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VERDICTS

Martha Nussbaum: The Voice of Convention

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Martha Nussbaum is the premier defender of the humanities education now dominant throughout the American academy. Though a political liberal, in debates about higher education she sees herself as occupying the center. She heralds the post-sixties multiculturalist transformation of higher education, while also beating back postmodernist attempts to further minimize the Western tradition. Both the postmodern and conservative critics get it wrong, according to Nussbaum, and overlook what a good thing we've got going. She speaks for the status quo.

For those who believe that the humanities have lost their way, Nussbaum presents a dilemma. Genuinely well-educated and by no means the worst of the lot, she's far better positioned than conservative voices now locked out of academia to ensure that college students continue to receive at least some exposure to Plato, Kant, and Shakespeare.

But her usefulness, in this respect, depends on how one assesses the threat to the humanities. Nussbaum herself is most concerned about "education for profit-making," the growing trend to recast our education system entirely as a jobs training program. She may be right about the nature of the threat, but if so, that makes her less capable of defending the humanities, because she fails to see how changes from the sixties have strengthened the justification for education for profit-making.

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Ethics

Martha Nussbaum (née Craven) can trace her lineage back to the Mayflower.[1] She had a privileged upbringing in Philadelphia's Main Line suburbs, about which she seems to feel guilty. Her childhood comes up often in her writings, nearly always with reference to the atmosphere of coldness and bigotry in which she says she was surrounded.[2] She considered entering the Episcopalian clergy in her youth, but has since converted to Judaism and currently attends a Reform synagogue in Chicago.[3] Her current position is the Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics at the University of Chicago, with full or associate appointments in no fewer than five departments. She has written or edited over thirty books, published dozens of articles in scholarly journals and highbrow literary outlets such as the *New Republic* and *Times Literary Supplement*, and been the subject of several magazine profiles.[4] She prefers to be known as a "philosopher."[5] By conventional standards of academic success, she is easily one of the most outstanding figures in the humanities today.

Trained as a classicist, Nussbaum first made her mark with *The Fragility of Goodness* (1986), an ambitious work of solid scholarship that took about fifteen years to complete.[6] (By contrast, over the last decade, she has averaged a book a year.) Now in its twenty-eighth printing, *Fragility* is Nussbaum's best book, and likely to be her longest-lived. It inquires into the relationship between luck and human wholeness, or "flourishing" in Plato,

[1]Martha C. Nussbaum, *Liberty of Conscience: In Defense of America's Tradition of Religious Equality* (New York: Basic Books 2008), 2.

[2]Ibid., 29, 319. Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Clash Within: Democracy and Religious Violence and India's Future* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), xiii; *From Disgust to Humanity: Sexual Orientation and Constitutional Law* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), xxii.

[3]Nussbaum, *Liberty of Conscience*, 9, 15, 337.

[4]Robert Boynton, "Who Needs Philosophy?" *New York Times Magazine*, November 21, 1999, http://www.nytimes.com/1999/11/21/magazine/who-needs-philosophy.html. Scott McLemee, "What Makes Martha Nussbaum Run?" *Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 5, 2001, http://chronicle.com/article/What-Makes-Martha-Nussbaum/21702; Julia Keller, "The Martha Show," *Chicago Tribune*, September 29, 2002, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2002-09-29/features/0209290310_1_scholars-philosophy-greek-literature; and "Gross National Politics: Questions for Martha Nussbaum," interview by Deborah Solomon, *New York Times Magazine*, December 10, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/13/magazine/13FOB-Q4-t.html?_r=0.

[5]Nussbaum, *Liberty of Conscience*, 10, 15, 29. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Philosophical Interventions: Reviews 1986–2011* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 2; or "political philosopher," *Clash Within*, xii.

[6]Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

Aristotle, and Greek tragedy. While no one could dispute that luck is necessary for a happy life, what role does it play in an "ethically complete" life?

Nussbaum has published more on Greek and Roman works than most classicists do in an entire career, though her classical scholarship now represents a small fraction of her total output. Her corpus is vast and diverse. She has written about constitutional law,[7] Henry James,[8] Gustav Mahler,[9] Roger Williams,[10] and Indian philosophy.[11] What unites her studies is a concern for how we should live and arrange our political affairs. Philosophy, for Nussbaum, is a means of practical instruction.[12] Her early works, such as *Fragility*, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (1990) and *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (1994), tended to be ethical in purpose, but in more recent decades she has focused on lending support to liberal political causes. One might think that someone who spent as many years as Nussbaum has studying Aristotle's *Ethics* and Greek tragedy would have found some cause to depart from the values espoused by the "Port Huron Statement," but this is not so.[13] Nussbaum takes her own literary or philosophical route to arrive at positions critical of

[7]Nussbaum, *Liberty of Conscience*.

[8]Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[9]Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), chaps. 5 and 14.

[10]Nussbaum, *Liberty of Conscience*, chap. 2.

[11]Martha C. Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), chap. 4.

[12]Martha C. Nussbaum, *The New Religious Intolerance: Overcoming the Politics of Fear in an Anxious Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), 59; *Love's Knowledge*, chap. 1; *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), passim.

[13]Nussbaum could have written this:

> We regard *men* as infinitely precious and possessed of unfulfilled capacities for reason, freedom, and love.… Men have unrealized potential for self-cultivation, self-direction, self-understanding, and creativity….The goal of man and society should be human independence: a concern not with image of popularity but with finding a meaning in life that is personally authentic; a quality of mind not compulsively driven by a sense of powerlessness, nor one which unthinkingly adopts status values, nor one which represses all threats to its habits, but one which has full, spontaneous access to present and past experiences, one which easily unites the fragmented parts of personal history, one which openly faces problems which are troubling and unresolved; one with an intuitive awareness of possibilities, an active sense of curiosity, an ability and willingness to learn.

"Port Huron Statement of the Students for a Democratic Society, 1962," http://www.campusactivism.org/server-new/uploads/porthuron.htm.

the religious Right[14] and supply-side economics,[15] and supportive of feminism[16] and same-sex marriage,[17] but she always ends up conforming to the Democratic party line.

Nussbaum's erudition does not always carry over into her writing. Despite a lifetime spent immersed in master works, she sometimes expresses herself through slipshod prose reminiscent of an undergraduate term paper.[18] Her body of work is uneven. Many books are turgid and contain long sections that could have been excised without injury to the overall argument. She can, however, be a powerful writer when she sets herself to it. Some of her book reviews, written for popular forums, are minor polemical classics.[19] Her inconsistency could be read as a commentary on the state of editing standards at academic publishing houses, or it could mean that Nussbaum holds herself to higher standards when writing for nonacademic audiences. In any event, given her manifest talents, the unevenness of Nussbaum's work suggests that she has chosen quantity over quality.

Politics

Nussbaum's decision to dial up the production seems to have coincided roughly with her turn from ethics to politics. In the early 1990s, she became deeply involved in the *Evans v. Romer* or "Colorado Amendment 2" affair, a flashpoint in the culture wars that's now largely forgotten.[20] The citizens of the

[14]Nussbaum, *Liberty of Conscience*, chap. 1.

[15]Martha C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

[16]Martha C. Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[17]Nussbaum, *From Disgust to Humanity*, chap. 5.

[18]"[W]e live in a world where, on balance, human beings behave pretty badly, and this means that we live in a world that needs good laws and persistent hardworking attempts to make them better." Nussbaum, *Liberty of Conscience*, 363. "[President Obama's education] produced a person who knows how to think critically, who thinks with rich information about a wide range of world situations, who repeatedly displays a robust ability to imagine the predicaments of many types of people—and its corollary, the ability to think reflectively about himself and his own life story." Nussbaum, *Not for Profit*, 136.

[19]See, for example, Nussbaum's devastating critique, "The Professor of Parody: The Hip Defeatism of Judith Butler," *New Republic*, February 22, 1999, 37–45. *Arts & Letters Daily* has featured this essay in its "Classics" section for years: http://www.akad.se/Nussbaum.pdf. Nussbaum's critical review of *Closing of the American Mind* is also, in a way, an impressive feat of rhetoric, even if it's not always fair to Allan Bloom. "Undemocratic Vistas," *New York Review of Books*, November 5, 1987, http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1987/nov/05/undemocratic-vistas/?insrc=toc. Nussbaum recently said that she would approach *Closing* in a somewhat more generous spirit were she to review it again. *Philosophical Interventions*, 14–15.

[20]Daniel Mendelsohn, "The Stand: Expert Witnesses and Ancient Mysteries in a Colorado Courtroom," *Lingua Franca* 6, no. 6 (September/October 1996): 34–46.

state of Colorado voted into law in 1992 a law that would have prohibited state and local authorities from enforcing any nondiscrimination laws about sexual orientation. Gay rights proponents sued Colorado for repeal of Amendment 2. Nussbaum was called to give expert testimony in support of the argument that there was no moral basis for placing restrictions on homosexual conduct, only religious, and thus the law violated the Constitution's Establishment Clause.

Ultimately, the plaintiffs prevailed: Amendment 2 was ruled unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in May 1996. But Nussbaum's scholarly reputation did not fare equally well.

The Greek term *tolmêma* appears in Plato's Laws at 636C, in reference to homosexual acts. Australian legal scholar and philosopher John Finnis, in an affidavit supporting the State of Colorado, the defendant, cited a translation that rendered the term as "enormities," and noted the passage as one of many instances where pre-Christian authors condemned homosexual conduct.[21] Nussbaum leapt on Finnis's pejorative rendering of *tolmêma*, asserting that it "[could not] reasonably be claimed to convey a nuance of guilt."[22] She overreached. As Finnis pointed out, the standard classical dictionary, Liddell and Scott's *Greek-English Lexicon*, most recently updated in 1968, listed "shameless act" as a possible translation for *tolmêma*. Nussbaum cited the 1897 Liddell and Scott, which conveniently did not include "shameless act."

Rather than backing off and admitting that Finnis's interpretation was, in fact, perfectly reasonable, Nussbaum resorted to a series of increasingly desperate maneuvers to explain why it was the most natural thing in the world for her to cite the superseded 1897 edition: "[the 1897 Liddell and Scott is] more reliable on authors of the classical period";[23] "I considered [the current edition's entry for *tolmêma*] to be an absolutely useless entry, which supplies no guidance about the meaning of any particular passage. I would never dream of submitting such a sloppy and useless entry to a court";[24] "Lexicographers are not always the best scholars, and what they gain in breadth of experience they frequently lack in depth with a particular

[21]The passage in full reads: "when male unites with female for procreation the pleasure experienced is held to be due to nature, but contrary to nature when male mates with male or female with female, and those first guilty of such enormities [*tolmêma*] were impelled by their slavery to pleasure." John Finnis, "'Shameless Acts' in Colorado: Abuse of Scholarship in Constitutional Cases," *Academic Questions* 7, no. 4 (Fall 1994): 22.

[22]Quoted in ibid., 26.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Quoted in Robert George, "'Shameless Acts' Revisited: Some Questions for Martha Nussbaum," *Academic Questions* 9, no. 1 (Winter 1995–96): 35.

author";[25] "later does not always mean better….A nineteenth-century scholar…could perfectly well be a better Platonist than a lexicographer of recent date."[26] In short, she protested too much in her defense against charges that she had deliberately distorted the philological record to discredit Finnis. Strikingly, Nussbaum had, in other published works, herself cited the updated Liddell and Scott, despite claiming "I don't even have the [later version] around, so it would have been absurd to cite that."[27]

Though Nussbaum's participation earned her the reputation of an intellectual opportunist, one willing to play fast and loose with the facts in exchange for public kudos, she remains defiant.[28]

Since *Romer*, Nussbaum's political activism has mainly consisted of writing books about political theory, an activity she at one point describes as "[s]upplying principles to guide democratic political practice."[29] Her political theory has two main thrusts: nations should be judged based on their respect for equal opportunities for human development, and emotions play a critically important role in supporting justice.

Nussbaum believes that the most praiseworthy political orders are those most committed to equal respect for the right of all "persons" to "fashion a life in accordance with their own view of what is deepest and most important."[30] Everyone deserves to be treated in a manner that reflects our innate dignity. "Dignity" is defined by ten "capabilities" that constitute a meaningful human life.[31] No obstacles to the exercise of anyone's capabilities should be tolerated. The goal of politics should be to protect human capabilities, at least up to a certain "threshold."[32]

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[25]Martha Nussbaum, "Platonic Love and Colorado Law: The Relevance of Ancient Greek Norms to Modern Sexual Controversies, *Virginia Law Review* 80, no. 7 (October 1994): 1621.

[26]Ibid.

[27]Quoted in George, "'Shameless Acts' Revisited," 34.

[28]Nussbaum, *From Disgust to Humanity*, chap. 4.

[29]Nussbaum, *New Religious Intolerance*, 59.

[30]Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 5.

[31]Lists can be found in Martha C. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 77–80; *Political Emotions*, 415; and *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 33–34.

[32]Discussions of the "capabilities approach" or equal respect doctrine may be found in many of Nussbaum's books (*New Religious Intolerance*, 61–68; *Liberty of Conscience*, 76–85; *Sex and Social Justice*, intro. and chap. 1; *Political Emotions*, 118–24), but they receive their most extended treatments in *Women and Human Development*, *Creating Capabilities*, and *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006).

She places her capabilities approach in opposition to purely economic standards, such as GNP per capita, which she sees as an overly narrow measure of the political good. "[T]he capability approach maintains that resources have no value in themselves, apart from their role in promoting human functioning."[33] A good, fully human existence requires more than merely comfort; quality of life is a question of basic justice for Nussbaum.

Utilitarianism is another important foil, because it allows Nussbaum to clarify her political theory of emotions. "The greatest happiness for the greatest number" can't serve as a standard, because human desires are often perverted by unenlightened beliefs. As most philosophers have understood, our emotional life is determined by what we believe to be true and right, and emotions themselves may be thought of as "judgments of value,"[34] very different from appetites.[35] In explaining why pleasure cannot serve as a standard for politics, Nussbaum cites her own experience of working in developing countries with oppressed women, whose desires have been unjustly stultified.[36]

Emotions are serious business for politics.[37] Laws and institutions alone cannot ensure the stability of the liberal political order. We must also attend to culture, and emotions, the substance of culture.[38] Nussbaum analyzes and arranges emotions in accord with her liberal principles. She holds disgust and shame in low regard,[39] the latter because it tends to be rooted in intolerance for weakness in oneself or others. Disgust comes in for even rougher treatment because it reflects irrational anxiety about the lower aspects of human existence (having a body and the functions and experiences that come with it), and the "tendency to establish unjust hierarchies."[40] Compassion and empathy are good and should be extended as broadly as possible. Nussbaum advocates an emotional life that respects equality and is shared by all. Shaping a liberal political culture thus requires overriding the natural human preference for particularity, to love only our own and fear what is unknown

[33]Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, 34.

[34]Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, chap. 1; *Poetic Justice*, chap. 3.

[35]Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame and the Law* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), chap. 1.

[36]Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*, introduction, chap. 2.

[37]Nussbaum, *Political Emotions*.

[38]Ibid., chap. 1.

[39]Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity.*

[40]Nussbaum, *From Disgust to Humanity*, 26 and passim.

and unfamiliar.[41] She recommends teaching empathy through various "public strategies" such as hymns, poetry and rhetoric, public parks, national monuments, and shared holidays.[42]

Nussbaum's teaching on political emotions occasionally comes across as intrusive, and stands in some tension with her equal rights doctrine. One advantage of the capabilities approach, she says, is its flexibility: every individual's right to live a meaningful life is to be respected, regardless of what each of us finds meaningful. All nations should be able to embrace this doctrine without seriously compromising their unique religious and cultural heritage.[43] Nussbaum denounces the pressures that nineteenth-century European societies applied to Jews to assimilate,[44] and she supports making formal legal accommodations for the faithful.[45] Nonetheless, she is clearly promoting a subtle form of assimilation with her views on the political significance of emotions. To be fair, reconciling an authentic respect for religion or diversity with worldly political principles is a challenge for all modern liberal political theories. Where Nussbaum stands out is with her idealistic reluctance to admit that major tradeoffs will have to be made.

Above all, what's hardest to understand about Nussbaum's political theory is why we should be expected to take it as true. Throughout her many extended discussions of her capabilities approach, Nussbaum devotes herself almost completely to descriptions of the theory and drawing contrasts between it and other theories. She forthrightly—moralistically might be a better word—articulates her egalitarian norms as universally true, and criticizes cultural relativism.[46] But where do her norms originate? She does not ground them in metaphysical principles or a doctrine of human nature; nor do they derive their merit from a promise that people will be happier by respecting them. That may be true, too, but the key is the principle of the thing.

Nussbaum describes her capabilities approach as "intuitive."[47] She asks people to begin with "equal dignity" and unpack what that must mean.

[41]Nussbaum sometimes groups fear with disgust and shame: *New Religious Intolerance*, chap. 2; *Political Emotions*, chap. 10.

[42]Nussbaum, *Political Emotions*, 188, chaps. 8–11.

[43]Nussbaum, *New Religious Intolerance*, chap. 3; *Frontiers of Justice*, 78–80.

[44]Nussbaum, *Liberty of Conscience*, 348.

[45]Nussbaum, *New Religious Intolerance* and *Liberty of Conscience*.

[46]Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, chap. 1; *Women and Human Development*, 34–51.

[47]Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, 70, 74, 78, 80, 83–84; *Women and Human Development*, 5.

Through that exercise one arrives at justice and the priorities of politics. It's an attractive approach, one those without any interest in questioning the principles of conventional liberal society would most likely find persuasive. But would everyone everywhere and at all times accept it as true?

Combining the high-mindedness of ancient Greek political philosophy with the early modern philosophers' universalistic natural rights theory, Nussbaum opens herself up to criticisms from both directions. "Dignity" occupies a hazy space between self-preservation, the early moderns' political standard, and excellence, the ancient standard. The early moderns believed that the desire for self-preservation deserved pride of place in the scheme of human goods, because no goods are secure if self-preservation is threatened. Dignity, however defined, cannot therefore qualify as equally natural as, or prior to, self-preservation.

Nussbaum's notion of a dignified life is a more modest version of the ancient notion of an excellent life. It's a life with the *capability* for excellence. But does it make sense that two nations, equally protective of human capabilities, should be held in equal regard, even though one may have succeeded in actually realizing excellence, in government, war, and/or the arts, more than the other? Perhaps, in the end, achievement is what matters most. By Nussbaum's standards, unambitious modern European states deserve to be elevated over history's greatest republics and empires.

Tocqueville saw much reason to be suspicious of equality as a political principle. To begin with, it has a simplistic appeal to unreflective democratic minds disinclined to sort through complex questions about justice and the political good.[48] Tocqueville advised modern democracies to leave off equality and focus more on liberty[49] and the looming danger of what he called "soft despotism."[50] Liberty is far more important, and more threatened, and by that Tocqueville meant *political* liberty. While Nussbaum argues that modern democracies should inculcate a more generalized outlook and sensibility among their citizens, Tocqueville argued that we should put our trust in more locally-oriented instruments of freedom such as township government, civic associations, and the family.[51] Nussbaum is far less

[48]Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. and ed. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 2.1.3.

[49]Ibid., 2.2.1.

[50]Ibid., 2.4, 6–7.

[51]Ibid., 1.1.5; 2.2, 4–5; 2.3.8.

interested in how to make free self-government work. Indeed, she talks very little about government at all. Political theory, for Nussbaum, consists in laying down principles and then educating emotions to realize and maintain those principles. She gives us a political theory without the politics. Tocqueville would view Nussbaum as naïve about the subtle threats to political liberty that exist in the modern democratic world.

Higher Education

Nussbaum's thought on the humanities should be understood within the context of her teaching on political emotions. She calls for colleges and universities to serve the just society by shaping a liberal political culture. Teaching philosophy encourages habits of independent thought, and multiculturalism and literature teach empathy. The goal of the humanities is to produce "citizens of the world."

In *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (1997), Nussbaum's most comprehensive statement on higher education, she argues: "[O]n the whole, higher education in America is in a healthy state. Never before have there been so many talented and committed young faculty so broadly dispersed in institutions of so many different kinds, thinking about difficult issues connecting education with citizenship."[52] As evidence for this assessment, Nussbaum relies not only on her own experience as a professor, but direct research into conditions at several colleges and universities across the nation. She assures us that, however daunting teaching world citizenship may seem, humanities professors are up to the task.

Which is not to say that Nussbaum believes the humanities have nothing to fear. She is greatly concerned with the rise of education for profit-making and the threat it poses to the humanities: "Thirsty for national profit, nations, and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive.…[T]he humanistic aspects of science and social science—the imaginative, creative aspect, and the aspect of rigorous critical thought—are…losing ground as nations prefer to pursue short-term profit by the cultivation of the useful and highly applied skills suited to profit-making."[53] It's a trend that's sweeping the Western world and

[52]Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 2–3.

[53]Nussbaum, *Not for Profit*, 2.

developing countries such as India, and exercising influence over elementary and secondary education as well. Both the Bush and Obama administrations get called to account for neglecting the humanities in favor of more superficially useful curricula.

Nussbaum casts the debate over higher education in epic terms: "We are in the midst of a crisis of massive proportions and grave global significance."[54] One wonders what historical basis she has for saying that. America may lay claim to many accomplishments, and yet nothing like the multiculturalist liberal arts education she champions existed until very recently. We didn't need multiculturalism to vanquish Nazism and Imperial Japan—we didn't even need a particularly high college enrollment rate. How important could they be?

Were Montesquieu to assess Nussbaum's thoughts on liberal political culture, the humanities, and "education for profit," he might wonder why she is so reluctant to let commerce take the lead in shaping hearts and minds, because, historically, "doux commerce" has proven to be extremely effective in producing the mild, tolerant temperament that Nussbaum considers vital to the success of liberal democratic orders.[55] Why must people attend college to become compassionate and decent? Why can't they acquire these characteristics by participating in commercial life—getting a job and building a career, perhaps even starting a business? Nussbaum has high standards for empathy and independent-mindedness, which commerce cannot fulfill to the highest degree. But it could come close, and surely closer, for society as a whole, than higher education. Nussbaum's staunch and long-standing skepticism toward economic standards of national merit has blocked her ability to see how closely her conception of liberal character resembles what is commonly found throughout the capitalist world. All it requires is a shift from looking at economic growth not as an end in itself but as a means to a more liberal and tolerant society.

As mentioned earlier, Nussbaum believes that philosophy should be practical, centrally concerned with learning about how to live. In her review

[54]Ibid., 1.

[55]See *Spirit of the Laws*: "Commerce cures destructive prejudices, and it is an almost general rule that everywhere there are gentle mores, there is commerce and that everywhere there is commerce, there is gentle mores. Therefore, one should not be surprised if our mores are less fierce than they were formerly. Commerce has spread knowledge of the mores of all nations everywhere; they have been compared to each other, and good things have resulted from this." Charles de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller, and Harold Samuel Stone (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 20.1.

of *Closing of the American Mind*, she criticizes Allan Bloom for his elitist suggestion that the philosophical life is, at its core, committed to the search for truth and, secondarily, to living a better life.[56] But the danger of demanding, as Nussbaum does, immediate practical instruction from philosophy, is that philosophy can become hard to distinguish from ideology. Her advice on teaching literature bears out this danger. She argues that the purpose of reading literature in colleges and universities is, or should be, to teach compassion.[57] She has a long-standing interest in literature's ability to develop our moral imagination.[58] But it happens to be the case that not every great book is written for the purpose of teaching tolerance, strengthening democracy, and promoting world citizenship. Indeed, the vast majority haven't been. Reading literature in this manner could therefore subvert the intentions of many great authors for the sake of a political goal. Or, to avoid gross unfaithfulness to the text, one would have to assemble, with careful discrimination, a selection of works with an unmistakably democratic message and then guide students through them to ensure they come to the right conclusions. And many truly great works would have to be left out, because they treat topics only indirectly related to democracy and compassion, such as ambition (*The Red and the Black*), revenge (*The Count of Monte Cristo*), and what makes a happy marriage (*Pride and Prejudice* and the rest of the Jane Austen).

In addition to being narrow, Nussbaum's literature program is impractically didactic. The only moral quality that great literature, taken on its merits and read without preconceptions, can be relied on to foster in students is depth, more an intellectual than a moral quality. Introducing young people to great literature can make them more thoughtful, perhaps we could even say more philosophical. And if they experience literature's pleasures, perhaps they will continue to pursue it outside of an academic environment. Yet Nussbaum wants students to read great literature to learn empathy and compassion.

A thoroughly depoliticized higher education system may be impossible. In any civilized modern society, the humanities will exist, at least in part, to train the next generation of political leaders, and will therefore be shaped by what people believe the ruling class needs to know. But in order to provide for an authentically open-minded education, there must also be room, in the

[56]Nussbaum, "Undemocratic Vistas."

[57]Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, chap. 3; *Not for Profit*, chap. 6.

[58]Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice.*

humanities, for inquiry for its own sake. Students should be free to follow out the reasoning of Plato, Thomas Aquinas, or Nietzsche wherever it leads—which may not always mean truths supportive of liberal political culture. Of course, Nussbaum is careful to insist that illiberal points of view should be welcomed. But by offering such bland assurances that freedom of mind is alive and well in modern academia,[59] Nussbaum shows that her respect for the moral imagination does not extend to conservatives, who, for years, have been listening to liberal humanities professors tell them that they have no reason to feel out of place in modern academia. And yet they do.

Conclusion

Is Martha Nussbaum's influence over the humanities good or bad? To be clear: Nussbaum does not advocate banishing the great works of Western civilization from humanities departments. She simply argues that they be leavened with a healthy dose of multiculturalism and studies in gender, race, sexuality, etc. She strongly criticizes postmodern academic anti-Western prejudices and the attempt to devalue reason.[60] One sometimes comes across statements in Nussbaum's works such as "the dialogues of Plato are second to none for their capacity to inspire searching, active thinking, with the life and example of Socrates up front to inspire."[61] If one believes that great

[59]"Instead of a monolithic 'politically correct' orthodoxy, what I hear when I visit campuses are the voices of many diverse individual faculty, administrators and students, confronting curricular issues with, for the most part, resourcefulness, intelligence, and good faith." Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, 78.

[60]Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, 7, 18–19, 37–41, 109–11.

[61]Nussbaum, *Not for Profit*, 55. The following passage, in which Nussbaum reflects, twenty-five years later, on her harsh review of *The Closing of the American Mind*, is worth quoting at length:

> I have…shifted more toward Bloom in a way that involves a partial change in my own views. *I now have far less objection than I once did to the idea of a liberal arts curriculum based on a list of Great Books*. I still see the dangers of that approach; excessive deference to intellectual authority, excessive parochialism (such as the focus on European culture that Bloom recommended), and insufficient attentiveness to the activation of the student's own critical powers. Nonetheless, these pitfalls can be avoided by good teaching and by wise updating of the core lists themselves, as has by now been done at both Columbia and my own university. Such a core does something that is very good in this era of video games and social networking: it makes sure that people are actually reading big, complicated books. Times have changed, and it seems likely that the only way to make sure that undergraduates actually read a novel of George Eliot, a dialogue of Plato, or a treatise of Rousseau or Hume is to put it on a list—though one would be well advised to supplement any such list of "classics" with more recent works that engage undergraduates, and with works from a variety of cultural traditions.

Philosophical Interventions, 14–15, emphasis added.

works have a power to reach students that, though it can be obscured and diminished, will always remain, one must admit that students will continue to receive some benefit from Nussbaum's approach. This is, after all, contemporary academia, where one must grade on a curve.

But what about the threat from the education for profit-making crowd? One need not agree with Nussbaum's apocalyptic characterization of this threat to accept that we should now be concerned that the humanities could be co-opted, weakened, or somehow denied their rightful centrality in higher education as a result of the push to make college more practical. In an era of soaring tuition it's impossible to ignore calls for more appreciable return-on-investment in higher education.

What Nussbaum doesn't seem to recognize is how the insularity of modern humanities departments has made them incapable of the introspection necessary to combat the profit-making agenda. She blames *society* for changing, and for becoming so crass and shortsighted to dismiss the value of the humanities. But with so much frivolity and radicalism rampant throughout higher education, many feel conflicted about coming to their defense. Conservatives certainly do. Why *not* let your children major in business administration instead of postcolonial literature? At least your son or daughter will not be *mis*educated and may even become employable. Nussbaum claims, in the face of education for profit-making, she would now welcome the support of Allan Bloom as a "potential ally" who shares with her a "conviction that the humanities are educationally central and that they make an important contribution to democracy."[62] But why does Nussbaum assume Bloom would be enthusiastic to join her in defending a curriculum he almost completely rejects?

Perhaps American higher education will one day collapse under the weight of its bloated costs and self-importance. Maybe parents, employers, and students will recognize how few benefits our higher education system now provides us. To forestall that outcome, the humanities need to develop a more energetic spirit of doubt and self-criticism. Nussbaum can't take the lead there. She's too blinded by convention.

[62]Nussbaum, *Philosophical Interventions*, 15.