

## Interview with Martha C. Nussbaum

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1. *Professor Nussbaum, as can be seen in your publications Not for Profit and Frontiers of Justice and in your study of the Capabilities Approach, over the last few years much of your work has focused on issues of moral and political philosophy. One of the features of your political reflection has always been your insistence that the study of humanities is fundamental to the education of good citizens and that study of literature, creative writing, classical philosophy, art and the theatre is the only way to make young people sensitive to healthy social relations and the respect for democracy. Do you think that the aesthetic dimension should be placed before all things?*

First of all, I don't like the category of "aesthetic" to describe all this, because in the English language, at least, "aesthetic" is standardly contrasted with "ethical," and thus would not include the ethical aspects of works of art. So let's just say the contribution of the arts and literature. No, I think that this dimension of education is extremely important, but of course it is not the only thing that is important. Within the humanities, even, other things are also important: for example, the ability to think critically, examining arguments and understanding their structure. This Socratic ability is crucial for the creation of a health public culture that examines issues carefully with respect for opposing positions. And knowing many facts about history, economics, and the nature of the major world religions is also extremely important, since the arts give us many hypothetical examples, but we need facts to tell us which ones are present in our own society. Of course the sciences contribute still further crucial elements, but even in thinking about the humanities we have an irreducible plurality of values. And they support one another: we imagine best when we know how to think critically; and history that is studied well is studied with a keen analytical and critical ability, which enables the student to think about how historical evidence is used, how a historical narrative is composed, etc.

2. *Your in-depth study of the theory of emotions (from Therapy of Desire and The Fragility of Goodness to The Intelligence of Emotions) has offered a lucid explanation of how the emotions of shame, disgust and compassion intervene in social and political life in the determination not only of the development of the individual, but also of the development of social rules and the dynamics of public debate. What is the relationship between emotion and cognition? And how does this relationship function in the aesthetic sphere?*

Well, I do spend about two hundred pages on the relationship between emotion and cognition in *Upheavals of Thought*. Basically, I hold that the major emotions all contain evaluative appraisals, perceptions of salience or importance from the point of view of the person's own system of goals and ends. That is their cognitive dimension, and it needn't be linguistic; moreover, it is present in most animals as well as in humans. By cognition I just mean reception and processing of information. Any animal which fears harm or longs for food has cognitions that enter into its emotions. Are there other necessary elements of emotion? I argue that there are usually many feelings and bodily states that are present, but not with enough constancy that we would want to include any particular one of them in the definition of an emotion such as fear or compassion. I am not sure what you mean by "the aesthetic sphere", but if you mean in responding to works of art, I hold that we have real emotions in those instances, and they are ultimately directed at human possibilities, what Aristotle called "things such as might happen" in a human life.

3. *You have often contemplated the role of preference in social dynamics. How important are aesthetic preferences (those constituted in the dimension of perception) in the development of moral attitudes and choices?*

I reject the notion of the aesthetic if it means something distinct from the ethical. When we hear stories as young children, our emotions are responding to the efforts of the characters to live flourishing lives, and thus they are ethical in the broad Aristotelian sense of the term. I think perhaps what you are asking about is what role works of art play in shaping our ethical attitudes. Quite an important role. They give us insight into how other people live and feel, how they strive for happiness, and how conditions of many types affect them. That is crucial for living any sort of decent life.

4. *Many Italian professors of philosophy see Martha Nussbaum as a moral philosopher rather than a scholar of aesthetics. In fact an aesthetic text such as Love's Knowledge is*

*often interpreted as a book which uses aesthetics only to focus on a discussion of moral issues, and not as a purely aesthetic work. How do you respond to this?*

Well I am happy that people do not categorize me using a notion I reject! I actually am a philosopher who thinks about the ethical in a broad Aristotelian sense, and my own interest in works of art is pertinent to the struggles of human beings to flourish. There are probably some works of art that do not deal with human struggles (purely formal works of fine art or sculpture, perhaps – or perhaps not!), but those are not the works I write about. I think it would be pretty weird to read a British novel, or Proust's great novel, as a purely formal entity with no relationship to human life. Why on earth would one do that?