



Martha C. Nussbaum

THE THEATER OF ETHICS

Bernard Knox reviews

***The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics
in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy***

by Martha C. Nussbaum

“There is an ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry,” says Plato’s Socrates, as, in Book X of the *Republic*, he reconfirms his decision to banish Homer and the tragic poets from his ideal city. And indeed it is true that long before Plato such philosophers as Xenophanes and Heraclitus had inveighed against the poets for, among other things, their presentation of gods engaged in unjust or immoral activities. Poets working in what Plato called the imitative poetic media, epic and tragedy, were of course unable to reply in kind (though some passages of tragic lyric reflect a critical reaction

to current philosophical speculation), but Pindar complained that the natural philosophers (*tous physiologous*) were “harvesting the fruit of wisdom unripe.”

Later on Aristophanes put on stage a scurrilous caricature of Socrates, and Plato himself was a favorite target of the comic poets when his Academy became a philosophical center in Athens. We have a fragment from a play of Epicrates, for example, which presents Plato and his students trying, without much success, to “distinguish” (a Platonic technical term) between “the life of animals, the nature of trees, and the species of vegetables.” And in a comedy by Amphis a slave says to his master: “What good you expect to get from this, sir, I have no more idea of than I have of Plato’s ‘good.’”

This “quarrel” between poetry and philosophy tends to manifest itself also in modern scholarly and critical approaches to the two adversaries. Literary surveys of classical Greek culture usually pay too little attention to philosophical texts—and vice versa. Scholars who are not philosophically trained or inclined usually confine their reading of Plato (as Martha Nussbaum slyly remarks) to the early and middle dialogues, where dramatic and poetic elements are given full play; as for Aristotle, they rarely venture outside the *Poetics*, the *Rhetoric*, and the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Students of philosophy, on the other hand, often seem unaware that many of the problems discussed by ancient philosophers, especially in the ethical field, are also posed, in a different but no less valid form, by lyric and especially by tragic poets.

An extreme case of such disciplinary tunnel vision is the second volume of Michel Foucault’s *Histoire de la sexualité*, recently published in English translation under the title *The Use of Pleasure*. Its subject is the “problematization” of sexual behavior in classical Greek culture but its evidence is drawn exclusively from the writings of Plato, Xenophon, Aristotle, and the Hippocratic physicians. It does not seem to have occurred to Foucault that for an understanding of the ways sexual behavior was conceived of in classical Greece, tragedies such as Sophocles’ *Women of Trachis* and Euripides’ *Hippolytus* and *Medea*, to cite only three of the relevant examples, might be just as revealing as the strictly homosexual erotic theorizing of Plato’s *Symposium*.

Foucault’s Olympian indifference to the evidence of tragedy is perhaps unique, but it is nevertheless “customary,” as Nussbaum puts it, to regard tragic and philosophical texts as “of quite differ-

ent sorts, bearing in quite different ways on human ethical questions.” But this, as she goes on to point out, “was clearly not the view of the Greeks.” Homer, Hesiod, and the poets of the tragic stage were in fact thought of as ethical teachers and Plato’s indictment of them sprang from his conception of them not “as colleagues in another department, pursuing different aims, but as dangerous rivals.” Nussbaum proposes to study the “works of the tragic poets as Plato studied them: as ethical reflections in their own right.”

She is of course primarily a distinguished student of Greek philosophy, editor of a difficult Aristotelian text, *On the Motion of Animals*, and author not only of the first full-length commentary on that text to be published since the thirteenth century but also of a series of essays on the philosophical problems it raises.^[1] But she is also the author of a remarkable article entitled “Flawed Crystals: James’s *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy” as well as a penetrating essay on Sophoclean tragedy, “Consequences and Character in Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*.”^[2] She comes, then, well equipped for a book which opens with chapters on Aeschylus and the *Antigone* of Sophocles, proceeds to discussion of Plato’s *Protagoras*, *Republic*, *Symposium*, and *Phaedrus*, follows this with five chapters on Aristotle, and ends with an epilogue devoted to Euripides’ *Hecuba*. This long, intellectually demanding, and richly rewarding book must be almost unique in its expert analysis of both tragic and philosophical texts.

Nussbaum’s argument is complex, occasionally technical, but always intelligible even for those who, like the reviewer, read Plato with pleasure as far as the *Phaedrus*, find the going tough in the *Parmenides* and *Politicus*, but get a second wind in *The Laws*. She recognizes that her chapter, “Rational Animals and the Explanation of Action” may “seem rather technical for the non-specialist reader, who might prefer to turn directly to the chapter’s concluding section (v), where the ethical implications of the explanatory project are described.” In a short preface she gives the reader a choice: “This book can be read in two ways.” Since after the introductory chapter, which identifies the problems to be discussed, each chapter is devoted, except in the case of Aristotle, to a single work—tragedy or Platonic dialogue—“readers can...feel free to turn directly to the chapter or chapters that seem most pertinent to their own concerns.” But the reader is also advised that “there is...an overall historical argument, concerning the development of Greek thought on our questions; this is closely linked to an overall

philosophical argument about the merits of various proposals for self-sufficient life.”

“Our questions” are those raised by the author’s stated purpose: to examine “the aspiration to rational self-sufficiency in Greek ethical thought: the aspiration to make the goodness of a good human life safe from luck through the controlling power of reason.” The word “luck” is a rough equivalent of the Greek word *tuche*—“rough” because *tuche* does not necessarily refer to “random or uncaused” events; *tuche* means simply “what just happens to a man” as opposed to “what he does or makes.” Goodness, on the other hand, is used by Nussbaum in a double sense: the ethical quality of a human life and also the happiness, the enviability of that life. Clearly, goodness of the second kind is vulnerable to luck; the Greeks in general believed, contrary to modern Kantian ideas, that the first—the ethical quality of life—was vulnerable also. For one thing, the constituents of a happy life—love, friendship, attachment to property—may be “capable, in circumstances not of the agent’s own making, of generating conflicting requirements that can themselves impair the goodness of the agent’s life.” And secondly there can be an inner conflict between a person’s aspiration to self-sufficiency and the irrational forces in his own nature—“appetites, feelings, emotions”—sources of disorder, of what the Greeks called *mania*, “madness.”

The attainment of complete immunity to luck would seem therefore to call for a renunciation not only of those vulnerable components of the good life that set it at risk but also a total suppression of the appetites and passions that might undermine a personal dedication to self-sufficiency. Even if such rigid self-control were possible for mere human creatures, the resultant life would seem, to most of us at least, limited and impoverished. And in fact it is only Plato, at the vertiginous height of his argument in *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and *Symposium*, who proposes “a life of self-sufficient contemplation, in which unstable activities and their objects have no intrinsic value.”

The tragic poets, however, especially Aeschylus and Sophocles, present us with human characters exposed to fortune through their pursuit of those genuine human values that put us at risk—responsibility to others, loyalty to a community, devotion to the family. Nussbaum offers an impressive analysis of the tragic dilemmas of two Aeschylean heroes, Agamemnon at Aulis and Eteocles at the seventh gate of Thebes: in each case a “wrong ac-

tion [is] committed without any direct physical compulsion and in full knowledge of its nature, by a person whose ethical character or commitments would otherwise dispose him to reject the act.” Agamemnon, if he is to do his duty as commander of the expedition, must sacrifice his daughter; Eteocles, to save his city from destruction, must engage his brother in mortal combat. Agamemnon is placed by Zeus in a situation in which there is open to him no “guilt-free course.” Modern critics have found contradiction and illogicality in the Aeschylean view of tragic necessity, a criticism for which Nussbaum has scant sympathy. “Such situations,” she says, “may be repellent to practical logic; they are also familiar from the experience of life.”

In Sophocles’ *Antigone* the two principal characters attempt to avoid such dilemmas by “a ruthless simplification of the world of value which effectively eliminates conflicting obligations.” Creon rules out all loyalties except that to the city; since Polynices, though a member of Creon’s own family, has led a foreign assault on the city, he does not hesitate to order the exposure of his corpse, in spite of the fact that custom and religion assign him, as the only surviving male relative, responsibility for Polynices’ proper burial.

Antigone too has her strategy of “avoidance and simplification”; her exclusive loyalty is to family obligations, specifically “duty to the family dead.” Both of them come to grief, and though our sympathies are with Antigone the play clearly rejects the kind of rigid simplification of issues which inspired their actions. As Antigone is led off to her underground tomb, the chorus sings about others who have been similarly imprisoned, a song which Nussbaum, in a sensitive and convincing interpretation, sees as a repudiation of human action, a blind acceptance of passivity under the blows of fortune. The play seems to offer no escape from the choice between “Creon’s violence against the external and complete helpless passivity before the external.”

But this “paralyzing vision” is not the last word. In the speeches of Haemon and Tiresias a third possibility emerges, a prudent and intelligent moderation that makes it possible “to be flexibly responsive to the world, rather than rigid...a way of living in the world that allows an acceptable amount of safety and stability while still permitting recognition of the richness of value that is in the world.” Creon concludes in the end that “it is best to keep to the established conventions (*nomous*).” These are “the traditions of a community, built up and established over time” which “offer a good guide to what, in the world, ought to be recognized and

yielded to.” They “preserve a rich plurality of values” though they “offer no solution in bewildering tragic situations—except the solution that consists in being faithful to or harmonious with one’s sense of worth by acknowledging the tension and disharmony.”

The second choral ode of the *Antigone* begins with a famous celebration of the *technai*, the arts and sciences which have brought man, step by step, from helplessness to mastery of his environment and his crowning achievement, the creation of the state. *Techne*, the song seems to suggest, is the instrument by which man can make himself immune to *tuche*. In the event this proves to be a delusion; the messenger who announces the deaths of Antigone and Haemon proclaims the omnipotence of *tuche*—“Luck raises and luck humbles the lucky and the unlucky from day to day”—and the only successful *techne* mentioned in the play is that of the prophet Tiresias who reads the signs of divine wrath and comes to warn Creon that he stands “on the razor-edge of luck.”

Discussion of *techne* and *tuche* was not a monopoly of the tragic poets, it was a major preoccupation of intellectual circles in Periclean Athens. The Sophists, the West’s first professional educators, taught *technai*, especially the arts of persuasion, claiming they were the key to political advancement in democratic Athens; Protagoras, perhaps the greatest of them, says, in the Platonic dialogue that bears his name, that he can teach political *techne* and make men good citizens. This dialogue, one of Plato’s greatest creations from the literary and dramatic point of view, is full of stumbling blocks for the admirers of Plato the philosopher; not only does Socrates use arguments that border on the fallacious, he also proposes an identification of pleasure and goodness which is specifically repudiated in nearly every other Platonic dialogue. Nussbaum’s analysis of the dialogue is a subtle, finely argued attempt to set Plato’s thought squarely in the context of her leitmotif: the aspiration to rational self-sufficiency.

Protagoras’ science of practical reasoning can claim it is a *techne* that “increases our control over *tuche*” but, though it will go far toward “training the passions...it will not completely render them innocuous.” Above all it will not eliminate the conflict of values and the possibility of tragedy since, against the argument of Socrates, it recognizes “a plurality of distinct values.” Socrates’ insistence on the unity of the virtues Nussbaum sees as a necessary base for his ethical science (*episteme*) of measurement which would remove the possibility of “serious value conflict. For instead of choosing, under circumstantial pressure, to neglect a distinct value with its own separate claims, one will merely be giving up a

smaller amount of the same thing.” His adoption of pleasure as “the single measuring-stick of value” Nussbaum sees as a temporary expedient, which is “undefended, even unexplored” and in effect discarded at the end of the dialogue. What is important is the formulation of a science of “deliberative measurement.”

This reading of the argument of *Protagoras* is no more likely to win universal acceptance than any of its predecessors, but it is presented with persuasive skill and buttressed by footnotes addressed to professional colleagues dealing in depth, with possible objections and conflicting interpretations. What is interesting about it from the point of view of the non-professional is the link to tragedy. Protagoras’ program of practical reasoning is a *techne* which, as Nussbaum points out, “follows Tiresias’ advice”; it is a “practical wisdom that bends responsively to the shape of the natural world, accommodating itself to, giving due recognition to, its complexities.” It might be added that Socrates, in his insistence on a single value, seems to be following the pattern of Antigone and Creon, whose exclusive loyalty to one value armored them against normal human feelings that might conflict with it.

In later dialogues of the middle period Socrates abandons pleasure as the measuring stick but continues the search for a science concerned with “rendering diverse particulars qualitatively homogeneous and interchangeable” which will “undo several problems at once, transforming troublesome conflicts,” and “cutting away our motivations for passional excess.” The search leads in the *Republic* to the total rejection of passions and appetites in favor of the life of the philosopher, who “stands apart from human needs and limitations,” and whose viewpoint is “detached and extra-human,” and in the *Phaedo* it leads to the creation of a model life that is “practice for the separation of the soul from the body.” This is, as a doctor might put it, a heroic remedy and Nussbaum might have pointed out that Plato’s Socrates owes more than a little to tragedy’s conception of the hero: he rejects compromises and goes to his death rather than change his way of life. In the *Apology*, Plato’s version of his speech at his trial, Socrates compares himself to, of all people, Achilles, and even claims he is looking forward to conversing, in the next world, with the most stubborn, bloody, and revengeful of the heroes, Ajax son of Telamon.

Nussbaum’s emphasis, however, is on the difference, not the resemblance. The tragic hero’s single criterion of value has its roots in the passions; it involves him fatally in a nexus of human needs and interests—family, community, love of another person—which

breeds conflict. Plato's hero on the other hand reaches his criterion through the exercise of reason, rejects the passions and appetites completely, and lives a life spent in contemplation of eternal unchanging truths, free from internal value conflicts and immune to luck.

Plato's intellectual heroism denies the premises of tragedy but, as Nussbaum reminds us in a brilliant interlude between chapters—"Plato's Anti-tragic Theater"—the medium he invented for the presentation of his ideas was much indebted to that tragic drama which he was eventually to banish from his ideal state. Not only did he develop along new lines the ethical themes that tragedy had embodied in its heroic protagonists, he also adapted for his own literary and philosophical ends tragedy's dramatic means—character, dialogue, and plot. The dramatic form of his philosophical treatises is a radical departure. Previous philosophers, whether they wrote verse like Parmenides and Empedocles or prose like Anaxagoras and Democritus, addressed their readers in their own persons and in a didactic tone; as Nussbaum observes, Parmenides claims that he is an initiate and Empedocles that he is a god on earth. These are the books that Socrates (so Plato tells us in the *Phaedrus*) compared to figures in paintings: "For if you ask them a question, they keep a solemn silence." The Platonic dialogue "puts before us the responsiveness of dialectical interaction, as tragedy has also shown us concerned moral communication and debate." Unlike the ex cathedra pronouncements of the philosophers or the artful rhetoric of the Sophists, the dialogues "might fairly claim that they awaken and enliven the soul, arousing it to rational activity rather than lulling it into drugged passivity. They owe this to their kinship with theater."

They are theater, but "theater purged and purified of theater's characteristic appeal to powerful emotions"; they are "a pure crystalline theater of the intellect." Like tragedy, the dialogues move toward recognition of the truth through *elenchos*, testing and refutation; they "share with tragic poetry its elenctic structure." But there is a fundamental difference between the tragic and the Platonic *elenchos*. Creon rejects the arguments of Antigone, Haemon, and Tiresias; it takes the death of his son, "the sudden rush of grief, the tug of loss to make him see an aspect of the world to which he had not done justice." Recognition of the truth comes through the emotions; it was his intellectual conviction that led him to disaster. For Plato, on the other hand, learning comes through the intellect alone; it "takes place when the interlocutor is enmeshed in logical contradiction." His emotions are not to be aroused; "the ascent of

the soul towards true understanding, if it uses any texts at all, will...avoid any with an irrational or emotive character.”

The most powerful and dangerous of the emotions is what the Greeks called Eros, an irrational, passionate attachment to another human being. If the philosophical life can be lived only with passions and emotions totally subdued, Eros is clearly the most formidable adversary to be faced.

Plato recognizes this; he devotes to the problem of Eros the most richly dramatic of his dialogues, the *Symposium*. At a banquet in the house of the tragic poet Agathon, six speakers deliver an encomium of Eros; the last to speak is Socrates. Claiming that he is handing down the doctrine of the seer Diotima, he describes the progress of the lover, under the teacher’s guidance, from love of an individual body and mind to contemplation of the beautiful itself, “unalloyed, pure, unmixed, not stuffed full of human flesh and colors and lots of other mortal rubbish” (211E, Nussbaum’s translation). Anyone who can reach such a stage of unworldliness is obviously immune to luck, impervious to the sorrow that loss of the beloved person can inflict.

But to reach such heights is no easy matter. We shall be given later, when Alcibiades, an uninvited guest, speaks about Socrates, a picture of a man who has started to make the ascent. He is a man who, as Nussbaum puts it, “has so dissociated himself from his body that he genuinely does not feel its pain, or regard its sufferings as things genuinely happening to him.” He is impervious to cold, to fatigue, to hardship of any kind; he can drink without fear of intoxication and he can resist “the most immediate and intense sexual temptation.” This is a man “in the process of making himself self-sufficient,” and it is not an inviting prospect. Socrates, as Alcibiades truly says, “is not like any human being.”

When Alcibiades bursts in on the party just as Socrates concludes his exposition of Diotima’s teaching, we are faced suddenly with the incarnation of everything Diotima, or rather Socrates, would have us renounce. Crowned with the ivy of Dionysus and the violets of Aphrodite, Alcibiades is a vibrant image of the splendors of this fleshly world—a man of extraordinary physical beauty, a rich aristocrat, a brilliant wit and forceful speaker, and also, at the dramatic time of the dialogue, 416 BC, indisputably the most admired man in Athens, the political leader who was shortly to persuade the Athenian assembly to send him in command of a fleet and army to conquer Sicily. The speech he makes is not, like those of the dinner

guests, an encomium of Eros; it is a tragicomic account of his unsuccessful wooing of Socrates, this strange, fascinating, but incorruptible man.

Nussbaum sees in this speech more than a reluctant encomium of Socrates; it offers, she claims, an alternative to Diotima's progress from love of an individual to contemplation of universal truth. Her cogent analysis of the implications of the speech must be read in full for a real understanding of her thesis. Roughly speaking, she sees in Alcibiades a spokesman for the lover's understanding—an understanding “attained through the subtle interaction of sense, emotion, and intellect” and “yielding particular truths and particular judgements as a form of practical understanding.” This is a position which has an affinity with that of Tiresias, Haemon, and Protagoras, as well as that of Socrates in the *Phaedrus*. But its spokesman is himself, as every reader of Plato knew, a terrible example of lack of practical wisdom, a man “who will live, to the end, a disorderly, buffeted life, inconstant and wasteful of his excellent nature,” to die at last in exile, murdered by order of the victorious Spartans or, according to another account, by the brothers of a girl he had seduced. On this reading, the *Symposium* does indeed seem to us “a harsh and alarming book... We see now that philosophy is not fully human; but we are terrified of humanity and what it leads to.”

This comfortless vision of the human dilemma was something Plato himself was later to find too extreme; he tempered and modified it—so Nussbaum's argument proceeds—in the *Phaedrus*. In this dialogue Socrates first makes an attack on “erotic passion as a form of degrading madness” and denies the passions any “role to play in our understanding of the good.” Later on, however, he makes another speech, which begins with a quotation from the palinode of Stesichorus, the poet's recantation of his censure of Helen:

*This story is not true.
You did not board the benched ships,
you did not come to the towers of Troy.*

It is a prelude to his own recantation of his first speech, a defense of the benefits of madness (*mania*). *Mania* is a word that up to this point Plato has used to designate “the state of soul in which the nonintellectual elements—appetites and emotions—are in control and lead or guide the intellectual part,” a state which Socrates has

always rejected in favor of *sophrosune*, “the state of soul in which intellect rules securely over the other elements.”

Socrates now finds some good in *mania* after all. It is a necessity for the inspired seer as also for the poet; it is also, he goes on to say, necessary for the lover. From the poetic speech that follows, famous because of its image of the soul as a charioteer with two horses, one good and one bad, there emerges a view of the role of the passions quite different from the total rejection of them characteristic of the earlier dialogues. It makes us see human sexuality as something much more complicated and deep, more aspiring, than the middle dialogues had suggested; and, on the other hand, to see intellect as something more sexual than they had allowed, more bound up with receptivity and motion.

This is not, of course, an endorsement of Alcibiades’ position (though he too uses the word *mania*); the noblest lovers will stop short of sexual intercourse. Yet those who occasionally lose control of the bad horse are not condemned outright, and in any case Plato’s acceptance of love for a particular person exposes the lover to luck, to the possibility of loss, to all those human emotions to which the Socratic lover of the *Symposium* has made himself immune. This dialogue, Nussbaum claims, is a work in which Plato “admits that he has been blind to something, conceived oppositions too starkly,” a work in which “he seeks, through recantation and self-critical argument, to get back his sight,” as Stesichorus did when he wrote his palinode to Helen. “In the *Phaedrus* philosophy itself is said to be a form of *mania*, of possessed, not purely intellectual activity, in which intellect is guided to insight by personal love itself and by a complex passion-engendered ferment of the entire personality.”

Obviously such a dramatic volte-face cries out for explanation—“We feel like asking, what happened to Plato?” Nussbaum looks for it in the historical circumstances in which the work was composed. She has in fact been conscious of this element throughout her discussion of Plato. It was put to brilliant use in her evocation of what Alcibiades meant to the Athenian readers of the *Symposium* and provides the fascinating suggestion that the reason Protagoras can adopt a “conservative,” compromising position is “satisfaction.” He has lived the prime of his life in the greatest age of Athenian political culture. He still seems to us to be a part of this glorious, relatively happy past...He is not gripped by the sense of urgency about moral problems that will soon characterize the writing of younger thinkers.

In the case of the *Phaedrus*, the background factor is personal: it is Plato's love for his pupil Dion, the man who was to overthrow the tyranny in his native city of Syracuse, only to be assassinated later on by political rivals.

It has often been noticed that when Socrates in the *Phaedrus* speaks of the ideal lovers he juxtaposes two words that mean "of Zeus" and "brilliant" and in their original Greek form *dios dion* suggest a punning reference to Plato's pupil; the great German scholar Wilamowitz regarded the allusion as "beyond reasonable doubt." Nussbaum adds that Phaedrus's name also means "brilliant," and since she has suggested that we are to think of Socrates and Phaedrus as representing the ideal lovers of Socrates' speech she can go on to see them as "standing in for Plato and Dion." This gives the dialogue "the character of a love letter, an expression of passion, wonder, and gratitude." She is not of course saying anything as simple-minded as that love made Plato change his mind; she recognizes that "his experience of love was certainly also shaped by his developing thought." But she does claim firmly that the dialogue asks "us to recognize experience as one factor of importance."

Here, however, she may be carrying her legitimate and even admirable attempt to ground the Platonic arguments in the contemporary scene too far. An allusion to Dion there may well be, but, though Dion was Plato's pupil and the close relationship between the two men extended over a quarter of a century, the evidence for an erotic attachment is weak. Plutarch's very full biography of Dion, for example, gives no hint of it; the argument for it rests principally on the testimony of one Diogenes Laertius, whose gossip compilation *The Lives and Opinions of the Philosophers* was put together some time in the third century AD. He cites from Book IV of Aristippus' *The Luxury of the Ancients* an epitaph for Dion written by Plato which concludes with the line: "O Dion, you who drove my soul mad with love." But since this same Aristippus announces that Plato was also in love with a boy named Aster ("Star") and produces a love poem addressed to him as well, following this up with the information that Plato was in love with Phaedrus too, many scholars, including the late Sir Denys Page, the most recent editor of these poems, have concluded that like the other Platonic love poems collected by Diogenes—addressed to Phaedrus, Alexis, Agathon, and two professional ladies called Archeanassa and Xanthippe—the Aristippus love poems, including the epitaph for Dion, are typical Hellenistic forgeries.[\[3\]](#)

Whatever may be thought of Nussbaum's tentative reconstruction of the emotions that prompted the composition of the *Phaedrus*, there can be no doubt that she offers a challenging new reading of it. When she moves on to Aristotle, whose "conception of ethical theory...is," she says, "roughly" her own, she presents us with an Aristotle whose vision of the good life has more affinity with the *Phaedrus* than with the middle dialogues. Her Aristotle develops a conception of a human being's proper relationship to *tuche* that returns to and further articulates many of the insights of tragedy. His philosophical account of the good human life is...an appropriate continuation and an explicit description of those insights.

Plato's earlier conception of philosophy as a *techne* that can lift the individual above the level of normal humanity and so free him from the tyranny of luck Aristotle rejects in favor of a nonscientific mode of practical reasoning, which recognizes that some components of a good life are vulnerable to catastrophe. Turning his back on the philosophical tradition which held that appearances are deceptive and the opinions of the many false, Aristotle "insists that he will find his truth *inside* what we say, see, and believe, rather than 'far from the beaten path of human beings' (in Plato's words) 'out there.'"

Nussbaum's limitation of the scope of Aristotle's ethical enquiry to the common beliefs and conceptions of humanity depends on her interpretation of the word *phainomena*, literally "appearances," which occurs in Aristotle's discussion of his method at the beginning of Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The method consists of setting down the *phainomena*, dealing with the initial difficulties, and proceeding in this way to demonstrate the truth of all the common beliefs (*endoxa*) about these states of mind or, if that is impossible, the truth of the majority and the most important of them. For if the difficulties can be resolved and the beliefs (*endoxa*) still stand, the demonstration will have been adequate.

Shortly after this passage Aristotle dismisses Socrates' claim that no one acts wrongly knowing that his action is wrong, but only in ignorance as "manifestly in contradiction with the *phainomena*." Most interpreters and translators, some of them in one of these passages and some in both, have taken *phainomena* to mean "the facts," "the observed facts," "data of perception," "observations"—almost anything, as Nussbaum says, "but the literal 'appearances', or the frequently interchangeable 'what we believe,' or 'what we say.'" The tendentious translations derive from a "long tradition in the interpretation of Aristotelian science," which sees

Aristotle in Baconian terms: a scientist who gathers data through empirical observation and then searches for a theory that will explain the data. It is clear that in the texts quoted above such an interpretation of *phainomena* is not acceptable, since the *phainomena* are immediately identified with *endoxa*, “common conceptions or beliefs on the subject.”

The correct interpretation of *phainomena* was established in what Nussbaum calls a “justly famous article” by G.E.L. Owen; according to her, however, he did not go far enough, since he understood the term in the Baconian sense in Aristotle’s biological works and thus “forces us to charge Aristotle with equivocation concerning his method and several of its central terms.” Finding this inadmissible, she devotes an important chapter, “Saving Aristotle’s Appearances” to a “univocal general account” of *phainomena* in Aristotle’s method of ethical enquiry[4]

What is that method? The philosopher begins by “setting down” the relevant appearances, “the ordinary beliefs and sayings” and a “review of previous scientific or philosophical treatments of the problem, the views of ‘the many and the wise.’” The next step is to sort out the confusions and contradictions such matter contains, to eliminate contradiction. But the process of bringing “the matter of life into perspicuous order” does not allow us to “follow a logical argument anywhere it leads.” We must, in the end, show that the *phainomena*, or at any rate the greatest number and the most important of them, are true. “Theory must remain committed to the ways human beings live, act, see.”

A more total rejection of Plato’s fundamental precepts is hard to imagine, and Nussbaum quotes from, of all places, the *Posterior Analytics*, a “burst of exuberant malice that shows us aspects of Aristotle’s temperament usually masked by a measured sobriety”: “So goodbye to the Platonic Forms. They are *teretismata*” (the sort of sounds you make when you hum to yourself) “and have nothing to do with our speech.”

Her next four chapters are devoted to an explanation and defense of Aristotle’s articulation of “a conception of practical rationality that will make human beings self-sufficient in an appropriately human way.” The chapter which she warns us “may seem rather technical for the nonspecialist reader” is a discussion of Aristotle’s theories of animal motion and motivation which is relevant to ethical theory because it is part of Aristotle’s ethical view that “our

shared animal nature is the ground of our ethical development. It is our nature to be animal, the sort of animal that is rational.”

This is followed by Nussbaum’s discussion of “non-scientific deliberation”; it deals with Aristotle’s claim that, contrary to Platonic doctrine, practical wisdom is not scientific wisdom. It deals also with Aristotle’s emphasis on the anthropomorphism of the search for the good life, his attack on the Platonic commensurability of values and the Platonic demand for generality, and his affirmation of the role nonintellectual elements in deliberation (a point on which he comes close to Plato’s position in the *Phaedrus*). He has eliminated those elements in the Platonic “science” which conferred invulnerability to outside contingency. Rejecting both extreme positions—that luck is the sole decisive factor in the living of a good life and that good living is invulnerable to luck—Aristotle admits the possibility of “disruption of good activity” and even “damage to good states of character.” For the ethical values that constitute good living cannot exist except in a context of human activity; though for animals and gods such concepts as justice, courage, generosity are irrelevant, these central human values “cannot be found in a life without shortage, risk, need, and limitation.” This is true also of the values of friendship and political activity, the subject of Nussbaum’s final chapter on Aristotle’s ethical theory. This chapter ends with an eloquent assessment of the Aristotelian achievement.

Aristotle has attempted...by setting our various beliefs before us, to show us that they contain a conception of human good living that makes it something relatively stable, but still vulnerable, in its search for richness of value, to many sorts of accidents. We pursue and value both stability and the richness that opens us to risk. In a certain sense we value risk itself, as partially constitutive of some kinds of value. In our deliberations we must balance these competing claims. This balance will never be a tension-free harmony.

Good human deliberation is a “delicate balancing act...delicate, and never concluded, if the agent is determined, as long as he or she lives, to keep all the recognized human values in play.” To those who find this picture of deliberation “mundane, messy, and lacking in elegance,” Aristotle would reply “that we do well not to aim at a conception that is more elegant, or simpler, than human life is.” This is one of several passages in the book which will seem to many readers to justify Nussbaum’s belief “that Nietzsche was correct in thinking that a culture grappling with the widespread loss of Judaeo-Christian religious faith could gain insight

into its own persisting intuitions about value by turning to the Greeks.”

But this is not the end of her book. She began with tragedy and it is with tragedy that she ends. Plato rejected it as a corrupting influence, but Aristotle’s ethical position clearly allows it a place, even an important place, in human life, since it “explores the gap between being good and living well.” Under the heading “Luck and the Tragic Emotions” Nussbaum discusses Aristotle’s treatise on tragedy and especially his remarks about pity and fear. “For Aristotle, pity and fear will be sources of illumination or clarification, as the agent, responding and attending to his or her responses, develops a richer self-understanding concerning the attachments and values that support the responses.”

This interpretation of a much-disputed text depends on a new understanding of the key word *katharsis* in Aristotle’s formula “through pity and fear to accomplish the *katharsis* of experiences of that kind.” Developing an argument of Leon Golden, who pointed out that *katharsis* and related words, as used by Plato, have a strong connection with learning, occurring in connection with “the unimpeded or ‘clear’ rational state of the soul,” Nussbaum looks at the history of these words and finds that their “primary, ongoing, central meaning is roughly one of ‘clearing up’ or ‘clarification.’” “The meaning ‘purgation,’ usually adduced in explanation of this passage in Aristotle, is a special medical application of this general sense.

In an epilogue Nussbaum presents an analysis of a play which Plato, though he does not mention it, must have regarded with indignation, for it shows us the complete deterioration of moral character under the pressure of calamity. It is the *Hecuba* of Euripides, a play rarely discussed in the voluminous literature on Greek tragedy, one which from the nineteenth century on into our own has often been censured as “episodic,” “melodramatic,” even, by one influential critic, “poor and uninteresting.”

Nussbaum offers a convincing defense of its dramatic and thematic unity: the two main episodes, the sacrifice of Polyxena and Hecuba’s atrocious revenge on the murderer of her son Polydorus, are seen as dramatic embodiments of contrasting views on the stability of good character under adverse conditions. The nobility of Polyxena, who refuses to plead for her life and dies with dignity and courage, prompts Hecuba to reflect that “among human beings... the noble [is never] anything but noble, and is not corrupted

in its nature by contingency, but stays good straight through to the end.” But with the discovery of her son’s body and the realization that he has been murdered by the guest-friend Polymestor to whom she has entrusted him for safekeeping, Hecuba’s conception of a world governed by *nomos*, “deep human agreements concerning value,” is shattered. In exchange she embraces a *nomos* of a different nature: revenge, the old law—an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Using the same moral convention of guest-friendship that Polymestor has betrayed, and appealing to the greed which had prompted his murder of her son, she lures him and his infant sons into the tents of the captured Trojan women, where the children are killed and Polymestor blinded. Later Polymestor prophesies that she will fall from the yardarm of the ship on her way to Greece and be transformed into a dog, a creature which, as Nussbaum emphasizes, ranks, for the Greeks, “very low on the scale of animal nobility.” But she is already something less than human. The destruction of the *nomos* of mutual trust can produce, even in a stable character, “bestiality, the utter loss of human relatedness and human language.”


This is, as Nussbaum puts it, a “worst case,” but Aristotle, though he might insist on the rarity of such a combination of disasters as that which overwhelms Hecuba, “cannot consistently close off the possibility of such events.” He too, like Hecuba, “bases human excellence on the social nature of the human being” (*nomos*). He “stresses that all of excellence has an other-related aspect” and that “personal love and political association are not only important components of the good human life but also necessary for the continued flourishing of good character generally.” And he “mentions explicitly that trust is required to reap the benefits of these associations.”

Euripides’ play does show us, in the person of Polyxena, an example of uncorrupted nobility, but, as Nussbaum puts it, she has the “good luck” to die before life can bring disillusionment—“to live on is to make contact in some way at some time with the possibility of betrayal.” The Platonic alternative, to “put the world in good order by sealing off certain risks, closing ourselves to certain happenings,” and still retain a world “relatively rich in value, since it would still contain the beauty of the Platonic contemplative life” seems, when we look at the world of the *Hecuba*, an attractive one. And yet, as Aristotle, and for that matter the *Phaedrus* and the *Antigone*, have made clear, “there is in fact a loss in value whenever the risks involved in specifically human virtue are closed off.... Each salient Aristotelian virtue seems inseparable from a risk of harm”—courage for example exists only in a context of death or

serious damage. "There are certain risks," Nussbaum concludes, "that we cannot close off without a loss in human value, suspended as we are between beast and god, with a kind of beauty available to neither."

This outline of Nussbaum's argument gives little idea of its originality, intellectual richness, and logical force, nor can quotations from her text convey more than a faint impression of the fluidity, grace, precision, and economy of her prose. In her opening pages she speaks of the problem facing a philosopher who chooses to deal with "competing conceptions of learning and writing, as embodied in poetic and philosophical texts": the decision whether to adopt "the hard 'philosophical' style" or "a mode of writing that lies closer to poetry and makes its appeal to more than one 'part' of the person," or else to "use different styles in different parts of the inquiry." Her choice is "to attempt to vary the way of writing so that it will be appropriate to the ethical conception to which it responds in each case; to try to show in my writing the full range of my responses to the texts and to evoke similar responses in the reader." She will "remain always committed to the critical faculties, to clarity and close argument" but will also "try to deal with tragic (and Platonic) images and dramatic situations in such a way that the reader will feel, as well as think, their force." Over the four hundred or so pages of text and the nearly one hundred pages of notes she succeeds handily in fulfilling these promises; this is a book which keeps a firm hold on the reader's attention, challenges the reader's intellectual capacity, and appeals, gravely and without fulsome rhetoric, to his or her deepest emotions.

It is also a book which, besides being required reading for anyone interested in Greek philosophy or literature, addresses a wider audience. It analyzes the attempts of poets and philosophers in the great creative age of Greek civilization to deal with problems that, as Nussbaum says in her opening chapter, are still problems for anyone who finds it hard to accept the Kantian view that the domain of moral value supersedes all other values and that it is altogether immune from the assaults of luck. "That much that I did not make goes towards making me whatever I shall be praised or blamed for being," she writes, "that I must constantly choose among competing and apparently incommensurable goods and that circumstances may force me to a position in which I cannot help being false to

something or doing some wrong; that an event that simply happens to me may, without my consent, alter my life; that it is equally problematic to entrust one's good to friends, lovers, or country and to try to have a good life without them—all these I take to be not just the material of tragedy, but everyday facts of lived practical reason.” 

Endnotes

[1] Aristotle, *De Motu Animalium*. Text with translation, commentary, and interpretive essays (Princeton, 1978). Paperback edition with corrections, 1985.

[2] *New Literary History* 15 (1983), pp. 25–50; *Philosophy and Literature* (1976–1977), pp. 25–53.

[3] Aristippus of Cyrene was a contemporary of Plato so it is not likely that he would have included Plato's love affairs in a book called *The Luxury of the Ancients*. Even Wilamowitz, who accepts the Dion epitaph as genuine, assigns Diogenes “Aristippus” to the second century BC.

[4] “If we do not insist on introducing an anachronistic scientific conception,” she says later, “the alleged two senses and two methods can be one. When Aristotle sits on the shore of Lesbos taking notes on shellfish...he will be describing the world *as it appears to*, as it is experienced by, observers who are members of our kind.”

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