

**on the role of philosophy in  
self-cultivation: reassessing  
nussbaum's critique of  
foucault**

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## 1. NUSSBAUM'S COMPLAINT

Martha Nussbaum begins *The Therapy of Desire*<sup>1</sup> with the claim that “[t]wentieth-century philosophy, both in 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.”<sup>2</sup> Nussbaum aims to remedy this neglect by attending to what she argues is the nature of Hellenism’s conception of *philosophical self-cultivation*, the complexity and unfamiliarity of which she believes has chronically hampered previous efforts to understand this tradition. By re-situating Hellenistic texts within a context that views philosophy as an eminently practical undertaking, one which primarily understands itself as an exercise in self-cultivation, she argues, Hellenism is a “very helpful way of balancing [moral philosophy’s] interest in common human problems” while “illuminating our own contemporary circumstances.”<sup>3</sup> While Nussbaum acknowledges that traditional forms of folk self-cultivation were also a large part of the *Weltanschauung* of the Hellenistic world, and that the philosophers in this tradition had much “in common with religious and magical/superstitious movements [of] their culture,” she insists that:

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.<sup>4</sup>

It is her account of the specifically philosophical dimension of self-cultivation in Hellenistic ethics that Nussbaum tells us decisively separates her account from the account that Michel Foucault offers in his third volume of *The History of Sexuality*,<sup>5</sup> *The Care of the Self*, which appeared in French a decade earlier than Nussbaum's monograph. While commending Foucault for drawing scholarly attention to the "extent to which [Hellenistic philosophers] are not just teaching lessons, but also engaging in complex practices of self-shaping," she argues that Foucault "fails to confront the fundamental commitment to reason that divides philosophical *techniques du soi* from other such techniques" and, because of this, she views his approach as "deeply problematic".<sup>6</sup> When scrutinising his reading of the Stoics, for example, Nussbaum complains that Foucault's alternative "emphasis on habits and *techniques du soi* [...] too often obscures the dignity of reason," and that although "many forms of life in the ancient world purveyed *techniques du soi*, ... what sets philosophy apart from popular religion, dream-interpretation, and astrology is its commitment to rational argument" (Nussbaum 1994: 353). Furthermore, in addition to disagreeing with the historical accuracy of Foucault's account, Nussbaum tells us that his previous philosophical commitments severs him from the possibility of offering an account that does justice to the Hellenistic emphasis on rationality. In her scathing review of *The Use of Pleasure*<sup>7</sup> in 1985, she argues that Foucault's interest in classical self-cultivation in this work is a "retreat from the principles that defined his career"<sup>8</sup>; expanding on this view in her subsequently published *The Therapy of Desire*, she claims that "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."<sup>9</sup> In Nussbaum's view, Foucault neither gives a historically accurate account of the practices and techniques of self-cultivation in the Hellenistic world, nor could he given the philosophical positions he had previously argued for so effectively in his earlier work.

On Nussbaum's own reading, all the Hellenistic schools prioritised *rationality* and the use of *reason* in self-cultivation,<sup>10</sup> and she adduces compelling textual evidence for her contention that a specifically philosophical conception of self-cultivation dominated the Hellenistic world.<sup>11</sup> She cites Epicurus's claim that philosophy must be primarily understood as therapy for the soul,<sup>12</sup> before turning to the frequent references to this idea in the Stoic literature. Here she quotes Galen recounting the Stoic Chrysippus who tells us that, in addition to the "art called medicine," there is a "corresponding art concerned with the diseased soul" which is called philosophy.<sup>13</sup> Additionally Nussbaum finds further explicit support for this contention in Cicero's writings on the early Stoics. She quotes the Roman statesman approvingly where he refers to the early Stoic writings that suggest that philosophy should be regarded as "a medical art of the soul" and by attending to it "we can become capable of doctoring ourselves."<sup>14</sup> Nussbaum believes that self-cultivation was necessarily philosophical at this time because she views Hellenistic ethics as organised according to an analogy that trades on a distinction between therapeutic procedures that apply to the body and those that apply to the soul. In the opening pages of *The Therapy of Desire*, she tells us that her work will not "attempt to [tell] the entire story of Hellenistic ethical thought," nor try to provide a "systematic selective outline," but rather it will present an account of Hellenistic ethics that follows a "central guiding ... analogy between philosophy and medicine as arts of life."<sup>15</sup> In the same way that medicine treats bodily pathogens—so Nussbaum's analogy runs – philosophy treats maladies of the soul, maladies that are either "produced by false beliefs" or by "emotions or passions."<sup>16</sup> She writes:

[Philosophy's] arguments are to the soul as the doctor's remedies are to the body. They can heal, and they are to be evaluated in terms of their power to heal. [...] This general picture of philosophy's task is common to all three major Hellenistic schools, in both Greece and Rome.<sup>17</sup>

The philosophical art of curing false beliefs and wayward passions should be understood as an "art whose tools are arguments, an art in which precise reasoning, logical rigor, and definitional precision have an important role to play."<sup>18</sup> Philosophical therapy is appropriate, Nussbaum argues, because of the nature of the malady: for the Hellenistics, "diseases of belief and social teaching" are what hamper human flourishing, so the only way "we can [become] truly free and truly flourishing"<sup>19</sup> is through dialectical and deliberative practices, which she insists should be regarded as quintessentially philosophical. While the features of "pre-

cise reasoning, logical rigor, and definitional precision” still characterizes the discipline of philosophy in our own era, for Nussbaum, the use of such argumentation had a markedly different purpose in the Hellenistic world, one which aimed at the “achievement of flourishing human lives,” which meant that the “valuation of any particular argument must concern itself not only with logical form and the truth of premises, but also with the argument’s suitability for the specific maladies of its addressees.”<sup>20</sup>

Nussbaum is not alone in worrying about the historical accuracy of Foucault’s interpretation of Hellenistic self-cultivation, and she garners support for her view from Pierre Hadot, who Foucault acknowledges as a direct and powerful influence on his later works.<sup>21</sup> In a footnote<sup>22</sup> Nussbaum approvingly cites the first edition of Hadot’s *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*<sup>23</sup> and his translated article “Forms of Life and Forms of Discourse in Ancient Philosophy,”<sup>24</sup> both of which emphasise the explicitly philosophical nature of self-cultivation in the Hellenistic world, and go to great lengths to distinguish philosophical self-cultivation from the other modes of self-cultivation that were common in this era. Moreover, if Nussbaum had waited a year before publishing *Therapy*, she could have cited support for her view from Hadot’s own pointed comments on what he too regards as the lack of philosophy in Foucault’s account. In his 1995 *Philosophy as a Way of Life*,<sup>25</sup> an English collected edition which includes the two texts Nussbaum cites, Hadot includes an extra chapter that strongly criticises Foucault’s neglect of the rational activities which Hadot claims were integral to the Hellenistic conception of self-cultivation. In this chapter, “Reflections on the Idea of the *Cultivation of the Self*,” Hadot bemoans the “tendency of modern thought” that views the ideas of “universal reason” and “universal nature” as being without “meaning anymore,” and suggests that Foucault, as an exemplar and committed advocate of this tendency, found it “convenient to ‘bracket’ them.”<sup>26</sup> In a similar vein Hadot seems to have Foucault in mind in *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie antique?* [What is Ancient Philosophy?], which appeared in French the same year as the English edition of *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. Hadot does not mince his words when he tells us:

[The] danger, the worst of all, is to believe that one can do without philosophical reflection. The philosophical way of life must be justified in rational, motivated discourse, and such discourse is inseparable from the way of life. Nevertheless, we have to reflect critically on the ancient, modern, and oriental discourses which justify a given way of life. We must try to render explicit the reasons we act in such-and-such a way, and reflect

on our experience and that of others. Without such reflection, the philosophical life risks sinking into vapid banality, “respectable” feelings, or deviance.<sup>27</sup>

In this article I will propose that there are three reasons why Nussbaum’s complaint misses its intended target. I will characterise the first two arguments as “positive” insofar as they deal directly with the account of philosophical self-cultivation offered in Foucault’s work, and because they relate to how Nussbaum misrepresents Foucault’s position. As well as listing the times Foucault explicitly emphasises the role of philosophy in Hellenistic self-cultivation (section 2), I will also explore the account of how the Hellenistics differentiated between the *logos* of philosophy and the *askesis* of self-cultivatory techniques offered in the work of John Sellars (sections 3 and 4). The third reason—which I will characterise as “negative”—concerns the supposedly alternative account that Nussbaum (and Hadot) offer of philosophical self-cultivation, one which I will argue does not adequately differentiate their own positions from Foucault’s (section 4). I will end by suggesting how resolving this debate in the light of Sellars’ work not only gives a more plausible account of Foucault’s own understanding of self-cultivation, but also leads us to a better understanding of Hellenistic self-cultivation itself.

## 2. PHILOSOPHICAL SELF-CULTIVATION IN THE CARE OF THE SELF

Given Foucault’s wide-ranging focus in *The Care of the Self* and concomitantly-presented lectures, it is perhaps unsurprising that Nussbaum complains that his account of self-cultivation does not clearly emphasise its philosophical dimension. In the opening lecture on theme of the care of the self at the Collège de France in 1981 he tells us that over the “long summer of Hellenistic and Roman thought, the exhortation to care for oneself became so widespread that it became [...] a truly general cultural phenomenon.”<sup>28</sup> Similarly, in a more polished version of the idea in *The Care of the Self*, Foucault concedes that the theme of philosophical self-cultivation eventually worked “loose from its first philosophical meanings,” becoming “rather general in scope,” operating as an “imperative that circulated among a number of different doctrines.”<sup>29</sup> Like Nussbaum, Foucault acknowledges that it would be “a mistake to think that care of the self was an inversion of philosophical thinking and that it constituted a precept peculiar to philosophical life” because, as he emphasises, the idea of cultivating and caring for the self “was actually a precept of living that, in a general way, was very highly valued in Greece.”<sup>30</sup> During the Hellenistic period, Foucault contends that the ideal of cultivating the self be-

came increasingly diffuse, evolving into “procedures, practices, and formulas that people reflected on, developed, perfected, and taught,” which required it spilling into other disciplines outside of philosophy. He writes:

[T]he fact that the philosophers advise that one give heed to oneself does not mean that this zeal is reserved for those who choose to live a life similar to theirs, or that such an attitude is required only during the time one spends with them. It is a valuable principle for everyone, all the time and throughout life.<sup>31</sup>

Foucault’s account here fits with Nussbaum’s acknowledgement that both philosophical and non-philosophical kinds of self-cultivation pervaded the Hellenistic world, and that even philosophers whose work falls squarely under the medical analogy have much in common with those “religious,” “magical,” and “superstitious movements” who also “purveyed a *biou technê* [or] an ‘art of life’”.<sup>32</sup> But because she also concedes that self-cultivation was a wide spread phenomenon in the Hellenistic world, caveats like this seem to undercut the severity of her criticisms of Foucault, especially if we consider the prominent appearance of philosophers in *The Care Of the Self*. While Foucault clearly does not view Hellenistic self-cultivation as *only* existing within the province of philosophy, many of the sources with which he articulates his reading have a distinctly philosophical flavour, even when they do not directly come from philosophers themselves, and moreover he often directly cites philosophers on this theme, which we will explore in depth below.

Although Foucault begins *The Care Of the Self* with a lavish description of the dream interpretation of Artemidorus<sup>33</sup> and frequently refers to the medical texts of Soranus<sup>34</sup> and Galen,<sup>35</sup> he draws the substance of his account from self-described (and, for the most part, canonically ratified) philosophers. Of course just because Foucault draws on texts written by philosophers does not mean his account of Hellenistic self-cultivation is philosophical, nor that it elides Nussbaum’s charge that it is philosophy “and not anything else” that we require in order to understand Hellenistic self-cultivation, but in what follows I will suggest Foucault’s use of the source material is overwhelming directed towards showing that philosophical thought—understood as broadly as it was in the Hellenistic world—was necessary (although not sufficient) for Hellenistic self-cultivation.

Foucault begins his account of the role of philosophy in self-cultivation with an analysis of Plato's early dialogue<sup>36</sup> *Alcibiades*, which he views as emblematic of the importance of care of the self in the classical period, and which he tells us "constitutes a basic theme of the dialogue." Socrates tells Alcibiades that in order to shoulder his political responsibilities effectively<sup>37</sup> he "must first attend to himself."<sup>38</sup> And indeed the theme of caring for oneself in order to care for others is an oft-revisited theme in Foucault's later analysis of self-cultivation in the classical era.<sup>39</sup> In a similar vein, in Plato's portrait of Socrates in the *Apology*, Foucault tells us that it is as a "master of the care of the self that Socrates presents himself to his judges," one who urges the Athenians not to "concern themselves [with] riches [or] honour" but with "themselves and with their souls".<sup>40</sup> But although the idea of the care of the self was strongly articulated by Socrates, Foucault argues that it tended to be down-played in the later Platonic dialogues (although not the Platonists of late antiquity), was suppressed by Plato's successors in the Academy, and was completely ignored by the Peripatetics. For example, Foucault argues that for Aristotle the "question of spirituality was least important."<sup>41</sup> Instead of a set of teachings (*logos*) that require initiates to cultivate themselves through various different practices and techniques (*askêsis*), Aristotle introduced the idea that philosophy should be resolutely theoretical insofar as it should primarily strive to attain objective knowledge, albeit including practical habit-forming techniques that he discusses in the *Eudemian Ethics*.<sup>42</sup> Although it is this that leads many to regard Aristotle as the "founder of philosophy in the modern sense of the term", Foucault argues that this should also lead us to view Aristotle as "not the pinnacle of Antiquity" but rather "its exception."<sup>43</sup> For Foucault, rather than either Aristotle or Plato, "Socrates is, and always will be, the person associated with care of the self."<sup>44</sup>

After the various classical interpretations of (and deviations from) the care of the self, Foucault tells us that the philosophers of the Hellenistic and Imperial eras—the period that *The Care of the Self* covers in most depth – returned to Socratic self-cultivation, and developed this idea increasingly programmatically. He writes:

In the slow development of the art of living under the theme of the care of oneself, the first two centuries of the imperial epoch can be seen as the summit of a curve: a kind of golden age in the cultivation of the self—it being understood, of course, that this phenomenon concerned only the social groups, very limited in number, that were bearers of culture and for

whose members a *technê tou biou* could have a meaning and a reality.<sup>45</sup>

Not only did the Hellenistic philosophers return to Socrates' understanding of self-cultivation, they also retained its philosophical dimension. Accordingly Foucault's account of this return to Socratic self-cultivation explicitly draws from sources that offer a robustly philosophical account of this theme. Beginning with the Epicureans, Foucault quotes Epicurus' *Letter to Menoeceus*, which he plausibly interprets as "stat[ing] the principle that philosophy should be considered as a permanent exercise of the care of oneself."<sup>46</sup> After this Foucault moves to the Stoics, noting that both Musonius Rufus and Plutarch approvingly quote Zeno's injunction that "He who wishes to come through life safe and sound must continue throughout his life to take care of himself," before turning to Seneca and Marcus Aurelius. Here he quotes the latter urging us to "hasten [...] to the end, discard vain hopes, and if you care for yourself at all, rescue yourself [*sautai boêthei ei ti soi meleî sautou*] while you still may", and cites Seneca's remarks about "devot[ing] oneself" to philosophy, "spar[ing] no effort in order to 'develop oneself,' 'transform oneself,' and 'return to oneself.'"<sup>47</sup> But although these quotations indicate that the idea of self-cultivation was taken as a serious philosophical concept by Hellenistic philosophers, Foucault tells us that "it is in Epictetus [...] that one finds the highest philosophical development of this theme" since the *Discourses* define human beings as beings who are "destined to care for [themselves]," a definition that is used to distinguish them from other sentient creatures.<sup>48</sup> For Epictetus, Foucault claims, while other creatures are "'ready prepared' [with what] they need in order to live" and do not have "to look after themselves," human beings "must attend to [themselves]" because the "god (Zeus) deemed it right that [they] be able to make free use of [themselves]; and it was for this purpose that [Zeus] endowed him with reason."<sup>49</sup>

From this we can see that Foucault's account of Hellenistic self-cultivation strives to reflect the extant textual emphasis on the philosophical dimension of this theme. So, if Nussbaum's objections do not stem from the source material Foucault uses to present the Hellenistic conception of self-cultivation, why does she object to his account so vehemently? The answer to this lies, I will argue in the next section, in the fact that Foucault's account also makes much room for practices and techniques of self-cultivation that are what I will term *extra*-philosophical. As well as citing source material that explicitly underlines the importance of philosophical interest in self-cultivation, Foucault also attends to the more ancillary dimensions of self-cultivation in the Hellenistic world, especially those



aspects through which one's philosophical commitments could be expressed. But while Nussbaum regards Foucault's coverage of these techniques as evidence that he misses the essentially philosophical dimension of self-cultivation, we will see that Foucault devotes serious scholarly attention to these techniques—including the dream interpretation of Artemidorus and the medical texts of Soranus and Galen—because he views these “procedures, practices, and formulas” as strengthening, precipitating, and expressing the tenets of a certain philosophical outlook. Foucault does not introduce extra-philosophical practices and techniques to *replace* philosophical ones; he views these techniques as a necessary *complement* to philosophical ones because it is through these techniques that the philosophical commitments of the Hellenistic school (whichever school that may be) are realised.

### 3. EXTRA-PHILOSOPHICAL SELF-CULTIVATION IN FOUCAULT

In addition to his emphasis on the philosophical sources of Hellenistic self-cultivation, Foucault spends much of *The Care of the Self* detailing practically-orientated techniques, which seems to give succour to Nussbaum's complaint. Many of the practices of self-cultivation that he includes in this text are patently non-philosophical in modern terms, although Foucault views them as having philosophical significance for Hellenistic philosophers. Directly after his account of how Hellenistic philosophers viewed the philosophical self-cultivation of Socrates as their immediate precursor, Foucault writes of the importance of practical techniques of self-shaping for the Hellenistics.<sup>50</sup> In contrast to the detached and contemplative attitude students are encouraged to take up in a modern philosophy seminar room, Hellenistic philosophers encouraged their students to engage with practical tasks that allowed them to imbibe and mull over their philosophical insights. Foucault writes:

It is important to understand that [the cultivation of] oneself does not require simply a general attitude, an unfocused attention ... This time is not empty; it is filled with exercises, practical tasks, various activities. Taking care of oneself is not a rest cure. There is the care of the body to consider, health regimens, physical exercises without overexertion, the carefully measured satisfaction of needs. There are the meditations, the readings, the notes that one takes on books or on the conversations one has heard, notes that one reads again later, the recollection of truths that one knows already but that need to be more fully adapted to one's own life.<sup>51</sup>

Instead of viewing techniques of self-cultivation as philosophical or non-philosophical like Nussbaum, Foucault proposes that we should regard Hellenistic exercises as lying on a continuum between “two poles,” which the Greeks called *meletê* [meditation] and *gymnasia* [physical exercise]. Between the poles of *meletê* and *gymnasia*, he tells us, there were a “whole series of intermediate possibilities” which comprised the bulk of self-cultivatory exercises in the Hellenistic world.<sup>52</sup>

Foucault’s discussion of *gymnasia* begins in *The Use of Pleasure*. Taking Hippocrates’ account of the regimens the physician prescribes for his patients as his example, Foucault notes that:

What a properly designed regimen [*diorite*] ought to cover was defined by a list that became almost conventional as time went on. It is the list found in Book VI of the *Epidemics*; it included “exercises [*ponoi*], foods [*sitia*], drinks [*pota*], sleep [*hypnoi*], and sexual relations [*aphrodisia*]”—everything that needed to be “measured.”<sup>53</sup>

When turning to Hellenism in *The Care of the Self*, Foucault tells us that the importance of practices and techniques relating to *gymnasia* had “remained remarkably continuous since the classical period,” and that although the “general principles stayed the same,” they were “developed, given more detail, and refined” as the Socratic principle of care of the self regained its importance in the Hellenistic world. For Foucault, “what stands out in the texts of the first centuries ... is the insistence on the attention that should be brought to bear on oneself” specifically in terms of “the modality, scope, constancy, and exactitude of the required vigilance.”<sup>54</sup> The “intensification” of Hellenistic techniques relating to *gymnasia* required a “more constantly vigilant attention to the body” which took the form of a “change of scale in the elements to which one needed to direct one’s attention [...] as a physical individual.”<sup>55</sup>

But as well as devoting much attention to practices of self-cultivation relating to *gymnasia*, Foucault cautions that an individual would only “be able to assign [a] regimen correctly provided it has done a good deal of work on itself” which he describes as “eliminat[ing] the errors, reduc[ing] the imaginings, master[ing] the desires ... in order to be able to guide the body.”<sup>56</sup> This is achieved through mental and intellectual exercises which—according to Foucault’s continuum metaphor—would be situated towards the *meletê* end of the self-cultivation spectrum. Like

Hadot,<sup>57</sup> Foucault tells us that *meletê* includes heterogeneous “rational,” “imaginative,” and “intuitive” elements that were fashioned into mental and intellectual exercises that aimed to foster the care of the self. While some practices of *meletê* included a physical dimension,<sup>58</sup> Foucault’s detailed account of these exercises in his shorter texts from the mid-1980s focus on those that involve using one’s mental faculties alone. The first, “controlling one’s representations,” appeared in both the Epicurean and Stoic schools, and consisted in an “attitude of constant supervision over the representations that may enter the mind.”<sup>59</sup> Epictetus’ account of such mental exercises, Foucault tells us, was expressed with “two metaphors”:

[T]hat of the night watchman who does not let just anyone come into the town or the house; and that of the moneychanger or inspector—the *arguronomos*—who, when presented with a coin, examines it, weighs it in his hand, and checks the metal and the effigy.<sup>60</sup>

Watching “perpetually over representations” involved a “morning examination” that considered the “tasks and obligations of the day,” alongside an examination of one’s conscience in the evening to “review the day that had gone by.”<sup>61</sup> But the most-prized Hellenistic exercises of *meletê* were those devoted to the “mediation on future ills” [*praemeditatio malorum*] and the “meditation on death” [*meletê thanatou*]. The aim of the *praemeditatio malorum* was not to “visualize the future as it is likely to be” but rather to “systematically imagin[e] the worst that might happen,” even if this was not likely to happen at all<sup>62</sup>; whereas the aim of the *meletê thanatou* was to make the initiate “live each day as if it were the last,” that is, as Seneca puts it in his letter to Lucilius, live “each day as if one’s entire life depended on it.”<sup>63</sup> While both exercises may sound pessimistic and needlessly morbid, Foucault’s account emphasises how they were primarily aimed to reappraise one’s worldly attachments, and to “judge each action that one is performing in terms of its own value.”<sup>64</sup> As we will see in the next section, Foucault does not claim that such exercises were philosophical in themselves, but rather that they aimed to elucidate the philosophical positions of the school concerned. To see why this is so we must turn to an important Hellenistic distinction that Nussbaum does not employ: the *logos* of the Hellenistic schools and the *askesis* they proposed employing to access it.

#### 4. PHILOSOPHICAL SELF-CULTIVATION?

Despite Nussbaum’s complaint, we have seen that Foucault views philosophy as

having an integral role in self-cultivation, both according to the Hellenistic philosophers he cites and in terms of these philosophers' explicit claim of the essential role of philosophy in self-shaping. As we have seen, in *The Use of Pleasure* Foucault supports his account of philosophical self-cultivation from Plato's early dialogues, whereas in *The Care of the Self* he finds similar accounts given by the major thinkers of the Stoic and Epicurean schools. Not only do the figures Foucault cites explicitly agree that philosophy is important, they also offer persuasive reasons why philosophy is necessary in appropriately employing and directing self-cultivatory techniques themselves. What is less clear, however, is what role extra-philosophical cultivatory techniques play in Foucault's conception of self-cultivation and how they are connected to the practice of philosophy. Both Nussbaum and Hadot rightly note that Foucault's account of self-cultivation does not restrict itself to canonical philosophers, but includes a wide range of putatively non-philosophical authors, especially when he discusses the self-cultivatory exercises that are situated between the poles of *meletê* and *gymnasia*. In fact it is Foucault's focus on such extra-philosophical techniques that arouses both Nussbaum and Hadot's ire. While Nussbaum concedes that the value of self-cultivation was widely recognised across a variety of discourses and disciplines in the Hellenistic world, Foucault's detailed account of the writings of non-philosophical figures—from Artemidorus to Soranus to Galen—directly leads her to complaint that Foucault unfairly deemphasises the importance of philosophy. So does Nussbaum overreact to the presence of these figures and the lavish descriptions of extra-philosophical self-cultivation in Foucault's account? Or is there a way to justify Foucault's inclusion of so much of this kind source material which is compatible with Nussbaum's claim that philosophy has an essential role?

To understand why Foucault devotes much attention to the extra-philosophical exercises of *meletê* and *gymnasia*, we must view his conception of Hellenistic philosophy as a bipartite endeavour involving both our rational and non-rational faculties. While—along with Nussbaum and Hadot—Foucault clearly states that the faculties of rationality and reasoning are essential to Hellenistic self-cultivation, he proposes that an exclusively-rational conception of self-cultivation is insufficient because rational techniques must be supplemented by a range of extra-philosophical and practically-orientated self-cultivatory practices that allow rational insights to be expressed and assimilated. Viewing the Hellenistic conception of philosophy as one which has both a theoretical and a practical dimension is strongly supported by some of the most insightful scholarly literature published after the *Therapy of Desire*. In his 2003 text on this topic, *The Stoics on*

*the Nature and Function of Philosophy*, John Sellars insists that Hellenistic philosophers viewed their discipline as “involv[ing] both rational principles (*logos*) and practical training (*askesis*)”<sup>65</sup> Because it necessarily involves two complementary elements, for Sellars, we cannot understand Hellenistic self-cultivation if we:

[I]dentify spiritual exercises with philosophy itself [because such exercises are] merely the second, although essential, stage of philosophical education coming after an initial stage devoted to philosophical principles (*logos*).<sup>66</sup>

Taking on board the fact that we must view Hellenistic self-cultivation as including both theoretical and practical components can explain Foucault’s inclusion of those extra-philosophical techniques that vex Nussbaum so much. The rational dimension of Hellenistic self-cultivation only accounts for half of the process. In order to fully understand self-cultivation in the Hellenistic world, we must give an account of how the *logos* of the school concerned was theoretically tied to a practical set of exercises through which this *logos* could be imbibed and ratified in the life of the initiate. On the one hand this explains Foucault’s interest in those mental self-cultivatory exercises that he refers to as *meletê*. The techniques of daily self-examination, or even the exercises of *praemeditatio malorum* or *meletê thanatou*, should not be understood as philosophy themselves, but rather as an extra-philosophical technique which enabled initiates to assimilate the insights of their school. The same applies to the more practically-orientated techniques relating to *gymnasia*, such as dream-interpretation or the physical training of the body. Nussbaum is certainly right to identify that these are not philosophy themselves, but she is mistaken in denying that they had a philosophical import and purpose in the Hellenistic world (and therefore mistaken in denying that Foucault has reason to include them), as these techniques are solely aimed to develop and corroborate philosophical insights.

Nevertheless, while we may agree that Nussbaum is right to insist that Foucault pays relatively little attention to the rational aspects of self-cultivation, we may also feel that her complaint is unfair on account of the presence of non-philosophical self-cultivatory techniques in her own work. In section one I noted that she acknowledges that self-cultivatory techniques were employed in Hellenistic “religion, dream-interpretation, and astrology”, but we should also note that there is a significantly widespread exploration of extra-philosophical techniques of self-cultivation throughout her own work. Early in *Therapy* Nussbaum

describes Hellenistic ethics as an “immersed and worldly art of grappling with ... issues of daily and urgent human significance – the fear of death, love and sexuality, anger and aggression” which coupled with her subsequent descriptions of this art is loose enough to accommodate many of the self-cultivatory techniques that belong to Foucault’s continuum.<sup>67</sup> Like Foucault, Nussbaum, also refers to “memorization,” “confession,” and “daily self-examination” when she discusses Stoic self-cultivation exercises,<sup>68</sup> for example, and—even while she distances herself from Foucault—aligns herself with Hadot’s and Arnold Davidson’s accounts of these kinds of extra-philosophical self-cultivation exercises in the Hellenistic world.<sup>69</sup>

Although Nussbaum concedes that such techniques would be no longer regarded as philosophical by the “detached intellectual techniques” of modern Anglophone philosophy, she commits to the position that they were philosophical staples in the Hellenistic world.<sup>70</sup> As we have seen, one kind of malady is false beliefs, and it is relatively straightforward to envisage how a specifically *philosophical* techniques of self-cultivation might be used to correct these.<sup>71</sup> But, as well as treating the mistakes generated by “invalid inferences and false premises,” Nussbaum herself tells us that philosophical self-cultivation in the Hellenistic world aimed to ameliorate unwelcome passionate attitudes: “irrational fears,” “excessive loves,” and “crippling angers.”<sup>72</sup> Hellenistic philosophers believed that the passions were susceptible to the argumentative force of philosophy, she claims, because they had a “sophisticated” understanding of emotion, one which she believes has the potential to contribute to contemporary philosophical understanding by viewing the passions as “made up out of belief[s] and respond[ing] to arguments.”<sup>73</sup> Departing from Aristotle’s conception of passion (which views them as opaque and refractory to one’s rational capacities), Nussbaum tells us that the Hellenistics did not regard emotions and passionate states as “blind surges of affect that push and pull us without regard to reasoning and belief,” but rather as “intelligent and discriminating elements of the personality that are very closely linked to beliefs, and are modified by the modification of belief.”<sup>74</sup> This explains the variety of self-cultivatory techniques that Hellenistic philosophers employed, as well as why these techniques often included non- or extra-philosophical elements. Nussbaum claims that Hellenistics had to resort to techniques that are “more psychologically engaging than those of conventional deductive or dialectical argument,” which is why Hellenistic texts typically shower the reader with “gripping examples,” “narrative,” “appeals to memory and imagination.”<sup>75</sup> These rhetorical and literary forms were primarily ways “in which an argument may be effectively housed” so

that it could better discharge its philosophical content, which as we will see below is supported by Hadot's view of self-cultivatory exercises of the Hellenistic world as using "all the means obtainable by dialectic and rhetoric."<sup>76</sup>

Interrogating Nussbaum's own account of the necessary interplay between rational and non-rational techniques of self-cultivation suggests we should view the substance of her criticisms of Foucault as less damaging than she presents them as. To make sense of Nussbaum's complaint, we must see it as urging us to fully apprehend the role of philosophy in self-cultivation, one which Foucault's account includes albeit tentatively, while also acknowledging that the conception of philosophy that the Hellenistics operate with is vastly different to the one we have today. Understanding Hellenistic philosophy à la Sellars, as a bipartite process that includes rational elements pertaining to its *logos* while necessarily including practically-orientated techniques pertaining to its *askesis*, helps us make sense of this. Foucault's detailed and extensive inclusion of the latter kind of ascetic techniques is justified because it offers an account of how Hellenistic self-cultivation operated, which Nussbaum herself acknowledges when she explores the use that Hellenistic philosophers made of imaginative and rhetorical techniques to communicate the philosophical substance of their teachings. This indicates that Nussbaum's complaint against Foucault's understanding of self-cultivation does not capture a substantive difference between their respective notions of self-cultivation, but relates instead to how they present its ascetic dimension. Moreover, there seem to be further persuasive reasons to side with Foucault over Nussbaum on this issue: as we have seen, Nussbaum's complaint is grounded on a hard distinction between the philosophical and the non-philosophical, one which we have little reason to attribute to the Hellenistic conception of the philosophical exercise. In a similar way to how Foucault advocates understanding Hellenistic techniques of self-cultivation as lying on a continuum between *gymnasia* and *meletê*, there is little evidence for a firm distinction in the Hellenistic source material that Nussbaum and Foucault cite, and it is impossible to decisively pull these two senses apart because this source material suggests that they had a wide and porous notion of philosophy.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Both Nussbaum and Hadot single Foucault out for harsh criticism regarding his analysis of the Hellenistic conception of philosophy because of his attention to those extra-philosophical self-cultivatory exercises that he regards as integral

to the philosophers of the Hellenistic world. While Foucault certainly gives much attention to extra-philosophical self-cultivatory exercises, he also explicitly cites source material that suggests that philosophy was central to Hellenistic self-cultivation, which suggests that he views self-cultivation as a bipartite endeavour that involves both our rational and non-rational faculties. Nussbaum's own account implicitly acknowledges this. Although she defines her account in contradistinction to Foucault's as one that privileges the philosophical aspect of self-cultivation, she also attends to how non-rational techniques (especially imaginative and rhetorical ones) were integral to the conception of self-cultivation at work in the Hellenistic world. Understanding Hellenistic self-cultivation as comprised of a philosophical *logos* and a practically-orientated *askesis* helps resolve this difficulty. While this distinction shows that Foucault's position may be closer to Nussbaum's own than she is prepared to acknowledge, it also allows us to make better sense of the Hellenistic source material which resists sharply distinguishing between the philosophical and extra-philosophical dimensions of self-cultivation.

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## NOTES

1. Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.
2. Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 4
3. Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 16. For Nussbaum, Hellenistic philosophy is a “practical and compassionate 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.” At Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 3. In contrast to what she views as the obtuseness of today’s moral philosophers: “Ancient Greek and Roman philosophy tends to be more sensitive to [philosophically understanding human need and motivation] than contemporary moral philosophy ...; for *asking how to live* is never, in the Greek traditions, a merely academic exercise, nor philosophy a merely academic subject. ... From all of these attempts contemporary moral philosophy has much to learn, if it wishes to move beyond the academy to take its place in the daily lives of human beings.” Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 484. Later Nussbaum helpfully lists the ways in which Hellenistic philosophy can add to contemporary philosophy, including their “lack of jargon-laden academic language,” their “interest in *particular perception as an ingredient in good choice*,” “their recognition that existing desires, intuitions, and preferences are socially formed and far from totally reliable,” and their recognition of “the existence of unconscious motivations and beliefs” provides them with much to contribute to modern moral philosophy. See Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 486–90.
4. Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 5.
5. Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality: The Care of the Self*. Trans. R. Hurley. London, Penguin, 1984.
6. Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 5–6.
7. Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality: The Use of Pleasure*. Trans. R. Hurley. London, Penguin, 1985.
8. Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 13.
9. Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 5–6; cf. 353.
10. For Nussbaum, “Skepticism is in some ways an exception [but] even Sceptics rely heavily on reason and argument, in a way other popular ‘arts’ do not.” Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 5–6.
11. See further discussion of this debate by Timothy O’Leary, *Foucault and the Art of Ethics*. London: Bloomsbury, 2002, 75–76; and more recently John M. Cooper, *Pursuits of Wisdom: Six Ways of Life in Ancient Philosophy from Socrates to Plotinus*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012, esp. 17–22, 304; Matthew Sharpe, “What place discourse, what role rigorous argumentation? Against the standard image of Hadot’s conception of philosophy as a way of life”, *Pli: the Warwick journal of philosophy* 2016, 25–52.
12. The source is Hermann Usener’s *Epicurea*, which Nussbaum translates as “empty is that philosopher’s argument [*logos*] by which no human suffering is therapeutically treated. For just as there is no use in a medical art that does not cast out the sicknesses of bodies, so too there is no use in philosophy, unless it casts out the suffering [*pathos*] of the soul” (Nussbaum 1994: 5).
13. Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 13.
14. Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 14.
15. Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 6.
16. Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 14, 37.

17. Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 14.
18. Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 15.
19. Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 5.
20. Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 15; see Konrad Banicki, “Therapeutic Arguments, Spiritual Exercises, or the Care of the Self. Martha Nussbaum, Pierre Hadot and Michel Foucault on Ancient Philosophy”, *Ethical Perspectives*, 22.4 (2015), 602; cf. 601–34.
21. Foucault, *Care of the Self*, 241; see also Foucault’s approving references to Ilsetraut Hadot at Foucault, *Care of the Self*, 50, 244.
22. The footnote appeals to both the “different account in Hadot (1981, 1990), and the approving introduction by editor Arnold Davidson.” At Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 353.
23. Pierre Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*. Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1981.
24. Pierre Hadot, “Forms of Life and Forms of Discourse in Ancient Philosophy,” *Critical Inquiry* 16 (1990), 483–505.
25. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. Trans. M. Chase. London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1995.
26. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 208. First published in French in 1989. See Pierre Hadot, “Réflexions sur la notion de ‘culture de soi’,” in *Michel Foucault: Philosophe*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1989.
27. Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* Trans. M. Chase. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002, 281.
28. Michel Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject. Lectures at the College de France 1981-1982*. Ed. Frédéric Gros. Trans. by Graham Burchell. USA: Picador, 2001, 9.
29. Foucault, *Care of the Self*, 44–45
30. Michel Foucault, “Hermeneutics of the Subject”, IN *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault. Volume 1: Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, 94. Cf. “[T]he idea that one ought to attend to oneself, care for oneself (*heautou epimeleisthai*), was actually a very ancient theme in Greek culture. It appeared very early as a widespread imperative.” Foucault, *Care of the Self*, 43–44.
31. Foucault, *Care of the Self*, 47–48
32. Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 5.
33. Foucault, *Care of the Self*, pt. 1, ch. 1–3
34. Foucault, *Care of the Self*, 16.
35. Foucault, *Care of the Self*, pt. 4; ch. 1.
36. See Julia Annas’ argument for why it is likely to be an early Platonic dialogue and therefore more directly influenced by Socrates: in Julia Annas, “Self-Knowledge in Early Plato”. In Dominic J. O’Meara ed., *Platonic Investigations*. CUA Press, 111.
37. “Take charge of the city, manage its affairs, and enter into competition with the kings of Sparta or the rulers of Persia.”
38. Foucault, *Care of the Self*, 45.
39. See the important late interview: Michel Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom,” in *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault. Volume 1: Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. Ed. Paul Rabinow. New York: The New Press, 1997, 287, where Foucault tells us: “What makes [the care of the self] ethical for the Greeks is not that it is care for others. The care of the self is ethical in itself; but it implies complex relationships with others insofar as this *ethos* of freedom is also a way of caring for others. This is why it is important for a free man who conducts himself as he should to be able to govern his wife, his children, his household; it is also the art of governing. *Ethos* also implies a relationship with others, insofar as the care of the self enables one

to occupy his rightful position in the city, the community, or interpersonal relationships, whether as a magistrate or a friend. And the care of the self also implies a relationship with the other insofar as proper care of the self requires listening to the lessons of a master. One needs a guide, a counselor, a friend, someone who will be truthful with you. Thus, the problem of relationships with others is present throughout the development of the care of the self.” Foucault, “The Hermeneutic of the Subject”, 287.

40. Foucault, *Care of the Self*, 45.

41. at Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 16-17.

42. Interestingly, as well as blaming Aristotle for shifting the focus of philosophy from the injunction to “care for oneself” to the injunction to “know yourself,” Foucault also blames Descartes, at Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 14; and also Kant (in “The Ethics of the Concern for Self”, 279-80 and Christianity, eg, in Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self”, also in *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault. Volume 1: Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, 228.

43. Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 16–17. The full quotation reads: “[T]hroughout Antiquity (in the Pythagoreans, Plato, the Stoics, Cynics, Epicureans, and Neo-Platonists), the philosophical theme (how to have access to the truth?) and the question of spirituality (what transformations in the being of the subject are necessary for access to the truth?) were never separate. There is, of course, the exception, the major and fundamental exception: that of the one who is called “the” philosopher, because he was no doubt the only philosopher in Antiquity for whom the question of spirituality was least important; the philosopher whom we have recognized as the founder of philosophy in the modern sense of the term: Aristotle. But as everyone knows, Aristotle is not the pinnacle of Antiquity but its exception.” Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 16–17.

44. Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 8.

45. Foucault, *Care of the Self*, 45.

46. Foucault, *Care of the Self*, 46. Foucault’s translation reads: “Let no young man delay the study of philosophy, and let no young man become weary of it; for it is never too early or too late to care for the well-being of the soul.” This fits well with Nussbaum’s quote “Empty is that philosopher’s argument by which no human suffering is therapeutically treated. For just as there is no use in a medical art that does not cast out the sicknesses of bodies, so too there is no use in philosophy, unless it casts out the suffering of the soul.”

47. Foucault, *Care of the Self*, 46-47. Seneca’s Latin reads “*Se formare, sibi vindicare, sefacere, se ad studia revocare, sibi applicare, suum fieri, in se recedere, ad se recurrere, secum morari.*”

48. Foucault, *Care of the Self*, 46.

49. Foucault, *Care of the Self*, 47.

50. Foucault, *Care of the Self*, 37–68.

51. Foucault, *Care of the Self*, 50–51.

52. Foucault, “Technologies of the Self”, 220. See also: “Between the pole of the *meditatio*, where one practices in thought, and the pole of the *exercitatio*, where one trains in reality, there is a whole series of other possible practices designed for proving oneself.” Foucault, “The Hermeneutic of the Subject”, 102.

53. Foucault, *Care of the Self*, 101. The source is Hippocrates, *Epidemics*, 6, 1.

54. Foucault, *Care of the Self*, 41.

55. Foucault, *Care of the Self*, 103.

56. Foucault, *Care of the Self*, 133-34.

57. See Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 59.

58. Foucault tells us that Seneca and the neo-Pythagoreans recommended both recommended

part-mental and part-physical exercises: he describes the former recounting an exercise which involved “voluntarily placing oneself ‘within the confines of destitution’ for three or four days, one experiences a bed of straw, coarse clothing, and bread of the lowest quality: ‘not a game, but a test’”; whereas Plutarch recalls a similar game championed by the neo-Pythagoreans involved “whetting the appetite through the practice of some sport [and then] plac[ing] oneself in front of tables laden with the most succulent dishes, [before leaving] them to the servants and making do with the kind of food that slaves ate.” (Foucault 1984 [1986]: 58–60).

59. Foucault, “Hermeneutic of the Subject”, 103–04.

60. Foucault, “Hermeneutic of the Subject”, 103–04.

61. Foucault, “Technologies of the Self”, 240; with *Care of the Self*, 60–61.

62. Foucault, “Hermeneutic of the Subject”, 103.

63. Foucault, “Hermeneutic of the Subject”, 105; cf. Pierre Hadot, *The Present Alone is Our Happiness. Conversations with Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson*. Trans. M. Djabbalah & M. Chase. Stanford: Stanford university Press, 162.

64. Foucault, “Hermeneutic of the Subject”, 105.

65. John Sellars, *The Stoics on the Nature and Function of Philosophy*. London: Ashgate, 2003, 107.

66. Sellars, *The Stoics on the Nature and Function*, 118.

67. Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 3.

68. Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 40. Nussbaum’s account of exercises also seem very close to Foucault’s account of them in his 1980–81 lectures at Collège de France. On memorisation see Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 331–355; on confession, see 355–371; on self-examination, see 149–169.

69. Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 353, n1. Hadot’s exercises appear equally non-philosophical as those that Nussbaum criticises Foucault’s account for emphasising. Hadot lists “the view from above” at Pierre Hadot, *The Present Alone is Our Happiness. Conversations with Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson*. Trans. M. Djabbalah & M. Chase. Stanford: Stanford university Press, 167; *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 238–49, “living in the present” (at Hadot, *Present Alone*, 160; *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 217–37), and “wonder” (at Hadot, *Present Alone*, 173–175) as the principle self-cultivating exercises in the Hellenistic world. Interestingly he too views them as philosophical: it is dangerous “to believe that one can do without philosophical reflection. The philosophical way of life must be justified in rational, motivated discourse, and such discourse is inseparable from the way of life.” Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 281.

70. Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 3–4.

71. Nussbaum views this as no accident. She writes “if the diseases that impede human flourishing are above all diseases of belief and social teaching, and if [...] critical arguments of the kind philosophy provides are necessary and perhaps even sufficient for dislodging those obstacles, then philosophy will seem to be necessary, perhaps even sufficient, for getting people from disease to health.” Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 34.

72. Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 37–38.

73. Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 39. See Nussbaum’s account of this literature in her article “Aristotle on Emotions and Rational Persuasion” in Amelie Rorty ed., *Aristotle’s Rhetoric*. California: University of California Press, 1996.

74. Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 38.

75. Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 35.

76. Hadot writes that: “[i]n all these exercises, all the means obtainable by dialectic and rhetoric will be utilized to obtain the maximum effect.” Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 59.