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Contribution on Martha Nussbaum's *The Therapy of Desire*

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Martha Nussbaum's study of Hellenistic philosophy, *The Therapy of Desire*, is a significant intellectual accomplishment. It is an exploration of "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..." (p. 3). Nussbaum develops what she calls "the medical model" of philosophy, which she attributes to the Hellenistic philosophers. On this model, philosophy is not a "detached intellectual technique...but an immersed and wordly art of grappling with human misery" (p. 3). Nussbaum reconstructs what she calls the "Epicurean practice of therapeutic argument" (p. 8), and she shows how the Hellenistic philosophers employed this sort of argumentation to investigate such urgent issues as the fear of death, the nature of love, sexuality, and emotions such as anger.

Nussbaum "enthusiastically endorses" Hellenistic philosophy's "practical commitment, its combination of logic with compassion" (p. 9). But she also carefully explores the internal tensions within Hellenistic philosophy, especially the apparent tension between a practical commitment and the advocacy of various kinds of detachment and "freedom from disturbance" (p. 9). Nussbaum's book is thoughtful, balanced, subtle, and insightful. There is in this book the combination of attention to detail and thoughtful exploration of larger philosophical themes that I have come to expect—and greatly admire—in Nussbaum's work. The book is philosophically stimulating and also humane.

The scope of the book is large, but my discussion is constrained here; I shall thus focus somewhat narrowly on Chapter Six: "Mortal Immortals: Lucretius on Death and the Voice of Nature." This chapter provides a good example of the general pattern, identified by Nussbaum, of therapeutic argumentation (on the medical model of philosophy). She carefully shows how Lucretius argues that the fear of death has pervasive, destructive consequences for human life (even when we are unaware of this fear). Thus, we have good

reason to rid ourselves of it. Further, Lucretius wishes to argue that there is no rational basis for this fear; thus, philosophy can aid us in living better lives (not shattered by the corrosive effects of the fear of death).

Nussbaum points out that Lucretius offers various arguments aimed at showing that it is indeed irrational to fear death. The “main argument” is also found in Epicurus:

1. An event can be good or bad for someone only if, at the time when the event is present, that person exists as a subject of at least possible experience, so that it is at least possible that the person experiences the event.
2. The time after a person dies is a time at which that person does not exist as a subject of possible experience.
3. Hence the condition of being dead is not bad for that person.
4. It is irrational to fear a future event unless that event, when it comes, will be bad for one.
5. It is irrational to fear death (pp. 201–2).

Having discussed the famous symmetry argument elsewhere, I shall not also discuss it here. A third argument urges us to “realize that life is like a banquet: it has a structure in time that reaches a natural and appropriate termination” (p. 203). The idea here is (roughly) that we should not strive to prolong our lives indefinitely, because immortality is somehow incompatible with our flourishing: it is incompatible with our lives’ containing activities with value recognizably like the value we actually attach to these activities. Nussbaum identifies a fourth argument, which she calls the “population argument.” The point here is that, if there are births but no deaths, the world will become overpopulated and thus unlivable.

Nussbaum critically evaluates various aspects of these arguments. She believes that the main argument is not easily defeated by certain strategies. Further, she finds considerable merit in the banquet and population arguments, suitably refined. I shall begin with some remarks on the main argument, and then I shall turn to the banquet and population arguments.

As Nussbaum points out, Thomas Nagel has taken issue with the first premise of the main argument (and its focus on *experience*). Nagel offers an example in which an individual is betrayed behind his back; even though the individual never comes to know about this betrayal (or, let us say, experiences any unpleasant consequences of it), Nagel contends that the betrayal can be a bad thing for the individual. Further, a person may lose all higher mental functioning in an accident (or as a result of a stroke); this is a loss for the person, even if he is now contented. On Nagel’s view, death is bad for the individual who dies not in virtue of involving unpleasant experiences, but insofar as it is a deprivation of the goods of life.

But Nussbaum contends that Nagel has not successfully impugned the main argument's first premise. It will be useful to consider what she says:

...Nagel does not make it clear exactly how an event located completely outside a life's temporal span diminishes the life itself. The cases he actually analyzes are not by themselves sufficient to show this, since in each of them a subject persists, during the time of the bad event, who has at least a strong claim to be identical with the subject to whom the bad event is a misfortune. In the betrayal case, this subject is clearly the very same, and is a subject of possible, if not actual, experience in relation to that event. In the second case, it is hard not to feel that the continued existence of the damaged person, who is continuous with and very plausibly identical with the former adult, gives the argument that the adult has suffered a loss at least part of its force. Where death is concerned, however, there is no subject at all on the scene, and no continuant. So it remains unclear exactly how the life that has ended is diminished by the event (pp. 205–6).

But consider an example in which your daughter is trekking in the Himalayas while you are at home in the United States. (This example is similar to some cases presented by Jeff McMahan, to whose work I am here indebted.¹) Tragically, she dies in an accident. I believe that you are harmed by your daughter's death—a bad thing has happened to *you*—even before you find out about it. Suppose, further, that you die without ever finding out about the accident in the Himalayas; imagine, for example, that you die of a heart attack just five minutes after your daughter dies. You never find out about her death, and, given plausible assumptions about the situations of you and your daughter, you *cannot* find out about it. Nevertheless, it seems to me that you have been harmed (at least, for the five minutes of your continued life) by the death of your daughter. And here it is not merely the case that you do not have any unpleasant experiences as a result of your daughter's death; in addition, it is, at least on a very natural understanding of “possibility”, *impossible* for you to have any such experiences as a result of her death. (Suppose, for example, that your daughter's accident occurred miles from any town, with no communications equipment available for hundreds of miles, and so forth.)

Now it might be replied that, since you are still alive at the time of your daughter's death (and shortly thereafter) and a subject of possible experiences, there is at least *some* sense in which it is possible for you to have the relevant sorts of experiences as a result of your daughter's death. But why would *this* sense be the relevant sense of possibility? If one bases one's view of badness (or harm) on the possibility of experience, it seems much more natural to employ the notion of possibility according to which it is *impossible* for you to have unpleasant experiences as a result of your daughter's death. That is, I would suggest that the intuitive force of the crucial claim—that

¹ Jeff McMahan, “Death and the Value of Life,” *Ethics* 99 (October 1988), pp. 32–61; reprinted in John Martin Fischer, ed., *The Metaphysics of Death* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 233–66.

something's being bad for an individual requires the possibility of the individual's having unpleasant experiences as a result of it—depends at least implicitly on employing a notion of possibility which is considerably narrower than (say) mere logical possibility. On this narrower sort of possibility, you *cannot* experience anything unpleasant as a result of your daughter's death. Thus, the example seems to call the first premise into question, insofar as this premise bases the "existence requirement" on the idea that something's being bad for an individual requires that it be possible for the individual to have unpleasant experiences as a result of it.

Further, the example of your daughter's death suggests an analogy which further casts doubt on the existence requirement. The example seems to show that something that takes place at a *spatial* distance from you and cannot result in unpleasant experiences in you can nevertheless be bad for you. If there is an analogy between the spatial and temporal dimensions here, then it would seem to follow that something (death) which takes place at a *temporal* distance from you (and thus cannot result in unpleasant experiences in you) can nevertheless be bad for you. (The analogy between space and time here was suggested to me by work by Harry Silverstein.²) And if so, then the existence requirement is shown to be unreasonable.

The above reflections are meant to cast some doubt on the main argument. Let us now consider the third argument Nussbaum attributes to Lucretius, the "banquet argument." Here the basic point is that, as in the case of a banquet, there is a certain kind of temporal structure to a life; if that temporal structure is removed, the life may not be recognizably attractive (or worth living). Nussbaum develops the banquet argument in an important and intriguing way. This involves "pursuing seriously the thought that the structure of human experience, and therefore of the empirical human sense of value, is inseparable from the finite temporal structure within which human life is actually lived" (pp. 225–26). The idea here is that our mortality is a necessary condition of our various activities having meaning and value of the sort we can comprehend. Nussbaum says, "...the removal of all finitude in general, mortality in particular, would not so much enable these values [the values we find in friendship, love, justice, and the various forms of morally virtuous action, for example] to survive eternally as bring about the death of value as we know it" (p. 226).

Without the possibility of death, Nussbaum points out, it is unclear that we can have the virtue of courage (at least as we know it), for courage involves "a certain way of acting and reacting in the face of death" (p. 227). Moderation, Nussbaum contends, "is a management of appetite in a being for whom excesses of certain sorts can bring illness and eventually death..."

² Harry S. Silverstein, "The Evil of Death," *Journal of Philosophy* 77 (July 1980), pp. 401–24; reprinted in Fischer, ed., 1993, pp. 95–116.

(p. 228). Similarly, “political justice and private generosity are concerned with the allocation of resources like food, seen as necessary for life itself...” (p. 228). Nussbaum continues:

If parents are not necessary to enable children to survive and grow, if a city is not necessary for the life of its citizens...then human relationships would more and more take on the optional, playful character that Homer, depicting the gods, so marvelously shows us.... And, in general, the intensity and dedication with which very many human activities are pursued cannot be explained without reference to the awareness that our opportunities are finite, that we cannot choose these activities indefinitely many times (p. 229).

I find Nussbaum’s argument fascinating and highly suggestive. Ultimately, I do not think it is clear what to say about these matters. But I do wish to highlight some countervailing considerations, as it is not evident to me that the values in immortal existence would be so radically changed that they would not be recognizably similar to (if not identical to) our current values. Clearly, courage can be exhibited in the face of the risk of horrible pain, disfigurement, separation from loved ones, financial ruin, and so forth—the possibility of death is not required for a pretty robust virtue very much like (if not identical to) what we would call courage. And the situation may be similar, in my view, with regard to the other virtues and valued human activities.

A parent’s protection and nurturing is required to prevent physical and psychological damage to the children (and subsequent suffering by both the parent and children). The just distribution of basic resources may well be necessary to make possible a minimally decent standard of living for certain people (even if they are in some way guaranteed continued life). Working hard to make a relationship—such as marriage—successful still would have considerable importance. After all, a failed marriage will lead to separation and the associated disappointment and pain; that this suffering can last indefinitely long is perhaps further reason to want to avoid it. Of course, an immortal individual can perhaps hold out to himself the possibility of eventual reconciliation or the possibility of finding happiness in another relationship; but this must be counterbalanced against the possibility of long periods of suffering, and many failures.

Here is an example (offered in a light-hearted spirit). As a philosopher, one takes great pride in having a paper accepted by a leading journal. Now it may be argued that having a paper accepted by such a journal would lose much (if not all) of its meaning, if one had an indefinite amount of time during which to think, write, and submit papers to the journal. Immortality would apparently rob the accomplishment of its significance.

But why? It will still presumably be very difficult (and perhaps more difficult, given more philosophers!) to have a paper accepted by the leading journals. And the possibility now emerges of an indefinitely large number of

submissions and *rejections* (with the attendant disappointment and pain). Further, now perhaps there will be another goal which will to some extent replace the goal of having a single paper (or a few papers) accepted by the leading journals; maybe one will strive, over one's immortal lifetime, to have a greater number of papers accepted, or to have papers regularly accepted, or whatever. (Imagine the humiliation of being asked, perhaps at an APA meeting "You've lived *that* long and you've only published *one* paper in the *Journal of Philosophy*?")

Granted, certain aspects of the activity of writing and seeking to share one's thoughts will be changed; but must it follow that there will not be a *structure* involving aspiration, possible failure, possible success, pride, and disappointment? In general, even if the precise contours of our activities and values may change in an immortal existence, *must* it be the case that those activities and associated values are not *recognizably like* our activities and values? Don't the risks of pain, loneliness, and mediocrity provide enough energy to propel us forward, even into immortality? Nussbaum has usefully begun a discussion of these points—a discussion which I hope will be continued.

Just as the banquet argument is intriguing but not, in my view, decisive, so also with the population argument. While I find it an important *supplementary* argument to the various arguments traditionally offered by philosophers who reject the desirability of immortality, its cogency depends on our not being able to colonize space or otherwise replenish our resources in the future. Of course, these possibilities are the most fantastic kinds of science fiction. But it is not clear that their invocation is unfair in the context of discussions of immortality, which already involve significant leaps into science fiction. The limited efficacy of the population argument is a reflection (in my view) of the fact that it does not really go to the *heart* of the objections that philosophers have raised to immortality; these objections typically contend that immortality would be essentially boring, or would destroy the meaning of our lives (as in the banquet argument).