

**Martha Nussbaum**

*Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs The Humanities.*

Princeton: Princeton University Press 2010

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This is a little book with a big, and important, message. Its seven chapters explore the author's experience of the decline of humanist educational values that she sees as central to effective democratic citizenship. Nussbaum speaks passionately from within liberal political theory, drawing anecdotal evidence from her academic experience in the US and Europe and from her development work in India. It is expressly 'not an empirical study' (121). But it is a moving personal 'manifesto' that draws its energy from theorist-reformers like John Dewey and Rabindranath Tagore, and from contemporary figures like physician-psychologist, Donald Winnicott, and philosophers Matthew Lipman and Gareth Matthews.

The first three chapters sketch how educational institutions worldwide have refocused their aims and objectives away from forming of students as citizens toward preparing them to serve the needs of domestic and global commerce. The next three chapters explore a different training, one in the 'humanities' and associated with what she calls 'Socratic pedagogy'. In her view, Socratic 'critical thinking' is essential to global peace and liberation of the oppressed. For Nussbaum, the humanities disciplines foster the ability to imagine sympathetically the predicament of another person. While she does 'not deny that science and social science, particularly economics, are also crucial to the education of citizens,' her focus is Humanities, since 'nobody is suggesting leaving these studies [i.e. science and social science] behind' (7). The final chapter summarizes her position, reaffirming her conviction that democracy's survival depends on adopting Socratic pedagogy. Nussbaum has long demonstrated her courage as a public intellectual, and this book articulates the liberal vision that sustains her.

That said, I am not confident that the rhetoric she uses will prove as effective as we could hope. She acknowledges that many of the educational reformers she cites, though helpful, are 'general' (73) in describing the methodologies and practices they advocate. Even John Dewey fails her, it seems: 'Dewey...never addressed systematically the question of how Socratic critical reasoning might be taught to children of various ages' (73). However, despite this recognition on Nussbaum's part, *Not For Profit* does little to address this potentially fatal weakness in what remains a vital project facing humanities and, if Nussbaum is right, for democracy itself.

Chapter 4, 'Socratic Pedagogy: The Importance of Argument', presents the philosophical core of Nussbaum's manifesto. She explores the 'theory and practice of liberal education in the Western tradition', and claims that 'courses in philosophy and other subjects in the humanities..., through both content and pedagogy, will stimulate students to think and argue for themselves, rather than defer to tradition and authority' (48). To her credit, Nussbaum acknowledges that 'it is difficult to measure Socratic

ability through standardized tests' (48). But that is not the only problem. It is also difficult, but vitally urgent, to show how such a pedagogy actually yields the Socratic ability she claims results from it. She peppers the text with phrases like 'Socratic thinking' and 'critical thinking' without offering any clear definitions of what such phrases might actually mean in practical pedagogical terms.

Like a good liberal, Nussbaum relies on the efficacy of sympathy, rather than on the possibility of a more structured 'method' in the humanities that might ground the virtues she claims for these studies, and even complement what has come to be known as 'scientific method'. While she does call for 'a more focused attention to the structure of argument' (55), she seems to ignore the need for careful exploration into the still problematic nature of argument and its pedagogical application, especially as practiced in the newly 'virtual' world. (Incidentally, mathematics does not appear to figure as a humanities discipline in this book.) Her comment (54) on 'Socratic thinking' as a 'social practice' is tantalizing, but she refrains from saying how such a method might meet competition for course enrolments posed by 'scientific method' in its many, often poorly understood, applications.

In the popular imagination, humanities studies face a substantial methodological deficit. The sciences offer students a 'method' that can, apparently, be readily and reliably acquired, effectively tested, and productively practiced. The popular perception of humanities disciplines, on the other hand, is of a less obviously productive set of exercises, where opinion and complex debate prevail over cold, hard, reliable facts. Nussbaum does not explore this deficit adequately. She does not directly pose critical questions about our global culture's lack of a shared heuristic. She offers 'Socrates' as a kind of universal cure, but does not point out that the dialectical process he and Plato initiated was, at its core, a challenging method, in which both anxiety and human need were key dynamics. Such omissions may be understandable, given the expressed goal of her manifesto. But they do weaken the cogency of her argument, and lay her open to the charge that she speaks more for elitist, rather than critically tested, educational values. Her project might have been better served if it had been framed as a call to humanists to focus more critical energy on such urgent social, methodological and pedagogical questions.

Nussbaum chooses, rather to frame the issue as a matter of public security. Democracy will fail, she warns, if we fail to reintegrate humanities disciplines into the curriculum of our schools and colleges. She is right. In fact, the warning may be already too late if Jane Jacobs is to be believed in her rather apocalyptic little book, *Dark Age Ahead* (New York & Toronto: Random House, Vintage Canada 2004). But Nussbaum's warning is certainly too late if it is not supported with more cogent and detailed analyses than she offers of *why* and *how* humanities studies can make the difference she claims. The irony is that the 'theory and practice of liberal education' as Nussbaum presents it may need to look outside its own resources to develop these analyses.

She might want to reconsider in more detail the pedagogy originating not so much in 'Socrates' but in his pupil, that dubious democrat, Plato. In the *Republic*, Plato portrays

the preservation of the state as contingent on ensuring its citizens have educational procedures that enable them to calculate what they actually need, and to assess without illusion or denial the dangers they face if they fail to redress those needs. Plato, and his student Aristotle, also focused philosophic attention on the logical techniques and psychological preparation required to link perception of need to courageously alert private and public behavior. In our own day, Hubert Dreyfus (*Plato on the Internet: Thinking in Action*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Routledge 2008) has picked up aspects of these analyses in his study of how a kind of self-reflexive anxiety is an essential epistemic condition of learning. There is much urgent work that remains to be done on method in humanities. It is certainly as urgent as the work that remains to be done on method in Science.

The theory and practice of liberal education for which Nussbaum argues in *Not For Profit* gives us some of the story. It is important and timely. It certainly makes us look for a fuller account from her that fills in the devilish details she leaves unexamined in this valuable book.

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