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Book Review

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Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities

Martha C. Nussbaum. Princeton University Press. 2010.

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Socialists and enthusiasts of social philosophy have long recognized a depth to the injustices characteristic of the market society which is often unacknowledged by other modes of inquiry. In the classical tradition, the propensity for citizens of a given regime to develop psyches reflective of that regime forms the centrepiece of political analysis and it has often been observed by those influenced by this tradition that societies dominated by market economies cannot be adequately understood without privileging an analysis of the psychological effects market forces have on citizens. In this brief and accessible book Martha Nussbaum sounds an alarming call to pay this potential evil greater attention, describing a distorted yet burgeoning approach to education which threatens nothing less than the annihilation of effective democratic citizenship.

Nussbaum's target is what she simply calls 'education for economic growth' or 'the growth model' which attempts to mould human beings into passive instruments equipped with basic literacy and numeracy and, for some, more specialized familiarity with appropriately framed economic and historical fact. Literature and the arts, critical thinking, and the cultivation of imaginative sympathy are looked upon by this model as superfluous to the project of growth or even as threatening distractions due to their tendency for encouraging challenges to the priority accorded to the growth model. Nussbaum draws upon twentieth century psychology to show how the exclusion of these elements tends to warp the development of the human personality, usually incapacitating students from participating in healthy political life. Citizens of democracies, she claims, beyond mastering indispensible critical reasoning skills, require highly developed moral emotions to participate effectively. Because democratic societies rely heavily upon a sense of mutual

respect and sympathy between both citizens at home and non-citizens abroad, and since this egalitarian ethos is dependent on an ability to appreciate the complexity of the inner lives of others and to imaginatively inhabit their subjective standpoints, civic education in democracies is behoved to develop moral emotions consonant with this ability.

Yet Nussbaum maintains that developing such a capacity is no easy feat. Indeed, as the research of psychologists such as David Winnicott, Paul Rozin, and Jonathan Haidt seems to confirm, human beings are predisposed from infancy to a sort of narcissism, understood as an inability to appreciate the complexity and genuine value of other people and often expressed in an overpowering need for self-control. Moreover, the familiar research of Asch, Milgram, and Zimbardo suggests that this predisposition can easily re-emerge when an individual is faced with social circumstances that encourage finding invulnerability in group-think. Since this narcissism is incompatible with healthy civic virtue, and because it is not sufficiently overcome without careful child-raising and life-long practice in imaginatively sympathizing with others, Nussbaum argues that a social system lacking either in adequate educational resources devoted to the elimination of narcissism or in plenty of opportunities to reinforce the habituation towards imaginative sympathizing will be incapable of practicing democratic governance. This, she bemoans, is precisely the situation towards which the United States is rapidly moving and in which many Asian countries such as India are already mired. The increasing reliance on 'education for economic growth' spells not only a failure to address our narcissistic predilections but, Nussbaum contends, compounds their hold on the personality. The passive, rote learning characteristic of the growth model leaves citizens vulnerable to grievous inconsistency in personal values and political reasoning and its failure to address the innate and culturally constructed forces which resist the development of the moral emotions indirectly encourages their stultification.

Though her schematic account of the moral psychology of democratic citizenship plays a fundamental role in the overall argument, the majority of the book is devoted to sketching an educational program for the effective promotion of civic virtue. It is at this level that Nussbaum insists a life-long exposure to and practice in humanistic education is

indispensible. From an early age, she argues, children can and should be schooled in progressively more complex forms of logical reasoning, familiarity with different cultures, and finally the pivotal 'imaginative sympathy' or 'narrative imagination' already discussed. With the help of an historical survey of like-minded pedagogical thinkers such as John Dewey and Rabindranath Tagore, Nussbaum shows the vital role of imaginative play and later participation in musical and dramatic performance art as well as the serious study of appropriate literatures in the development of civic virtue. Employing examples of educational experiments such as the school and university Tagore helped found in India and the incredible work of the Chicago Children's Choir, she makes a convincing case for the efficacy of this educational model in the promotion of healthy democratic citizens.

A great strength of the book is this emphasis on a specific and remarkably well-developed conception of psychological health. It allows Nussbaum to speak to issues with which theorists of ideology in market societies have long grappled without becoming hindered by the often abstract and philosophically controversial elements of that discourse. By focusing on civic virtues necessary for democratic citizenship rather than on developing a theory of false consciousness, Nussbaum is able to appeal persuasively to a wide readership and at the same time address issues which have been sidelined in academic, not to speak of popular, conversation. However, this strategy does suffer a serious drawback. Theorists of ideology have long pointed to forces peculiar to market societies rather than exclusively to forces issuant from human nature as potential impediments to human development. A pedagogical theory which purported to envision a strategy capable of effectively educating citizens in a market society and yet did not tailor that strategy to compensate for salient peculiarities of that society—perhaps an especially influential advertisement industry or work ethic—would, according to such thinkers, risk raising citizens insufficiently capable of resisting their pernicious psychological distortions. Though Nussbaum does at times gesture to the importance of these sorts of distortions, she does not allow them to shape her policy recommendations in any significant way. While the argument is timely and persuasive to be sure, Nussbaum's case could be improved by attention to this issue.