* Introduction *

The idea of a practical and compassionate philosophy—a philosophy that exists for the sake of human beings, in order to address their deepest needs, confront their most urgent perplexities, and bring them from misery to some greater measure of flourishing—this idea makes the study of Hellenistic ethics riveting for a philosopher who wonders what philosophy has to do with the world. The writer and teacher of philosophy is a lucky person, fortunate, as few human beings are, to be able to spend her life expressing her most serious thoughts and feelings about the problems that have moved and fascinated her most. But this exhilarating and wonderful life is also part of the world as a whole, a world in which hunger, illiteracy, and disease are the daily lot of a large proportion of the human beings who still exist, as well as causes of death for many who do not still exist. A life of leisureed self-expression is, for most of the world’s people, a dream so distant that it can rarely even be formed. The contrast between these two images of human life gives rise to a question: what business does anyone have living in the happy and self-expressive world, so long as the other world exists and one is a part of it?

One answer to this question may certainly be to use some portion of one’s time and material resources to support relevant types of political action and social service. On the other hand, it seems possible that philosophy itself, while remaining itself, can perform social and political functions, making a difference in the world by using its own distinctive methods and skills. To articulate this relationship, and the conception of philosophy that underlies it, is a central preoccupation of Hellenistic thought, and an area in which Hellenistic thought makes a major contribution to philosophical understanding.

The Hellenistic philosophical schools in Greece and Rome—Epicureans, Skeptics, and Stoics—all conceived of philosophy as a way of addressing the most painful problems of human life. They saw the philosopher as a compassionate physician whose arts could heal many pervasive types of human suffering. They practiced philosophy not as a detached intellectual technique dedicated to the display of cleverness but as an immersed and worldly art of grappling with human misery. They focused their attention, in consequence, on issues of daily and urgent human significance—the fear of death, love and sexuality, anger and aggression—issues that are sometimes avoided as embarrassingly messy and personal
by the more detached varieties of philosophy. They confronted these issues as they arose in ordinary human lives, with a keen attention to the vicissitudes of those lives, and to what would be necessary and sufficient to make them better. On the one hand, these philosophers were still very much philosophers—dedicated to the careful argumentation, the explicitness, the comprehensiveness, and the rigor that have usually been sought by philosophy, in the tradition of ethical reflection that takes its start (in the West) with Socrates. (They opposed themselves, on this account, to the methods characteristic of popular religion and magic.) On the other hand, their intense focus on the state of desire and thought in the pupil made them seek a newly complex understanding of human psychology, and led them to adopt complex strategies—interactive, rhetorical, literary—designed to enable them to grapple effectively with what they had understood. In the process they forge new conceptions of what philosophical rigor and precision require. In these ways Hellenistic ethics is unlike the more detached and academic moral philosophy that has sometimes been practiced in the Western tradition.

Twentieth-century philosophy, in both Europe and North America, has, until very recently, made less use of Hellenistic ethics than almost any other philosophical culture in the West since the fourth century B.C.E. Not only late antique and most varieties of Christian thought, but also the writings of modern writers as diverse as Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, Adam Smith, Hume, Rousseau, the Founding Fathers of the United States, Nietzsche, and Marx, owe in every case a considerable debt to the writings of Stoics, Epicureans, and/or Skeptics, and frequently far more than to the writings of Aristotle and Plato. Especially where philosophical conceptions of emotion are concerned, ignoring the Hellenistic period means ignoring not only the best material in the Western tradition, but also the central influence on later philosophical developments.

A few examples will help to make this point vivid to the reader. When Christian thinkers write about divine anger, or about mercy for human frailty, they owe a deep debt to the Roman Stoics. When Descartes and Princess Elizabeth correspond about the passions, Seneca is the central author to whom they refer. Spinoza is aware of Aristotle, but far more profoundly influenced by Stoic passion theory. Smith’s theory of moral sentiments is heavily inspired by Stoic models, as is his economic teleology. When Rousseau defends the emotion of pity, he is taking sides in a debate of long standing between Stoics and Aristotelians. When Kant repudiates pity, he joins the debate on the Stoic side. Nietzsche’s own attack on pity,
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coupled with a defense of mercy, should be understood—as he himself repeatedly insists—not as the policy of a boot-in-the-face fascist, and also not as an innocuous refusal of moral self-indulgence, but as a position opposed both to cruelty and to deep attachment, a position he derives from his reading of Epicurus and Seneca. When we speak of the influence of “the classical tradition” on the framers of the U.S. Constitution, we must always remember that it is, on the whole, Hellenistic (especially Stoic) ethical thought, via the writings of Cicero, Seneca, and Plutarch above all, that is central to their classical education. Thus the neglect of this period in much recent teaching of “the Classics” and “the Great Books” gives a very distorted picture of the philosophical tradition—and also robs the student of richly illuminating philosophical arguments.

Contemporary philosophical writing has begun to undo these wrongs; in both Europe and North America we have been seeing a flourishing of first-rate scholarship on this material, to which the present book owes a large debt. But there is one reclaiming of Hellenistic texts within philosophy—perhaps the most widely known to the general public—that seems to me, though exciting, also deeply problematic. This is Michel Foucault’s appeal to the Hellenistic thinkers, in the third volume of his History of Sexuality, and in lectures given toward the end of his life, as sources for the idea that philosophy is a set of techniques du soi, practices for the formation of a certain sort of self. Certainly Foucault has brought out something very fundamental about these philosophers when he stresses the extent to which they are not just teaching lessons, but also engaging in complex practices of self-shaping. But this the philosophers have in common with religious and magical/superstitious movements of various types in their culture. Many people purveyed a biou technē, an “art of life.” What is distinctive about the contribution of the philosophers is that they assert that philosophy, and not anything else, is the art we require, an art that deals in valid and sound arguments, an art that is committed to the truth. These philosophers claim that the pursuit of logical validity, intellectual coherence, and truth delivers freedom from the tyranny of custom and convention, creating a community of beings who can take charge of their own life story and their own thought. (Skepticism is in some ways an exception, as we shall see; but even Skeptics rely heavily on reason and argument, in a way other popular “arts” do not.) It is questionable whether Foucault can even admit the possibility of such a community of freedom, given his view that knowledge and argument are themselves tools of power. In any case, his work on this period, challenging though it is, fails to confront the fundamental commitment to reason that divides philo-
sophical *techniques du soi* from other such techniques. Perhaps that commitment is an illusion. I believe that it is not. And I am sure that Foucault has not shown that it is. In any case, this book will take that commitment as its focus, and try to ask why it should have been thought that the philosophical use of reason is the technique by which we can be truly free and truly flourishing.

Writing about this historical period raises difficult organizational questions. The greatest problem for an author who gives an account of Hellenistic practical argument is one of scope. Hellenistic philosophy is hard to study partly on account of its success. The teachings of the major schools, beginning in the late fourth century B.C.E. at Athens, have a continuous history of dissemination and elaboration until (at least) the early centuries C.E. at Rome, where some of the most valuable writings in these traditions are produced and where philosophy exerts an enormous influence on the literary and the political culture. This means that one must deal, in effect, with six centuries and two different societies. One cannot deal exhaustively with all the relevant material, copious and heterogeneous as it is. Any treatment must be a sampling. This, then, will not even attempt to be the entire story of Hellenistic ethical thought; nor will it be a highly systematic selective outline. Instead, it will be a somewhat idiosyncratic account of certain central themes, guided by an obsessive pursuit of certain questions—taking as its central guiding motif the analogy between philosophy and medicine as arts of life.

Even with respect to these questions, it is difficult to find principles of selection. If the major works of Greek Hellenistic philosophers such as Epicurus, Zeno, and Chrysippus had survived, one might decide to limit such a study to the Greek beginnings of the schools, thus to a single culture and period. But the evidence does not permit this. From the vast output of these enormously prolific philosophers, only fragments and reports survive for the Stoics and, for Epicurus, only fragments and reports plus three brief letters summarizing his major teachings, and two collections of maxims. For the arguments of the Skeptics, we are almost entirely dependent on sources much later than the school’s beginnings—Diogenes Laertius’ *Life of Pyrrho*, and the works of Sextus Empiricus. There is, of course, ample later evidence about the Greek sources; there are also whole original works of Epicurean and Stoic and Skeptic thought from a later period (above all from Rome). The lack of coincidence between early date and textual wholeness makes the task of selection difficult.

But when one turns to later sources, especially to Roman sources, it does
not seem sufficient simply to raid them for evidence toward the reconstruction of the Greek sources, as is frequently done. One must face the fact that these Roman philosophical works—works such as the De Rerum Natura of Lucretius and the dialogues, letters, and tragedies of Seneca—are themselves complex philosophical and literary wholes, whose practice of “therapeutic argument” cannot be well understood without attending to their overall literary and rhetorical structure, their characteristic patterns of language, their allusions to other literary and philosophical texts. And this is not all: one must attend to their Romanness. For Roman philosophy pursues its questions about the relation of theory to practice while standing in an intimate relation to Roman history and politics. Roman therapeutic argument is more than incidentally the therapy of Romans and of Rome; one cannot completely understand its operations without understanding, as well, the character of the implied interlocutors—of Memmius in Lucretius, of figures such as Lucilius and Novatus in the works of Seneca, and, in all such works, of the implied Roman reader. This means understanding as much as one can of the relevant aspects of Roman literary, political, and social history, of the nuances of the Latin language, as it both translates Greek philosophical terms and alludes to its own literary traditions, and, finally, of specifically Roman attitudes to ethical and social questions. Roman Epicureans and Stoics are Epicureans and Stoics; and as Epicureans and Stoics they are concerned with what they believe to be aspects of our common humanity, as each school understands it. But as Epicureans and Stoics they also believe that good philosophical argument must besearchingly personal, bringing to light and then treating the beliefs that the interlocutor has acquired from acculturation and teaching, including many that are so deeply internalized that they are hidden from view. Many such acquired beliefs are specific to the society in question; so good Roman Epicurean or Stoic philosophy must at the same time be a searching critical inquiry into Roman traditions.

Frequently philosophical scholars neglect this contextual material, producing a picture of Hellenistic ethics as a timeless whole. Typically such approaches will use the Latin texts only as source material for the Greek Hellenistic thinkers, disregarding their specifically Roman literary and social features and the shape of the literary wholes in which the philosophical material is embedded. This book, by contrast, is committed to studying the philosophical arguments in their historical and literary context. Indeed, I shall argue that Hellenistic therapeutic argument is, by design, so context-dependent that it can be fully understood in no other way—even, and especially, when we are trying to understand aspects of human life that
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are of continuing interest and urgency to us. (This does not imply that there are no transcontextual ethical truths to be unearthed by such a study, as we shall see.) On the other hand, I am aware that to study all of these contextual features completely, in the case of each of the relevant texts and authors, would be the undertaking of several lifetimes, not of a single book. Nor can I achieve complete coverage by limiting my inquiry to a single author, or even a single school; the questions I want to ask require comparing the techniques and insights of the three schools. To make matters more complex still, my own preference for whole texts whose literary form can be analyzed as a part of its argument has drawn me more and more to Roman sources as my work has progressed.

I have therefore found no easy solution to the problems of chronological and cultural range, apart from that of selecting certain topics for discussion and not others, certain works of a given author rather than others—and, in general, focusing on Lucretius and Seneca more than on Cicero, Epictetus, or Marcus. I have begun by limiting my focus to the three major schools in their more or less central and orthodox development, using Aristotle’s ethical thought as a background and a foil. I have omitted eclectic schools and the later versions of Aristotelianism. A more problematic omission is that of the Cynics, practitioners of a quasi-philosophical form of life that challenged public conventions of propriety as well as intellectual conventions of appropriate argument. The Cynics are certainly important in some way in the history of the idea of philosophical therapy; and the reader of Diogenes Laertius’ life of Diogenes the Cynic will find them fascinating figures. On the other hand, there is, I believe, far too little known about them and their influence, and even about whether they offered arguments at all, for a focus on them to be anything but a scholarly quagmire in a book of this type. With some regret, then, I leave them at the periphery.

In the case of each school, I have tried to give some idea of its Greek origins, as well as its Roman continuations. Thus I try to reconstruct the Epicurean practice of therapeutic argument, and to examine Epicurus’ own attitudes to fear, love, and anger, before dwelling on the analogous aspects of Lucretius’ poem and its therapeutic design. And I attempt to reconstruct Chrysippus’ own theory of the passions (concerning which, fortunately, we have an unusually large amount of information) before examining its development in Seneca’s therapy of anger and its ambivalent treatment in Senecan tragedy. In each case I have tried to mention at least those portions of the cultural context that seem the most relevant. Although I offer no systematic account of the history of rhetorical practices—again, an undertaking that would require another book—I do consider some portions of
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Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* in detail, and I attend closely to the rhetoric of particular philosophical arguments. Where my account has gaps, I hope that there is sufficient methodological frankness that the gaps themselves will be visible, in such a way that they can be filled in by others.

At the very least, I hope to have shown—by the incompleteness of my account as much as by what it does succeed in doing—how hard and yet how exciting it is to study the history of ethics in this period, when one understands it not simply as the history of arguments, but also as the history of practices of argumentation and psychological interaction aimed at personal and societal change.

Writing this book has also posed some delicate philosophical problems, which it is best to mention at the start. I undertook this project to get a better understanding of an aspect of Hellenistic philosophy that I enthusiastically endorse—its practical commitment, its combination of logic with compassion. This commitment is to some extent bound up with a more problematic aspect of Hellenistic thought, namely, its advocacy of various types of detachment and freedom from disturbance. The two commitments seem to me to be, in principle, independent of one another; and to some extent this is so also in practice. But it is also plain that one cannot go far in understanding these accounts of philosophical therapy without grappling with the normative arguments for detachment.

When one does grapple with them one finds, I think, three things. First, one finds that to a certain extent the radical social criticism of the Hellenistic philosophers does indeed require them to mistrust the passions: not, that is, to take passion-based intuitions as an ethical bedrock, immune from rational criticism. If passions are formed (at least in part) out of beliefs or judgments, and if socially taught beliefs are frequently unreliable, then passions need to be scrutinized in just the way in which other socially taught beliefs are scrutinized. But this seems to be a wise policy from the point of view of any philosophical view (including Aristotle’s) that holds that some ethical beliefs and preferences are more reliable than others.

Second, it becomes clear that at least some of the arguments that Epicureans and Stoics give for radically cutting back the passions are powerful arguments, even to someone who is antecedently convinced of their worth. In particular, their arguments against anger, and their further arguments connecting passions such as love and grief with the possibility of destructive anger, seem unavoidably strong. It is relatively easy to accept the conclusion that in living a life with deep attachments one runs a risk of loss.
and suffering. But according to Hellenistic arguments that risk is also a risk of evil: at the very least, of corruption of the inner world by the desire to harm. Confronting these arguments should occasion anxiety for any defender of the emotions. This book investigates that anxiety.

Finally, however, one finds in at least some of the Hellenistic texts themselves—especially in Lucretius and Seneca—a greater ambivalence than is at first apparent about the emotions and the attachments that are their basis. Epicurus’ commitment to invulnerability is qualified already by the central role he gives friendship. In Lucretius, commitments to the world extend more widely, including, it seems, not only friendship but also the love of spouse and children and city or country. This leads to a complex position, where love, fear, and even anger are concerned. The position of Stoicism is apparently simpler. But Seneca qualifies his anti-passion view in some ways even in his dialogues and letters; and in his tragedies, I believe, one sees a deeper ambivalence, as Stoicism confronts traditional Roman norms of worldly effort and daring. These complexities should be recognized in any critique of Hellenistic norms of self-sufficiency.

Further difficulties are raised by the role of politics in Hellenistic thought. The major Hellenistic schools are all highly critical of society as they find it; and all are concerned to bring the necessary conditions of the good human life to those whom society has caused to suffer. They are, moreover, far more inclusive and less elitist in their practice of philosophy than was Aristotle, far more concerned to show that their strategies can offer something to each and every human being, regardless of class or status or gender. On the other hand, the way they do this has little to do, on the whole, with political, institutional, or material change. Instead of arranging to bring the good things of this world to each and every human being, they focus on changes of belief and desire that make their pupil less dependent on the good things of this world. They do not so much show ways of removing injustice as teach the pupil to be indifferent to the injustice she suffers.

Aristotelianism sets exacting worldly conditions for the good life, making virtuous activity dependent in many ways upon material and educational conditions that are beyond the individual’s control. But Aristotle then assigns to politics the task of bringing those conditions to people: the good political arrangement is the one “in accordance with which each and every one might do well and lead a flourishing life” (Pol. 1324a23–25). Don’t the Hellenistic schools, by contrast, promote what is claimed to be well-being by simply lowering people’s sights, denying that material conditions have importance, and renouncing the political work that might effect
a broader distribution of these conditions? Epicurus urged a complete withdrawal from the life of the city, Skeptics an uncritical obedience to forces of existing convention. Even among the Stoics, whose commitment to the intrinsic value of justice is plain, we hear less about how to alter the political fact of slavery than about how to be truly free within, even though one may be (politically) a slave; less about strategies for the removal of hunger and thirst than about the unimportance of these bodily goods in a wise life; less about how to modify existing class structures and the economic relations that (as Aristotle argued) explain them, than about the wise person’s indifference to such worldly distinctions. In all three schools, the truly good and virtuous person is held to be radically independent of material and economic factors: achieving one’s full humanity requires only inner change. But isn’t this in fact false? Isn’t the inner world itself at least in part a function of social and material conditions? And doesn’t the failure to consider this diminish the interest of Hellenistic arguments for contemporary thought? (Consider, in this connection, Marx’s shift of allegiance from Epicurus, the topic of his doctoral dissertation, to Aristotle, the classical mentor of his mature work, once the importance of class analysis and of the material conditions of human flourishing became plain to him.)

I shall conclude that this criticism has some merit. But the simple contrast I have just drawn, between material/institutional change and inner change of belief and desire, is too crude to tell the whole story about the relationship between Aristotle and his Hellenistic successors. For in fact both Aristotle and the Hellenistic thinkers insist that human flourishing cannot be achieved unless desire and thought, as they are usually constructed within society, are considerably transformed. (Both hold, for example, that most people learn to value money and status far too highly, and that this corrupts both personal and social relations.) Nor does the more insistent and elaborate attention to such inner changes in the Hellenistic schools seem inappropriate, given their powerful diagnosis of the depth of the problems. Any viable political approach—now as then—must also be concerned, as they are, with the criticism, and the shaping, of evaluative thought and preferences.

Furthermore, the Hellenistic focus on the inner world does not exclude, but in fact leads directly to, a focus on the ills of society. One of the most impressive achievements of Hellenistic philosophy is to have shown compellingly and in detail how specific social conditions shape emotion, desire, and thought. Having shown this, and having argued that desire and thought, as they are currently constructed, are deformed, these philosophers naturally concern themselves with the social structures through
which these elements have been shaped, and with their reformation. Above all—like Aristotle, but with more detailed arguments—they are preoccupied with education. Their philosophical therapies both describe and model a new approach to the design of educational practices; and in their representation of the relation between teacher and pupil, they represent, as well, an ideal of community. Here, at least, they appear to achieve an egalitarian result that would have been unachievable in the world around them.

In other respects as well, they reshape social institutions that seem to them to impede human flourishing. Epicurus and Lucretius conduct a radical assault on conventional religion; Lucretius reconstructs social practices in the areas of love, marriage, and child-rearing. Since their arguments claim to be not only correct but also causally effective, they claim to contribute to the revolution they describe. In the Greek Stoics we find ideal political theory that attempts to eliminate differences of gender and class, and even to do away with the moral salience of local and national boundaries. In the Roman Stoics—along with several different types of political theory, both monarchical and republican (the latter very influential in practice, both at Rome itself and in much later republican revolutions)—we find arguments that confront entrenched political realities with bold criticisms, on the topics of slavery, gender relations, ethnic toleration, the concept of citizenship itself. The idea of universal respect for the dignity of humanity in each and every person, regardless of class, gender, race, and nation—an idea that has ever since been at the heart of all distinguished political thought in the Western tradition—is, in origin, a Stoic idea. The relationship of this idea to Stoic detachment needs close scrutiny. But in the meantime, we can say that to study the inner world and its relationship to social conditions is at least a necessary, if not a sufficient, task for a political philosophy that aims to be practical. Hellenistic philosophy gives us distinguished help with that task.