

Humanity and Feminism

An Interview with Prof. Marth Nussbaum

Interviewed by: Fatemah Al-Shamlan

I would like first to thank you for agreeing to make this interview with Hekmah.org. You talk about humanities and in their importance not only in improving individual qualities and with dealing with other individuals, but in shaping a nation's attitude toward others in addition to their role in economy, can you elaborate more on that?

The humanities (literature, philosophy, and history) make a big contribution to the quality of political citizenship. They cultivate three abilities that are crucial for good citizenship. First, **Socratic self-examination**. Courses in critical thinking and philosophy teach the crucial skill of deliberation and reflective analysis. People learn to understand the reasons why they support this or that policy, and to be curious about the reasoning of others. They also learn that some political debates use bad arguments, and to distinguish good argument from bad. This creates a space for genuine deliberation in our all-too-shrill public spaces, and conduces to respect for one's opponents, who are seen not as mere enemies, but as human beings who have reasons for what they think.

Second, the humanities teach a sense of **global citizenship**. History conveys a sense of the complexity of each nation, with its groups and subgroups all striving for well-being, and, beyond that, a sense of the whole world.

Third, the humanities – literature and the arts especially – nourish and develop the **narrative imagination**, the sense of what it could be like to be in the shoes of someone different from oneself. This ability is crucial, given that we must often vote in ways that affect the interests of others.

All three abilities can be cultivated beginning in elementary school, but the period of university education is a very important one, since at that time young people are mature and starting to be voters and active citizens. Universities would be well advised to require some “liberal arts” courses of all students, whatever major subject the student chooses. This is the normal system in the U. S., Scotland, South Korea, and all Jesuit universities, but most universities in Europe, Asia, and Africa have a one-subject system, which makes shared courses more difficult to include. But it can be done!

There is a study released by the British Council in December 2015 by Martin Rose which has stated that most radical jihadists from Middle East and North Africa are medical or engineering graduates and that such teaching fails to incorporate critical thinking in the way humanities do, thus leads to submission and subordination which make them acquire a mind that can be easily manipulated and controlled, How do you think this problem can be solved, since the society still sees science and economy education superior to humanities?

The simplest way to solve this problem is to make education at all levels diverse and broad. In elementary and secondary education, all countries typically encourage students to pursue a wide range of subjects, and even if they are learning technical

things they should at the same time be learning critical thinking. In university education, if a nation has a liberal arts model, or can shift in that direction, then students will all have some shared courses that prepare for citizenship and life, as well as a major subject.

Unfortunately, autocratic regimes are not fond of critical thinking, and they prefer to foster narrow technical education. However, to such people we may always say that success in business also demands critical thinking, since a workplace in which nobody raises a critical voice tend to fall victim to corruption, and large problems go unrecognized. Business leaders and business educators have been saying this for a long time. Both Singapore and China have recognized this truth, and since 2005 they have conducted educational reforms emphasizing critical thinking. Of course, they try to stop people from using these skills to criticize the government, but once human freedom is unleashed, it is hard to limit it!

The notion of emotions finds its way in most of your books (Upheavals of Thought, Political Emotions, Not for Profit, Anger and Forgiveness, Hiding from Humanity, and others), from that and from your position as a professor of law and ethics can we get that emotions are corner stones in both ethical and legal decisions and in way a consequence of them?

The role of emotions both in personal life and in political life has been a major part of my work as a philosopher. Indeed, it is a large subject in the entire history of Western philosophy, and I have learned a lot from many earlier thinkers, including Plato, Aristotle, the Greek and Roman Stoics, Adam Smith, and John Stuart Mill. I have also read widely in cognitive psychology, anthropology, and psychoanalysis. My 2001 book **Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions** proposes a general account of the nature and structure of emotions, drawing on all these fields, and then applies this account to a more detailed study of compassion and love.

Hiding From Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law (2004) studies the emotions of disgust and shame, focusing particularly on their political and legal role. I argue that a deeper philosophical understanding of these emotions will lead us to refuse to make laws against conduct simply because people find it disgusting. I study numerous areas of law where this idea makes a difference. I also find that laws aimed at shaming some group of citizens are morally inappropriate. In **From Disgust to Humanity: Sexual Orientation and Constitutional Law** (2010) I focus on recent U. S. controversies about sexual orientation, showing how my theory of disgust helps clarify those debates. **The New Religious Intolerance** (2011) focuses on the connection between fear and religious difference, and particularly on European and U. S. fear of Muslims. I urge a framework that protects ample space for religious liberty and refuses to base laws on any “established” majority religion. **Anger and Forgiveness** (2016) studies anger in both personal life and political life, defending a non-retributive attitude in both. **Political Emotions** (2013) is a more general book, studying the role of emotions in supporting the institutions of a decent society. My new book **The Monarchy of Fear** (2018 forthcoming) looks at the current political crisis in the US, arguing that fear underlies and poisons other emotions that do great damage currently: anger, disgust, and envy. So, I continue to think about many topics in this area, and often change my mind!

On that note John Rawls has played a major role in the political philosophy arena with his A Theory of Justice where he builds the basis of his theory on moral argument adopting Kant approach, where do you meet and where do you drift apart?

Well it is difficult to reply briefly, because my large book **Frontiers of Justice** (2006) is an extended confrontation with Rawls, and the differences are very subtle. First of all, I utterly concur with the main claim of Rawls’s second book, **Political Liberalism**: political principles must not be based on any one religious or secular

comprehensive doctrine of the goals of life, but must be open to all citizens, respecting them all equally. This means that the principles must be drawn somewhat narrowly, leaving citizens lots of room to pursue other goals in accordance with their religious or secular doctrine, and must also use a thin ethical language, not a deep metaphysical or religious language. This idea was already that of the framers of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Coming together from many different nations and religions, they chose the ethical language of human dignity as something all world citizens could support. So that is the idea that Rawls defends, and that I have also defended in my writings. For my most detailed account of this idea, you should look at my article "Perfectionist Liberalism and Political Liberalism" in PHILOSOPHY AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS, 2011.

Speaking of emotions and politics, Talal Asad (the anthropologist) has once wrote "The politics of secularism are fraught with emotion, calling into question the very idea of neutrality. Guilt, contempt, fear, resentment, virtuous outrage, sly calculation, pride, anxiety, compassion, all intersect ambiguously in the secular Republic's collective memory and inform attitudes towards its religiously or ethnically identified citizens."* how does fear and anxiety play in the tension we see in the world today; fear from immigrants, Muslims (the different if we might say) and to what extent does it affect the liberal and secular values that usually nations are proud to carry?

I would like to know how he defines "secular." In the US, the word is used to mean "anti-religious," either agnostic or atheist. In India, where I do a lot of work, it is used differently. Usually it is not people but policies that are characterizes as secular, and that means "neutral among the religions, favoring none of them over the others." Europeans often think of themselves as "secular" in the first sense, but most Americans do not. Furthermore, even those Americans who are atheist or agnostic would not recommend that policies be based upon atheism, because they

respect their fellow citizens. Indeed, any policy that would favor atheism over religion, or religion over atheism, or one religion over another, would be unconstitutional and illegal. So, we have a politics of non-Establishment, not a politics of secularism in the first sense. Our Constitution's Establishment clause also rejects India's form of secularism, where four religions are chosen for special privileges: we hold that nobody gets special privileges.

What this means for the treatment of Muslims is that whereas in Europe it seems easy and fine to make the **burqa** and even, sometimes, the headscarf, illegal, in the U. S. such a law would be blatantly unconstitutional, as I describe at length in **The New Religious Intolerance**. We still have our struggles about fair treatment of Muslims, and I describe those at length there. But we surely agree that it's legally protected for people to manifest a religious identity in their clothing in any way they choose, and in general the US is a nation of religious minorities who originally came here in order to find free expression for their dissident religions. My new book describes the roots of fear in our current moment, arguing that the rhetoric of the current administration violates fundamental American values. Fortunately, we have an independent judiciary that remembers what those values are.

You have worked with the distinguished Economic Sciences Nobel prize winner of 1998 Amartya Sen in the book "Quality of Life" in 1993, by making the "Capabilities Approach" which he introduced in the 80s as a paradigm of human development that the UN eventually adopted as an index, tell us more about this achievement and how was it like working with Sen?

Actually, **The Quality of Life**, which is an edited book, represents only one tiny part of the collaborative project of developing the Capabilities Approach. Sen's work on the Index was long before that, and most of my own work has been after that. Sen has written about his version of this approach in six or seven books, and I

have written three books entirely devoted to developing my own version: **Women and Human Development** (2000), **Frontiers of Justice** (2006), and **Creating Capabilities** (2012) – plus dozens of articles. **Creating Capabilities** gives a summary of both Sen's and my approaches and discusses their differences; it also contains a full bibliography. By now, too, this is a huge international movement. The Human Development and Capability Association (HDCA) is almost fifteen years old. We have annual meetings, each time in a different part of the world. We have about 1000 members from 80 countries. And we have an excellent journal, the **Journal of Human Development and Capabilities**. I think the best description of this entire movement is the one in my **Creating Capabilities**. The association has successfully brought together scholars across national and disciplinary boundaries, and it also crosses the theory-practice divide. I think it is very exciting. We have had a large influence on both governments and international agencies. And the quality of young researchers in our Association is getting more impressive all the time. I just returned from our latest annual meeting, in Cape Town, South Africa, and I would say that it was our best, in terms of the quality of papers on the program. So, working with Amartya is always exciting, but that is not really the main story: the main story is that there is a large and marvelous movement, of which I'm proud to be a Founding President, along with Amartya.

Regarding the term "Objectification", which is almost always entwined with treatment of women in feminism, you have a rather unorthodox view of the term, that it is not only treating but also "seeing" the person as an object, a broader view of the concept than that of Kant, MacKinnon or Dworkin's. How do you define "Objectification" and in what ways it does not necessarily carry the negative implications usually people associate it with?

Actually, I don't feel that my understanding of the concept is unorthodox. It is the same as that of Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, with both of whom I've

had long and productive exchanges. I just put more philosophical detail into the analysis. Rae Langton, the other philosopher who has written extensively about the concept, follows my analysis and adds some further valuable insights of her own. I define objectification as they do: seeing and treating a person as a thing. (Of course, you could not even conclude that a person had been **treated** as a mere thing without taking how the person is **seen** into account! If I trip and grab you to keep from falling, I do in a way treat you as a thing, but that is not objectification, because there is no evidence that I am really seeing you as a thing: it's just accident, without **mens rea**. Objectification is one of those offenses in which **mens rea** (a guilty state of mind) is crucial.) But I then add that this has a number of aspects: denial of autonomy, denial of subjectivity, denial of the status of end, and several more. I spend a lot of time looking at the relationship between these different ways a person could be objectified, and I argue that the centrally bad thing is to see and treat a person as a mere means and not as an end. Where I depart from MacKinnon and Dworkin is in my normative analysis. I argue that we must take context into account, before we draw any normative conclusions, something they deny. Sometimes objectification is not pernicious, but may even be good, a way of doing justice to the fact of our embodiment, in a context in which the larger relationship affirms that the person is an end and not a mere means. Here I draw on D. H. Lawrence, who thought that we are ashamed of our bodily thinghood, and that this shame causes damage in sexual life.

-Thank you, Prof. Nussbaum, for this informative interview, do you have anything to add?

I welcome reactions and correspondence from the readers of this interview! I hope my readers in the Arab world will contact me with questions and will read some of my other books. Maybe you will join the Human Development and Capability

Association (website online), and attend one of our annual meetings. (We met in Jordan in 2010.) Thank you for taking an interest in my work.

*Talal Asad. French Secularism and the "Islamic Veil Affair." Hedgehog Review; Spring/Summer2006, Vol. 8 Issue 1/2, p93