

Martha Nussbaum and Liberal Education

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After her important works on ethics in Greek and Hellenistic philosophy, *The Fragility of Goodness* (1986) and *The Therapy of Desire* (1994), Nussbaum in 1997 published *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*. Like the former books it is replete with references to classical philosophers such as Socrates, Aristotle and Seneca, but it is also based on empirical investigations of how courses are designed at several contemporary American liberal arts colleges.¹ The main argument in *Cultivating Humanity* is that all students, regardless of the direction of their academic education, must be given the opportunity to develop some basic intellectual capacities which Nussbaum perceives as desirable, not to say absolutely necessary, in a well-functioning multicultural, democratic society. She highlights above all three capacities: to be able to critically examine one's own prejudices, to see oneself in others, and to regard oneself as a world citizen.

¹ To be able to write this empirical part of the book, which contains many inspiring illustrations of how high-quality education could look like in practice, Nussbaum gathered together informants from fifteen liberal arts colleges who provided reports for her. Along with classical philosophical texts, these reports are the basis for her reflections on how a good higher education should be designed. See Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), preface.

The purpose of this article is to introduce, analyze and contextualize Nussbaum's defense of a reform of liberal education in general and these three capacities in particular. In which intellectual context does she formulate her proposal of a reform in liberal education? How does she think that a contemporary liberal arts education should be designed in the best way? Which topics should be studied and which teaching methods should be used? And finally, how does all this relate to Nussbaum's thinking in general, including her later book on the humanities, *Not for Profit*?

Beyond Postmodern Relativism and Cultural Conservatism

Nussbaum's defense of liberal education in *Cultivating Humanity* is mainly directed toward two targets: on the one hand, some postmodern theories, and on the other hand, a kind of cultural and educational conservatism. It is between these two poles that Nussbaum formulates her ideas on liberal education reform.

When Nussbaum published her book in 1997 she regarded postmodernism, associated with French thinkers such as Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Derrida, as a main threat to the classical heritage as well as to the enlightenment ideals that she vindicates. She insists that postmodern thinkers oppose any form of objectivity without any convincing argument, and thus objects to what she perceives as their pronounced relativism and criticism of the concept of truth. Regarding the question of truth and objectivity, Nussbaum claims that analytical and linguistically oriented philosophers, such as Donald Davidson, Hilary Putman and Willard Van Quine, are far more insightful than Derrida and other postmodernists. According to Nussbaum, it is significant that these French thinkers' ill-founded theories have not had any real impact on the discipline

of philosophy in the United States, but only on other humanistic disciplines such as literature and rhetoric.²

Nussbaum is even more critical to the way postmodern ideas have been used by many American academics. She dismisses in particular Judith Butler's theories of gender and performativity. In a thoroughgoing negative review for *The New Republic*, in which Nussbaum deals with several of Butler's books, Nussbaum presents her as typical of the postmodern turn in American feminism. While feminism was formerly associated with concrete women's struggle, Nussbaum argues that, like many other contemporary feminists, under to a lesser and greater degree the influence of Foucault and other French philosophers, Judith Butler is mainly engaged in theoretical questions without any practical political significance. In fact, Butler's theories serve to support an "amoral anarchist politics." It is a feminism that Nussbaum dismisses as confused, almost sophistic and philosophically substandard. "Butler's hip quietism", Nussbaum concludes, is "cooperating with evil", further adding that "Feminism demands more and women deserve better."³

Nussbaum's far from sophisticated objections to Derrida, Foucault and Butler are reminiscent of many of the criticisms of postmodernism that were during the same period pronounced by some American conservative intellectuals, including Allan Bloom, Roger Kimball and Dinesh D'Souza. They too turned against what they regarded as the relativistic approach extolled by these theorists, considering them to have undermined the values of the true, good and beautiful as well as—by extension—

² It can be noted that Nussbaum is not as harsh on Foucault as she is about Derrida. About Foucault's writings, she maintains that there are some insights that make them "the only truly important work" produced "under the banner of 'postmodernism'". Foucault's analysis on the whole is, nevertheless, characterized by "historical incompleteness" and "lack of conceptual clarity." Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, p. 40.

³ Martha Nussbaum, "The Professor of Parody", in *Philosophical Interventions: Reviews, 1986–2011* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 198–215; quotes on p. 213 and 215.

the whole Western cultural and educational tradition. They argued moreover, like Nussbaum, that philosophy—especially classical philosophy—should play a far more prominent role in both education and society than is generally the case now.

Bloom, one of the most prominent of these conservative intellectuals advocating a traditionalist anti-postmodernist and anti-relativistic position, was professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago and author of the bestseller *The Closing of the American Mind*, with the telling subtitle *How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* from 1987. The book was to be an influential part of the controversy known as the Culture Wars, a highly polarized controversy during the 80s and 90s revolving around a large number of issues—from religion, abortion and sexuality to youth culture, music and the kind of literature students should be studying at colleges and universities; a set of issues that the combatants perceived as addressing the meaning of American identity and its culture. That both the design of higher education and the curriculum offered at liberal arts colleges became such provocative areas of public policy was at least in part due to the fact that its outcomes were thought to have direct implications for which ideals, values and analytical categories would guide future American leaders.⁴

In *The Closing of the American Mind* Bloom criticizes what he regards as a pronounced leftism in contemporary higher education institutions. He maintains that many intellectuals in the wake of the backlash against the radical ideas of 1968 have been strongly affected by Nietzsche's perspectival theories. Bloom sees a similar kind of relativism and nihilism among his students.

⁴ James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America: Making Sense of the Battles over the Family, Art, Education, Law, and Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), p. 211. See also William Casement, *The Great Canon Controversy: The Battle of the Books in Higher Education* (New Brunswick & London: Transaction Publishers, 1996) and Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), pp. 222-252.

The situation is even more problematic due to the current diversification and specialization of higher education. As a counterforce against all these tendencies, Bloom proposes a return to “the good old Great Books approach”: what the students should study the classical books of western literature, philosophy and science.⁵

The great books movement, to which Bloom refers, had its most typical and grandiose expression with the *Great Books of the Western World*, which was published in the early 1950s with Mortimer J. Adler and Robert Maynard Hutchins as the main editors. In 54 volumes they republished 443 classical texts—literary as well as philosophical and scientific, from Homer to Freud.⁶ During the 70s and 80s this type of canonical thinking, with focus on dead white men (none of the authors in *Great Books of the Western World* were female), was subjected to fierce criticism from not only feminists but also postmodernists and post-colonialists. That the concept of the great books nevertheless was already at the fore when Bloom wrote his book was due to the fact that the *Great Books of the Western World* had just been re-published in a second, expanded edition in 1990. According to Bloom, it is this kind of classical work, from ancient tragedians and philosophers to some of the writers, thinkers and scientists during the 20th century, that students should spend most of their study time reading and discussing. One thing is for sure, he writes: “wherever the Great Books make up a central part of the curriculum, the students are excited and satisfied, feel they are doing something that is independent and fulfilling, getting something from the university they cannot get elsewhere.”⁷

⁵ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today’s Students* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), p. 344.

⁶ See Tim Lacy, *The Dream of a Democratic Culture: Mortimer J. Adler and the Great Books Idea* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) and Daniel Born, “Utopian Civic-Mindedness: Robert Maynard Hutchins, Mortimer Adler, and the Great Books Enterprise”, in DeNel Rehberg Sedo (ed.), *Reading Communities from Salons to Cyberspace* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011).

⁷ Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, p. 344.

Although there is much that reconciles Nussbaum and Bloom—not least their idealization of ancient philosophy and struggle against various forms of relativism—she refused his critical view of contemporary academy. In a long review of *The Closing of the American Mind*, published in *The New York Review of Books*, Nussbaum distances herself from Bloom and his critical description of the higher education system. It is simply not true, as the conservative professor maintains, that the American colleges and universities are in a serious crisis, that students are rootless as well as narcissistic or that contemporary academics generally lack both passion and quality. If someone lacks academic quality and probity it is Bloom, Nussbaum emphasizes and shows that his book is filled with inaccuracies and highly questionable interpretations.⁸

The objections that Nussbaum directs against Bloom affect to some extent the whole conception of great books. In *Cultivating Humanity* she writes:

It is an irony in contemporary “culture wars” that the Greeks are frequently brought onstage as heroes in the “great books” curricula proposed by many conservatives. For there is nothing on which the Greek philosophers were more eloquent, and more unanimous, than the limitations of such curricula.⁹

Although Nussbaum has a strong belief in the educational value of classical books, in contrast to Bloom, she points out that world literature is much larger and richer than what is represented by the European and North American cultural sphere. The curriculum needs thus to be expanded with other perspectives and traditions.

⁸ Martha Nussbaum, “Undemocratic Vistas”, in *Philosophical Interventions: Reviews, 1986–2011* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 36–52.

⁹ Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, p. 33. In addition to the concept of the great books, Nussbaum denounces Bloom’s normative chauvinism and “militant ethnocentrism”. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, p. 132; “Our Past, Ourselves”, in *Philosophical Interventions*, p. 89.

Let Us Cultivate our Humanity

With a retrospective view, Nussbaum could state that her review of *The Closing of the American Mind* in 1987 was the starting point for her work with educational theoretical questions that a decade later resulted in *Cultivating Humanity*.¹⁰ The title of the book from 1997 alludes to a quote by Seneca, which also serves as the motto of the book, “while we live, while we are among human beings, let us cultivate our humanity”.¹¹ This classical notion of human cultivation is at the heart of Nussbaum’s defense of liberal education. Since every human being is basically political and active, a *zoon politikon*, to borrow the Aristotelian notion, the cultivation of humanity has an intimate connection to citizenship.

The idea of liberal education implies, according to Nussbaum, “a higher education that is a cultivation of the whole human being for the functions of citizenship and life generally”.¹² The relationship between liberal education and democratic political life is a topic that during recent decades has attracted much attention in the sphere of educational research, but unlike most others who write about civic education Nussbaum consistently goes back to Aristotle and other ancient thinkers. She emphasizes that the discussion in *Cultivating Humanity* is specifically based on three themes from the Greek and Roman philosophy:

[O]n Socrates’ concept of “the examined life,” on Aristotle’s notion of reflective citizenship, and above all on Greek and Roman Stoic notions of an education that is “liberal” in that it liberates the mind from the bondage of habit and custom, producing people who can function with sensitivity and alertness as citizens of the whole world.¹³

¹⁰ Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, p. xi.

¹¹ Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, p. xiii.

¹² Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, p. 9.

¹³ Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, p. 8.

These classical ideas are thus the inspiration for Nussbaum's attempt to formulate a modern and democratic conception of liberal education. Socrates' ideas are of importance in terms of the critical thinking and self-reflection which education should promote and which is the first of three capacities specifically highlighted in *Cultivating Humanity*. The other two capacities are the ability to consider oneself as a world citizen and the empathic capacity to place oneself in the position of another person, which Nussbaum in an original way connects to what she calls the narrative imagination.

Critical Thinking and the Examined Life

The first capacity that all higher education should cultivate among the students is, according to Nussbaum, Socratic self-examination and critical thinking. Socrates serves here as the role model, for it was Socrates who, after the earlier philosophers' speculations on nature and cosmos, brought philosophy down to earth and made it to a concern for all people, underlining the importance of everyone to think critically and independently. He even claimed that an unexamined life is not worth living, which Nussbaum reinterprets in the following way: that a life in wonder and thinking "is not just something useful; it is an indispensable part of a worthwhile life for any person and any citizen".¹⁴

Through the ages it has been discussed whether and in what ways Socrates' thinking may be distinguished from Plato's idealistic philosophy. For Nussbaum it is clear that it is not only possible but necessary to separate them from each other, at least from a political point of view: while Plato was an aristocratic elitist, Socrates was a convinced democrat who argued that the vast majority of the people has at its disposal the sufficient intellectual prerequisites to be good citizens. Nevertheless, as Nussbaum goes on to note, even Socrates' thinking has some limitations when it is judged by contemporary standards. In many

¹⁴ Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, p. 21.

ways it was Seneca and the stoics who had properly drawn out the pedagogical implications of Socrates' notion on the examined life. Their educational interpretation of the Socratic conception of the good life may according to Nussbaum be summarized in four statements: liberal education is intended for all people; it should be individualized and adapted to students' different circumstances and contexts; it should be pluralistic and treat a variety of norms, ideas and traditions; and books should not be used in an authoritative way. In line with these conditions, Nussbaum advocates a Socratic dialogue-based teaching and is reassured by the fact that this is already the common medium through which education is conducted at many contemporary liberal arts colleges:

Liberal education in our colleges and universities is, and should be, Socratic, committed to the activation of each student's independent mind and to the production of a community that can genuinely reason together about a problem, not simply trade claims and counterclaims.¹⁵

Through the Socratic method, students are encouraged to develop their critical thinking. This should be directed not least against their own prejudices and any such beliefs they embrace by virtue of their upbringing without having the possibility of reflecting upon them. Reason must be recognized as the highest intellectual authority, standing above customs as well as traditions of different kinds.

When Nussbaum in this context speaks of a need for philosophy, she does not primarily mean logic or the study of various metaphysical subtleties. What is needed is rather a practical philosophy based on contemporary issues. Philosophical thought arises, generally speaking, in relation to different problems that confront us in our everyday life. It is also in such a way that philosophical education should be designed, which is often the

¹⁵ Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, p. 19.

case at current liberal arts colleges. “Instead of learning logical analysis in a vacuum”, Nussbaum writes, “students now learn to dissect the arguments they find in newspapers, to argue about current controversies in medicine and law and sports, to think critically about the foundations of their political and even religious views.”¹⁶

It is this practical and useful philosophy that all students should encounter during their higher education studies. The concrete philosophical courses may be designed in many different ways, but as a starting point they might, for example, take discussions of classical philosophical texts or actual moral dilemmas. Questions and problems of that kind have gradually been placed in greater focus among contemporary American philosophers, Nussbaum says:

Given the tremendous importance, for citizenship and for life in, of producing students who can think clearly and justify their views, a course or courses in philosophy play a vital role in the undergraduate liberal arts curriculum. If philosophy presents itself as an elite, esoteric discipline preoccupied with formal notations and with questions of little evident human interest, it will not be able to play this role. But professional philosophy has increasingly over the past twenty years, returned to the focus on of basic human interests that it had in the time of John Dewey and William James.¹⁷

For Nussbaum, it is obvious that philosophy and critical thinking are intimately connected to a democratic and political life. If democracy would not be reduced to “a marketplace of competing interest groups”, education has to “foster a democracy that is reflective and deliberative”.¹⁸ That young people develop their ability to reason critically over their own prejudices is ultimately good for democratic society. In line with this argumen-

¹⁶ Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, p. 18.

¹⁷ Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, p. 41f.

¹⁸ Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, p. 19.

tation, Nussbaum formulates a deliberative vision of a democratic society where politics is ultimately determined by the best arguments based on a variety of views and positions. In every democratic society freedom of speech has to be guaranteed and citizens must regularly have the opportunity to have their voices heard in general elections. But it is also important, Nussbaum stresses, that people can in other ways participate in politics as well as providing the younger generation with the opportunities of participating in a broad civic education. For it is at schools and colleges that the foundation is laid for a democratic active life.

Cosmopolitanism

Nussbaum points out that we as human beings do not only belong to the group of our closest or smaller community. Since all of us relate to the world at large, we should as much as possible strive to think of ourselves as citizens in the world. In *Cultivating Humanity* the notion of a cosmopolitan identity is highlighted as the second capacity that all higher education should try to cultivate among its students.

Nussbaum quotes the well-known statement of Diogenes of Sinope, "I am a citizen of the world".¹⁹ This ancient cynic philosopher coined the concept of cosmopolitanism, before the stoics further developed it, turning it into an intellectual and political tradition in its own right. For the stoics, we belong at one and the same time to the community in which we are raised and to mankind at large. In the sense of the latter, we are *kosmopolitēs*. The idea of being a world citizen was an integral part of the stoics' general philosophy, according to which all people are united in common universal reason. In addition, they developed an educational program aimed at making the younger generation aware that they are citizens of the world and that it is better to accept the necessary order of all things. Such a cosmopolitan upbringing and education, Nussbaum says, "requires transcending

¹⁹ Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, p. 52.

the inclination of both students and educators to define themselves primarily in terms of local group loyalties and identities.”²⁰

At various times throughout history, the cosmopolitan tradition has been revived, for instance, during the Enlightenment by Thomas Paine, Immanuel Kant and other philosophers. When Nussbaum at the end of the 20th century wrote *Cultivating Humanity*, cosmopolitanism was again on the political and philosophical agenda. Thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas, Ulrich Beck and David Held were intensively discussing cosmopolitan theories. Like Nussbaum, most of them may politically be defined as social democrats or left-wing liberals. In addition, they were more or less explicitly committed to capitalize on the best of the cosmopolitan heritage in both antiquity and the Enlightenment. At the same time, they were opposed to conservative interpretations of the current political situation after the Cold War. One of these conservative thinkers was Samuel Huntington, the American political scientist, who in the book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* from 1996 claimed that the fall of Soviet communism had led to a new world order where the decisive battle is no longer fought between communism and capitalism, but between different monolithic cultures or civilizations, such as Western, Muslim and Chinese-Confucian.²¹

The theorists of cosmopolitanism problematize this simplistic and homogenizing narrative through highlighting what is common to different cultures and the actual forces working for a peaceful cooperation that exist between them. Habermas, for instance, sees the United Nations as the central organization in the efforts to find new forms for a democratic order beyond the traditional nation states.²² But however laudable this may seem

²⁰ Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, p. 67.

²¹ Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

²² See, for instance, Jürgen Habermas, “A Political Constitution for the Pluralist World Society?”, in *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2008).

from an abstract historical and geopolitical perspective, there is indeed something idealistic with such notions of a future cosmopolitan democratic world order. In today's world there are so many conflicts and opposing interests that cannot be contained in such a cosmopolitan project, and politics in itself may even be said to contain within itself an irresolvable conflict that cannot be reconciled by means of reaching an underlying consensus advanced by leading theorists of cosmopolitanism. Indeed, is not politics, as the French philosopher Jacques Rancière underlines, based on dissensus rather than consensus?²³ This, however, is a position that neither Nussbaum nor Habermas countenances.

Although Nussbaum shares many of Habermas' and the other cosmopolitan theorists' basic assumptions and conclusions, she differs from most of them since her primary interest in cosmopolitanism is not because it is a transnational phenomenon.²⁴ The cosmopolitanism with which *Cultivating Humanity* deals is rather a moral and pedagogical issue, with a focus on how education at liberal arts colleges should be designed. In this context, Nussbaum emphasizes the importance of learning foreign languages and studying non-Western cultures as well as including knowledge of minorities in the curriculum and to undertake systematic work with regard to a fully integrated gender perspective. All of this would accordingly contribute to the development of the students' multicultural and cosmopolitan self-understanding.

The Narrative Imagination

The narrative imagination—the ability to imagine how it would be like to be in someone else's situation—is the last of the three capacities discussed in *Cultivating Humanity*. Nussbaum points out that this ability, which in another context she remarks is

²³ Jacques Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics", in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), p. 45.

²⁴ Marilyn Friedman, "Education for World Citizenship", *Ethics* vol. 110, No. 3, 2000, pp. 586-601.

perhaps the most important of the three capacities,²⁵ can be improved by reading realistic novels such as Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*, Henry James' *Portrait of a Lady* or Richard Wright's *Native Son*. Based on the novel's narration we may—through our imagination—identify ourselves with different characters. The same is true in our life-world; when we try to understand another person and her actions, we do it best by placing them into a narrative. Through the reading of novels one may thus improve the ability to situate oneself in another person's position and life situation.

In her discussion on the narrative imagination and the role of literature in education Nussbaum refers to Aristotle's notion of the philosophical precedence of poetry over historiography; poetry depicts what might happen in a more logical and generally valid narration instead of what actually has occurred. "This knowledge of possibilities is an especially valuable resource in the political life", Nussbaum writes.²⁶ Alongside this narrative imagination, she refers to a civic and compassionate imagination as well as a democratic imagination, but without clarifying the relationship between them.²⁷ Still she emphasizes: "If the literary imagination develops compassion, and if compassion is essential for civic responsibility, then we have good reason to teach works that promote the types of compassionate understanding that we want and need."²⁸ A genuine liberal education should, then, in a systematic way use various kinds of fiction, especially a certain kind of narrative fiction.

²⁵ Martha Nussbaum, "Political Soul-Making and the Imminent Demise of Liberal Education", *Journal of Social Philosophy* vol. 37, No. 2 2006, p. 309.

²⁶ Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, p. 86. Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. James Hutton (New York: Norton, 1982).

²⁷ See, e.g., Nussbaum, "Education for Democratic Citizenship". Lecture delivered on the occasion of the awarding of the degree of Doctor Honoris Causa at the Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, The Netherlands, 9 March, 2006; www.iss.nl/fileadmin/ASSETS/iss/Documents/Academic_publications/nussbaum_text.pdf (2018-08-09).

²⁸ Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, p. 99.

It seems like Nussbaum in *Cultivating Humanity* prioritizes literature over other art forms and, moreover privileges the realist novel over other literary genres—with the exception of Walt Whitman, whose “democratic poetry” in *The Leaves of Grass* she has a particular fondness for.²⁹ She claims that the novel defends the “Enlightenment ideal of the equality and dignity of all human life”, but not “uncritical traditionalism”.³⁰ According to such a normative perspective one may ask how literature that is neither edifying nor supportive of the elevated ideals of the Enlightenment should be estimated, for example Marquis de Sade’s violent erotic fantasies or William Burroughs’ hallucinatory *The Naked Lunch*. Although the realistic novel may be an excellent medium for the cultivation of self-critical thought and narrative imagination, the same is true for many other things, including other kinds of literature as well as movies, visiting unfamiliar places, and not to forget, simply conversing with other people. Indeed, there is no reason to reduce the means for cultivating self-critical thought and narrative imagination to a certain kind of novel.

When Nussbaum talks about the transformative power of literature it sometimes sounds like she imagines that the content of a novel by itself can make the reader wiser. She argues, for example, “the genre itself, on account of some general features of its structure, generally constructs empathy and compassion in ways highly relevant to citizenship”.³¹ But the fact is that the actual reader always reads and interprets a text in her own way, based on her previous experiences, knowledge, expectations and the current situation. At best, the reading is processed into an experience that the reader then may carry with her through her life. It is only when literature is embraced in such an active way

²⁹ Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, p. 96.

³⁰ Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), p. 46.

³¹ Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice*, p. 10.

that it functions as a means for the development of compassion, empathy and self-formation.

However, these critical reflections or objections do not imply that *Cultivating Humanity* is lacking in strong arguments for a reformed liberal education in which literature as well as other arts play a central role. Nussbaum's way in treating literature as something that basically deals with what it is to be a human being, and her insistence that by reading novels we can learn important things about ourselves, is indeed appealing. The arts, in the broadest sense of the word, may contribute to the cultivation of judgment and the narrative imagination, which is of great importance not only for our empathy but also for civic, democratic life in general. Nussbaum writes: "The arts cultivate capacities of judgment and sensitivity that can and should be expressed in the choices a citizen does."³² For good reasons literature and art should thus be treated as integral parts of a liberal education that ultimately aims at revitalizing the whole democratic society. According to Nussbaum, a reform of the education system in line with the proposal presented in *Cultivating Humanity* is of great importance. As she puts it in the end of the book: "It would be catastrophic to become a nation of technically skilled people who have lost the ability to think critically, to examine themselves, and to respect the humanity and diversity of others."³³

Why Democracy Needs the Humanities

When Nussbaum wrote *Cultivating Humanity*, she thought that the American higher education system was in a fairly good condition. However, over a decade later, when she returned to the issue of higher education, with the *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, no longer was Nussbaum convinced.³⁴ In the book from 2010 she maintains that liberal education

³² Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, p. 86.

³³ Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, p. 300.

³⁴ Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010).

aiming at students' personal growth, critical thinking and civic education is seriously threatened.

The most immediate threat to liberal education is, according to *Not for Profit*, neither postmodernism nor cultural conservatism. It comes now instead from an increasingly dominant economic ideology according to which the extent of a child's and adolescent's education in schools does not go beyond the need to learn about computer science and technology, in addition to the basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic. Only rudimentary knowledge of history, art and literature is required, and even less is taught on values associated with gender, equality and democracy. With the focus squarely and entirely on entrepreneurship, economic benefit and gross national product per capita, everything else is, at best, of secondary importance.

This economic growth paradigm, which facilitates an education for profitmaking, has so far only rarely been fully implemented—as examples, Nussbaum refers to some states in India (Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh)—but it is gaining greater traction in both the United States and other parts of the world. In a certain respect, such a model for economic growth stands behind the successive wave of cuts to the arts in schools as well as in the dismantling of the humanities in general, something we have witnessed as a globalizing phenomenon during recent decades, in favor of technological and other skills that seem to be more useful, at least in short economic terms.

It is against this background that Nussbaum is drawn to speak in quite unsettling terms that we are living in the midst of a worldwide educational crisis which we yet barely even noticed, but which left unrecognized is spreading like a deadly cancer. Based on her belief that a prosperous democracy requires well-oriented, empathic and critical thinking citizens, Nussbaum is genuinely concerned that schools, colleges and universities in our time produce useful human machines rather than citizens. Although this, perhaps, could be desirable from a strictly economic point of view, it is particularly unfortunate from a broader,

humanistic perspective. What is ultimately at stake is nothing less than the future of democracy.

When Nussbaum formulates her positive alternative to the economic growth model she distinguishes, as in *Cultivating Humanity*, between different abilities that educational institutions of various types should seek to foster. The list of desirable capabilities is longer in *Not for Profit* than in the previous book. Besides the three capacities that were highlighted there—is to think critically, to go beyond one's own local sympathies and instead become a citizen of the world, and through the narrative imagination realizing what it is like to be in other people's life situations—Nussbaum speaks here of the abilities to think well about political affairs, to recognize all human beings as people with equal rights (regardless of their race, religion, gender and sexuality), to concern for the lives of others, to envision the complexity of human life and to judge political leaders in a critical but well-informed and constructive way. This is what the school system—not only liberal arts colleges—should focus on imparting in the younger generations.

On the basis of a series of thinkers such as Socrates, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, John Dewey, Maria Montessori and Rabindranath Tagore (the Indian Nobel Laureate in Literature 1913 who was also an important educator and founder of an elementary school as well as a university, Visva-Bharati), in *Not for Profit* Nussbaum presents a list of suggestions on how to concretely work with a democratic education. She outlines an ideal education system from kindergarten to college, with small classes, much teaching time and focus on subjects such as world history, foreign language, religion and cultural studies. She stresses also the importance of argumentation analysis, source criticism and critical thinking. Literature and art occupy a central place in this curriculum, not least due to the training of the narrative imagination. At college level, Nussbaum remains faithful to her liberal education ideals, placing due emphasis on philosophical studies. Ideally, she means, all college students would read at least two semesters of philosophy.

Proceeding in this way Nussbaum tries to be more specific in *Not for Profit* than she had been in *Cultivating Humanity*. Nevertheless, many questions remain unanswered. Still more problematic is perhaps the slippage that occurs in her argumentation between the concepts of human beings and citizens. She seems to think that students through their cultivation of humanity may become not only good citizens, but also better human beings. But, one may ask, who has the right and possibility to say that a particular person is better than another, and what constitutes in this context the criteria for deciding between the good and the bad? Considering the moralistic tone that sometimes breaks through in Nussbaum's prose, such as when she connects Judith Butler's gender theories with "evil", Nussbaum sometimes appears to believe that she herself has the ability to determine which people are better and worse, and which are good or evil. However, this type of discussion leads inevitably in the wrong direction and should in no way be encouraged.

Yet, important insights still remain in both *Cultivating Humanity* and *Not for Profit* about the ways in which higher education may contribute to the formation of enlightened, active citizens. With Nussbaum one may ask why not only schools but also colleges and universities should have the right—or even obligation—to try to cultivate their students. Nussbaum points out that this idea is not nearly as prominent in Europe as it is in the United States: "Students in Europe enter university to study one subject, be it law or medicine or philosophy or history or chemistry or classics. There is no idea, in these curricula, of a core of common studies that is essential to the good life for each and every person."³⁵ However, Stanley Fish reminds us that the notion of the cultivating mission of higher education is not obvious in the United States either. Arguing against any such claims, Fish in *Save the World On Your Own Time* maintains that university and college teachers, *qua* teachers, should not have any ambi-

³⁵ Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, p. 31.

tions other than to introduce relevant knowledge to their students and to teach them key analytical skills. In other words: forget character education, civic education, and everything else with which liberal arts colleges usually try to justify their existence.³⁶

Regardless of how one thinks about such critical arguments it is clear that Nussbaum is of a completely different opinion. In contrast to Fish, she believes that we must try to accentuate the dimension of social and civic formation present in all forms of academic studies. As the world actually looks like today—globalized, multicultural, unfair, for many even frightening—and when mankind faces greater ecological and climate-related challenges than ever before, there are strong reasons that students should not only learn technical knowledge but also develop their practical judgment and other abilities that facilitate and enrich their own lives and that may have beneficial effects on democratic life in general. That is at least Nussbaum's firm conviction, from which she formulates her passionate defense of a higher education aiming at cultivation of humanity.

³⁶ Stanley Fish, *Save the World on Your Own Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).