

Martha Nussbaum and Heraclitus: Early Notions on Interpretation

Synne Myrebøe

If we know what we ought to do, why do we not just do it? In ancient Greek philosophy, this was the troublesome question of *akrasia*, or lack of will. For Socrates, *akrasia* simply meant ignorance; as long as you do not practice what you teach, you have not really understood what you are teaching. Socrates' dismissal of Athenian tragedy as offering pedagogical and therapeutic lessons on human failure, make plain from the outset his endeavor to overcome the human condition in which the void between theory and praxis seems impassable. Through the art of reason and the taming of the passions, Socrates faces death unruffled.

Although Socrates is one of Martha Nussbaum's paragons, she rejects the idea that philosophy is a way of preparing for death. In her extensive work on ethical and political philosophy, she argues that the pervading influence of Platonic anti-tragedy must be transgressed in order to establish stability within contemporary politics. The problem of *akrasia* is not in the lack of knowing, as Nussbaum sees it, but rather uncultivated sentiments. Throughout her work, she returns to the classical question of how to live, stressing how this must be a leading question in all human activities. Since the mid-nineties, she has related this question to a number of topics from literature to law and politics. She recalls the Aristotelian notion of a cultivation of a second nature whereby "we can learn to feel appropriately, just

as we can learn to act appropriately”.¹ The art of cultivation is nothing less than a thoroughgoing transformation of the self, what Nussbaum in her late work characterizes as a transition from un-reflected prejudices to a self-scrutinized way of living. To those who work hard to change their bad habits, Nussbaum suggests that the problem of *akrasia* might be dissolved without losing touch with matter.

The fact that Nussbaum presents the Aristotelian art of cultivation as radically different from Plato’s philosophical approach might be considered as a rhetorical framing of her own project. Actualizing the Ancient Greek tradition where different philosophical schools offered to teach their students a certain view of the world, Nussbaum develops her own understanding of philosophy as a way of life in which cultivation is considered as a way of practicing theory, namely as a way of learning to see. What view then, or vision, does Nussbaum’s philosophical schooling offer?

For Nussbaum, contemporary crises in law, higher education and in politics, can be understood as arising from a general ignorance about how senses and emotions direct people’s perception and understanding about the world. She insists that historical as well as contemporary political philosophy have ignored the role of emotions for an unquestioned acceptance of rational choice theories. In response Nussbaum calls for a masscultivation of political emotions.² To some this may sound illiberal, but Nussbaum will contend that all societies cultivate emotions, and out of necessity. She argues that a vast part of the the history of Western philosophy has struggled to cultivate an ignorance of emotions. For this reason, the lessons of Greek tragedies, which Socrates himself rejected, constitute a leitmotiv for the entirety of her philosophical work. When in *Love’s Knowledge* (1992) she

¹ Martha Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), p. 65.

² Martha Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 218.

recalls her own education, we are presented with an early passion for tragedy:

I was finding in the Greek tragic poets a recognition of the ethical importance of contingency, a deep sense of the problem of conflicting obligations, and a recognition of the ethical importance of the passions, that I found more rarely, if at all, in the admitted philosophers, whether ancient or modern.³

What the authors of tragedy made it possible for Nussbaum to effectively index was some basic ethical and philosophical questions surrounding conditions of life and on how to live. But the young Nussbaum's expectations on higher education as a continuous path of scrutinizing existential and ethical wonderings turned out to be a challenge; the intellectual cultures at New York and Harvard University seemed uninterested in fostering the institutional conditions under which dialogues between literature, ethics and philosophy could take place. Nussbaum ended up in the Classics department, where she wrote her dissertation on Aristotle's *De Motu Animalium*.⁴ In her translation of Aristotle's text as well as in the following five interpretative essays, Nussbaum criticizes the disciplinary order between which she finds herself split. She had, in fact, already presented this critical notion on contemporary disciplinarity in her first two articles, "ΨΥΧΗ in Heraclitus, I" and "ΨΥΧΗ in Heraclitus, II", both articles published in the journal *Phronesis* in 1972, where she discusses the concept of *psyche* and *logos* in Heraclitus.⁵

Now, why does Nussbaum direct her attention to Heraclitus? His poetic notions were considered obscure already among his

³ Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 14.

⁴ Martha Nussbaum, *Aristotle's De Motu Animalium: Text with Translation, Commentary, and Interpretive Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

⁵ Martha Nussbaum, "ΨΥΧΗ in Heraclitus, I" and "ΨΥΧΗ in Heraclitus, II", both articles in *Phronesis*, 1 January 1972, Vol. 1.

own contemporaries, and the authenticity of his fragments have been questioned within the history of philosophy, since their remnants have been preserved only on account of later interpretations. A large part of the Heraclitian fragments were collected by Friedrich Schleiermacher in 1807, and for the philosophical direction later formulated by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, the dialectics of Heraclitus was an essential key to a world of concealment. With the exception of her references to Kant, Nussbaum rarely touched upon the heritage of German idealism. Nonetheless, it is precisely through her reading of Heraclitus that we can trace in what way Nussbaum offers her own critical commentary to the rationalistic path of the Enlightenment, which came to feature within Anglo-American epistemological debates during the 20th century.

The international reception of Nussbaum's work has showed little, if any interest in these early texts. In this article, I argue that Nussbaum's interpretation on Heraclitus is indispensable for an understanding of her philosophical work and the art of reading she proposes. In what follows I will suggest that her interpretive reading of Heraclitus offers a more radical notion of praxis than what otherwise appears in her philosophical oeuvre. To this end, I will draw attention to three aspects of Nussbaum's reading of Heraclitus. The first aspect considers Heraclitus' philosophy as a break with the Homeric tradition. The second will show how Nussbaum interprets Heraclitus to be the first psychologist. Finally, the third aspect will reveal in what way her reading of Heraclitus touches on questions surrounding her own methodological approach further developed in subsequent works, and how precisely this approach relates to her specific ideas regarding cultivation and self-transformation.

Breaking up with Homer

One of Heraclitus' more famous notions is what Plato described as *panta rei*, that everything flows. The transience of water is a recurrent theme in Heraclitus, for example in fragment 36:

For souls it is death to become water, for water it is death to become earth; out of earth water comes-to-be, and out of water soul.⁶

The consideration that the soul is mortal is, Nussbaum writes, unthinkable among Heraclitus' contemporaries. When *psyche* is mentioned in the pre-Socratic literature, it is always as an immortal substance. In the Homeric narrative, the soul is what takes leave of the body once one's last breath has been taken. The eternal life of the soul entails that ideas remain as shadows of the past, wherefrom they can be recalled, traced or understood as a given—albeit hidden or unnoticed—treasure.

Hence with Heraclitus, Nussbaum sees a rupture in this image of cyclical and reproductive time where he introduces a new temporality. Contrary to Homer, Heraclitus considers the past to be part of a constantly productive understanding. One could say that the past is in the present, just as the present is born by the past. In this way, Heraclitus' philosophical approach makes an interpretive connection between past and future and between the individuals and the community consisting of the living as well as the dead and unborn. The explicit critique of the Homeric tradition, which appears in Heraclitus' fragments, corresponds to a problem Nussbaum recognizes in contemporary ethical and political debates. Her aim is to formulate philosophy as a way of life, according to which the history of philosophy is not understood as ruins from the past, but as a potential resource for contemporary thought and for the effectuation of social change in the present. Thus, just like Heraclitus, the task to which Nussbaum returns is the risk of trusting appearances without considering their inseparable hidden parts.⁷

⁶ Heraclitus, *The Cosmic Fragments*, ed. G. S. Kirk (Cambridge, 1954), fragment 36, p. 339.

⁷ As Nussbaum sees prejudices as part of the unconscious, she is critical to the literary and philosophical theory of ordinary language philosophy, which she claims is too close to utilitarianism. Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, p. 25 and p. 33.

Unlike the nostalgic conservatism characteristic of some of her neo-Aristotelian peers, Nussbaum stresses an ambition to combine Aristotelian ethics with ideas of Enlightenment. From this perspective, her reading of Heraclitus can be seen as a critical note on how the heritage of Enlightenment has evolved within the Anglo-American tradition. In situating the notion of psyche within an immanent ontology, Nussbaum seeks to renegotiate the very dualisms between matter and soul, emotions and reason, literature and philosophy.

Within the European philosophical tradition, epistemology, ethics and aesthetics are constituent parts of political philosophy. Hence, a pertinent question is why, with her autobiographical note of disciplinary alienation as well as her concerns for both literature and politics, Nussbaum nonetheless remains evasive with respect to her own connection with the development of the German philosophical tradition during the 19th and 20th centuries and its contemporary work on Ancient philosophy. Thus, as Seyla Benhabib writes, Nussbaum's philosophy can be characterized as a branch of neo-Aristotelianism that dovetails with certain ethico-political issues discussed by Hans-Georg Gadamer.⁸ An active dialogue with Gadamer and his critique of positivism, as well as, in particular, Gadamer's specific works on Heraclitus, could have offered an alternative to the analytical tradition by which Nussbaum finds herself marginalized. Yet, although many of Nussbaum's questions are discussed within the so-called continental philosophical tradition, the critical and hermeneutic traditions remain conspicuously absent in her work, with the exception of some comments. It is relevant to ask why this may be? Perhaps the absence of these conversations can be understood against the background of a general skepticism in the United States toward the German tradition during the decades after World War II, parallel to the political positioning of

⁸ Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), p. 49.

the cold war. Whether, however, this serves as an adequate explanation regarding her neglect of Heidegger and Gadamer remains unclear. What is interesting is how, through her interpretation of psyche as a center for cognition, Nussbaum presents a psychologically oriented philosophy outside the continental tradition as well as outside contemporary catholic Aristotelianism.

Through Heraclitus' interpretation of psyche as a cognitive and linguistic faculty that remains for every individual unique, Nussbaum argues that he opened up the very possibility for a radically new understanding of knowledge, pointing toward the philosophical dawn of 4th century BC.

Heraclitus as the First Psychologist

Although Nussbaum was to present her theory of cognitive emotions, according to which emotions are described as rational judgments of value much later, the outline of the theory can nonetheless be discerned in her reading of Heraclitus. The spider-simile in fragment 67a, a key figure in Nussbaum's reading of Heraclitus as the first psychologist, serves also as the paragon for her ethical approach and interpretive work:

As a spider [...] standing in the middle of its web is aware the instant a fly breaks any one of its threads and runs there swiftly as though lamenting the breaking of the thread; so a man's soul when any part of his body is hurt hastily goes there as though intolerant of the hurt to a body to which it is strongly and harmoniously conjoined.⁹

This fragment, which derives from a 12th century text discussing Plato's *Timaeus*, remains one of the most disputed fragments, and yet it is central to Nussbaum's reading. The emphasis that Heraclitus places on the soul as a central cognitive faculty is a point developed further in her dissertation on Aristotle where

⁹ Hans Ruin, comment to fragment 67a in Herakleitos, *Fragment* (Lund: Propexus, 1997), p. 150.

this faculty, or organ, is seen as a simile for the heart as well as for the city. I will not advance any further with this political metaphor here. What is important is the notion of a cognitive potential that has to be cultivated in order for its possibilities to be developed.

Nussbaum's psychological approach should not be confused with a contemporary understanding of psychology, now recognized as a discipline within the social sciences. In Plato as well as in Aristotle, we find expositions on the soul according to which politics cultivates the citizens of *polis*. Like these ancient philosophers, Nussbaum argues that a rigorous knowledge of *psyche* as a cognitive faculty must be the ground on which political decisions rest. In harnessing the spider-simile as part of her own methodological approach, a specific interpretation becomes existentially constitutive for both an individual as well as for the community in which the person takes part. Body and thought, senses and perception, are indivisible in any given interpretation of, and action that take place in, the world. What Nussbaum sees as the lessons of tragedy is the capability to act according to a practical knowledge, which is conditioned by a volatile understanding of human need and the fragility of goodness.

Nussbaum describes how the Heraclitian spider, *psyche*, is "self-moving and capable of directing its movement", but it constitutes no capability in and by itself. Hence, in the same way that the spider moves over its net, connecting its different parts, *psyche* creates the conditions for human understanding, combining language with experience.¹⁰ Understood in this way, Heraclitus' critique of Homer is directed toward the idea of the latter whereupon knowledge is considered as the capability to speak your mother-tongue and repeat, or reproduce, what is already taught. Instead, Nussbaum's Heraclitus insists on the necessity to cultivate one's *psyche* as a faculty to understand. Knowledge, *logos*, or what there is to understand, is the object

¹⁰ Nussbaum, "ΨΥΧΗ in Heraclitus, I", p. 8.

for an interpretive understanding that is created by the web of *psyche*. What Heraclitus might have been the first to understand, at least according to Nussbaum, was what we could call a “cognitive capacity”; learning is not a passive reception through the senses. Only through interpretive acts does understanding take place. The act of reading thus changes what is read, as well as the one who reads. Hence, like the reader, the text does not remain constant; the river we step into is never the same.

The approach to the philosophical tradition that appears in Nussbaum’s reading of Heraclitus reflects her own practice of philosophy along with her later ideas on the fragility of goodness.¹¹ Thus, as Plato feared, the insight of Heraclitus has risky consequences. Relating to Heraclitus’ classic predication that everything flows, Nussbaum writes:

Although there is no stable constituent in a river – though the waters are always different – yet there is a sense in which the river is the same. Its identity does not depend on the preservation of the same waters. [...] As a man’s fame is handed down from generation to generations among mortals, it is constantly reinterpreted and re-expressed; it is never, in fact, the same. And yet, as the fame of one man, it is the same, and the changing continuity of human tradition does not destroy its identity. For example, not two people, throughout the centuries, have given the same account of [...] Heraclitus.¹²

What will remain is up to the living, not the dead, she writes. Hence the past cannot be understood from another perspective other than as it reveals itself in a present reading. I suggest that Nussbaum’s attention to Heraclitus’ ideas on the soul should be regarded as a defense of an actualizing art of reading, a reading that withdraws from the act of seeking the truth in a given past. Although Heraclitus insists that the truth loves to hide itself,

¹¹ Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and philosophy* (1986).

¹² Nussbaum, “Heraclitus II”, p. 162.

Nussbaum writes that his dialectical insight does not mean that he countenances a withdrawal from ethical judgments:

We must understand the relativity of relative terms. [...] Ethical judgements are relative, but they must be made; and the recognition of the relative nature of our ethical terms should not trick us into believing they are meaningless.¹³

To be able to make good judgments, Nussbaum insists on the necessity to cultivate perception and emotions. And just as Heraclitus highlights *psyche* as a particular human faculty, he also emphasizes the different temptations with which human beings are confronted. His understanding of *psyche* and its potential for self-awareness implies, as Nussbaum sees it, the possibility for the individual to transcend the immediate pleasures of prejudices and take responsibility for its own life.¹⁴

Heraclitus writes that a dry soul has self-control, whereas a watery soul lacks the same; sleep and drunkenness are taken as examples of watery conditions.¹⁵ In the Greek tradition, to abandon oneself to wet conditions are the similes for death. However, Nussbaum emphasizes that Heraclitus distances himself from any such ascetic restraints: getting drunk and the need to sleep are, he insists, inseparable parts of the human condition. The message that Nussbaum wants to put forward is rather the importance of self-knowledge as a constant endeavor.¹⁶ Recognizing human beings as neither gods nor animals brings up the ethical question on how to live, it also shows up the human life as a political life, another recurring theme in Nussbaum's Aristotelian writings. Heraclitus' thoughts on the mortal soul indicate for Nussbaum that the human condition and the transcendence

¹³ Nussbaum, "Heraclitus II", p. 165.

¹⁴ Nussbaum, "Heraclitus II", p. 159.

¹⁵ Nussbaum's comments on Heraclitus' fragments 36, 77 and 117 in Nussbaum, "Heraclitus II", pp. 153, 159.

¹⁶ Nussbaum's comments on Heraclitus' fragment 116 in Nussbaum, "Heraclitus II", p. 159.

of the soul are re-thought. To make reincarnation or past-mortal fame as incitement for virtuous action, as was the view of Homer, is here replaced with an idea of the particular life as having intrinsic value for both the mortal *psyche* and the immortal *logos*. Here, the Delphic call to “Know thyself” is presented as a meditative exercise led by the individual, where one scrutinizes and examines *logos* from a unique perspective. Thus, the contemplative practice in Nussbaum’s theory is first of all an activity, a potentiality actualized in matter. What Heraclitus does is to bear in mind contemporary and traditional ideas while changing the meaning of their content. Maybe this can give us a hint of the methodological protocols that Nussbaum herself develops and follows?

Philosophy or Barbarism: Exercising the Art of Interpretation

As we have seen in Nussbaum’s actualization of the spider-simile, capabilities for ethical action requires that one is inducted into a way of living that fosters perspectival pluralism and a sensitive understanding. Without proper learning, your senses and your language will deceive you, Nussbaum writes. Or as Heraclitus puts it: “Eyes and ears are bad witnesses to men who have barbarian souls.”¹⁷

Now, Nussbaum argues that in Heraclitus’ time *barbarian* solely meant someone who does not speak Greek. Thus being a barbarian only meant that you need education to cultivate what Aristotle later called the second nature. An important aspect here is that Nussbaum rejects the later interpretation of Aristotle’s *telos* as a determinate understanding. Rather, what we consider to be the right way to live and to be is always the focus for a deliberative discussion, or for reaching an overlapping consensus, as Nussbaum says referring to John Rawls. Hence, what is recognized as either civilized or barbaric varies across different times and places. But in order to have this discussion on how to

¹⁷ Heraclitus, fragment 107, cited in Nussbaum, “Heraclitus I”, p. 9.

live, we must first learn to direct our love from our own needs toward a heterogeneous common good. Also, and this is at the core of Heraclitian dialectics, humans need to understand the secret of nature as loving to hide itself. Every word carries its own negation; day means nothing without night, justice nothing without injustice etc. Heraclitus' lesson seems to be that the world is not just exposed out there for humans to explore through their senses. Understanding also requires a connecting and interpreting faculty that makes sense of the senses. How language is understood is thus key to a wider understanding of the world. The importance of cultivating the sense of the senses is apparent in Nussbaum's interpretation of fragment 34. The fragment reads:

People, who fail to make connections, when they hear, seem like deaf people. What they say bear witness that although they are present, they are absent.¹⁸

What Nussbaum emphasizes here is speech, and its connection with a capability to listen and interpret. As long as a person has not understood what he says, he is still a barbarian, that is to say, a stranger to what is said and even to his own speech. What appears for thought and perception are not phenomena that expose themselves in their own right, rather they are the result of a perceptive capacity. While, in these early texts on Heraclitus, Nussbaum has a thin understanding of language—something she will develop later—what is central here is her understanding of *psyche* as an active, connecting organ and interpretive faculty. At the same time, she interprets *logos* as an ever-changing and indefinite object of knowledge, from which the conditions for understanding (*nous*) are created.¹⁹ If *psyche* so to say rises out of *logos* then at the same time *psyche* explores and creates *logos*, with every resultant and new interpretation expanding and changing what can be explored.

¹⁸ Heraclitus, fragment 34, cited in Nussbaum, "Heraclitus I", p. 12.

¹⁹ Nussbaum, "Heraclitus I", p. 14.

At the end of her second article on Heraclitus, Nussbaum describes his inventive understanding of the soul as both a beginning and a goal for a single individual, understood as a knowledge producing and, performing, subject. This understanding has radical consequences for how we might conceive the limits of knowledge:

He emphasizes the capacity of each man for self-seeking and self-knowledge, and teaches the importance of self-restraint. [...] Man's potential for self-development in terms of $\psi\upsilon\chi\eta$ [*psyche*] is unlimited; and understanding leads to new understanding.²⁰

Nussbaum finds significant in Heraclitus the idea that *psyche* works in the individual life both as something unique and particular. Hence, language for Heraclitus is nothing that is traded directly from one generation to another. It is, in fact, never the same. In contrast to Homer's thoughts on the eternal life of souls in Hades, Nussbaum considers Heraclitus as developing an immanent art of interpretation according to which cognition constitutes the single person's relation to the world. Departing from Heraclitus' understanding of the soul, Nussbaum discerns in human experience a connecting tissue between language and thought, both with respect to individuals as well as in terms of a shared humanity.²¹ Life and death, like night and day, are latent in the dialectics of Heraclitian thought, and equally so in the idea that there is "unity in difference—difference in unity".²²

An overarching goal of all education must, according to Nussbaum, be to transcend the field of immediate experience and to strive toward a common sensibility, or a sense of a com-

²⁰ Nussbaum, "Heraclitus II", s. 169.

²¹ Nussbaum, "Heraclitus I", p. 5.

²² Hans Ruin, "Unity in Difference – Difference in Unity: Heraclitus and the Truth of Hermeneutics", in Hans Ruin & Nicholas Smith (eds.), *Hermeneutik och tradition: Gadamer och den grekiska filosofin* (Huddinge: Södertörns högskola, 2014), pp. 19-52.

mon world. Conscious of one's own barbaric inclinations—that is, to see from the already seen and to hear according to the already heard—the cultivation of a capacity making possible complex perception must be nurtured in education in order to avoid being misled by prejudices. In the act of transcendence, Nussbaum recognizes a double risk: first, a risk of turning inwards and second an uncritical belief that one has grasped it all. To protect oneself from these risks, Nussbaum defends a dialectical transformation that mimics the existential human condition. In Heraclitus' prophesies, she understands the death of the gods as signaling their irrelevance regarding judgments about human life. Ethical judgments are, as Nussbaum will write many years later, of personal concern and they must depart from the principle of reciprocity between humans.²³ Hence as a reciprocal possibility, common sense is always a radical, thus fragile, potential.

Expecting the Unexpected as an Ethical Condition

Now, what is it that makes Heraclitus such an important thinker for Nussbaum? First of all, we have seen how his understanding of *psyche* provides an entry into philosophy as a way of living, which in itself presents a break with the mythological tradition of Homer, according to which reproduction is the central praxis. In the ancient understanding of humans, in which human beings are placed between the animals and the gods, between mortality and eternity, Nussbaum considers Heraclitus to be the first to elevate human history and language as objects for cognitive understanding. In his thoughts on how the soul of a single individual affects how the world appears for that individual Nussbaum recognizes a gesturing toward the birth of the individual, something that Aristotle will formulate in his own reading of Heraclitus. The main argument that Nussbaum develops here is the risk of being seduced by single measurements of value and knowledge.

²³ Martha Nussbaum, "Foreword", in Iris Marion Young, *Responsibility for Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

With his interpretation of *psyche*, Heraclitus also initiates a critique of the traditional view about the afterlife. The fact that later translators have argued that Heraclitus kept his religious convictions on immortality are, for Nussbaum, rather proof of the predominance of Christian interpretation where translations of ancient texts were made to conform to the values of Christendom.²⁴ For Nussbaum, what these translators omit is the radical potential that Heraclitus represents. In her own reading of ancient philosophy, specifically, in her treatment of how the ancients grappled with ethical, political and epistemological issues, Nussbaum takes as her point of departure precisely this significant potential found in Heraclitus.

As an answer to what is left after death, Nussbaum says, “Nothing” is the most likely solution for Heraclitus’ cryptic riddle.²⁵ But what are the possibilities of a “nothing”? In Nussbaum’s reading of Heraclitus, “nothing” is what calls for and serves as an opening for ethics. She points out that ethical questions are irrelevant for the gods, likewise the notion of moral virtues. To be brave or good, Nussbaum argues, is not a question for those who have nothing to lose. Recognizing Heraclitus’ thoughts on the unconditional contradiction that follows every concept is what Nussbaum considers as a necessary approach in understanding the complexity of how the world is perceived. In the spider-simile, she emphasizes sensitivity between thinking and what is thought, a reciprocal sensitivity that joins perception and the perceived.

Nussbaum’s early articles on Heraclitus show reading to be an individual act, for which no interpretation is alike. Since the past can only be understood from the perspectives taken by a present reading, what remains to be noticed rests on the responsibility of the living, not the dead. Nussbaum urges us to let the text appear through an act of reading, and understands this to be

²⁴ Nussbaum, “Heraclitus II”, p. 158.

²⁵ Nussbaum, “Heraclitus II”, p. 158.

a condition for thought. Her claim finds sustenance in Heraclitus' fragment 18:

If you do not expect the unexpected, you will not find it;
for it is hard to be sought out and difficult.²⁶

In the unexpected, we can seize the philosophical wondering as a condition for true knowledge. Here, in Nussbaum's first published articles, we can see the beginning of a broad, epistemological critique. Far from being empirical fragments available for immediate observation, the study of the past is considered as shaping the past as such. The inseparable relation between knowledge and the subject of knowledge in Nussbaum's approach does not resolve itself into relativism. What she sees in this approach is a basic argument on how the history of philosophy implies ethical and individual responsibility. The politics of cultivation, how to let the past appear in the present, is here presented as an ethical question on point of fact that history, and the history of philosophy, is a narrative that we create and are created by.

In Nussbaum's reading of Heraclitus, we can see the contours of her extensive thoughts on cultivation as a quest for ethico-political engagement. Her ideas on cultivation relate to the Ancient Greek and Roman tradition, but at the same time she helps to give new interpretive shape to Ancient philosophy. What appears in this art of reading is an interpretation of the past in which its actuality appears in a changing now. For Aristotle, the difference between memory and recollection was that the latter presupposed a creative mind. The radical potential in Nussbaum's actualizing art of reading, grounded in her early interpretation of Heraclitus, is embedded in the dialectical relation between a repetition of the past and the unraveling of the same in order to create new meaning. This repetitive and at the same time un-

²⁶ Heraclitus, *The Cosmic Fragments*, Fragment 18, p. 231. The Greek word *aporon*, here translated as "difficult", can also be understood as "impassable".

raveling motion characterizes Nussbaum's philosophical work. In her reading of Heraclitus, she criticizes the conservative view on knowledge represented by Homer for the benefit of a more sensitive and pluralistic art of reading which she defends from psychological, ethical and linguistic perspectives. What makes her attempt at widening the number of voices participating in contemporary discussions distinctive is none other than her way of mobilizing the past. Here, the target of Heraclitus' critique can just as well be the positivist tradition that, prior to Nussbaum's own entry into higher education, had contributed significantly to the split between philosophy and literature.

This way of presenting a critique, which is both timeless and bound to particular temporal and spatial contexts, is further developed in Nussbaum's *oeuvre*. But despite her sustained and inventive praxis of exploring ethical, aesthetic and political aspects of education through what it is possible to hear, say and see in certain times and places, she stops short from this constituting a wholesale critique.

Tragedy and politics

Nussbaum's difficulties in finding an intellectual home may be regarded as one reason why her work is hard to define. Is it philosophy? Ethics? Literary work? Political theory? Although she insists that she left Aristotelianism behind in the mid-nineties to the advantage of a political theory inspired by Kant, Marx and Rawls,²⁷ I claim that a certain cognizance of her reading of ancient philosophy is important in understanding her later work. In her early study of Heraclitus we find the origins of her art of interpretation. Nussbaum's understanding of the inseparable relation between the particular in every single soul or *psyche*, and *logos* as a constantly changing, common and universal heritage, is at the

²⁷ Nussbaum, "Response to papers", *International Journal of Social Economics*, vol. 40, 2013, p. 664.

core of her ideas on cultivation as an individual as well as a political quest.

What we have seen is also how Nussbaum has given a particularly modern interpretation of Heraclitus, which makes him relevant as a contemporary interlocutor in discussions on how to re-think the relations between the past, present and future. Through an actualization of the Heraclitian concepts *psyche* and *logos*, Nussbaum transgresses what she sees as an insufficient understanding of reason with a psychological philosophy. What this amounts to is a particular mode of philosophy that seeks to cultivate a way for humans to live within a tragic cosmic order. When much later she presents her emotional theory in *Upheavals of Thought*, the cultivation of *psyche* is replaced with a cultivation of capabilities, what Aristotle promoted as an actualization of potentials.²⁸ In *Political Emotions* she argues for a cultivation of political love.

The subject of knowledge, *psyche*, moves and creates its web of knowledge led by its sensitivity towards the particulars. The etymological meaning of truth, *aletheia*, is “to uncover” or “not forget”. What Heraclitus reminds us when he says that nature loves to hide itself, is that our senses can deceive us owing to our prejudices. Thus, Nussbaum writes, philosophy takes its start when we discover that the world might be different than what it seems to be. But is the ethical stance of wondering, which Nussbaum defends, a matter of radical displacement?

What Nussbaum’s reading of Heraclitus emphasizes is the opening that his philosophy affords, an opening toward a form of interpretation that exists between the past and the future, and for which his significant notions on unity and difference serve as a challenge to the established philosophical tradition. For what is absent will hereafter be seen as present in its absence, and also as a condition for what appears. That Nussbaum emphasizes emo-

²⁸ Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

tions and body as matter for reason can be seen as an attempt to make what has been ignored visible. However, a problem often raised by her critics is that her arguments on cultivation have a significantly normative, namely already expected, notion of the good that keep up an ignorance for difference. Hence, it is with the goal of becoming capable citizens in a democracy defined by political liberalism that Nussbaum creates her ideas on cultivation.

Tragedy, as Socrates saw it, was the inability of letting go of yourself. His dialectical art did not strive for a quantity of perspectives, but rather the capability to expose oneself for what must be considered a radical fragility: the position of *atopos*, displacement and not knowing. Thus, as the story tells us, Heraclitus left his fragments to the public and went out to the country to live in solitude. Socrates did what he ought to when he rejected to leave Athens and emptied the poison cup. Actualized as Nussbaum's contemporary they are both placed in the middle of an intrusive public discussion on how to live and how to deliberate on the politics of cultivation.

Making yourself vulnerable is not a virtue for Nussbaum. Rather, she searches for the acceptance of the fragility of life as that over which we have no control. As a rhetorical grip, aiming at expanding and reforming institutions, Nussbaum's political approach makes sense; after all, we can see her position informing her extensive dialogues with law, higher education and human rights. A relevant comparison of her Heraclitian spider-simile is the voyagers of the Grand Tour tradition, and its important influence on the liberal humanist tradition developed during early modernity. As we know, the spider, as well as the Faustian traveller, is unconditionally captured in its own net, pushed by its own affects and desires.

However, being stuck in tragedy is for Nussbaum the very definition of the human condition. Her emphasis on transition rather than transcendence means that the task of cultivation is not a turning away from the world, but rather as a possibility or potentiality of dwelling in the strange void between theory and praxis, the *atopos* that at one and the same time separates us from our-

selves as from each other, just as it is a prerequisite for reciprocity. Thus, the paradigmatic example of Socrates and his true knowledge is, in Nussbaum's interpretation, not only impossible, but also undesirable. For Nussbaum, tragedy as the fragility of goodness is nothing to overcome. On the contrary, it signifies the continuous struggle through which a common world is actualizable, over and over again.