

L'intervista

# “The First Thing Philosophers Have to Do Is to Learn”: An Interview with Martha C. Nussbaum

## “La prima cosa che i filosofi devono fare è imparare” Intervista a Martha C. Nussbaum

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**Abstract.** Martha C. Nussbaum is internationally renowned for being one of the leading moral and political philosophers of our time, and is highly regarded for her work on the role of the emotions in moral and political reasoning. In this interview, in dialogue with her interlocutors, she discusses her work over the past four decades, and gives insights into her book in progress on opera and its relationship to liberal political ideals, *The Republic of Love*. In addition to declaring her love of Italian culture, she clarifies her stance on some contemporary issues, including the controversy on sex and gender, animal rights, the relationship between philosophy and natural sciences, and the importance of liberal arts and ancient Greek and Roman philosophy.

**Keywords:** Martha C. Nussbaum, Politics and Emotions, Italian culture, animal life, liberal arts, gender.

**Riassunto.** Tra le maggiori voci del dibattito filosofico contemporaneo internazionale, Martha C. Nussbaum è conosciuta soprattutto per i lavori che ha consacrato alla centralità delle emozioni in campo politico e morale. In questa intervista, in dialogo con i suoi interlocutori, la filosofa statunitense ripercorre il suo itinerario filosofico e offre alcune anticipazioni sul libro che attualmente ha in preparazione,

*The Republic of Love*, dedicato alla relazione tra l'opera lirica e gli ideali del liberalismo politico. Oltre a evidenziare il suo amore per la cultura italiana, il dialogo affronta numerosi temi di rilevanza attuale, tra cui la definizione di genere, i diritti degli animali, il rapporto tra filosofia e scienze naturali, e la rilevanza dell'educazione liberale e della filosofia antica.

**Parole chiave:** Martha C. Nussbaum, politica e emozioni, cultura italiana, vita animale, arti liberali, gender.

1. *Since the beginning of your academic career, one of your major sources of inspiration has been ancient Greek and Roman philosophy. Do you think that this tradition of thought can be instrumental to understanding the present crisis of liberal democracies and the rise of illiberal societies? What lesson can we learn from the past, despite the self-evident moral failings of the societies from which ancient political philosophy arose?*

Greek and Roman philosophy is of course not a single tradition, it is a multiplicity of traditions, often arguing with one another. I think that fact alone makes the works of the Greek tragedians, Plato, Aristotle, and the Hellenistic Epicureans and Stoics priceless resources for teaching philosophy, to both graduates and undergraduates. I still believe, as I argued in *The Fragility of Goodness*, that ancient Greek tragedy yields deep insights into human vulnerability in a world where we do not control many of the most important things.<sup>1</sup> I disagree with much of what Plato offers, but he writes philosophy in a way that helps us all sharpen our critical capacities through dialogue. And his insights into love are unmatched. Aristotle is a huge source of insight about the nature of life and mind, and about the nature of a flourishing life. His view of *eudaimonia* is a corrective to simplistic views that focus on pleasure and momentary happiness. And his account of friendship is still the best one that Western philosophy offers (along with Cicero's).

The Stoics were the first who recognized that the worth and dignity of a human being is utterly independent of wealth and rank, even gender. In my recent book *The Cosmopolitan Tradition*, I show how the Stoics are sources of much that is fine in the modern human rights movement – although their view is too anthropocentric, neglecting animals and the environment.<sup>2</sup> Also, the Stoics' analysis of the nature of emotions, the first we have in the Western tradition, is deep and richly insightful. I use it as

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<sup>1</sup> See Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*.

<sup>2</sup> See Nussbaum, *The Cosmopolitan Tradition*, chap. 3.

the basis for my own analysis of emotion in *Upheavals of Thought*, altering it in various ways.<sup>3</sup> Their normative view about emotions is entirely separate from their analysis, and is, I think, very misguided, holding that we should not care about anything that can be affected by events outside our control. But even this misguided view is worth engaging with, because it is right about some things: many people care much too much about money and reputation, for example. So the Stoic view challenges us to ponder why we think they are right about some things but profoundly wrong about family, loved ones, and political citizenship, concerning which the Greek tragic poets got it right: these things are, though highly vulnerable, of enormous value in a human life.

There are many other topics on which the Greeks and Romans offer insight: Cicero's wonderful work on aging, for example, the best work on that topic in the Western philosophical tradition.<sup>4</sup> And Porphyry's magnificent work on animal dignity is the best on that topic in the Western tradition until very recently. (Hindu and Buddhist traditions are wonderful non-Western sources here.) But I will stop there and let readers add their own examples.

2. *One of the pillars of your thought is the understanding of emotion as a form of intelligence. Your high regard for John Rawls is well-known. You once remarked that your book Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice "is an attempt to execute Rawls's project in detail" by developing some insights into questions of moral psychology that were already present in A Theory of Justice.<sup>5</sup> Could you explain what your richly cognitive account of emotions adds to Rawls's treatment of the problem of stability of societies based on ideas of respect and reciprocity?*

In Part III of *A Theory of Justice* Rawls developed a richly cognitive account of emotions and used it to develop an account of how the just society could perpetuate itself over time.<sup>6</sup> He later came to doubt the specifics of the account he had given, thinking it might be incompatible with the requirements of "political liberalism." But he always held a space open for a "reasonable political psychology," and that is what I try to supply in *Political Emotions*, and later in *The Monarchy of Fear*.<sup>7</sup> It is not the account Rawls gave. It has a larger place for individual love, including love of an individual nation. It is not imagined as totally continuous with our independently jus-

<sup>3</sup> Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, part. I.

<sup>4</sup> See Nussbaum and LeVmore, *Aging Thoughtfully*, 64-84.

<sup>5</sup> See Nussbaum, Introduction, 55 (fn 39).

<sup>6</sup> See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, chap. 8.

<sup>7</sup> See Nussbaum, *Political Emotions; The Monarchy of Fear*.

tified political principles, but, rather, as in a continual dialogue with them. I have a psychoanalytic orientation, and I argue that people care deeply about something only when they connect it to the roots of love in childhood, and that a wise politician will tap into these sources to move and inspire. I give examples from the history of the US and India: Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Martin Luther King, Jr., Rabindranath Tagore, and Jawaharlal Nehru. I think it is compatible with what Rawls was after, and he always took King as a model, as do I. If you look at my detailed reading of a speech of King's you will see how I think specific emotions figure in its force.<sup>8</sup>

3. *Emotions and passions seem to be an inescapable subject in current political thought. You have written about compassion, fear, disgust, shame, anger and, most recently, pride. Do you think that your work on the emotions can help us understand the polarization of the public sphere in a post-pandemic age? Has your view of love for one's country, globalization, human rights changed or, rather, has been strengthened by recent events? In short, did you learn something unexpected from the global health emergency?*

The whole purpose of my 2018 book *The Monarchy of Fear* was to address this set of questions about the emotions. The Italian translation of the book appeared in September 2020 from "il Mulino".<sup>9</sup> I think I will let you find out what I think, rather than trying to summarize the whole book. My 2019 book, *The Cosmopolitan Tradition*, is also published in Italian.<sup>10</sup> There I make it clear that I believe global justice issues should be addressed through the nation-state, since it is accountable to people's voices and has moral importance as a vehicle for people's autonomy (agreeing here with Grotius).

4. *As far as the role of anger in politics is concerned, it seems that you have changed your mind over the years. What is the reason for that? Is it due to the spread of political struggles that seem to be aimed at punishing past faults rather than promoting reconciliation and opening up new democratic processes? More specifically, to what extent is the overcoming of the unresolved racial question in the United States hindered by emotions (such as anger or shame), which seem to arise from a sense of guilt too deep to be atoned?*

I would not exactly say that I have changed my mind, since I had no mind before, really. I mean that I had never written a detailed analysis of

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<sup>8</sup> See Nussbaum, *Political Emotions*, 235-239.

<sup>9</sup> See Nussbaum, *La monarchia della paura*.

<sup>10</sup> See Nussbaum, *La tradizione cosmopolita*.

anger. I had made some casual remarks about it that I decided were mistaken when I actually sat down to work on it seriously. What I realized was that ordinary anger is retributive, containing within itself a wish for payback. In fact Aristotle's definition, Stoic definitions, and all subsequent definitions in Western philosophy include this wish as a conceptual part of anger, as do both Buddhist and Hindu definitions. I think they are right about everyday anger, and for that reason everyday anger is confusing and confused, trying to make up for a problem in the present by pretending to change the past. This confused enterprise does a lot of harm. Parents who have lost a child to violence often long for the death of the murderer, and spend their lives in pursuit of capital punishment, which actually does no good to them or anyone else. It certainly doesn't bring back the child. So my argument in *Anger and Forgiveness* was directed against this retributive form of anger.<sup>11</sup> But, unlike Aristotle, I recognize a type of anger that is different, purely forward-looking. Its entire content is: "How outrageous that is! It should not happen again." One example is the anger of parents when their children do something wrong: they want to protest the bad behavior and to hold the child accountable, but they do not wish for payback. They want future improvement in the child, and they choose strategies to get it. I think we should always foster this sort of anger, which I call Transition-Anger, and protest without seeking payback. What we should do instead is to fix the future. (This can include punishment, in a spirit of deterrence, education, and reform.) Where race is concerned, I think that symbolic reparations for slavery are not entirely useless, since they may help reconciliation and bring people together. But the main thing is to address existing inequality with constructive measures.

5. *A significant part of your effort has been devoted not only to outlining the human capabilities approach but also to its practical application, especially with regard to women's struggles in India.<sup>12</sup> This approach is nowadays supplemented with a broader, environment-centered notion of sustainable development that you already implicitly considered in your list of central capabilities. How do you see this issue today, in the light of the (wavering) mobilization against climate change of global players and, more interestingly, of young motivated citizens such as Greta Thunberg?*

I am not an activist or a politician. I study the work of first-rate activists, but they are the ones who implement the Capabilities Approach, not I. One of the main purposes of the Human Development and Capability

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<sup>11</sup> See Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*.

<sup>12</sup> See Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*.

Association is to create a meeting place for discussion between academics and activists/policy makers, and I often visit and address policy-making bodies in other countries. (Never the US, which has had no interest in the Capabilities Approach at the political level.) In the HDCA we have many discussions of environmental issues, and sustainable development is one of the biggest concern of our members, theorized in different ways by different people. My own focus is on the plight of animals, and I see the larger environmental question as instrumental to the flourishing of sentient beings. But others think that the environment has intrinsic value. I like to encourage people in our association to develop different positions, not to defer to what I think or what Amartya Sen thinks.

I do think that the issue of climate change is now real for most people, all over the world, in a way it was not previously. The US has often lagged behind Europe, but now Biden has moved it to the center of his agenda. Politically he is enmeshed in controversy, but he has done a lot quietly through administrative regulation.

*6. The condition of women, and the urge to rethink the frontiers of justice in both Western and non-Western countries is a key concern in your thought. In *Citadels of Pride*, your latest book, which has not been translated into Italian yet, you thoroughly examine sexual abuse and harassment.<sup>13</sup> Could you sum up your claim about the culture of pride that you see as lying behind women's objectification, manipulation and vulnerability and how patriarchal and oppressive cultures can be fought without losing hope in a possible future reconciliation? The debate within the feminist movement is very lively today, in some cases has become even bitter. Often, the bone of contention is the very definition of what a "woman" is. What is your view about the current controversy on sex and gender?*

I certainly won't be able to give a view on all controversies within feminism. Women's studies is a huge and lively field, full of different questions and inquiries. My inquiry in the new book focuses on specific questions of justice and equal rights, and therefore on the longstanding problem of "objectification," meaning treating a person as a thing. Women have often been objectified by men, and this is at the root of a lot of bad things, including sexual violence and workplace sexual harassment, the two big issues studied in the book. I first ask, what lies behind and produces objectification? I turn for insight to Dante's concept of the sin of Pride. Pride, not the momentary emotion, but a lasting character trait, is a trait that consists in thinking that other people are not fully real and that you are the only one

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<sup>13</sup> See Nussbaum, *Citadels of Pride*.

who counts. Dante depicts the Proud, in *Purgatory*, as bent over like hoops, so that they cannot see anything but themselves. Of course, people are rarely proud in all contexts. Some have class pride without race pride. Some have race pride without class pride. Dante finds that he himself has career pride, without some of pride's other forms. But in most modern societies, for ages, men have been brought up to have gender pride: women seem to them like extensions of themselves, useful objects who can do things for them, rather than people whose autonomy and subjectivity is to be taken utterly seriously. The book examines the way this has formed cultures of sexual abuse and sexual harassment, and then studies in detail the ways in which law, over the past fifty years, has combatted these ills. But though progress has been made, I argue that there are still specific areas of life that resist law because of their diseased structures, and these are the "citadels" of my title. The examples I study are: the federal judiciary, media and arts, and, finally, the culture of the sports world, in particular college and university sports, which you are very lucky not to have. Some of the specific discussions are US-centered, but the general point is easy to grasp and translate into a different context. And the arts discussion is fully international.

*7. You often stress the importance of liberal arts (and their goal of "cultivating humanity") in education as a crucial element for the development of collective freedom and the formation of open-minded individuals. How do you see the future of the university and, more generally, of higher education in a society dominated by the logic of profit and the unforgiving rationality of the market?*

Well, first of all, I do not think you are entirely correct. Institutions of higher education in my country, whether private or public, are mostly nonprofit. For-profit institutions have a very bad reputation and are typically avoided. This is true in Europe as well, except that the public sphere is larger and the private sphere smaller. Private higher education has some advantages: you still need money, but you can refuse donors who want to do something with their money that you think educationally bad. My own university's former President, recently retired, used to say that he spends more than half of his time with donors saying no to their proposals. Public institutions can't choose in this way, since they get their money from legislatures, which often do have a short-sighted economic agenda. In the US, however, public universities have to compete in quality with private ones, so they are all becoming more and more privately funded in order to have the freedom to uphold educational standards that they value.

The US is lucky, too, to have a longstanding tradition of liberal arts education at the university level, and all the prestigious institutions have

a liberal arts system, in which students spend roughly two years studying a major subject, and roughly two years pursuing general courses seen as a preparation for citizenship and life. Moreover, both law and medicine are postgraduate subjects, meaning that you first have to have an undergraduate liberal education. And once in law school, students continue to do a lot of interdisciplinary work: that's how I can be in the Law School. Unfortunately, it is difficult to shift from a one-subject system to a liberal arts system, and the liberal arts system prevails only in the US, South Korea, Scotland, and the Jesuit universities of Latin America. I think it is short-sighted not to have a liberal arts system, because if people are going to be responsible democratic citizens they need to study history, philosophy, basic science, and some aspects of literature and art, whatever they choose as their major subject. But at least in the US, the liberal arts system remains very strong.

8. *From your commentary on Aristotle's De Motu Animalium to the final section of Frontiers of Justice animal life has been a central concern of your philosophy.*<sup>14</sup> *We know that your forthcoming book will focus on our collective responsibility for the wrongs humans have done and do to animals.*<sup>15</sup> *Long ago, B.A.G. Fuller spoke of the "messes animals make in metaphysics."*<sup>16</sup> *Could you tell us something about how you handled the difficulties that philosophy encounters when it deals with the hard problem of extending justice and rights to nonhuman animals?*

The first thing philosophers have to do is to learn. During the past thirty years scientists have revolutionized our knowledge of animal cognition, animal behavior, animal emotions, and animal societies. Actually, the ancient Greek thinkers Porphyry and Plutarch knew a lot of this by sensitive observation, but now we have convincing experimental evidence, and lots of observations of species such as whales, dolphins, and elephants that are difficult to study without circumstances that were unavailable to the ancients. Then we examine philosophy's traditional concepts of mind, emotion, and cognition and challenge them with the new data. By and large, I think Aristotle's *De Motu Animalium* was correct: there is a generic similarity between human action and cognition and that of other animals. All of us are striving toward objects to which we attach importance, using varieties of perception, thought, emotion, and desire. So, I think

<sup>14</sup> See Nussbaum, *Aristotle's De Motu*; Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, chap. 6.

<sup>15</sup> See Nussbaum, *Justice for Animals*. See also her 2021 Holberg Lecture "Justice for Animals: Practical Progress through Philosophical Theory", available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KFGim85MDaE>.

<sup>16</sup> See Fuller, "The Messes Animals Make."

we have most of the philosophical tools we need, once we get the science right. But every single thing we find in human life is realized in subtly different ways in animal lives. Even perception: birds have an ability to sense magnetic fields, which we lack. Dolphins have the capacity to perceive the insides of a foreign object by “echolocation,” a sense we also lack. (Once a dolphin was able to inform her human trainer that the trainer was pregnant, because she could perceive what was going on inside the woman’s body, as the woman herself could not!) Animals have different forms of friendship and love from our forms, and so forth. So our challenge is to open our eyes and learn. I have spent years reading books on these things, with the greatest fascination.

9. *Our journal is called Rivista Italiana di Filosofia Politica (Italian Journal of Political Philosophy). We want it to be a sort of bridge between the tradition of Italian political philosophy and a wider international community of political philosophers. Almost all of your books have been translated into Italian and aroused great interest, not only among scholars. May we ask you what is your relationship with the Italian culture? Which aspects of it do you consider relevant for both your work and a wider international audience?*

I love traveling in Italy, and have done so often, starting in 1973, when I was examining Aristotle manuscripts in libraries in Venice, Florence, and the Vatican. I love visiting the wonderful museums and historical sites. Also, my primary Italian editor, Daniela Bonato of “il Mulino,” always takes me shopping in Milan when I am giving a lecture, and some of my most beloved and long-lasting clothes were purchased on those excursions. Sadly, I do not speak Italian. I read a little, using my knowledge of Latin and French and some rudimentary grammatical study. I have actually read all of Dante in the original, using a facing-page translation. Dante is very important to me, not least in my recent book *Citadels of Pride*.<sup>17</sup> And, as an amateur singer, and huge opera lover, I have learned to pronounce Italian correctly, and I often find that ordinary words in Italian have for me specific operatic meanings. For example, when in a hotel I am offered “la chiave,” I immediately hear that wonderful and hilarious section of *Le Nozze di Figaro* where the Count is demanding the key to the Contessa’s dressing room.

Indeed, I might say that my primary connection to Italian culture is my love of Italian opera. For years I have been Lyric Opera of Chicago’s program-note writer for the Mozart operas, and in teaching a class

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<sup>17</sup> See Nussbaum, *Citadels of Pride*, chap. 2.

on opera with Lyric's General Director Anthony Freud, I have spread my wings a little, teaching Verdi and Puccini as well. I now have a contract for a big book on opera and its relationship to liberal political ideals, not due until 2024. It will be called *The Republic of Love: Opera, Breath, and Freedom* (the opposite of *The Monarchy of Fear*), and it centers on the Mozart operas, which I believe to be central contributors to political thought, not just in the libretti, but far more, in the music. In *Political Emotions*, I already show this through an interpretation of *Le nozze di Figaro*.<sup>18</sup> But the first half of my book will also include readings of four other Mozart operas. In the second half, I turn to issues, obstacles to republican freedom, that Mozart, being an optimistic and gentle individual, did not confront, but later composers did. The operas I will discuss, as tackling unaddressed parts of the Mozartean project, include Beethoven's *Fidelio*, Verdi's *Don Carlos* (yes, like most experts of today, I now prefer the French version, not the Italian, apologies), Strauss's *Elektra*, and Britten's *Peter Grimes* and *Billy Budd*. So that is a large project, and it connects me, often, to specific moments in Italian culture, including Mozart's Freemason allegiance and Verdi's leading role in the Risorgimento.

Meanwhile, my love of singing continues. I am working with my teacher on several things to sing for her winter student recital, including two that are French, but also "In questa reggia" from Puccini's *Turandot*. My current plan is to sing that aria and to follow it with Rameau's aria "Rossignols amoureux" from *Hippolyte et Aricie* – thus showing contrasting sides of my personality!

You can see that my love of Italian culture and my gratitude to it is great.

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<sup>18</sup> See Nussbaum, *Political Emotions*, chap. 2.

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