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Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities [Review]

Michael Fischer

Trinity University, mfischer@trinity.edu

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Reviews

Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities, by Martha C. Nussbaum; 178 pp. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010, \$22.95.

In *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* Martha Nussbaum joins many observers in arguing that the arts and humanities are under siege, threatened by budget cuts and a growing emphasis on professional training. When budget cuts do not eliminate university programs in the arts and humanities, they swell class size to the point that the traditional hallmarks of a humanistic education—class discussion, essay examinations, research assignments demanding critical thinking—become untenable. Instead, PowerPoint lecturing and multiple-choice exercises dominate, reinforcing the rote learning that standardized testing has already made the norm in K–12 education. A recent *Wall Street Journal* article, “How to Get a Real Education,” puts the stress on vocational preparation this way: “Forget art history and calculus. Most students need to learn how to run a business.”

Nussbaum reminds us what we lose when we forget about art history. Drawing on the writings of John Dewey, Rabindranath Tagore, and her own earlier work, Nussbaum argues persuasively that democracy needs the humanities. Studying the humanities cultivates the qualities that democratic citizenship depends on, among them empathy, respect for differences, critical thinking, and appreciation of complexity. Taken to an extreme, education for economic growth does not simply dispense with the arts and humanities, it fears them: “For a cultivated and developed sympathy is a particularly dangerous enemy of obtuseness, and moral obtuseness is necessary to carry out programs of economic development that ignore inequality. It is easier to treat people as objects to be manipulated if you have never learned any other way to see them” (p. 23). By sharpening moral consciousness, the arts and humanities nurture creative, questioning “citizens of the world,” not “docile bureaucrats” (p. 23).

To her credit, Nussbaum holds out for the full social and ethical value of the arts and humanities as well as making a vocational case for them. As Nussbaum notes, business executives often support hiring liberal arts graduates over students with narrower training because businesses, too, need creativity, critical

thinking, and intercultural competence. Although the economic contributions of the arts and humanities are important, even more is at stake, as Nussbaum eloquently shows.

Again to her credit, Nussbaum intends her book to be “a call to action” (p. 122), not just cheerleading. As a call to action, it runs up against the familiar problem of preaching only to the choir. Most readers of *Not for Profit*, not to mention most subscribers to *Philosophy and Literature*, will already agree with most of what she has to say but will wonder how to act on their conviction—and Nussbaum’s—that we abandon the arts and humanities at our peril. The problem becomes persuading others who think differently, whether Tea Party legislators or bottom-line-driven administrators. Labeling antihumanists morally obtuse and undemocratic may be emotionally satisfying and even accurate, but it does not undo the damage they are doing.

Nussbaum approaches this challenge by asking the excellent questions, “What is it about human life that makes it so hard to sustain democratic institutions based on equal respect and the equal protection of the laws, and so easy to lapse into hierarchies of various types—or, even worse, projects of violent group animosity? What forces make powerful groups seek control and domination?” (p. 28). In one of her most thought-provoking chapters, “Educating Citizens: The Moral (and Anti-Moral) Emotions,” Nussbaum locates the answers to these questions within each individual, more precisely, in the tug-of-war within each of us between “compassion and respect” on the one hand, and “fear, greed, and narcissistic aggression” on the other (p. 29). Sources as different as Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Emile* and experimental psychology help Nussbaum sketch a narrative of human development that makes democracy precarious but still possible. In her account, families, schools, and the surrounding culture can come together to develop individuals with the compassion, humility, and generosity to make democracy work.

“This is a huge agenda” (p. 46), as Nussbaum admits, and in her concluding chapter (“Democratic Education on the Ropes”) signs of hope are hard to find. In her view, education for democratic citizenship is faring “very poorly” around the world (p. 121). In the United States, for example, the No Child Left Behind Act has forced K–12 teachers to “teach to the test,” squelching the creativity and wide-ranging exploration that the arts and humanities foster. Although Nussbaum believes that more supple, qualitative forms of assessment are possible, she expresses her disappointment that the Obama administration is not pursuing them, despite President Obama’s “own personal values” (p. 136) and his liberal arts education at Occidental and Columbia.

Nussbaum’s own university, the University of Chicago, is for her one ray of hope in an otherwise grim scene:

At my own university . . . we do not have to go hat in hand to bureaucrats who lack all sympathy with what we do. Instead, we go to wealthy alums whose

educational values pretty well match our own since they are by and large alums who loved their undergraduate liberal arts education, whatever else they went on to do. They love the life of the mind, and they want others to enjoy it. (p. 132)

Although I share Nussbaum's respect for the University of Chicago, her comment here is disheartening. Nussbaum notes that it would be hard in another country to start from scratch universities like her own. I would add that it is hard in this country to see them as a model for the kinds of schools and colleges the overwhelming majority of students attend. Nussbaum goes on to say that even at the University of Chicago all is not well for the arts and humanities. A viewbook for prospective students was revised to show students in laboratories (and not "sitting and thinking") and campus tours were directed to "bypass traditional bastions of humanistic learning to focus on parts of the campus associated with medicine, science, and preprofessional studies" (p. 133). Again, these examples are unfortunate. I know every little bit helps, but the humanities won't be saved by redoing the viewbooks and campus tours of elite universities.

I am sure that Nussbaum agrees. My main concern is that despite so much evidence to the contrary in her book, she concludes that although liberal arts education is "endangered" in the United States, "it still has many strong defenders and a good chance of surviving" (p. 125). I don't see how Nussbaum earns even that qualified degree of optimism in *Not for Profit*. At one point she urges, "If we do not insist on the crucial importance of the humanities and the arts, they will drop away, because they do not make money" (p. 143). But insistence, however necessary, won't be enough to save them. The problem of persuading others remains. At least since the late 18th century, even the most confident defenses of the arts and humanities have swung between hope and dejection. *Not for Profit* is no exception. I applaud Nussbaum for reminding us why we should care about the arts and humanities. But in *Not for Profit* how we can save them is less clear than the many signs that they are in trouble.

TRINITY UNIVERSITY

MICHAEL FISCHER

The Drama of Ideas: Platonic Provocations in Theater and Philosophy, by Martin Puchner; 272 pp. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, \$29.95.

The author of *The Drama of Ideas* has read parts of Martha Nussbaum's *Fragility of Goodness* and picked up a few notions about Plato's dialogues: they are a kind of drama, and they may suggest a down-to-earth alternative Plato in tension with the philosopher officially identified with the doctrine of metaphysical Forms. From these notions Martin Puchner spins a grandiose historical narrative of