managing* desire. The philosophical schools in this period share a view of desire as something we need to work on, transform, or even restrict at points, along with other ancient philosophical traditions such as Confucianism and Taoism, as well as some religious traditions such as Christianity (whose theology was directly influenced by these philosophical ideas and practices) and Buddhism. The wise men and saints in all these traditions are those whose desires are moderate and their behaviour appropriately modest (this is so even of the Epicureans who are sometimes thought to be hedonists and to pursue luxuries – a misunderstanding which I discussed in chapter 4). The difference between assumptions of well-being in much modern thinking based on ‘discovering’ desire, and in these ancient traditions based on ‘managing’ desire, leads to a completely different approach to desire, as well as to well-being, healing and happiness in general. In this way these

philosophies may provide a valuable resource for us to reflect on modern ideas of well-being and how we understand mental therapy.

### **Modern ideas of well-being and ethical conduct, seen in this light**

This kind of philosophy strikes me as more valuable than one that does not require or inspire such ethical effort and improvement. It may be worthwhile bringing out a crucial distinction made by Taylor (1992) between people who satisfy their own desires while neglecting others (even those of their close family) due to devotion to an ideal of authenticity, and those who follow their own desires out of mere self-indulgence. Taylor's remark helped me see more clearly the dilemma I was facing – that is: choosing between taking into account (and sometimes acting in accordance with) the expectations or preferences of others while feeling somehow that my life might be wasted, and following my own feelings but worrying that I was being selfish. In embracing authenticity as a valid moral ideal, Taylor sees this as an inevitable moral struggle that we have to continue encountering. The philosopher's task, hence, is to recognise this condition and raise himself up to follow the *higher* ideal of authenticity rather than lapsing into lower forms of it such as self-indulgence. But I find that the moral grounds provided by most modern approaches to support behaviour that is thought to follow an inner voice are often shaky. The result is that the line between authentic self-centred fulfilment and self-indulgence is, at times, very thin. I believe that the schools of Greco-Roman philosophy I have considered provide a better and more humane view of how we should live because they do not advocate a merely self-centred way of living. Rather they advocate a way that encourages us to live well together with others, while also inspiring self-improvement and self-perfection.

On the other hand, while there are these tendencies, it has to be said that few modern approaches to well-being would defend an idea of the good life as one consisting of completely selfish pursuits. Most of them, in one way or another, would count the well-being of the wider social and natural environment the individual lives in as part of the individual's own well-being. Martin Seligman, for example, the founder of positive psychology, who has been criticised for reducing well-being to subjective feelings of joy, includes relationships and a sense of achievement in his later work when developing the idea of 'flourishing'. Similarly, defenders of desire theory also consider the complications of conflicting desires, which refer to the incompatible desires of pursuing one's own interest and pursuing the

interests of close family or of friends.<sup>54</sup> One example is the situation where one receives a promotion opportunity to go abroad, but has to leave family and children to do so. The solution for those who embrace desire theory is often a utilitarian one – one should calculate the net consequence (if you can) and opt for the one that maximises benefit or satisfaction. But these approaches, even when they try to take others into consideration, often end up not having a place for a decision that is purely, or even mostly, altruistic (in fact a lot of them would argue that altruism is implausible). They do not have a proper space for such qualities as a non self-centred love, kindness, compassion, and benevolence, which have been at the centre of ethical thought and endeavour in most traditions. They tend to value rational calculation, distinguishing between my own and other people’s preferences, expectations and opinions, and being resolute in one’s stance. Avoiding being manipulated or fooled is crucial. The ‘quieter qualities’, to borrow Richard Smith’s term here, traditionally interwoven with ethical conduct, have been pushed away.

As for the satisfaction of our desires generally, in today's world, thanks to the development of technology, most of us have lots of material goods compared to all those who lived earlier, so arguably we have more desires satisfied. But the increased total amount of desire satisfaction does not seem to make a lot of us really *happy*. We also have more freedom at the legal level to choose what we want for ourselves, but a lot of us just feel trapped. While we pay attention to what makes us unfree, few search for the kind of inner freedom that Epictetus taught his disciples. Allied to such discontent and frustration, the phenomenon of increasing social division appears to have arisen in recent decades. This seems to relate to the widespread use of the social media, and the way these tend to work now. Matthew Syed (2020) suggests that one may think that the social media encourage diversity because of the potential range of opinions possible within such channels of communication, but in fact a series of closed ‘echo-chambers’ have emerged, where we only interact with those who agree with us. The result, he says, is that society is becoming more polarised, divided, and tribal – certainly not more interconnected in any meaningful human sense. This resonates with what the Legatum Report (see Brien and Stroud 2018) in Britain has found: i.e. that ‘social media have been shown to increase social isolation’ (31). Such media, it seems, make expressing one’s feelings about an issue or a person easier, untroubled by any ‘comeback’ which live interaction might involve. One’s idea about an opinion one has

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<sup>54</sup> Derek Parfit (1984) discusses the conflicts in terms of ‘global desires’ and ‘local desires’. For discussion on desire theory or desire-fulfilment theory, see Chapter 2, section ‘Desire-satisfaction’.

is likely to be enhanced by such echo-chambers, and one becomes blind the opinions of those who think differently.

In these circumstances, when the division between people having different stances and opinions becomes so huge, whether the argument is about politics or some other controversial issue, it is difficult, some would say, to get genuine and lasting satisfaction or happiness, even if one is on the winning side of an argument in a general election, for example; for one often continues to face vitriolic attacks from people who are on the opposite side. Thus life can become increasingly frustrating and upsetting. But again, rarely do we turn to reflect on ourselves to look for improvement, patience, tolerance, and kindness, which are generally at the core of any real ethical effort. It is actual ‘doing’, and our *own* doing and ethical effort, that matters. It is in this spirit that Georges Friedmann remarks, in words quoted many times by Pierre Hadot, that ‘many are those who are entirely absorbed in militant politics, in the preparation for social revolution. Rare, very rare, are those who, in order to prepare for the revolution, wish to become worthy of it’ (quoted in Hadot, 1995:70).

### **Some reflections on Nussbaum’s interpretations**

Nussbaum is the most important commentator of the Greco-Roman philosophy whose ideas this thesis has drawn on. Her contribution to the renewal of interest in Hellenistic philosophy in the last three decades, particularly the idea of a ‘medical model’ of philosophy, is undeniable. Nussbaum’s work on the Greco-Roman philosophical schools is rich and complex in its ‘combination of attention to detail and thoughtful exploration of larger philosophical themes’ (Fischer, 1999:787). The scope of the philosophical texts she considers is large and she does not approach the texts of each school as part of a ‘timeless whole’. Her reading of Lucretius, for example, looks at the teachings of Epicurus in the context of the social and literary milieu in which Lucretius lived, and the Epicurean ideas and attitudes in Lucretius’ poem are not taken to be the exact equivalent of what Epicurus stated. The characteristic method she adopts is one of identifying basic continuity but with variation to accommodate later Roman thinkers. Another feature of Nussbaum’s reading is that these philosophical arguments are in their nature dialectic. They are often responses to a prior argument or position, and therefore have a particular contextual purpose. Moreover, she explores the tensions between different schools, and between philosophers belonging to the same tradition. All these features make her interpretation of these ancient philosophies complex and subtle.



While this thesis benefits hugely from Nussbaum's celebrated work, one may have reservations about certain of Nussbaum's interpretations, some of which have appeared in discussion in previous chapters. In this concluding part of the thesis, I would like to address two in particular: firstly, Nussbaum thoughts on how the ancient Greek philosophers responded to the role of luck in human life; and secondly I would question the Aristotelian position (as discussed in chapter 7, section 'The sage and the philosopher') she identifies herself with. In Nussbaum's reading, there is a strong focus on the individual as an independent thinker, decision-maker, and actor – something which coincides with Western liberal values. This overt focus on the individual self, or at least on certain qualities of the self, is contrary to many of these ancient philosophical teachings which have an aim, rather, of decentring the individual ego. Nussbaum's depiction of the kind of philosopher whose task is to make ethical aims clearer, I believe, ironically, may have led her to miss an important aspect of ancient philosophy.

Firstly, the role of luck in human excellence is presented by Nussbaum as one of the main themes in ancient Greek literature and philosophy. As discussed in chapter 7, the opening of *The Fragility of Goodness* is this beautiful image in Pindar's (the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE poet) work: 'But human excellence grows like a vine tree, fed by the green dew, raised up, among wise men and just, to the liquid sky' (Nussbaum, 1986:1). The plant's growing is wonderful, but it relies on the nutrition coming from the external world, including water, air and the sun as well as the organism itself. The same goes for human excellence. In Nussbaum words: 'the excellence of a good person ... is like a young plant: something growing in the world, slender, fragile, in constant need of food from without' (*ibid.*). This dependency of human excellence or human life in general on things from the external world, which are beyond our own control, is a main source of worry for these ancient philosophers, Nussbaum tells us. It is, to some extent, an unbearable fact. Thus Nussbaum illustrates in detail in her work 'Plato's heroic attempt, in middle-period dialogues, to save the lives of human beings by making them immune to luck', and 'Aristotle's return to many of the insights and values of tragedy, as he articulates a conception of practical rationality that will make human beings self-sufficient in an appropriately human way' (8). In fact for Nussbaum (1994) the Stoics go to extremes: 'we are forced to conclude, what a large number of texts in fact assert, that external goods, all goods other than virtue, have no intrinsic value at all' (361). We are presented with the *arguments* that each school provides to persuade people to give up external goods. While reading these arguments, we are invited to do our own moral reasoning

and decision-making, and our role as rational agents is encouraged in discussions like this: ‘Socrates is put before us as an example of a man in the process of making himself self-sufficient’, but then we cannot help but wonder: ‘is this the life we want for ourselves’ (Nussbaum, 1986:184)?

This relates to the second reservation I would like to address, which is Nussbaum’s identification of herself as an Aristotelian philosopher, whose main task is to make moral views and moral ends clearer. In Nussbaum’s (1994) words:

The practical goal of Aristotelian ethics is individual clarification and communal attunement. In both cases, getting a clear view of the ‘target’ makes practice more discriminating and more reliable ... we do go after ethical and political goodness by pursuing the intellectual study of ethics – because through the intellectual scrutiny of our ends we get a clearer *vision* of what pertains to the end, that is, of the constituents of the good human life and how they stand to one another (71).

Philosophical arguments, from an Aristotelian point of view, have a significant function in that they facilitate clearer view of the moral ends of action, such as self-sufficiency, and what is involved in a pursuit, such as renouncing the importance of people or objects. In other words, gaining clarity about the moral target, human excellence or *eudaimonia*, what is involved in this, and how different elements involved relate or in conflict with each other – this is the most important task in order to live an ethical life. The ideal outcome of such philosophical efforts is that through such a dialectical process the philosopher will be ‘better at confronting new situations in the future’ (97) or ‘a better choice-maker both in her personal life and in her political interactions’ (61).

Nussbaum’s alignment with what she sees as an Aristotelian position on the role of the philosopher is reflected in her reading of these schools. Each school provides its own moral view. We follow Nussbaum and the fictional pupil, Nikidion, who is in search of a good life and *go into* these philosophical schools, encountering different teachings. In the *Stoa*, for example, ‘Nikidion will be asked to examine and scrutinize herself, to be on guard against her own first impulses’ (328). In Epicurus’ *Garden*, Nikidion will find that she is ‘there not to pursue an inquiry but to be converted’ (123), while finding ‘herself swallowing a heady mixture of praise, protreptic, and caustic reproof’ (125). At one point, Nikidion reflects on the teaching she receives there, and she:

feels that to give up the aim of taking charge of her own life, by her very own thinking, is to give up something too deep and too essential; she feels she would not survive without it. She wants to get the better of her lassitude and confusion through the toughness and energetic activity of good reasoning. She wants to become more, not less, of a distinct self, healthier and stronger, thinking only her own thoughts, and thinking them actively, rather than being a passive vessel for the dogmas of another. (321)

Nikidion's thoughts reflect Nussbaum's own worry. Philosophising in these schools involves some elements that look suspicious from the modern point of view. The teaching can appear dogmatic. The learning process often entails *following* the teacher's principles, and personal thinking is not always encouraged, but even at points, discouraged. It feels like being a student in the philosophical school means to be *converted*. That is, to *believe in* the teaching, even when your own reasoning inclines you to think differently. Here Nussbaum expresses her preference for an Aristotelian way of philosophising again:

Had Nikidion gone to Aristotle's school, she would have been exposed to a number of alternative positions and taught to examine their merits sympathetically, using her critical faculties. Epicurus' school, governed by the conviction that most available views are corrupting, proceeds otherwise. Nikidion will be saturated with the correct ways of thought and kept away from alternative views. (131)

Aristotle's school taught that there are alternative positions and encouraged students to examine them using their critical faculties. In that way, Nikidion had a better chance of improving her reasoning, and 'to become more, not less, of a distinct self, healthier and stronger, thinking only her own thoughts' (321). This Aristotelian stance that Nussbaum takes fits in with what is often taken for granted in modern philosophy and liberal attitudes to developing as a person. However, reading these schools in this way, rich as it is, misses the significance of the fact that in the original historical context, to philosophise generally means to choose one school and commit oneself to its teaching. This is not merely a historical fact irrelevant to a system's ethical ideas. It reflects a significant characteristic of being a philosopher in these ancient traditions: becoming a philosopher is, first of all, to know that one is ignorant, and then to become informed through studying the doctrines of a particular school.

Nussbaum's emphasis on the space for individual thinking and her wariness about being a mere dogma-receiver implies a distinct boundary between 'I' and 'others'. This is also revealed in her view of self-sufficiency. The dilemma she presents between the pursuit of

self-sufficiency and the need to give up certain cherished values is, therefore, potentially misleading. The other side of vulnerability is not necessarily a controlling, self-sufficient agent – this perception of the two sides (and the contrast between them) is established, based on an egocentric perspective, the perspective of an independent, separate I. But practices can be found in Epicureanism and in Stoicism (as well as in Plato) that aim at what Hadot calls the ‘expansion of the I’, i.e. although starting from definite and therefore limited horizons, going well into the implications of this base in an open and attentive way can lead to new discoveries which the ‘limited I’ could not see from the position before. One can see a parallel in the sort of practices that have been discussed more recently by philosophers such as Levinas writing about the idea of the ‘mystery’ of the other (he also situates the individual in terms of the wider cosmos in that there is a strong pull of theological thinking in his philosophy); and Murdoch with her idea of ‘attention’. Nietzsche’s affirmation of life (whose attunement with the spirit in ancient Greek philosophy Hadot particularly draws attention to) also makes sense when we see ourselves as practitioners of a philosophy, whose views may be limited initially and, to an extent, egocentric, but where philosophical effort is directed not just to making limited judgements, but to welcoming all the insights and life events that have come to one, and embracing them – even those one may initially find unwelcome.

### **The virtues of de-centring**

What I have been inclined to sympathise with in this thesis is the aspect of de-centring in ancient traditions that is in line with Hadot’s understanding of ‘spiritual exercises’. In the following section, I would like to point out some virtues associated with the practice of de-centring that have been highlighted in various chapters before. These virtues are in danger of being overshadowed by other virtues emphasised in the kind of interpretation offered by Nussbaum – one that is based on a strong idea of selfhood and the precise moral judgements made by the rational agent. These will be illustrated with reference to the two thinkers alluded earlier in this chapter – Murdoch and Smith. Both thinkers bring out the virtues of de-centring in their reading of ancient Greek traditions, particularly with regard to the ideas of ‘unselfing’ and (unselfish) ‘attention’.

#### *The virtue of openness*

Greco-Roman philosophy encourages a kind of openness that, I believe, requires the individual to admit the moral significance of the realm beyond the self, and to continually contemplate it. I would like to adopt this controversial term ‘religious’ to describe this

quality. This ‘religious’ element is denied by Nussbaum (1984) since one of her intentions is to defend the ancient medical model of philosophy as being ‘still philosophy’ (36). A central argument that Nussbaum uses to defend ancient Greek philosophy is that it is different from religion in that its tool is rigorous and logical argument. The omission of this significant ‘religious’ element in ancient philosophical practices is, I believe, why Nussbaum has missed, or at least has not done justice to, certain aspects of these practices.

Hadot, on the contrary, is convinced that there is this ‘religious’ element in ancient Greek philosophy. This is shown in his insistence on using the term ‘spiritual’ exercises, instead of ‘intellectual’ or even ‘ethical’ exercises to describe what ancient Greek philosophy is about. For Hadot (1995), both ‘intellectual’ and ‘ethical’ miss capturing fully the true dimensions of these philosophies: ‘the individual raises himself up to the life of the objective Spirit, that is to say, he, as it were, re-replaces himself within the perspective of the Whole (“Becoming eternal by transcending yourself”)’ (82). The irreducible element in these exercises, in other words, is that they urge the individual to *go beyond* his or her current thoughts, desires and judgements, by constantly considering changing his perspective to align with this sense of a greater ‘Whole’ in which he is embedded. In Hadot’s words: ‘the feeling of belonging to a whole is an essential element: belonging, that is, both to the whole constituted by the human community, and to that constituted by the cosmic whole’ (208). ‘Such a cosmic perspective’, Hadot tells us, ‘radically transforms the feeling one has of oneself’ (*ibid.*).

It is worth emphasising that to acknowledge the religious element in ancient Greek philosophy does not suggest that it *is* a religion. Nevertheless, it is to say these ancient philosophical traditions share some aims with religion. Murdoch explicitly suggests this commonality between moral philosophy and religion: they acknowledge the same enemy in moral life, which, in Murdoch (1970) words, is ‘the fat relentless ego (51). The practice of de-centring cannot be done if one *does not* let go of what one normally sees and thinks, even for a short while, when one has a vision of a kind of wisdom beyond the person’s own. The practice encourages a genuinely open attitude, which will enable one to be shown something previously unimagined and unexpected.

### *The virtue of attention*

Another virtue closely related to the practice of de-centring is that of attention. Lucretius’ lover, discussed in Chapter 4, the Stoic ‘radical acceptance’, discussed in Chapter

5, and the transformation of the perspective in relation to one's *lack* in Plato's *Symposium* all support an illusion-breaking practice, which in turn enables one to bring a more genuine attention to people or events. In a sense, the result of these philosophical efforts is something similar to what some modern psychologists have noticed. For example, at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century, a group of psychologists (referred to as the Gestalt school) explored the process when a 'new view' of the same object suddenly appears. They explained visual experience not according to mere points of retinal stimulation and our interpretation of this stimulation, but also through a sense of overall 'organisation' – how certain things seem to belong together (Köhler, 1930). The Gestalt psychologists suggest that a 'new object' is seen when the shape and background is conceived from a different perspective. Wittgenstein was also fascinated by this switch of vision. He (1980) comments on this aspect of vision change: 'What is incomprehensible is that *nothing*, and yet *everything* has changed, after all' (§474). On the one hand, the physical object has not changed; and on the other, when I see it from a different perspective, 'I have a new kind of experience, overlaying the first' (Eilan, 2013:9). So how things appear to us is related to the perspective from which we see them.

There is, however, a sense of ethical hierarchy implied in Greek philosophical practices in terms of this changing of perspective, which, I think, is not intended by Gestalt psychologists, nor is it particularly prominent in Wittgenstein's account here. What most of us 'see' in our daily experiences, according to these Greek schools, is taken to be coloured by our egocentric understanding of the world and ourselves. It is through the lens of personal desires, preferences and beliefs that we not only *have* an opinion about what we see, but in fact *see things* in a certain way. Not knowing this in most cases, 'how things look as they do' for us is wrongly taken to be objective reality. Acknowledging this view in Greek philosophy, Murdoch develops her own idea of moral attention. Murdoch (1970) tells us that Plato, in the *Republic*, points out that the arts (*technai*) have the power to lead 'the best part of the soul to the view of what is most excellent in reality' (63). She explains as follows:

It is important too that great art teaches us how real things can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self. ... Unsentimental contemplation of nature exhibits the same quality of detachment: selfish concerns vanish, nothing exists except the things which are seen. Beauty is that which attracts this particular sort of unselfish attention. (64)

What is shown here is the relation between reality and perspective. What exists in art, and in objects of vision in general, is not an objective and universal reality that is perceived in the

same way by every person who is equipped with the same sensory faculties. What is seen is a result of the viewer's *vision*; and our vision, unfortunately, is often obscured by the grasping and greedy nature of the self. For this reason, great art can be 'an educator and revealer' (63), in that it draws the viewer to *look* in a way that one's egocentric concerns are forgotten. Some would say that nature too, like great art, is a good place to practice detachment from an egocentric view, and to come to a state of 'unselfish attention'. Most of us can recall some experiences when we do *attend* to things in this way. It happens often with children. When a child is playing in a paddy field, she walks on uneven small paths, which can lead to an unforeseen destination. She may suddenly squat down and find snails crawling on the soil, water mosquitos and duckweed on top of the water. If she then sees pink snail spawn, she may want to pick them up and look with absorbed fascination at their bright colour and the irregular shapes. This is something natural for children. But as we grow up, we learn to differentiate between the world and 'I', and between the interests of others and the value things have for me. Often when we start to learn to *analyse* how an experience of this kind is 'educational' and 'beneficial', and how learning to be with nature is important, paradoxically, that is when we become disconnected from the basic experience. Attention of this kind, it seems, happens spontaneously when the 'I' is not in the picture.

There appears to be a paradox in this practice of perspective-change and decentering. It has to be me who *is aware* of the fact that I am limited and prejudiced, who *decides* to make an effort to change things, and who *carries out* the act of attending. The moral work to be done entails going beyond my limited thinking. But where is the line between 'I' acting as a thinking agent aware of all that is happening, and the forgetting of 'I' in the experience of genuine unselfish attention? I have not found an answer to this.

### *The virtue of acceptance*

Related to the virtue of attention is another virtue which reflects one's open and welcome attitude to what is encountered, that is an attitude of acceptance. The difference between acceptance and an inactive passivity should be noted here, though it is impossible to draw a perfect line between the binaries of acceptance/resistance, passive/active and action/inaction. The attitude of acceptance in these ancient philosophical schools is underlined by an understanding that human life consists of areas outside our control, and an acknowledgement of one's own limitations in acquiring perfect knowledge or wisdom. It goes with an appreciative attitude to whatever the present brings us. The philosopher who is

open to life does not ‘blame the flesh as the cause of great evils, nor blame fate for our distresses’, following Epicurus’ teaching. The Stoic emperor, Marcus Aurelius, displays a similar attitude in the following passage:

It follows that the defining characteristic of the good person is to love and embrace whatever happens to him along his thread of fate; and not to pollute the divinity which is seated within his breast, or trouble it with a welter of confused impressions, but to preserve its constant favour, in proper allegiance to god, saying only what is true, doing only what is just.

And if all people mistrust him, for living a simple, decent and cheerful life, he has no quarrel with any of them, and no diversion from the road which leads to the final goal of his life: to this he must come pure, at peace, ready to depart, in unforced harmony with his fate. (*Med.*, III:16.2)

The definition of a good person, Marcus says, is in his loving and embracing whatever happens to him. The premise for this is the Stoic’s commitment to do the right thing, which includes treating people fairly, being content, not indulging in vain hopes, and acting in accordance with reason – putting an effort into things that are within one’s control. The really important point here is, when things happen in a way that brings pain and trouble, one would not quarrel with them and would not change one’s behaviour. Rather, one would, ideally, ‘love and embrace’ what has happened.

This virtue of loving tends to be overlooked when the focus is on the person as a rational choice-maker, who, through his ability to make careful deliberation over options, makes the best choice among the possibilities (the maximum utilitarian outcome). From this latter perspective, the virtue of acceptance is often either altogether overlooked or recognised as a minor consideration in ethical choice (it seems to be the last thing people say and often with a bit of reluctance, ‘well, what else can you do?’). But it seems to be a huge mistake to miss the moral significance of being able to ‘accept’ in the way I have described, often with kindness and love. On this point, Smith (2016) explores the richness of ‘being a Man’ (a good one) in the well-known poem by Kipling, *If*, a poem which could almost serve as a manifesto for this sort of stance. The first half is quoted below:

If you can keep your head when all about you  
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,  
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,



But make allowance for their doubting too;  
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,  
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,  
Or being hated, don't give way to hating.  
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:  
  
If you can dream – and not make dreams your master;  
If you can think – and not make thoughts you aim;  
  
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster  
And treat those two impostors just the same;  
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken  
Twisted by Knaves to make a trap for fools,  
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,  
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools

Smith questions the simple binaries of confidence/diffidence, self-esteem/shyness, particularly the reductionist understanding of what is good which underlies these binaries in the field of psychology, and to some extent, in philosophy too. The qualities of being mild, shy, lacking in confidence and being self-effacing are not recognised as valuable. A father's voice in this poem tells the son to be confident in dreaming, thinking, expecting, and encountering success and failure, but at the same time, not to be carried away by these dreams, thoughts, expectations, glory and reproach. It is not easy, the concerned father says, to have trust in yourself, especially when all others share their doubts. But 'the *really* difficult thing', Smith reminds us, is 'making allowance for people's doubts when it is you they are doubting' (59): to let yourself be able to be lied to, to be hated, at the same time not to hate people in return. 'The *really* difficult thing', Smith says, is 'to do so without looking too good, or talking too wise' (*ibid.*). To confront triumph and disaster and take them both in the same way; to withstand people's misunderstandings and manipulations; to bear watching things you work hard on failing without turning away, and be able to start over again. Smith again points out that 'the *really* difficult thing' is not to bore people with your glorious life

history (*ibid.*). In this way the rich qualities inherent in being a good man here are revealed. In this process we are challenged by the ‘good’ we have taken for granted along with self-confidence etc, by being told that the *opposite* might be just as good. When we might think we gain wonderful insights, we are, once again, reminded that the true good person does not *look* good or wise, not only to others but to oneself. It is modesty, which is interwoven with the often less regarded virtues of diffidence and openness, that are highlighted here.

Smith wants to emphasise that there is a quality of softness in this virtue that tends, again, to be missed. It goes side by side with the kind of Stoic spirit of a willingness to take on significant tasks with a ‘stiff upper-lip’ (*ibid.*). However, there is, I believe, a kind of softness, related to genuine love and kindness in such ancient Greek philosophies, even in Stoicism. And there is a kind of enjoyment that goes with genuine acceptance. On this point, Hadot (1995) writes: ‘in the enjoyment of the pure present, he discovers the mystery and splendour of existence.’ (212) Hadot believes that Nietzsche catches this element in classical philosophy: ‘at such moments, as Nietzsche said, we say yes “not only to ourselves, but to all existence”’ (*ibid.*).

### **Implications for therapy today**

What can we learn from ancient Greek philosophy in relation to therapy today? It has become clear that what we understand as ‘therapy’ or the ‘therapeutic effort’ in philosophy of this period is not that it is an endeavour that aims at merely making one feel happier about oneself or about life in general; rather, it is what a philosophy practitioner does, guided by the ideal of wisdom, in order to get closer to a sense of ultimate goodness or a sense of living well (*eudaimonia*). Therapeutic effort, in this sense, is not so distinct from moral effort. This medical model of philosophy seen in these ancient schools, therefore, invites reflection on the conceptual gaps between such a philosophical therapy and modern psychotherapy.

#### *Philosophy and its practical effect*

I have discussed the loss of everyday practical relevance in modern philosophy. On this point, both Nussbaum and Hadot explicitly see a contrast between ancient Greek philosophy and modern philosophy and criticise modern mainstream developments. Murdoch (1970), along similar lines, suggests that most ‘moral philosophy’ in modern times (except for existentialism) is not the kind of ‘philosophy one could live by’ (46). This perhaps helps to explain why it may come as no surprise to learn that a recent study by Philipp Schönegger and Johannes Wagner (2019) suggests that philosophy professors engaged with ethics do not

seem to behave morally better than other people. Ethical reflections were found to have no positive influence on moral action. This coincides with some previous thinkers' critiques of modern moral philosophy on the grounds that it fails to be a 'lived in' philosophy, but is rather a 'grand palace sent up by someone who then lived in a hovel', as Murdoch (1970) describes it, drawing on Kierkegaard's words (46). Ancient Greek philosophy, along with many other philosophical traditions, on the contrary, was the kind of philosophy that bears implications for how to behave, and more widely, for how to live; and this is something that we may need to retrieve today with regard to both philosophy and therapy. It can be argued that ethical reflection should not be undertaken as a practice in its own right without inspiring action. On this point Epicurus' words seem as valid as ever: 'Empty is that philosopher's argument by which no human suffering is therapeutically treated' (quoted in Nussbaum, 1994:13).

#### *The influence of these philosophies on contemporary thought and practice*

In terms of the implications for therapeutic practice, ancient Greek philosophy provides insights in several ways. Firstly it has proved to be a rich resource for psychological, emotional and therapeutic theory and techniques. Sigmund Freud, for example, was known for his theory of sexual drive (*libido*), which he connected to Plato's concept of *erōs* in the *Symposium*, and appropriated it for his own purposes (Sandford, 2006). Jacques Lacan developed the idea of 'ontological lack' in reading Plato's *Symposium*. The existentialist psychologist, Rollo May, developed a theory of love and will, again, based on Plato's idea of *erōs* in the *Symposium*. In establishing the approach of therapy that is based on the cognitive character of emotion, the founder of Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT), Albert Ellis, and Aaron Beck, who founded cognitive therapy (later combined with behaviourist techniques and changed into cognitive-behavioural therapy), both explicitly refer to ancient Greek philosophy, particularly Stoicism, as providing roots for their theories. In these approaches, the techniques of the philosophical exercises are translated into the psychotherapeutic context (in a similar way, the development of Mindfulness draws ideas from Buddhism, particular Zen Buddhism). The question of what has and has not been inherited in this process of 'translation' or appropriation has been investigated by various thinkers, and appears to be a continuing feature in the development of therapeutic approaches today. The founding of the *Modern Stoicism* movement, which involves academic philosophers and clinical psychotherapists is another example of modern applications of ancient Greek philosophy. A *Stoic Week* that has been organised is based on activities of

philosophy in the ancient period, for example, meditations on and discussions about particular texts. It aims at being therapeutic in a way that is closer to how things worked in antiquity. While *Modern Stoicism* and some of the cognitive approaches (based on the Stoic ideas and techniques) recognise more the significance of the virtues of ‘de-centring’ and attempt to incorporate these virtues into their practices, the majority of therapeutic practices today still have the aim of healing the individual by enhancing a stronger sense of self-identity, self-respect or self-care. To recover these ancient insights, it seems, requires more fundamental changes in thinking about the nature of human life in the therapeutic context.

*Re-thinking the concept of therapy – a more radical implication*

This leads to the third implication here. These ancient approaches invite us to re-think the whole concept of therapy, including the aim, the technique and what exactly needs to be cured. To explain this, I would like to draw on an example given by Murdoch of the relationship between a mother- and a daughter-in-law, who she calls M and D respectively. M finds D good-hearted but ‘insufficiently ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude, always tiresomely juvenile (17). M is an ‘intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just *attention* to an object which confronts her’ (*ibid.*). M reminds herself that she is possibly prejudiced or jealous and would like to re-consider her perception of D. Gradually her vision changes. D seems to be ‘not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful’ (*ibid.*). What happens to M’s alteration of vision is not morally neutral. It is encouraged by an intention of M to be just, loving and kind. And this result can be understood as moral progress.

But let us imagine a hypothetical situation here where M seeks a professional therapist’s help with her difficulties with D. She might be told that, firstly, if she is blaming herself for not being able to get along with D, she should not be, as the truth is that many people have been and are experiencing these kinds of relationship difficulty. She might be told to consider factors like the effect of hormones or a personality trait, and how they play a role in her experiencing difficulties with D. She then might be told that there are larger social factors in the background too. M might be frustrated by D’s way of behaving as it does not fit what M’s expectation of women, which itself has been shaped in a particular social context. M could be experiencing an emotion of jealousy because of D’s freedom and opportunities that M herself never had. Furthermore, the social environment M lives in may be one that rarely inquires

after what women feel and need. M might have experienced a denial of what she emotionally needed and therefore what the difficulties reveal is the need she has to be heard and supported herself. The patriarchal theme in her life has made her ‘far too tolerant of being silent and practicing self-neglect’, and now she is encouraged to get into ‘teaming up and pioneering a new normal... where women are speaking up and demanding to be heard.’<sup>55</sup> These are all suggestions provided by Rosjke Hasseldine in ‘Counselling Today’ where the theme is the mother-daughter relationship, but the suggestions may be applied to our case here.

M is encouraged to take a careful look at her own expectations and how that might be a cause for conflict. This is, however, a morally neutral act in most counselling settings, as the point is not to judge which is good or bad, but merely to acknowledge a problem. M is encouraged to find the root of her frustrations in life in generally, which in this case is the silencing caused by social pressures. She is encouraged to see D as the victim of the same system and make progress on that together with D. The suggestion from the counsellor may be inspiring and useful, M may end up having a more binding relationship with D. However, the primary concern would be that M should take care of her own emotions and her own well-being, say, if D is somehow continuously annoying. Creating real harmony between them is usually not the main goal.<sup>56</sup>

If M says to the counsellor that she wants to be a nice and loving mother-in-law, even if D acts awfully to her, it might be suggested that it could be a symptom of her lacking self-respect or self-esteem. What is missing in this framework of human behaviour is the room for purely moral motivations such as being just, kind, and loving and a general moral aim of simply acting virtuously. When the healing of emotions is considered to be a morally neutral act, like the medical treatment of a wounded limb, we risk losing sight of something really significant in being human – the possibility of making moral progress, of working to perfect oneself and to perfect the world by being a better person. In Murdoch words:

M’s activity is essentially something progressive, something infinitely perfectible. So far from claiming for it a sort of infallibility, this new picture has built in the notion of a necessary fallibility. M is engaged in an endless task. As soon as we begin to use words such as ‘love’ and

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<sup>55</sup> See <https://ct.counseling.org/2020/01/uncovering-the-root-cause-of-mother-daughter-conflict>.

<sup>56</sup> I was once in a study group discussing racial inequality. After several classes when we had been talking about different sorts of outrageous systemic prejudices and how most people in a privileged position still failed to recognise and admit prejudice, I ask the question that while it is important to raise attention to this, to what extent should we keep using this divisive, provocative language? How can we ever expect harmony between different groups if we keep using this language? A woman responded: ‘we don’t want harmony. It would just sweep injustice under the carpet.’

'justice' in characterizing M, we introduce into our whole conceptual picture of her situation the idea of progress, that is the idea of perfection. (23)

Therapy understood in the light of a sense of goodness is moral work. The negative emotions the person experiences are not themselves simply the target for treatment and removal. Just as they are, they provide the best chance for the person to reflect on and redirect them. For Murdoch we need a therapy that allows room for the concept of goodness, and one that does not too quickly pathologise such intentions and behaviour. She argues that we need a therapy that recognises the value of not only how to live well for the individual, but also how to live well with others and in the world, as the individual is not separable from her social and natural environment. We need a therapy that enables people to be loving, regardless how other people are. Murdoch's approach to a problematic relationship through focusing on self-improvement in the light of an idea of goodness is certainly found in ancient Greek philosophical teaching. There, therapeutic effort is, by nature, a moral effort.

### **The place for love**

At the beginning of this chapter, I referred to my grandmother as an example of the kind of life that is valuable, but nonetheless not qualified as *fulfilled* by the standards of many modern theories of well-being. These approaches do not provide an account of, or give little attention to, the moral values that may be found in the kind of life my grandmother had – a life where the person rarely made choices for herself based on what she personally wanted, and whose daily acts were mostly responses to the needs and desires of other people. When I started this thesis, I was unsure about how much legitimate moral value there could be in such a life. I was inclined, as explained above, to think that self-determination had a decisive significance in the moral life.

The course of my research, however, has transformed my thinking with regard to this question. Firstly, I would like to clarify that ideas of autonomy, authenticity and self-determination *do* have great moral bearing. The development and popularisation of these ideas has, in many ways, led to social progress. For example, in many societies today, the rights and freedoms pertaining to each individual's ability to choose to live *differently* are generally embraced and protected by law. This has fostered a certain respect for and appreciation of diversity amongst people – whether in relation to biological, psychological, racial, linguistic or cultural divisions.

However, the modern understanding of well-being that is underpinned by these ideas tends to exclude or to obscure some moral values which are as significant as (if not more significant than) the values of autonomy and self-determination. These values include kindness, generosity, tolerance and love. The potential harm that results is that we are left with a rather constrained view of the good life, which encourages self-centredness and self-interest in ways that undermine these other goods. Not only can this create increased tensions in interpersonal relationships, it can also serve to restrict the individual's own moral development. In studying the ancient Greek notion of *eudaimonia*, with which the individual is encouraged to recognise an ideal wisdom that one does not yet possess, to acknowledge the relatedness between individuals from a cosmological perspective, and to commit to perfecting one's limited perspective, it has become clear that an alternative model of morality suggested by the notion of *eudaimonia* is one better suited to the encouragement of personal growth. This conception of personal growth is not a matter of fostering ever-increasing self-confidence in one's own abilities and opinions, but is instead a matter of becoming aware of one's limitations, and becoming a more modest person, curious, willing to learn, and to be genuinely open and attentive and responsive. In short, it not only admits the virtues of kindness, humility, openness and love, but raises them to the status of being central ingredients in the good life.

The space for such kind of love in the alternative model of moral good provided in ancient Greek philosophical teachings, as I have tried to argue, is less noticeable when one follows Nussbaum's reading of these thinkers. This is, I suggest, because of Nussbaum's conception of the self as an independent existence, which is, in a fundamental way, different from the ancient Greek understanding of the individual as related to others and the surrounding environment. Hadot's reading, on the other hand, supports this alternative model of morality, which appreciates the virtues of acceptance and love. Such an account is also supported by various thinkers, amongst them Murdoch and Smith, whose work I have drawn upon in this chapter. Murdoch, similar to Hadot, acknowledges the *spiritual* aspect of ancient Greek philosophy, and aims to re-establish philosophical practices that encourage a never-ending perfection, inspired by a transcendent idea of goodness. Her idea of 'unselfing' captures the spirit of philosophical practice viewed as an exercise to rid oneself of egoistic opinion and feeling. Smith, agreeing that ancient Greek philosophical practices, exemplified by Plato's Socrates, are closer to a work of conversion than that of a linear accumulation or growth, suggests a shift of attention to the quieter epistemic and moral virtues, which fit more

harmoniously with this sort of ‘de-centering’ activity. In both thinkers’ accounts, a kind of tenderness and love is experienced when one loosens egocentric ideas and feelings, and attends to others and surroundings in an unselfish way.

In emphasising the element of belonging (to the Whole, as discussed in chapter 7) in these ancient traditions, I do not want to suggest a community-centred or collective approach to morality. The individual-community dichotomy is potentially misleading. A tension, for example, arises immediately between the seeking of personal fulfilment, and the goal of fulfilling one’s responsibilities to family, society, or community. But the point is *not* that we ought to think more of our responsibility as, e.g., citizens, and less of our personal fulfilment, or the inverse (self-denial in pursuit of duty). Rather, it is to encourage a shift of perspective, a perspective that starts from the individual but is continually expanded to include wider and wider contexts (to expand the self and plunge into the infinite or the cosmos). I also do not want to suggest that we should preserve traditional values *per se*. To the extent that my grandmother’s life was of moral value, it was not *because* she lived according to any *traditional* values, but rather because there was something in her life that was morally valuable. These things are valuable in and of themselves, and from this perspective it is quite irrelevant whether they are traditional or modern.

I hope that my thesis has succeeded in drawing out some of this nuance behind the position. They are the values found in the ancient schools I have investigated (or, at least, as seen through the eyes of Hadot, Murdoch and Smith). It might be said that this is an ancient tradition sustained by schools that have long since disappeared. But again, the tradition-modern dichotomy can be misleading. What I want to suggest is a conception of the moral life that allows us to work on ways not only to live well but to live well together, with others and the world – one that is capable of transforming life events that seem ‘unfortunate’ (when viewed from a certain angle) into the very soil that nourishes one’s spiritual growth. The modern idea of well-being tends to tell only one type of story of morally successful human – that of a rational thinker and choice-maker. What gets lost are the qualities of kindness, adaptation, benevolence, and tolerance. The alternative model that can be found in the ancient Greek notion of *eudemonia* is a model of moral philosophy that both admits and centralises the notion of love. It allows the person to pursue a morally good life in *attending* to others, *appreciating* others or one’s surroundings in general, finding a way to live with difficult situations and people (not necessarily by doing something to change the situation), and in doing good to others. While this can in certain situations overlap with the prescriptions of



contemporary individualistic notions of well-being, the fundamental shift in focus from the person herself to the world that she is part of – not as a rejection of herself but as an understanding of the self’s connected nature – is critical.

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## Ancient Texts (Abbreviations)

Aristotle:

*Metaphysics* (*Metaph.*).

Cicero (Cic.):

*On the Ends* (*De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*) (*Fin.*).

*Tusculan Disputations* (*TD*).

Diogenes Laertius:

*Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* (*DL*).

Epictetus:

*The Discourse* (*Dis.*).

*Enchiridion* (*Handbook*) (*Ench.*).

Epicurus:

*Letter to Menoecus* (*LMen*).

*Principal Doctrines* (*Kuriai Doxai*) (*KD*).

*Vatican Sayings* (*Vaticanae Sententiae*) (*VS*).

Lucretius (Titus Lucretius):

*De Rerum Natura*. Translated by Ian Johnston (2010).

Marcus Aurelius:

*Meditations* (*Med.*)

Seneca:

*Moral Epistles* (*Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*) (*Ep.*).

Sextus Empiricus:

*Against the Professors* (*Adversus mathematicos*) (*M.*).

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