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Rational Self-Sufficiency and Greek Ethics*

Nicholas P. White

Greek thought has been a double source of ideas for modern ethics. On the one hand it has been used as a conservative influence, providing confirmation of current ethical views. At other times it has been asked to play a revisionary role, to run counter to current ethical thinking. In recent times the latter tendency has been much the stronger. One important instance was G. E. M. Anscombe's "Modern Moral Philosophy," in which she invoked Greek ethics, with its stress on the notion of virtue, against the prevailing Kantian emphasis on the idea of moral obligation.¹ That theme has reappeared frequently since, in writings by Philippa Foot, Alasdair MacIntyre, Bernard Williams, and others.²

The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy, by Martha Nussbaum, is another in this series of appeals to the Greeks to help us turn away from modern and especially Kantian ethics. But although Nussbaum mentions the contrast between the ethics of duty and the ethics of virtue (e.g., p. 363), she focuses on other aspects of Greek ethical thinking. They revolve around three main questions, concerning (1) "the role in the human good life of activities and relationships that are, in their nature, especially vulnerable to reversal," (2) the relationship among the individual components of the good life, whether they "exist harmoniously, or are . . . capable, in circumstances not of the agent's own making, of generating conflicting requirements that can themselves impair the goodness of the agent's life," and (3) "the relationship between self-sufficiency and the more ungovernable parts of the human being's internal makeup," especially "the so-called 'irrational parts of the soul'" (pp. 6–7). She aims to show how some Greek thinkers, unlike Kant and his followers, understood and conceded the effects of luck on the value of people and their lives. The tragedians are said to have done this. Plato is said to have refused to grant such a role to luck in his early and middle work, notably in the *Republic*, but to have changed his position to some extent in the *Phaedrus*. Aristotle is said to have returned to something like the tragedians' attitude, working it out in an articulated methodology, philosophical psychology, and ethics (p. 8).

* A review of Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. xvii+544, \$59.50 (cloth), \$19.95 (paper).

1. G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33 (1958): 1–19.

2. See, e.g., Philippa Foot, "Virtues and Vices," in her *Virtues and Vices* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 1–18; Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); and Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985).

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A number of issues are linked by Nussbaum with her questions about luck. One has to do with whether there is a single scale of value on which all goods are measurable. Another has to do with whether in ethical thinking we should rely only on "reason" (the view that she attributes mainly to Plato and Kant) or should also in some way use emotions. Another concerns the relation of the aforementioned issue to questions of style (e.g., whether to write tragedy or Platonic dialogue or treatises). And the book deals with other matters as well. Some are points of straightforward philosophical exegesis in Plato's and Aristotle's ethics and psychology. Others concern the interpretation of three tragedies (Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, Sophocles' *Antigone*, and Euripides' *Hecuba*) and other matters which, though they are perhaps not philosophical in a narrow sense, Nussbaum rightly refuses to separate off from the issues that are so.

The book asks to be read as a philosophical account of the concepts and arguments used by the figures whom it examines. By "philosophical" I mean that it is not a general intellectual history or history of ideas, and it does not attempt to place philosophical views within their general intellectual or cultural context. A study attempting that would have to deal with various matters that this book passes over, such as the so-called Sophistic movement and the connections between it and the ideas of the tragedians, earlier Greek views of the soul and the self, and the influence of ideas of the polis—for example, loyalty to it, antipathy to it, ambivalence about it—on the thinkers whom she deals with. The book does discuss some things that currently are treated mainly by people who think of themselves as studying literature rather than philosophy, and some of those discussions are of interest independently of their bearing on the book's main philosophical themes. But clearly Nussbaum's purpose is first and foremost to engage in an essentially analytical philosophical discussion of certain ideas that are present, she holds, in the writings of the tragedians, Plato, and Aristotle, and this is the aspect of the book that I shall deal with here.

At the same time, it should be noted, the book does not claim to be a philosophical study of the notion of *tyche* in Greek philosophy or more generally in Greek thought. There is no general investigation of this notion (and related notions like *aitia*). Aristotle's treatment of *tyche* in *Physics* 4, for example, is only mentioned once. Nor is there any general treatment of *tyche* in Greek literature.

Most of the philosophical themes that Nussbaum uses are drawn from ideas of Bernard Williams. One is his idea, expressed in his essay "Moral Luck" and elsewhere, that the evaluation of a person's choices, character, and life depends, in a way that he takes the Kantian outlook to deny that it does, on happenings outside the person's control.³ Williams maintains that although "a sense of exposure to fortune is expressed . . . in Greek literature, above all in tragedy," the Greek philosophers, unlike the tragedians, mistakenly agreed with Kant that "what is of highest value, what matters most, should be entirely under the self's control." Nussbaum accepts this as a charge against Plato (with the partial exception of the *Phaedrus*). But Aristotle seems to her (as he did to a much lesser extent to Williams) to escape the indictment.⁴ The dominant issue, though, is the extent

3. See Bernard Williams, "Moral Luck," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 50, suppl. (1976): 115–35, reprinted in Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). See more recently his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*.

4. Bernard Williams, "Philosophy," in *The Legacy of Greece: A New Appraisal*, ed. M. I. Finley (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981), pp. 202–55; see esp. pp. 252–53 and, on Aristotle, pp. 249–50.

to which luck can affect the value or values of a person's character and life. For the same reasons as Williams, Nussbaum regards it as plain that luck can affect these things to a very great extent, and her project is then to see which of the Greeks realized this fact and in what ways.

Williams's main concern was of course not to describe Greek ethics, but to criticize Kantian and other modern views. His own accounts of the role of luck in Greek ethics are casual. One of them, a section of a dozen pages (see n. 3), is cursory and popular. The other, scattered here and there throughout his recent book, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (see n. 2), is tangential to his discussion of modern ethics and never aims at thoroughness. There can be no doubt that his discussion is directly relevant to Kantian and post-Kantian ethical philosophy. Although there may be room to dispute his interpretation of Kant, it is certainly a plausible one, since Kant does often seem to hold that the human rational self is in some sense outside of the natural world, and that what goes on there leaves the genuine value, that is, the moral value, of a person completely unaffected.

But although Williams does not aim to give a scholarly treatment of Greek ethics, he maintains that we see among the Greek philosophers the same "sustained pursuit of rational self-sufficiency" that he attributes to Kantian moralists.⁵ The scrutiny of this contention is the task that Nussbaum takes on herself. "This book," she writes, "will be an examination of the aspiration to rational self-sufficiency in Greek ethical thought: the aspiration to make the goodness of a good human life safe from luck through the controlling power of reason" (p. 3). She speaks of "the Platonic conception of a self-sufficient and purely rational being," and Plato's "aspiration to purity and to freedom from luck" (pp. 5–6). But although Plato is the only Greek philosopher whom she regards as having fully joined the "pursuit of rational self-sufficiency," she maintains that both the tragedians and Aristotle understood the force of that aim, even though they believed that it was misguided (see, e.g., pp. 8–9).

It would certainly be worthwhile, and not at all trivial, to show that the ethical problems that Williams develops in his criticism of Kantian ethics are in fact present in the writings of those who express themselves in such different terms from Kant as the Greeks do. Not only are Williams's views stimulating, but trying to see their place in Greek thought would also encourage us to clarify and deepen our understanding of what exactly is involved in such notions as luck and rational self-sufficiency as we try to ascertain whether the Greeks were in fact talking about the same things that Williams has in mind.

According to Nussbaum, Plato shows an aspiration to rational self-sufficiency in the *Protagoras* (chap. 4). As is well known, Plato here compares deliberation about future action to a calculation of future pleasure. Nussbaum comes to the conclusion that this conception of deliberation is developed as a way of systematizing our judgments so as to keep us from "being at the mercy of what happens" (pp. 99, 109). For one thing, she holds, this conception of deliberation involves (as others have pointed out)⁶ regarding all values as measurable on a single scale, which Plato here takes to be a hedonic scale. By rejecting the "heterogeneity" of goods, she says, this view works against "a necessary condition for the development of irrational motivations" (pp. 116–17), and thus "modifies our irrational mo-

5. *Ibid.*, p. 253.

6. See, e.g., Donald J. Zeyl, "Socrates and Hedonism in Plato's *Protagoras* 351b–358d," *Phronesis* 25 (1980): 259–60.

tivations, to the extent to which *akrasia* will no longer occur" (p. 121). This, she maintains, serves "our ambition to be in control of our planning through a deliberative *techné*" (p. 119). In this way, Plato emerges as responding to an "acute sense of the problems caused by ungoverned luck in human life" (p. 90) and as wishing to complete "a story of gradually increasing human control over contingency" (p. 91).

There is evident confusion in this account of what Plato is doing in the *Protagoras*. His claim there is that no one who believes *A* to be, all things considered, the better course than *B* can ever freely do *B* instead under the influence of some emotion or the like, in particular the attractive pleasantness of *B* (358b–d). This does not shield anyone from any contingencies. It tells you that if you are doing something freely, then it must be what you believe to be best, all things considered. But it in no way denies that you can be subject to capricious changes of belief about what is best, caused by whatever contingencies, external or internal, you care to mention. All that it guarantees is that *if* something changes your decision about what to do from what it was two minutes ago, that will count, in Plato's view, as a change in your belief about what is best, not as a change in some emotion working against it.

In view of this fact it is not surprising that the *Protagoras* does not claim to be providing, in the claim of the homogeneity of goods, any new or better method of liberation, let alone a better means of dealing with luck. As is well known, Plato claims that measuring pleasures and pains is the way in which people actually *do* deliberate; and no one, Plato says here, ever *does* go against his or her better judgment. The only proposal that he makes is that we should measure accurately rather than inaccurately. Nussbaum gives no reason for thinking that Plato otherwise means to be presenting a proposal about how we should deliberate rather than a description of how we do deliberate, which is what he says he is giving. Her account of how that proposal might serve to safeguard us from "being at the mercy of what happens" is inadequate in the obvious way just described, and, since this is so, her interpretation of the *Protagoras* is left quite unsupported. Perhaps there is some way of defending the interpretation, but it is not to be found here.

Nussbaum's next chapter, on the *Republic*, also tries to see Plato aiming for rational self-sufficiency. Nussbaum recognizes that in Plato's view, the good, as represented by the Platonic Form of the Good, is held to be good intrinsically, in the strong sense that its goodness is independent of any relation either to surrounding circumstances—good unqualifiedly, as G. E. L. Owen put it⁷—or to desires of any being for it. In this being a notion of what is good of its own nature and regardless of any relation to anything else, Plato's view of the good is quite similar, as is well known, to the view expressed by G. E. Moore in *Principia Ethica*, which was of course directly influenced by Plato. The notion of intrinsic goodness in question is of course a good deal stronger than the one usually expressed by that phrase in recent ethics, in which it is contrasted merely with instrumental goodness (the relevant distinctions have been well explained by Christine Korsgaard).⁸

7. G. E. L. Owen, "A Proof in the *Peri Ideon*," *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, pt. 1 (1957), pp. 103–11, reprinted in G. E. L. Owen, *Logic, Science and Dialectic*, ed. Martha Nussbaum (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 165–79.

8. Christine Korsgaard, "Two Distinctions in Goodness," *Philosophical Review* 92 (1983): 169–95.

Nussbaum tries to connect these Platonic views about goodness to her theme of the aspiration to rational self-sufficiency and immunity to luck. She holds that in Plato's view the activities that are genuinely good, notably philosophical thinking, must themselves be good independently of circumstances and desires or needs for them (pp. 143–44, 147). Here she contends that because philosophical thinking is good in a way independent of being desired or needed, its goodness must be recognized from a point of view dissociated from "human" needs, particularly those connected with the body (pp. 154–55), or from what she also calls a "pure viewpoint of needlessness" (p. 156). (Nussbaum here shifts casually from speaking of a point of view independent of "human" needs, including bodily ones, to speaking of a point of view of complete "needlessness," which is plainly quite another matter.) She also links this claim, in a way that she leaves quite unclear, with the idea that the best activities must be "stable," in being capable of being continued indefinitely and in being independent of contingent circumstances in the world (pp. 147–49). That the Forms are unchanging, she says, helps support the view that philosophical thought is itself "maximally stable, unvarying, and context-independent" (p. 149). In this way she comes to the conclusion that the *Republic* represents an attempt by Plato to help us escape "the pain and instability of our empirical lives" (p. 161), an attempt that is later criticized by Plato himself in the *Phaedrus* (pp. 222–23, 230) and later by Aristotle (e.g., pp. 319, 322, 381).

Julia Annas has urged that the *Republic* does try to show that a person's happiness is in important ways less dependent on external circumstances than common sense might suppose.⁹ But to see whether Plato does it in the way that Nussbaum maintains, several things need to be made clear. Suppose it is agreed, for the sake of argument, that the goodness of philosophical thinking is not dependent on any desire for it or pleasure taken in it by human beings. It should be plain that this has nothing to do with the issue of immunity to luck that is Nussbaum's main theme. To figure in a response to that issue, the activity of philosophical thinking would have to possess stability in the sense of what might be called "unlosability," the property of being such that when you have it, your chances of being deprived of it are low. Being intrinsically good in Plato's sense is quite a different thing. It is simply a matter of being good in no matter what circumstances and apart from being desired or needed. It is true that if something is intrinsically good in this sense then its being good will not depend on circumstances that might change. But this goes hardly anywhere toward showing that it is unlosable, since it merely excludes its ceasing to be good by virtue of changing circumstances and does not exclude its being lost.

To see the point clearly, consider the case of philosophical thinking. Assume, as agreed, that it is good in no matter what circumstances, and that it is good apart from anyone's desiring it. All of that is compatible with its being as fragile as you like. Or suppose that providing food to the hungry is good under no matter what circumstances and apart from anyone desiring to do it. That would not prevent its being something whose continuation is at the whim of fortune. Nussbaum's discussion obscures this fact through its confused notion of "stability," which combines the two notions in an unargued way so as to make it appear that a necessary connection between the two of them holds. But a little examination

9. Julia Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981), chap. 6, esp. pp. 167–69 and pp. 314–18.

of that combination would have shown how poorly suited it is to her purposes. Intrinsic goods are one thing; unlosable goods are quite another.

Once one notices this distinction, one sees that there is little reason to agree that in Plato's view philosophical thought is always more resistant to unlucky contingencies than other human activities are. A person who is contemplating the Forms might be said to be self-sufficient in the sense of not then needing to do anything else, and might be free of the worry that the objects of his thought might change or cease to exist. But Plato makes it abundantly clear, in passages whose relevance Nussbaum seems not to heed, that philosophical contemplation is often a very fragile activity indeed. Not only is the *Republic* full of warnings about how difficult the aptitude for philosophy is to develop, so that an elaborate educational scheme is necessary to nurture it, but Plato also emphasizes that even one who has become a philosopher needs to guard against influences that might lead him away from it (e.g., 496a–497a), including even the witnessing of tragic performances, which, Plato says, are able “to corrupt even good men, with very few exceptions” (605c).

In the light of these facts, another basic confusion in Nussbaum's line of thought becomes evident. Having seized on the vague observation that both Kant and Plato believe in some sort of radical separation of the reason and the body, she fails to consider the differences between the two kinds of separation involved. In Plato's view, the reason is closely bound up causally with the body. Obviously he thinks that the reason can affect the body by deciding what is best to do and, if conditions are right, getting the body to do it. Equally obviously, the body is able in many ways to affect, usually for the worse, the operation of the reason. It is perfectly true that in some respects the reason remains immune to bodily influence. For example, the reason supposedly cannot be destroyed by external influences, and it does not lose its capacity for true cognition (518c–d). But whether one's reason correctly exercises this capacity in its judgments about what is best is strongly influenced by one's body and by other factors, such as education.¹⁰ Plato is thus what might be called a reason-body interactionist, as Descartes was a mind-body interactionist. Kant's view—whatever exactly it amounts to—is clearly different. On it, even practical reason can apparently be thought of as unaffected by the physical or phenomenal world, so that the influences of that world somehow bypass it; and its goodness can be thought of as a function of its own intrinsic condition and not also of factors working on it from outside. This, of course, is why Kant has to insist that when we think of things in this way, we have to deny that determinism holds. Plato, on the other hand, notoriously pays no attention in these contexts to issues of determinism and is unconcerned with questions about whether the person, apart from surrounding factors, is responsible (“morally” responsible, in our sense) for good or bad actions.

All of this calls into question, of course, Williams's assimilation of Plato's outlook to Kant's. Nothing crucial in Williams's philosophical project hinges on the assimilation, as I have said, and he makes it casually and without much argument for its historical accuracy. He places some weight on our information that Socrates held that “the good man cannot be harmed,” which Williams interprets, along with other evidence of a general Socratic asceticism, as meaning

10. Therefore if we are willing to call “physical” anything that is capable of causally affecting and being affected by obviously physical things, it is quite wrong to say that the Platonic soul is nonphysical, though of course it is in some sense nonmaterial.

that “the only thing that could touch *him* [Williams’s emphasis] would be something that could touch, *not his body* [my emphasis], but the good state of his soul, *and that is inviolable* [my emphasis].”¹¹ Williams presumably has in mind *Apology* 41d, where Socrates is made to say that “there is nothing bad [or, perhaps, harmful, *kakon*] for a good man either living or dead, nor are the gods unmindful of his affairs.” Bits of testimony about Socrates (if that is what this is) are often difficult to interpret, and this one seems especially so. It might, after all, be nothing more than an expression of faith that the gods will keep the good safe from harm (cf., e.g., *Republic* 613a). The picture is not unambiguous.

Another issue that Nussbaum thinks can be used to focus on the Greek aspiration to rational self-sufficiency is the question whether there is a single scale of value by which all goods can be measured. Her picture of the philosophical issue again begins mainly from the views of Williams.¹² She follows the view, standard among philosophers (though some readers of the *Agamemnon*, e.g., will question whether it is as clearly true of that play as Nussbaum thinks), that tragedy exhibits “tragic conflicts,” in which different values clash that are in some sense incommensurable. (Though the matter is too complex to be explored fully here, I should mention that her account of these conflicts is somewhat unfocused as to the differences between different common ways of taking them: sometimes, as on p. 34, she talks as if there is a choice that is correct even though it entails a moral loss through not having made the other choice, whereas at other times, as on pp. 49–50, 434–35, she writes as if there is no saying that either choice is correct.) She also follows the standard view of Plato as having believed in a single standard of goodness, represented by the Form of the Good, by which seeming conflicts of value can all be rationally resolved. And she follows the equally standard view of Aristotle as having rejected Plato’s evaluative monism in favor of the view that “the good is said in many ways” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1196a23 ff.) and that there is a notion of “human good” which, rather than a general notion of goodness, should be used to evaluate human aims and actions (see esp. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.6). The outline of this tripartite story is familiar. Nussbaum’s effort to go beyond it consists primarily in her attempt to show that these figures’ respective views on this issue reflect in a significant way their positions on her central problem of vulnerability to luck.

Nussbaum never fully articulates the connection between the matter of incommensurability and the matter of luck. She says that if one shows the force of the tragic view, that there are in some sense conflicts of incommensurables, then one shows “the fragility . . . of a part of . . . moral goodness itself” (p. 30). This could just mean that since there is no single scale of goodness, there is no possibility of a complete decision procedure for guiding action. But Nussbaum seems to wish to go further. She suggests that the existence of incommensurable values may threaten the conviction that “the recalcitrant features of the world can be mastered by practical ethical rationality” (p. 60). There seems to be a pun here on the word “mastered.” The lack of a complete decision procedure for telling what is best, and of a complete set of facts about what is best (Nussbaum is unclear about which she has in mind, though perhaps it is both), is an obstacle to, precisely, “mastering” a way of answering all questions about what is best.

11. Williams, “Philosophy,” p. 249.

12. See Nussbaum, pp. 29–30; and Williams, “Moral Luck.”

But it is no obstacle to “mastering” the world in the sense of controlling it. A failure to attend to this distinction leaves Nussbaum’s position unfocused. Being unable to decide what to do is not the same as being unable to do something once you have decided to do it, even though superficially similar feelings of helplessness may attend both sorts of inability.

Nussbaum does suggest (pp. 47–49) one way in which the existence of cases in which incommensurable values actually come into conflict is a matter of accidental contingency. Even though it might be noncontingent that (as we may suppose, for example) the value of burying your dead brother is incommensurable with the value of defending your city-state, nevertheless it is contingent that there ever are cases, or that on a particular occasion there is a case, in which a person can do one or the other but not both. This is perfectly true. But this difficulty needs to be sharply distinguished from any problem about controlling the course of events in the world.

Moreover this issue does not appear to have much to do with the question whether the goodness of a person depends on contingencies outside of the self. Although Kant seems to have believed that there are no genuine conflicts of duty, he was certainly not forced to that belief by his doctrine that the only genuine value is independent of contingencies. For he could have maintained that doctrine and still held that when a person is confronted with a genuine conflict of moral incommensurables, the goodness of his or her will is unaffected by making one choice or the other, so long as the decision is made in full consciousness of the existence of both obligations (which is not far from what Nussbaum herself seems to maintain). Nussbaum seems to have taken “the Kantian position” as a monolithic whole, without considering the possibility that parts of it might be separable from each other in a way that would affect her whole conception of her project.

There is a further difficulty. At several junctures (e.g., pp. 117, 220, 362), Nussbaum without argument associates the problem of the incommensurability of goods with a problem about whether the objects of attachment or desire are in some sense irreducibly particular. She finds Aristotle holding that they often are, and she finds Plato tending (except in the *Phaedrus*) to deny it. This issue of “particularity” cannot be explored here, but one should note that its connection with the incommensurability of goods is far more complex than Nussbaum registers.

Even though it is independent of the issue of luck, the issue of obstacles to straightforward evaluation is extremely important in the comparison of the tragedians, Plato, and Aristotle. It is therefore unfortunate that Nussbaum simply does not discuss in any substantial way the one passage where Plato explicitly discusses and criticizes the tragic writers, namely, the first part of book 10 of the *Republic*. For here he says something directly both about how we should react to misfortune (*tychas*, 605d3) and about the tragedians’ treatment of the evaluation of courses of action. As is well known, he urges us not to react to critical situations simply by emotion. He also insists that when we encounter such situations, we should decide what is the best thing to do not simply on the basis of emotion but instead by some calculation of what will bring the most good (604b–d). And I think it is clear that he is criticizing the tragedians for encouraging us to believe that, in such important cases, there simply is no answer to the question of what is the best thing to do. At any rate, it is certainly strange and regrettable that Nussbaum says almost nothing about this passage, which at least shows how Plato himself wished to present his disagreements with the tragedians.

I have spent so much time on Plato because he plays the role of a quasi-Kantian antagonist in Williams's and Nussbaum's drama of Greek ethics, and so it seemed important to see whether he is really right for the part, and whether the issues in which he is involved are the ones that Nussbaum takes them to be. But it is of course equally important to see whether Aristotle is really a suitable protagonist (Williams takes him as a modified antagonist) who opposes Plato on Nussbaum's "central question," namely, "How far is human good living, *eudaimonia*, vulnerable?" (p. 318).

No one will deny that Aristotle allows that certain things are intrinsic goods that Plato regarded either as only instrumentally good or else instrumentally or intrinsically harmful. As *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.6 makes clear, and as is generally recognized, this is largely because Aristotle attempts to describe what he calls the "good for man," which he thinks is possible without somehow deriving it from a more general notion of "the good itself" or the Form of the Good. Moreover, as is also generally recognized, these goods that Aristotle recognizes are things whose possession by a person are, for various reasons, subject to contingencies. Nussbaum constructs an opposing "Kantian" interpretation of Aristotle, which takes him to hold that *eudaimonia* is immune to contingencies, such as those that befell Priam (p. 329). She cites Joachim and Ross (pp. 329; 495, n. 23), but if one looks at the passages cited one sees that Joachim's interpretation is Kantian only in the most diluted way, and Ross's is not so at all. In fact, Kantian interpreters of Aristotle's ethics are vanishingly few, and they have had no influence at all in recent times.

Nussbaum goes further, however, and holds that Aristotle was explicitly attacking the view that "the good human life is completely invulnerable to *tyche*" (p. 322; cf. p. 238), and that in certain passages "his primary point is to show us that whatever is fulfillment of activity is also, therefore, vulnerable" (p. 326). His target is said to be mainly Plato, but when Plato cannot (even by her lights) serve as target, Nussbaum suddenly presents some more opponents, notably one called the "good-condition theorist" (pp. 319 ff.; 493, n. 5; 495, n. 21). She says that she cannot identify these opponents, but in an extremely strange twist of the plot she suggests that because they sound like Stoics, people holding Stoic-like views must have been active in Aristotle's time (p. 494, n. 5). What Nussbaum never presents, however, is convincing evidence that Aristotle took such a view as his opposition, or that he ever focused much attention on this issue of *tyche*.

What replaces such evidence in her accounts is a set of indications, entirely uncontroversial, that Aristotle makes room, in both his ethics and his psychology, for values that are dependent on contingencies and the existence of various normal human desires. Nussbaum often presents these indications as evidence that Aristotle was particularly concerned to show that human goods are fragile, against opponents holding that they are not. But of course they show no such thing.

Indeed, Nussbaum seems to go yet further and ascribe to Aristotle the additional Williams-like view that the very fragility of human goods is, at least in some cases, part of what makes them so valuable (pp. 318–19, 341, 387, 421). At least, this seems to be her intent, though she does not always distinguish the thesis that (i) certain human goods are fragile and the thesis that (ii) fragility is (part of) what makes certain things good for human beings. In any case, I do not see that she provides any evidence that Aristotle holds ii, and it often looks

as though she takes evidence for i to be in itself evidence for ii, which it plainly is not.

Many readers of Aristotle will think that Nussbaum is unable to do justice to *Ethics* 10.6–8, where Aristotle seems to end up saying that the life of philosophical contemplation, or as much of it as possible, is the best life for a human being. Many interpreters, wishing to distinguish Aristotle from Plato far more sharply than these chapters seem to allow, have tried to show that they do not represent Aristotle's mature or true position. Nussbaum follows the same line, suggesting that although the chapters show Aristotle tempted by a Platonic stance, they are a "fragment" not intended to be part of the *Ethics* and do not represent Aristotle's fixed opinion (p. 377). I am skeptical of this type of interpretation, but it is easy to sympathize with Nussbaum here, since so many commentators have found this passage awkward. What is startling is that the appendix in which she discusses the passage deals so cursorily with the important objections to her view that it raises (pp. 373–77), and that the appendix was added only as an afterthought (p. 500, n. 3).

Moreover, even if these chapters do not belong in this spot in the *Ethics*, they are a sign of an underlying difficulty that surfaces elsewhere in Aristotle's ethical works, but which Nussbaum does not come to grips with, even though it affects her main theme. Plato, we know, believed in a single scale of value, and Aristotle is typically taken to have disagreed with him. Nussbaum thinks that he refused to accept some single standard of value whereby the life of a good human being could be ranked as less good than a life of pure philosophic thought or some other idealized condition (p. 374). On this view there is "a good life for a human being," and (say) "a good life for a god," but no way of comparing them or ranking the latter better than the former (p. 374).

The trouble is, though, that as Nussbaum notes (pp. 373–74), Aristotle sometimes does compare the values of these two sorts of lives, to the detriment of the human life, and he does this not just in *Ethics* 10.6–8 but elsewhere as well (e.g., *Metaphysics* 12.7, 9, where the argument depends on the comparison's being made). Nussbaum recognizes that there would be a difficulty in holding both that the comparison cannot be made and that it can be (pp. 374–75). But as I have just indicated, she seems to think that the difficulty can be avoided simply by relegating *Ethics* 10.6–8 to the status of a "fragment." In fact, however, the problem really requires us to look much more carefully than Nussbaum does at Aristotle's whole notion of goodness. For although he wants to insulate the best human life from certain kinds of comparisons with lives of other beings, at the same time he really does seem to want to say that in one sense a life of ordinary activity and moral virtue is the best life that a human being can aspire to, and that in another sense a human being, or a part of a human being, can aspire to a better life, namely, the life of theoretical rational activity. What exactly his view is, and whether it is coherent, are major questions for students of his work to answer. But his position is much more complicated than can be handled in the few pages that Nussbaum gives to it (pp. 373–77), or than is suggested by the simple statement that he will not countenance this comparison of lives of humans and superhuman beings. Clearly he is doing more than simply either rejecting Plato's single scale of value, or insulating a life involving normal human desires, with their attendant risks, from an unfavorable comparison with a life of some more self-sufficient kind. In the complex enterprise that makes up

Aristotle's investigation into various kinds of goods, the anti-Kantian project that Nussbaum constructs for him hardly seems to have a role.

But in spite of all that I have said, an account similar to Williams's of what is at issue in Greek ethics might turn out to be correct. In spite of my many misgivings about it, I do not by any means rule out the possibility that, with care and an understanding of the relevant issues, a good and interesting case for it might be made.

The primary cause for concern about *The Fragility of Goodness*, then, is not that its basic theses are wrong. Rather, the cause for concern is the low level of the treatment of those theses and of the notions involved in them. I have not had space to discuss by any means all of the matters with which the book deals—or even of the matters that are philosophical in a narrow sense. (For example, I have had to pass over Nussbaum's views on Aristotle's methodology and its relation to Plato's and the tragedians' views, her views on their respective styles, her views on the interpretation of the *Phaedrus*, and her views on the role of emotion vis-à-vis reason in arriving at ethical judgments, among other things.) I have, however, discussed the primary line of thought, and I do not think that the level of philosophical discussion of other themes is higher. Some readers will lack the opportunity or the inclination or the ability to examine the book in light of both a knowledge of the texts and secondary works and an awareness of the philosophical issues involved. Others, however, will be able to recognize that confusions and failures of formulation and analysis, far from being small or peripheral to the aims of the book, subvert virtually every one of its discussions. In spite of its confident tone, I have not found a single substantial issue in the book that seemed to me to be, even by fairly relaxed standards, adequately formulated. It would not have been an arduous task to think through, at least to some extent, the problems confronting an application of Williams's themes to the history of Greek ethics. (It might even have led to an awareness of a more fruitful field of application for those themes, namely, to Hellenistic ethics, since the Stoics, the Epicureans, and even the Sceptics show far more signs of being explicitly concerned with problems of fragility than do Plato and Aristotle.) The first part of the task would have been an attempt to formulate clearly just what the issues concerning fragility and self-sufficiency are, and the second part would have been a clear-sighted attempt to see which of them are in fact examined in the texts and how they are treated. But as the book is, unfortunately, the second part could not be carried out because the first part was scarcely begun.