

# The End of the Humanities?

Martha Nussbaum tells James Garvey why the humanities are under threat.

“We are in the midst of a crisis of massive proportions and grave global significance. No, I do not mean the global economic crisis....I mean a crisis that goes largely unnoticed, like a cancer; a crisis that is likely to be, in the long run, far more damaging to the future of democratic self-government: a world-wide crisis in education.” That’s the opening blast from Martha Nussbaum’s new book, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*.

She starts by identifying a global trend. Policy-makers, universities, and even entire nations are discarding the humanities and focusing instead on academic subjects linked to economic growth. She then makes a case for a connection between liberal arts education, free-thinking citizens, and healthy democracy. Pull the plug on the liberal arts, and you no longer have the sort of people able to do the things required for democratic citizenship. Barely a page into the book and we’re warned that “nations all over the world will soon be producing generations of useful machines, rather than complete citizens who can think for themselves, criticise tradition, and understand the significance of another person’s sufferings and achievements. The future of the world’s democracies hangs in the balance.” Strong stuff. Are things really that bad?

“I don’t write in this alarmist way usually,” she says, “in fact in my book *Cultivating Humanity* the whole point was to say that insofar as higher education is concerned the changes that we’re seeing are on balance very positive. We’re confronting the new complexity of the world better. We’re educating ourselves about women, about race, about non-western cultures much better. But now, I feel, it’s not true any longer.”

She talks about some American universities which have closed their philosophy departments. “If it’s happening in the US – where the liberal arts system is deeply entrenched, where you have a system of private philanthropy which is also deeply entrenched, and where the tax system gives you strong incentives for that kind of philanthropy – it’s happening all the more in other countries. All over Europe people are reporting big cuts in the humanities.”

She’s aware of plans in the UK to distribute funding in higher education based in part on the economic impact of research. The very idea makes philosophers wince. “The demand for impact is very scary because you can’t measure the role that the humanities play in people’s lives in any simple way. The right questions aren’t even being asked. Impact is not being understood as how we enrich a political culture, how we enrich people’s sense of meaning, their ability to relate to one another respectfully. No, that’s not what’s meant by ‘impact’ at all.”

She knows a great deal about education in many parts of the world – I’m surprised by a detailed analysis of the state of play in Korea, which it turns out is doing comparatively well. The rest of the world, though, is sacrificing history, art and literature for science, economics and accounting. She warms to the topic when she comes finally to India, a country clearly close to her heart. There are a

number of little elephants on her desk and floor – some carved, others polished and painted; some ready for battle, others laughing. She points to the largest one, which she's named after "my great hero Nehru because of the eyes, the expressive eyes."

She says that despite Nehru's love of the arts he thought that a growing country needs science above all, something that quickly translates into profit and jobs. She says that people still think this in India today. In conversations she's had with Indian government officials involved in education, she gets the feeling that they're not opposed to the humanities, but their concerns are almost entirely elsewhere. They want to produce engineers and computer scientists, not historians.

Does Nehru have a point? There's that old argument, maybe owed to some lean Spartan with a pudgy Athenian in mind, that the liberal arts are a luxury, and sometimes it's right to put luxuries to one side. Isn't it occasionally reasonable to push for economic growth at the expense of the liberal arts?

"There's a lack of imagination about how you can combine these things. Of course you need to produce people who are computer scientists and engineers, but why shouldn't they have years of general education where they learn things that equip them for citizenship and life? They're going to be citizens too whatever else they are.

"The major universities that have engineering schools don't just make people do engineering. They do courses in philosophy and literature too. Certainly with something like marketing and computer science it's really very easy to have the full two years of general education. If that's the expectation, that's the sense of what a bachelor's degree is, then people will do it. Sometimes they're dragged kicking and screaming into those classes, but then, once they're there, it opens new vistas. Some students wonder, 'Why would I take a philosophy course?', but they suddenly see that it changes their attitude towards political debate. It makes them think more critically about what's being fed to them by politicians. It's just good for them and good for their relationship to other people."

For Nussbaum it's the cultivation of our relationships to one another that's a large part of the point of a liberal arts education. The connection is tightly tied to her conception of human welfare. If all that matters is economic growth, then education for basic numeracy and literacy is about all that's needed. But Nussbaum has been arguing for years that money is an awful measure of human good. In collaboration with Amartya Sen and others, she's fleshed out the capabilities approach.

The view gets a large hearing in philosophical circles, but it has had real effects outside the academy too. It's changed the way some governments measure human welfare. The UN's Human Development Index ranks the countries of the world in terms of standard of living alongside such things as lifespan and levels of education. It's in the heads of policy-makers. She's among those behind the Human Development and Capability Association, which, according to its website, has members in over 70 countries promoting "research from many disciplines on problems related to impoverishment, justice, and well-being."

She's writing a book which she hopes will bring the approach to a larger audience. Her published work on the subject is, she admits, "academic, hard to use when teaching students who are not going to focus on philosophy, students in development studies or political science." Is it possible to say what the capabilities approach is without the heavy-duty philosophical apparatus?

"It's an approach to what the right question is, the question that should be asked when you're trying to assess how well a country is doing. It's not how much wealth is around, but a much deeper question: what are people actually able to do and be in a range of areas which you then go on to identify – such as health, education, and the quality of political liberties."

Nussbaum says that the thing to do is bite the bullet, just list the capabilities you think matter, and argue about it later. Her "famous or maybe infamous list" includes being able to live a decently long life, do what's required for good health, move about freely, imagine and think and feel, have emotional connections, form a notion of the good life and plan accordingly, live for and in relation to others, live with concern for other species, play, and have some control over one's political and material environment.

"A lot of people use the approach comparatively. In development you often want to do that, say that this country is doing better than that one on the following parameters. But I also use it as a building block to create a theory of minimal social justice. A country that is even minimally just is one that's guaranteed people up to a certain threshold level the ten capabilities on that list. Being a philosopher and a student of Rawls, I'm more interested in thinking about justice. It's one thing to compare X with Y, but I want to ask a more absolute question: how good do you have to be to be decent, to be minimally just?"

A decent nation has to educate its citizens with these capabilities in view, and that means taking the humanities seriously. When citizens engage with one another politically, she says, "You want much more reflection and thought, and more criticism of bad arguments. That has something to do with how you see other people. The tendency is to see people on the other side of an issue as just demonic forces that you need to defeat. Our talk radio and our internet culture encourage this. You don't listen to what they say, you just want to talk louder and win the battle. But if you have humanities courses then you learn that each person has reasons. You learn to listen to those reasons."

She gives an example of an assignment which requires a student who happened to be in favour of the death penalty to formulate arguments against it. "He never understood that you could produce an argument for a position that you don't hold yourself. That exercise gave him a new insight into what was on the other side: *people* with reasons like him. Once you lay out those reasons maybe you see that there's common ground. He viewed his opponents differently. They were people you could listen to and talk to. There was respect there.

"When you deal with situations where in addition to political polarisation you have ethnic and religious polarisation, listening requires not just arguments but a cultivation of imagination. You need to understand where other people are coming from, what their history is, what their experience of life is. It requires not just philosophy but history and literature. The listening has to be much more

complicated. It's easy to demonise all members of a group. We saw this in America with Catholic immigration. The same thing is happening with Islam today all over the world. Good education would teach you not just specific things about religious history – it would teach you an attitude of mind. Before you condemn you try to imagine and understand where different people are coming from. If you don't do that, it's much easier to engage in hatred, even violence against people.

“Gender issues are highly complicated, because people can be full of sympathy and yet hew to a very conservative line on what women should actually do. It's more complicated in that sense than race is. We've seen rapid progress with sexual orientation too. The attitudes of people under the age of 30 are totally different. With women it isn't changing so rapidly, because people have much more of an interested stake in certain forms of inequality. Even the fact that they might love someone doesn't change that.”

She says a lot about the importance of imagination and play in the life of a child. It helps us start to see the world from the point of view of others. In *Not for Profit* she expands on how this can be extended in adult life by going to the theatre, even singing the songs of another culture in a choir. It can help us see into our cultural blind spots. In the classroom a lecturer has to think about what those blind spots are and take some care in choosing subject matter which produces the right kind of understanding and sensitivity. At least one of the book's reviewers wonders if this amounts to nothing less than a kind of censorship.

“The question ‘What should a professor assign?’ is itself complicated. Often we learn a lot from seeing works that express hatred. There are very few works I think we shouldn't assign because they're dangerous. I think that about violent pornography because it's scary for people who've been victimised by sexual assault, and it's very powerfully evocative for people who might be at risk of committing some sexual assault. Should one assign *Mein Kampf*? I think yes. It might make sense to show people what that was like and why people rallied round it.

“Then the question is how to teach it. If you teach a work that inspires hatred it's right to teach it critically, and to make it clear that the reason we're reading it is to study something quite bad and see how that bad thing arises. That doesn't mean that you don't preserve an open space in the classroom. I think you want students to be free to say, ‘Well, I actually think this is a good idea.’ I always try in a feminism class to preserve that space for people to say, ‘You know, I think Rousseau was dead right that women should be in the home and that their sphere is totally separate.’ I have some very conservative students, and I really want them to feel included in the classroom discussion.

“I recall a student thinking about taking a feminism class asking, ‘What do you mean by feminism?’ She puts on a voice loaded with suspicion, ‘What do we have to... *agree to*... if we want to be in this class?’ She laughs. “Only that women have had a lot of serious problems over history, and it would be good to confront those problems and think what should be done about them. That would be a necessary condition of being a member of that class, but if you think the right solution is old time religion, then defend yourself with argument.”

She has something to say about the role of argument and philosophy in liberal arts education – an entire chapter of *Not for Profit* is devoted to it. She discusses the importance of Socratic pedagogy, questions, self-scrutiny, understanding rather than memorisation, critique, and debate. I wonder if this actually devalues philosophy in a backhanded way, reduces it to a mere means to good citizenship?

“Philosophy is constitutive of good citizenship. It’s not just a means to it. It becomes part of what you are when you are a good citizen – a thoughtful person. Philosophy has many roles. It can be just fun, a game that you play. It can be a way you try to approach your own death or illness or that of a family member. It has a wide range of functions in human life. Some of them are connected to ethics, and some of them are not. Logic itself is beautiful. I’m just focusing on the place where I think I can win over people, and say ‘Look here, you do care about democracy don’t you? Then you’d better see that philosophy has a place.’”

Philosophy has a place not just in keeping democracy alive. Nussbaum argues that a liberal arts education – and philosophy in particular – is important for a meaningful life. We need philosophy, she says, to criticise and analyse, but also to help us make sense of our inner lives – our feelings and attitudes towards one another. That’s part of what it is to live a flourishing life.

“It’s a fast-moving world. There are all kinds of reasons not to look within. Peer cultures, teen age cultures particularly, are so competitive that they discourage looking in, thinking, ‘What am I feeling now? What are the names for this cascade of emotions that I’m going through?’ When you go out into life all sorts of disturbing things happen. You love people and that doesn’t always go smoothly. You have children and that brings with it a complicated set of emotions and relationships. You have to confront illness and mortality, both your own and that of people you love. In all those situations you need to be able to look within and understand what you’re feeling.

“Mill understood from his own experience of depression that being able to read poetry – to think about emotions in connection with a work of literature – was a tremendous part of the cultivation of the inner world. It makes you capable of love and happiness and stability.

“Philosophy tells you that you had better look within. Philosophy the way I do it is closely linked to literature and the imagination. For example, when you’re dealing with philosophical accounts of emotion, how could you think philosophically about them without having powerful examples of what they’re like?

“I’m with Mill in thinking that education with respect to the emotions has to have an aesthetic component. He’s funny about this. He says in England we don’t understand this because we think life is all about making money. There is also the legacy of Puritanism. We think there’s something evil about experiencing emotion in connection with works of art. The result is that we become narrow-minded and ungenerous. We have a strict moral conscience but little sympathy with others.

“That’s right about a lot of people in a lot of places and times. The rigidity of conscience without the capacity for sympathy and love can do great damage

when you're a parent or a friend or a lover. So it's important for a meaningful life to read about and think about works of art."

In addition to safeguarding democracy and helping us live meaningful lives, Nussbaum argues that the liberal arts have a further, much larger role. Given the global character of the problems we face and the new interconnectedness of the world's people, education for *global* citizenship is needed too. It nearly goes without saying that a global citizen has to have a rich background in the humanities – some grip on the arts, histories, languages, beliefs and practices of other cultures. But the demand for global citizenship brings with it a weird sort of tension. Suppose you see yourself as a citizen of the world, and you have a grip on the vastness, the diversity of the human experience, as well as the problems, the horrors, the sheer scale of such things as poverty, global warming, terrorism, war and hunger. If you see yourself as a citizen of the world and recognise that the world's problems are your problems too, what can you be but paralyzed by that realisation? What can a citizen of the world do about the world's troubles?

"I make a large place for the nation. It is a good thing that nations should remain in the world. They're the largest units we know that are decently accountable to people, people who express their desire to give themselves laws of their own choosing. A lot of global duties are mediated by the nation.

"Mazzini, the great Italian revolutionary, was dead right when he said you can't expect people to love humanity directly. It's too diffuse. It's too big. Get them to first love a nation and use that as a lever to move on to the world. That's feasible. You want patriotism of a certain sort. One focused on ethical ideals, ideals that can be linked to a global ideal.

"This is not pie in the sky. This is something that Lincoln was very big on. He talks about America but then immediately moves on to the world stage. Roosevelt's advisors told him to take out all the references to 'all over the world' in his second bill of rights speech, but he wanted to keep it in. He said that we want this, and this, and this, in America *and all over the world*. The great exemplar of this is Nehru. On the eve of Indian independence, when you would expect him to say, 'Rah Rah! Now we're a nation!' instead he says, 'Those dreams are for India, but they are also for the world, for all the nations and peoples are too closely knit together today for any one of them to imagine that it can live apart...'"

Political attempts to interconnect national and global concerns aren't easy, she says, particularly when times are tough. There are, though, good reasons to try. "The ingredients include a focus on how we confront each other in areas of shared concern such as the environment. Peace is something every nation should be interested in. We should be interested in conditions of labour all over the world. We should be interested in how other nations are educating their citizens. This is something you can sell to people as just good sense. If we had done this with Pakistan – a lot of the problems just wouldn't be there. The idea that we don't want to do nation-building has led to the situation we now have. There are prudential reasons you can give for an engagement with global welfare."

There are things individuals can do, too, she says. “We’ve got to educate people to think about different ways they can be helpful. Give them suggestions of ways they can work for the world. Some involve giving money. Some involve going to work for an international agency – there are many things an individual can do.”

Despite the talk of a “crisis” and “this dire situation”, Nussbaum is consistently hopeful, even when you throw global threats to humanity at her. She says that democratic education is still doing reasonably well in the US, that it supports democratic citizenship better than it did fifty years ago. The crisis in the US consists in the fact that there’s now got a lot to lose. But I would have thought that things have gotten worse there lately, particularly when it comes to reasoned political debate. She mentioned talk radio and the internet. Of course it’s not just the US. I wonder if she’s actually seen Prime Minister’s Question Time.

“There are counter forces. What happens in university classrooms is only part of people’s lives. That part is doing its job better. When I was in university I never learned anything about the history of race relations in my country. I never learned anything about non-western religions and cultures. I didn’t know what Buddhism was. I didn’t know Islam or Hinduism. I was ill-equipped for the debates I was in. I think students today are not so ill-equipped.

“The progress we’ve had in race relations can be to some extent laid at the door of our system of higher education. We’re learning a lot more about what slavery was and what we did to people, and we’re learning in an atmosphere where the classroom itself is more pluralistic and you hear more voices there. On the other hand, students go out into a world that still has things in it that are pulling in the other direction.”

One of the things that can pull in the other direction is human nature. She discusses the power of narcissism, insecurity and shame – forces which start to work on us at a very early age and get in the way of compassion, imagination, sympathy and understanding. Can a few years at university undo all that?

“Mill thought that by the time you got to university all you can do is present people with different perspectives and a whole bunch of facts, and you can get them to read poetry and cultivate their imagination and refine it. You are working with equipment that’s been heavily worked on before.

“What Mill misses is that university is the first time when people really go away from home. All of a sudden they’re away from parental authority, and they are fashioning their own identity. You do have a powerful moment of intervention. You have the forces of development on your side because students want to question. They want to cast something off. If they have never been loved, then I think it’s hopeless. You can hope that they’re hungry for love, and you can begin to meet that need in some way. If they haven’t been loved, they need therapy, not university classrooms.”