A Passion for Wisdom

Readings in Western Philosophy on Love and Desire

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chapter thirty-nine

Martha C. Nussbaum

Martha Craven Nussbaum (b. 1947), contemporary philosopher and classicist, is a prolific writer whose work centers around such themes as the relationship between emotions and philosophy, the relationship between philosophy and literature, human mortality and vulnerability, liberal feminism and the equality of women in developing countries, and education. Nussbaum's philosophies manifest her belief that there is an intimate relation between philosophy and human life. The combination of the questions that her work takes up and her active participation in the wider community and across disciplines embodies a vision of philosophy that is both practical and compassionate. She describes this vision in *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (1994) as "a philosophy that exists for the sake of human beings, in order to address their deepest needs, confront their most urgent perplexities, and bring them from misery to some greater measure of flourishing."[1] In other words, for Nussbaum, ideally philosophy should be therapeutic in that it seeks to remedy what afflicts human life in both its social and individual spheres.

Nussbaum's commitment to address the deepest concerns of human life fosters the recurrent juxtapositions of philosophy and literature, ancient philosophy and contemporary problems, international feminism and liberal theory, and theory and practice that are so characteristic of her work. *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (2001) explicates, through the medium of Greek tragedy, one of her signature philosophical claims, namely, that human vulnerability and the good life are deeply intertwined. Nussbaum not only feels that philosophy should speak to the most distinctive features of the human condition, namely mortality, emotions, vulnerability, and mutability, but she also considers philosophy to be a tool with which to address concrete contemporary social problems. *Sex and Social Justice* (1999), from which "Constructing Love, Desire, and Care" is drawn, and *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (2000) are theoretical proposals that ground themselves in the actions that women are already taking to change their situations and that emphasize the experiences of impoverished women in developing nations.

Nussbaum's thought reflects her embeddedness in the contemporary period, for her unique pluralistic philosophy not only combines at least three historically prominent strains of philosophical thought—Aristotelianism, liberalism, and feminism—but is also attentive to the international and cross-cultural concerns that are constitutive of the contemporary world. Nussbaum owes to Aristotle her "sympathetic perception of complex particulars" and her philosophical focus that is directed not to "anchor . . . conclusions to extrahistorical first principles, but to seek the best comprehensive fit among principles and concrete judgements."[2] She highlights the liberal notion that human beings have equal worth based on "basic human capacities for choice and reasoning."[3] Finally, Nussbaum is a feminist who believes that human beings have equal worth regardless of their sex, gender, or sexuality. Her work at the World Institute for Development Economic Research provided the foundation for her theory that promoting improvement in the social conditions within which women live can come in part from adopting theoretical models that recognize "central human capabilities" that include life, bodily health, bodily integrity, practical reason, and emotions.[4] Nussbaum's feminism is also characteristically contemporary in that it is concerned with the lives of women regardless of their nationalities, races, classes, and sexualities. Whether Nussbaum is drawing from the resources of liberal thinkers such as Kant and Mill, or from the Stoics or Aristotle, she always does so with a critical eye. She directs her thinking toward the improvement of contemporary human life, and as such is an Aristotelian or a proponent of liberalism only in so far as those theories are mediated by her own agency, rationality, and the emotions that make up her person.

The present excerpt from *Sex and Social Justice* begins to describe Nussbaum's detailed theory of the emotions, which she deems "a cognitive-evaluative view," and which she later describes in detail in *Upheavals of Thought*.[5] Emotions are "cognitive" because they "are not blind animal forces but intelligent and discriminating parts of the personality, closely related to beliefs of a certain sort, and therefore responsive to cognitive modification."[6] In addition, Nussbaum thinks that emotions are about particular objects in the world: people never feel for no reason at all. Emotions are "evaluative" not only because they are judgments about the world but also because they are one's judgments about how the world relates to oneself. According to Nussbaum, emotions have "intentionality"; they are dependent on the way the one who is having the emotion sees the object of one's emotion. Furthermore, emotions are "*eudaimonistic*"; the way one sees the object of one's emotion involves one's complex beliefs about that object, which include beliefs about how the object fits into one's own life and personal projects.[7] In *Upheavals of Thought* Nussbaum writes, "Emotions involve judgments about important things, judgments in which, appraising an external object as salient for our own well-being, we acknowledge our own neediness and incompleteness before parts of the world that we do not fully control."[8] Throughout the work, following the example of Seneca who uses personal stories to explicate his ideas, Nussbaum uses an example of her own grief, namely, her grief over the death of her mother, to explain her "cognitive-

evaluative" view. *Upheavals of Thought* exemplifies Nussbaum's characteristic interdisciplinary breadth in that it draws upon recent research in psychology and anthropology and uses discussions of philosophy (Plato, Spinoza, Augustine), literature (Proust, Dante, Emily Brontë, Whitman, Joyce), and music (Mahler) to illustrate her theory. Not surprisingly, Nussbaum theorizes about emotions not for the sake of theory alone, but because she sees emotions as integral to the moralities of individuals and societies. She writes, "in an ethical and social/political creature, emotions themselves are ethical and social/political, parts of and answers to the questions, 'What is worth caring about?' 'How should I live?'"[9]

In the essay from *Sex and Social Justice*, Nussbaum's arguments that love, sexual desire, and family life are the products of a dynamic "social construction" rather than functions of a static "human nature" rests upon her cognitive-evaluative view of the emotions. Emotions vary across cultures and between different groups of individuals from the same culture (e.g., men and women) because they are not merely bodily forces that influence an individual; they vary because one's beliefs and judgments about an object and about how an object fits into one's conception of the good life are embedded within a social and cultural context. Nussbaum claims not only that the beliefs and judgments that constitute emotions vary across cultures, but also that the experience of the individual who possesses an emotion varies as well. Her arguments for the role of social construction in love, sexual desire, and family life are consistent with the liberal feminist theories that are central to *Sex and Social Justice*. A theory of justice that speaks to the equal worth of individual members of the global community must address the fact that women are situated differently in relation to central human capabilities than are men. Nussbaum accounts for commonalities across cultures, not by appealing to common human biology, but by pointing to the common problems that human life entails: mortality, vulnerability, embeddedness in relationships, and change.

Nussbaum received her B.A. in classics from New York University in 1969, her M.A. from Harvard University in 1971, and her Ph.D. in classical philology from Harvard University in 1975. Presently, she is the Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics at the University of Chicago, where she holds appointments in the Philosophy department, the Law School, and the Divinity School. She has also taught at Harvard, Brown, and Oxford Universities and has served as a research advisor at the World Institute for Development Economics Research, a division of the United Nations University, in Helsinki, Finland (1986–1993). In addition to authoring ten books from *Aristotle's "De Motu Animalium"* (1978) to *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (2001) and being the editor of ten more, Nussbaum served as president of the Central Division of the American Philosophical Association in 1999–2000, has chaired the Committee on the Status of Women and the Committee on International Cooperation for that organization, and has received eighteen honorary degrees.

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QUESTIONS

1. What does Nussbaum's cognitive view of the emotions entail? How is it different from what she terms the "adversary's view"?
2. According to Nussbaum, how are love and sexual desire different, if at all, in terms of being socially constructed? Do you think that different social groups experience emotions differently (e.g., men and women)?
3. Reflect upon an emotional experience of your own. Does Nussbaum's view of the emotions cohere with that experience? Why or why not?
4. What does Nussbaum's example of Glaukon illustrate? Do you agree with her argument? What is the relationship, if any, between advocating equal worth for lesbians and gays and advocating equal worth for women?
5. How do Nussbaum's discussions of social construction in terms of sexual desire and emotions speak to the injustices that women face around the globe?

ENDNOTES

1. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, p. 3.
2. Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, p. 23.
3. Ibid., p. 24.
4. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*, pp. 78–80.
5. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, p. 23.
6. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, p. 78.
7. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, p. 31. Nussbaum is referring to the Greek concept of *eudaimonia*, which she translates as "human flourishing."
8. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, p. 19.
9. Ibid., p. 149.

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from Constructing Love, Desire, and Care

Martha C. Nussbaum

NATURE AND CULTURE

Like most of us, the ancient Greeks tended to think that where sex is concerned some things are natural and other things are not, some up for grabs as expressions of personal preference and others ruled out (or in) by our universal animal nature itself. Like most civilizations, they had strong views about what "nature" was in this domain, and they were prepared to argue for these views using examples from the animal kingdom. Consider the following passage from Philo's *On Animals*, written in the first century A.D., in which Philo "proves" the naturalness of having heterosexual sex relations only for reproductive purposes, and "proves," too, the naturalness of male self-restraint, which subdues female greediness:

> Not only among animals domesticated and reared by us but also among the other species there are those which appear to have self-restraint. When the Egyptian crocodile . . . is inclined to copulate, he diverts the female to the bank and turns her over, it being natural to approach her (when she is) lying on her back. After copulating, he turns her over with his forearms. But when she senses the copulation and the impregnation, she becomes malicious in purpose and pretends to desire copulation once more, displaying a harlot-like affection and assuming the usual position for copulation. So he immediately comes to ascertain, either by scent or by other means, whether the invitation is genuine or merely pretense. By nature he is alert to hidden things. When the intent of the action is truly established by their looking into each other's eyes, he claws her guts and consumes them, for they are tender. And unhindered by armored skin or hard and pointed spines, he tears her flesh apart. But enough about self-restraint.[1]

The very biological implausibility of this story is suggestive: for it shows us how much the picture of "nature" has been shaped by assumptions deriving from culture. Philo appeals to the animal kingdom to demonstrate that male control over female sexual greed is grounded in nature. When we look at the crocodile world, we are supposed to discover that there is one natural position for intercourse (did the crocodiles get it from the missionaries, or the missionaries from the crocodiles?[2]); that it is