

NOTES FROM: *The Therapy of Desire*, by Martha C. Nussbaum

SUMMARY: In *The Therapy of Desire*, Martha Nussbaum, one of the most brilliant thinkers I've ever read, examines the medical model of philosophy, based on the work of famous Epicureans, Skeptics, and Stoics, all of whom prized the kind of philosophy concerned with *real* beneficial effects out there in the *world*, the kind which improved the lives of *real* people in *real-time*, instead of the more academic philosophy practiced today.

No stuffy, ivory-tower philosophy in this book. It's about examining what we *really* want in life, how we can adjust our desires to better fit what we *say* that we want in life, and about developing the intelligence and insight to make sure we want the right things, in the right amounts, at the right time.

Essentially, the thinkers she discusses believe that any philosophy that doesn't alleviate human suffering isn't worthy of the name. Same as medicine which doesn't cure what's wrong with the body should never be called medicine.

Nussbaum also speaks about death quite often in the book, and *The Therapy of Desire* actually helped change my opinion in this area. I was reading *Antifragile* by Nassim Taleb and I thought he was *crazy* for not wanting to live forever. And while I still absolutely, positively *love* being alive (I can't repeat this enough: *I do not waste a single minute of my one and only life and neither should you*), I can accept Nussbaum's - and Taleb's - viewpoint that death is a "making way for others" that sets limits to our existence, within which all our highest values are given expression.

If no one ever died, facing death would not be courageous, our personal relationships would lose some of their poignancy, and our projects would seem hollow. I'm still struggling with this question myself, and I'm certainly nowhere *near* done living.

I also sympathize with Albert Camus when he said in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death* that he is "against this universe, where children suffer and die." Likewise, I'm not willing to suffer the death of children without fighting back against it, *hard*; but death, as a necessity and constituent of life itself, does have its place.

This book also put into words something that I've often felt previously, namely that the value of each individual human life is *infinite*. The implication, of course, is that there is nothing that any of us have to "*do*" in order to become worthy of *unconditional positive regard* (in Rogerian terms) and nothing that we have to "*become*" in order to be persons of absolute value in the universe.

"Only in the life devoted to reason will you really get what you want."

“The complexity of adult emotions is made even more complex by virtue of the fact that many of them have infantile emotions embedded in them. If we don’t appreciate the way in which the fear and longing of the child survives in the adult, we lack, as well, a good understanding of why many adult emotions prove so recalcitrant to rational persuasion.”

“Short of cosmopolitanism, or fundamental loyalty to the human race generally, we can agree on a minimum threshold of concern and respect for all citizens.”

"At present I do not even accept cosmopolitanism as a fully correct comprehensive ethical view, since I think it gives too little space for a non-derivative loyalty to family, friends, loved ones, even nation. I have changed my mind on this point. Without such attachments, life becomes empty of urgency and personal meaning."

“Without a full appreciation of the needs people have for things outside themselves - food, shelter, bodily safety, the conditions of political participation - we just don't have sufficient reason to say that certain political arrangements are of urgent importance, and that others violate human dignity. If we agree with the stoics that all human beings are equal in dignity because of being human, we still need to find a way to make it clear that human dignity is not impervious to what happens in the world, that it makes demands on the world, and is worthy of certain sorts of treatment.”

“The task of government is to give people the social conditions of a life worthy of human dignity.”

“We always learn a great deal about our own views, or the views we might form, by engaging in a respectful and critical dialogue with significant works from philosophy’s history.”

“Because the damages caused by anger and hatred in public life cannot be addressed by philosophy alone, the author’s proceeds from the sale of this book will be donated to Amnesty International.”

“A life of leisured self-expression is, for most of the world’s people, a dream so distant that it can rarely even be formed.”

“If passions are formed (at least in part) out of beliefs or judgements, 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.”

“For just as there is no use in a medical art that does not cast out the sicknesses of the body, so too there is no use in philosophy, unless it casts out the suffering of the soul.”

Cicero: "There is, I assure you, a medical art for the soul. It is philosophy, whose aid need not be sought, as in bodily diseases, from outside ourselves. We must endeavor with all our resources and all our strength to become capable of doctoring ourselves."

“The best life might turn out to be a life that none of us could attain, or even one that none of us could grasp or envisage.”

John Rawls: "The notion of truth can be appropriate only in an inquiry that is a search for the nature of an altogether independent reality. Ethical theories, lacking such an independent goal, cannot claim to embody truth."

“Recognition of error is intimately linked to the grasp of truth.”

“Passions may be 'irrational' in the sense that the beliefs on which they rest may be false, or unjustified, or both. They are not irrational in the sense of having nothing to do with argument and reasoning.”

“Emotions and passions are socially constructed and taught, to some extent, as certain societies make certain attitudes and beliefs more or less likely to emerge.”

“Just like serious illnesses and injuries often require painful remedies, arguments that are going to have any sort of effect on your thoughts, actions, and ways of life need to be forceful and often must lead to distress.”

Aristotle: “For everyone has something of their own to contribute to the truth.”

"For we aim not to know what courage is but to be courageous, not to know what justice is but to be just, just as we aim to be healthy rather than to know what health is, and to be in a good condition rather than to know what good condition is."

“General principles are authoritative only insofar as they are correct; but they are correct only insofar as they do not err with respect to the particulars. And it is not possible for a general formula intended to cover many different particulars to achieve a high degree of precision, even when it is not actually wrong.”

“The general account, in ethics as in medicine, ought to be put forward as an outline or a set of guidelines, not as the precise final word.”

“A system of rules set up in advance can include only what has already been seen.”

“Emotions have a rich cognitive structure. They are not mindless surges of affect, but discerning ways of viewing objects; and beliefs of various types are their necessary conditions.”

“Most occasions for anger are removed by the removal of vulnerability.”

“The good person has no need for revenge, since the slights that others take to be harms and damages trouble him not at all.”

Aristotle's Idea: "There are some things in the world that it is right to care about: friends, family, one's own life and health, the worldly conditions of virtuous action. These can sometimes be damaged by events not under one's own control. For these reasons it is right to have some fear."

Aristotle's Idea: "Assuming one has made deep commitments to people and things that can be damaged by another, not to defend those commitments is to lose one's own integrity."

"Rationality recognizes truth; the recognition of some ethical truths is impossible without emotion; indeed, certain emotions centrally involve such recognitions."

"A detached unemotional intellectual survey of all the true opinions seems impossible; in avoiding emotion, one avoids a part of the truth."

"By a passion for true philosophy every disturbing and burdensome desire is undone."

"One sort of Eros drives out the other. The cure for bad desires comes through a love of arguments that dispels illusion and leaves us with truth."

"Our physiological state influences desire - and, through this, attention and perception."

"Lucretius carefully and subtly prepares the ground for his attack on erotic love through his discussion of false perceptions and dreams, only indirectly coming after what must be presumed to be one of the most important things in the reader's life, which is Lucretius' real target."

"Much of the human value of human experience is inseparable from the awareness of vulnerability, transience, and mortality."

"It is men's perception of their own vulnerability before death, and their perception that the gods lack their own weakness and fear that is one of the primary causes of the invention of worship and religious subservience."

"Fear is a response to value."

"Death is bad because it deprives the agent who was of the fulfillment of all his possibilities."

"Our fear of death is that, right now, our hopes and projects are vain and empty."

"True happiness is not additive: having more, or having a longer episode of it, does not make it better or more valuable."

"There is nothing new that one can devise that will increase the value of one's life."

"Those who are completely self-sufficient have no desire for any change at all to their mental condition."

“Our most cherished activities, such as the pursuit of power and wealth, pursue ends that are rendered unachievable by the nature of the activity itself.”

“The fact that an antecedent lack gives point and vividness to a pursuit does not mean that the pursuit itself has a merely need-relative value, like that of scratching an itch; nor does it imply that this activity is somehow absurd, and that a life without both need and activity would be somehow better and more respectable.”

“The fact that the beauty of spring is related to the contrast between spring and winter does not imply that spring is not really beautiful.”

“One who lives the life of the universe cannot be much concerned for his own.”

“This life to which you so stubbornly cling is not only not a very large part of the whole, it is actually required back from you, if the whole is to live well.”

"Instead, it asks from us a deeper and more consistent love of life and change, a love that is willing to confront one's own small place in the whole. It does not ask us not to think untimely death a tragedy; or even to stop fearing our death, as a loss, at any time. It reminds us, however, that this loss is someone else's good, that what you wish most to avoid is necessary and good for unborn others, that nature's structure contains an always tragic tension between the desires of the part and the requirements of the whole."

“To ask for a longer life at the expense of the health and proper functioning of the universe is to diminish the whole.”

“Gods are, as Heraclitus observed, in a paradoxical way finite; for they are dead to, closed off from, the value that we see, the beauty that delights us. Closed off from the struggle to do good work inside the constraints of a finite human life.”

“The fear of death has a just cause as one condition of our best possibilities.”

“Death would not be the sort of value-constituting limit it is in human life, if it were a limit to be embraced with equanimity.”

“Understanding the world is one of the greatest pleasures available to a human life; and all the greater, it seems, for a human life that places itself within the world, rather than apart from it.”

“A person who loves herself, and her limits as constitutive of herself, has no motive to flee herself.”

“Among the human ways of struggling against human limits, some are better and more valuable than others. The ways of power, reputation, and money are among the most prudentially unsound - in that they base the effort of human striving and imagining on goods that are both external and unstable. But they are also unsound in a deeper way: because they attempt to extend a person's life beyond itself using vehicles that are, in their impersonal nature, unsuited to express the identity of the person who is trying to project herself through them.”

“Anxiety is the soul's darkness, philosophy its light.”

"The task of therapy is always incomplete while the roots of these passions remain in the soul - as they do remain, in any human life that cherishes itself and knows itself to be incomplete."

“The skeptic does not express objections to necessary bodily pain, there being no point in objecting to something we can never hope to overcome completely.”

“For inasmuch as he is a human being, he will suffer through his senses; but if he does not in addition have the opinion that what he suffers is bad by nature, he will suffer moderately.”

“There is no value-neutral procedure in ethics.”

“Perhaps it is not in the case of the person or the city that one loves that one should make a demonstration of one's indifference.”

“What is more foolish than to praise in a person that which is not really him? What is more insane than someone who wonders at items that can the next minute be transferred to someone else?”

“No person should take pride in anything that is not his own.”

“Reasoning, on the Stoic view, is not just divine internally; it is our piece of the divinity that inhabits the whole framework of the universe.”

“Instead of seeing those with opposing views as evil or corrupt, we might instead perhaps feel sorry for them, disturbed by the fact that they assent to false views, and guided by compassion to assist them towards truth.”

“The job of living actively in accordance with one's own reason, rather than passively, in the grip of habits and conventions, requires vigilance and probing. The teacher's job is to awaken and assist this complex activity.”

“If the audience for philosophy is the entire human race, not just a narrow elite, philosophical teaching and writing will have to develop many different shapes and forms, in order to reach everyone it ought to reach.”

“If our intimate and distant relationships are a series of concentric circles extending outwards from the self, our job is to move those circles closer to ourselves through our own efforts.”

“It is good to have had the basic education embodied in conventional liberal studies, but philosophy is the only study whose activity is itself an exercise of human freedom.”

“Books should always be used as training for one’s own independent thought.”

“The soul confers nobility, and it is permitted to rise superior to fortune out of any situation whatsoever.”

“Virtue is something unaffected by external contingency.”

“We cannot speak intelligibly about exchanging a piece or part of virtue, however ‘small,’ for even the largest possible amount of any other good or goods.”

“There is, for the Stoic, no lessening of moral responsibility for someone who has, but masters their murderous thoughts, and someone who reluctantly carries out a murder.”

“All my goods are with me.”

“Giving in to vice is like diving off a cliff. At the top, you still have the power to decide whether or not you want to jump. But once you throw yourself off, your downward momentum pulls you down and you can’t get back to the top of the cliff again.”

“It is far better to cure a wrong than to avenge it.”

“Aggression grows not inside our nature, but out of an interaction between nature and conditions that is likely to be universal, unless and until philosophical education removes the darkness from human thought.”

“Life, if we develop attachments to it, alienates ourselves from our own humanity.”

"Given the omnipresence of aggression and injustice, if we look around us every day with the attitudes typical of the angry person - determined, that is, to consider injustice and aggression bad things, worth getting upset about, then we will never cease to be angry, for everything we see will upset us."

“A person who notes and reacts to every injustice must, in reacting to them all with anger, becomes, in the end, similar to the raging and furious people against whom he reacts. Anger hardens the spirit and turns it against the humanity it sees.”

“Plato, who, when he had cause of complaint against a slave, turned the actual punishment over to Speusippus, saying: ‘I am angry: I shall do more than is appropriate, I shall do it with pleasure. Let this slave not be in the power of someone who is not in his own.’”

"Seeing the complexity and fallibility of his own acts, seeing those acts as the product of a complex web of highly particular connections among the goodness of nature, the circumstances of life, and the complicated psychological reactions life elicits from the mind, he will learn to view others, too, in this light, as people whose every act and thought is worthy of keen attention, as people whose errors emerge from a highly complex narrative history rather than from a simply evil nature; he will moderate his rage toward their injustices and intensify his commitment to human solidarity and mutual aid."

"While we look back, as they say, and turn around, death is upon us."

Nietzsche: "Mercy is the self-overcoming of justice."

"We should not be angry with people who inevitably make mistakes during their lives, just as we would not be angry at people stumbling in the dark."

"The bold Stoic attempt to purify social life of all its ills, rigorously carried through, ends by removing, as well, its finite humanity, its risk-taking loyalty, its passionate love. Abandoning the zeal for absolute perfection as inappropriate to the life of a finite being, abandoning the thirst for punishment and self-punishment that so frequently accompanies that zeal, the education I recommend looks with mercy at the ambivalent excellence and passion of a human life."