Hellenistic philosophy - therapy for the soul
Hellenistic philosophy (an overview)

- The final phase of ancient Greek philosophy begins after Aristotle, during a period of history that we call Hellenistic civilization, which lasted from around 300 BCE to 200 CE.

- The term “Hellenistic” means “Greek-like” and refers to the uniquely Greek culture that spread around the ancient world beginning with the military campaigns of Alexander the Great.
Hellenistic philosophy (an overview)

- When Alexander died, his empire was divided among his generals into dynasties. These Greek dynasties were soon conquered by the Romans, who themselves adopted Greek culture and philosophy, spreading it further throughout their Empire.

- All the while, Athens continued to dominate as a philosophical learning center, with Plato’s Academy, Aristotle’s Lyceum, and several new Hellenistic schools.
While the new schools continued discussing the same issues of nature, reality and knowledge as did their predecessors, they added a therapeutic element, offering unique accounts for attaining happiness.

The principal schools of this period are Epicureanism, Stoicism and Skepticism, each of which developed its own conception of what it takes for humans to achieve happiness.
Epicureans, Stoics and Skeptics
The practical application of philosophy in terms of mental therapy emerged as its primary focus and interest.
Three schools of thought. Three slightly different roads aiming at ataraxia (tranquility or peace of mind) “freedom from disturbance”
What’s in the way of achieving *ataraxia*?
Epicurus - the formula for happiness
Epicurus’ four-part remedy for unhappiness & anxiety

- Epicurus (341-270 BC) and his followers had a unique formula to treat unhappiness and anxiety.

- The *tetrapharmakos* consists of four maxims which encapsulate the Epicurean outlook on god, life, death, pleasure, and pain. The maxims can be meditated upon in order to alleviate worries and concerns that continue to plague us as much as they did the ancients.
“When we say that pleasure is the goal of life we do not mean the pleasures of the profligate or the pleasures of consumption... but rather the lack of pain in the body and disturbance in the soul. For it is not drinking bouts and continuous partying and enjoying boys and women, or consuming fish and the other dainties of an extravagant table that produce the pleasant life, but [rather] sober calculation which searches out the reasons for every choice and avoidance and drives out the false opinions which are the source of the greatest turmoil for men’s souls... If our suspicions about heavenly phenomena and about death did not trouble us at all... we would have no need of natural science (i.e. philosophy)... It is impossible for someone ignorant about the nature of the universe but still suspicious about the subjects of the myths to dissolve his feelings of fear about the most important matters...”

Lucretius on the *Fear of Death*
First maxim - God is nothing the fear
The so-called problem of evil stated informally

“God... either wants to eliminate bad things and cannot, or can but does not want to, or neither wishes to nor can, or both wants to and can. If he wants to and cannot, then he is weak-- and this does not apply to god. If he can but does not want to, then he is spiteful-- which is equally foreign to god’s nature. If he neither wants to nor can, he is both weak and spiteful and so not a god. If he wants to and can, which is the only thing fitting for god, where then do bad things come from? Or why does he not eliminate them?” (Epicurus)
Epicurus - The so-called “problem of evil”

(1) If God exists, then there would be no evil in the world

(Why? Because of the divine attributes of omnipotence, omniscience and omnibenevolence seem to entail this expectation)

(2) But, there is evil in the world

Therefore,

(3) God does not exist
Second maxim - *Death is nothing to fear*
“Accustom yourself to think that death is a matter that should not concern us. For all good and all evil depend on sensation, and death is only the removal of sensation. Accordingly, the correct view of the fact that death is no concern of ours makes the mortality of life pleasant to us, not because it gives us limitless time, but because it relieves us of the longing for immortality. There is nothing terrible in living to a person who rightly understands that there is nothing terrible in ceasing to live. Only a foolish person says that he fears death, not because it will cause him pain when it occurs, but because it pains him while he anticipates it. It is quite absurd if something that is not distressful when present should distress a person when it is only expected…”

Epicurus on the *Fear of Death*
Epicurus - No perception of harm argument

(1) Death is the dissolution of the soul
(2) What is dissolved does not perceive
(3) What is not perceived is nothing to us
Therefore, death is nothing to us
(4) What is nothing to us is not a harm to us
Therefore, death is not a harm to us
“So death, the most frightening of bad things, is nothing to us; since when we exist, death is not yet present, and when death is present, then we do not exist. Therefore, it is relevant neither to the living nor to the dead, since it does not affect the former, and the latter do not exist...”
Epicurus - **No subject of harm argument**

(1) Death is annihilation

(2) The living have not yet been annihilated

(3) So, death is not bad for the living

(4) The dead do not exist

(5) So, death is not bad for the dead

(6) Therefore, death is bad for neither the living nor the dead
“Get used to believing that death is nothing to us. For all good and bad consists in sense experience, and death is the privation of sense experience. Hence, a correct knowledge of the fact that death is nothing to us makes the mortality of life a matter for contentment, not by adding a limitless time [to life] but by removing the longing for immortality…”

“So death, the most frightening of bad things, is nothing to us; since when we exist, death is not yet present, and when death is present, then we do not exist. Therefore, it is relevant neither to the living nor to the dead, since it does not affect the former, and the latter do not exist”

Lucretius on the Fear of Death
Third maxim - \textbf{The good things in life are easy}
Last maxim - *Enduring hardship is not too bad*
“Meditate then, on all these things, and on those things which are related to them, both day and night, and both alone and with like-minded companions. For if you will do this, you will never be disturbed while asleep or awake by imagined fears, but you will live like a god among men…”

Lucretius on the *Fear of Death*
Stoicism - living in accordance with nature
According to the Stoics, not accepting that everything has been fated is what causes humans the greatest anxiety and get’s in the way of achieving ataraxia.
Ataraxia (or peace of mind) comes when one learns to “live in accordance with nature”
“By ‘fate’, I mean what the Greeks call *heimarmenê* – an ordering and sequence of causes, since it is the connexion of cause to cause which out of itself produces anything… Consequently nothing has happened which was not going to be, and likewise nothing is going to be of which nature does not contain causes working to bring that very thing about. This makes it intelligible that fate should be, not the ‘fate’ of superstition, but that of physics, an everlasting cause of things – why past things happened, why present things are now happening, and why future things will be...”

*Cicero, On divination*
Stoicism - Fate and the order of the cosmos

- “God and mind and fate and Zeus are one thing, but called by many different names.” (DL pg.366)

- “God is an animal, immortal, rational, perfect in happiness, immune to everything bad, providentially [looking after] the cosmos and the things in the cosmos; but he is not anthropomorphic. [God] is the craftsman of the universe and as it were a father of all things, both in general and also that part of him which extends through everything; he is called by many names in accordance with its powers.”

- “Chrysippus says, in his On Fate, that everything happens by fate….. Fate is a continuous string of causes of things which exist, or a rational principle according to which the cosmos is managed.”
The Mystery of Free Will
Skepticism - peace of mind and doubt
The **Skeptics** and their quest for **ataraxia**

- The skeptics questioned whether it was possible to arrive at the truth.
- The Academics were a group of skeptics who took their starting point from Socrates’ dictum, “All I can know is that I know nothing.”
- They argued that since there is no way to distinguish between true perceptions and illusions, the best that human beings were capable of was probable true belief.
The **Skeptics** and their quest for **ataraxia**

- The other school of Skepticism was known as Pyrrhonian Skepticism (named after the founder of this school, Pyrrho of Elis).

- The Pyrrhonians were even more extreme than their earlier counterparts, denying that human beings could have any certainty at all...even about the impossibility of certainty itself.
The **Skeptics and their quest for ataraxia**

- One would think that a skeptic could never be happy, since he is so filled with uncertainty at all times.

- Ironically, it is not the skeptic who is unhappy, but the dogmatist since the quest for certainty can only lead to doubt, which in turn leads us to be perturbed.

- So the skeptic would maintain that in order to be happy, we must give up the quest for certainty....We must, in other words, become skeptics.
“Things are **equally indifferent** and unstable and **indeterminate**; for this reason, **neither our perceptions** nor our **beliefs** tell the truth or lie. As such, we should **not trust** them, but should be **without opinions** and without inclinations and without wavering, saying about **each single thing** that it no more is than is not, or both is and is not, or neither is nor is not… The **result** for those who are so disposed will be first speechlessness, but then **freedom from worry** (*ataraxia*) and **pleasure**…”
The Concept of Knowledge and the Threat of Skepticism
External-world skepticism is the view that we can’t know that anything outside of our own mind exists.
“Suppose that you are a disembodied brain floating in a vat of nutrient fluids. This brain is connected to a supercomputer whose program produces electrical impulses that stimulate the brain in just the way that normal brains are stimulated as a result of perceiving external objects in the normal way. However, if you are such a ‘brain in a vat’ (BIV), then you have experiences that are qualitatively indistinguishable from those of a normal perceiver. So if you come to believe, on the basis of your computer-induced experiences, that you are, say, ‘looking at your own hands’, then you are sadly mistaken....”
If you can’t rule out the possibility that you're a BIV (brain-in-a-vat), then there is a genuine skeptical worry about one’s knowledge of the external world.
After all, if you were a BIV, how could you tell the difference between the real world and the computer simulated vat world?
Maybe our experience of reality is all that really matters?
The Experience Machine...
“Suppose there was an experience machine that would give you any experience you desired. Super-duper neuropsychologists could stimulate your brain so that you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain. Should you plug into this machine for life, preprogramming your life experiences? [...] Of course, while in the tank you won't know that you're there; you'll think that it's all actually happening [...] Would you plug in?”

Robert Nozick
If you wouldn’t plug into the experience machine, then why wouldn’t you plug in?
“There are things which matter more to us than simply having certain experiences...”
What can we learn from Nozick’s experiment?

An argument against the claim that our experience of reality all that really matters...

(1) If all that mattered to us was our experience of reality, then we would want to plug into the experience machine.

(2) However, most of us would not want plug into the experience machine.

Therefore,

(3) There are things which matter more to us than our experience of reality.
Since we do care about more than just our experience of reality, how should we respond to the skeptical challenge?