

Philosophy as Therapeia

'Empty are the words of that philosopher who offers therapy for no human suffering. For just as there is no use in medical expertise if it does not give therapy for bodily diseases, so too there is no use in philosophy if it does not expel the suffering of the soul.' The philosopher Epicurus gave famous voice to a conception of philosophy as a cure or remedy for the maladies of the human soul. What has not until now received attention is just how prominent an idea this has been across a whole spectrum of philosophical tradition. A medical analogy features strongly in Buddhist conceptions of philosophical practice, and the idea that philosophy should be therapeutic, indeed that this is philosophy's first function, was indeed widely spread in several other, non-Buddhist, Indian schools. In the West, too, this conception of philosophy has displayed a great resilience, persisting long past the Hellenistic age. It can and will be argued that medieval scholasticism, a mode of philosophizing now so often and often so naively criticised, should be understood as therapeutic in intent. If that is right it is important, because it allows us to see continuities between ancient, medieval and early modern thought where too often discontinuities alone are emphasised. For Spinoza too thought of philosophy as therapeutic, and after him Nietzsche and James and Wittgenstein. So the conception of philosophy as therapeia allows for, and even necessitates, a new reading of the history of philosophy, one in which deep continuities come into vision which have been obscured, a reading which also contradicts those who have wanted to maintain that philosophy is a peculiarly European cultural product, and instead affirms its identity as a global intellectual practice.

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978-0-521-16515-0