
economist and senior fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution. They spend too much time, he charges, analyzing "initial conditions" that don't affect results and "advantages" that don't really exist. "Whenever group A outperforms group B in any given set of circumstances," notes Sowell, "those circumstances are said to 'favor' group A."

But this kind of thinking obscures genuine differences in "cultural capital": "the specific skills, general work habits, saving propensities, and attitudes toward education and entrepreneurship" possessed by different cultural groups, Sowell says. The Lebanese, for instance, entered West African markets with far less financial capital than did the Europeans. But they chose to live meagerly, save money, and employ their entire families. They became more familiar with their customers and were better able to bargain and extend lines of credit. In short, culturally shaped behavior was the key: "The Europeans simply did not choose to subject themselves to many of the conditions which the Lebanese endured."

Sowell calls on researchers to start "regarding groups as having their own internal cultural patterns, antedating the environment in which they currently find themselves and transcending the beliefs, biases, and decisions of others." The reason scholars tend not to, says Sowell, is twofold. First, most social scientists fail to apply an international perspective to their work. A one-country analysis might examine Chinese retailers in Jamaica and suggest that they prospered for reasons peculiar to Jamaica. But that fails to account for similar kinds of Chinese success in Indonesia, Malaysia, Peru, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, and elsewhere.

More important, Sowell believes, scholars have an "understandable revulsion" toward admitting that "some ways of doing things—some cultures—are better in some respects than others." Relativism continues to reign in the academy. Yet Sowell argues that some cultures are clearly more suited to certain economic roles than are others.

Through copious examples gathered from around the world, *Race and Culture* makes a strong case for "the reality, persistence, and consequences of cultural differences." So the book

succeeds at complicating a debate in which all differences in group performance are now automatically written off as consequences of politics or prejudice. Unfortunately, Sowell can be just as tendentious in his argumentation as the social scientists he criticizes. Perhaps most prominently, he essentially dismisses the impact of racial discrimination on a group's economic success. Where discrimination exists, he argues, it must reflect real differences in group productivity—an argument that ignores mounds of evidence to the contrary. Coupled with his familiar diatribes against affirmative action and multiculturalism, this sort of selective fact finding makes the book at times read more like a polemic than a serious scholarly study.

Philosophy & Religion

THE THERAPY OF DESIRE: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics. *By Martha C. Nussbaum. Princeton. 558 pp. \$29.95*

A health-care plan drawn up by Martha Nussbaum would surely cover visits to philosophers. They are the mind's doctors—or at least they once were. That they are no longer so, and that systems of philosophy hold little interest today for anyone outside the academy, is one measure of our distance from the Hellenistic period (from the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C. to the suicide of Cleopatra VII in 31 B.C.), when the question "How should one live?" drove the philosophical enterprise and the answer mattered equally to aristocrat and slave.

Nussbaum, a professor of philosophy, classics, and comparative literature at Brown University, begins her ambitious and impressive book with Aristotle, who accepted the idea that ethical philosophy should resemble medicine in its dedication to the practical goal of ameliorating human life. She goes on to explore how a medical and therapeutic conception of philosophy played itself out in the three principal Hellenistic schools of thought—the Epicurean, the Skeptic, and the Stoic.

All three schools worked to create a healing community that strove to counter the negative

effects of competition. In the new community, the patient was led to recognize that his desires were unhealthy, infected by the pursuit of harmful goals. He was guided toward a state of release from every kind of attachment and from domination by the common emotions—anger, worry, love, and the fear of death. The passions, the emotions, had to go—or at least be strongly tempered. With imperturbability would come *eudaimonia*, or “human flourishing.”

For all her admiration of this argument, Nussbaum cannot help wondering about the price one pays for denying emotion. Does extirpation of the passions surrender some essential component of one’s humanity as well? Does freedom from pain and disturbance keep people from commitment to anything outside their own virtue? What is left to link a person to fellow human beings? In the end, Nussbaum cannot accept the arguments for radical emotional surgery or envisage a community that is both self-respecting and entirely free from anger. Emotion and morality are as inseparable from each other as emotion and rationality.

The men who founded the three great schools were prolific writers, but very little of their work survives. We are greatly dependent for our knowledge of their doctrines on later sources, particularly the Roman writers Cicero, Lucretius, and Seneca. The incompleteness of the evidence can make argument tricky, particularly when poetry—Senecan drama or Lucretian epic—must provide the philosophical argument. Though Nussbaum is an ingenious reader, her conclusions sometimes seem willed as much as argued. Moreover, she may be too determined to put a contemporary face on the Hellenistic philosophies and to weight them too heavily with meaning for the late 20th century.

Yet in the cause of an enlightened dispassion, Nussbaum writes with an abiding passion, which her ancestor philosophers would have forgiven in spite of themselves. More important, she restores philosophy to its ministering function (long since assumed by religion). In these fervent pages, it is once again the mind’s balm, the heart’s release.

Arts & Letters

THE ART OF THE PERSONAL ESSAY. Ed. by Phillip Lopate. Anchor. 777 pp. \$30

There is no subject too quotidian or too delicate for the personal essayist. It may be a moth dying on Virginia Woolf’s window sill, or Seneca’s asthma, or Walter Benjamin’s experience of smoking hashish. “At the core of the personal essay,” explains Lopate in a spirited introduction to his anthology, “is the supposition that there is a certain unity to human experience.”

The personal essay’s fundamental departure from the more traditional formal essay is its familiarity. The author aims to connect intimately with the reader. When Montaigne (1533–92) ruminates about a severely deformed child, he is imploring the reader to join him in his personal confrontation with revulsion and prejudice. Beyond this unique qualification, the form of the personal essay is as fluid as its subject matter. Lu Hsun, one of the most famous modern Chinese writers (1881–1936), often slips into stream of consciousness reveries in a discussion of recovery from illness that ranges from elephants to blossoms and fruit. Samuel Johnson (1709–84) describes the boarders who have occupied his room chronologically and methodically: “The first tenant was a tailor. . . . The next was a young woman. . . . An elderly man of grave aspect, read the bill, and bargained for the room. . . . A short meagre man in a tarnish’d waistcoat, desired to see the garret. . . . At last [the landlady] took in two sisters. . . . Such, Mr. Rambler, are the changes which have happened in the narrow space where my present fortune has fixed my residence.”

Yet no matter the form, the goal is always to peel away artifice and reveal human complexity. Says Lopate, “The plot of a personal essay . . . consists in watching how far the essayist can drop past his or her psychic defenses toward deeper levels of honesty.” The essayist reflects a moment, showing us “how the world comes at another person, the irritations, jubiliations, aches and pains, humorous flashes.” In the end, the essayist dissolves, leaving readers alone to reconcile the reflection with their own reality. “The trick [for the personal essayist] is to realize