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Discussion

The Tragic Philosopher: A Critique of Martha Nussbaum

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Martha Nussbaum has written an important book: *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy.* In her lengthy work Nussbaum treats the three classical tragedians, Plato, and Aristotle. Throughout she is guided by the following sorts of questions: To what degree is a good human life vulnerable to the contingencies of the external (and internal) world? To what extent can reason protect life from the vulnerability brought upon it by such contingency? What, in other words, are the limits of practical reason, that modality of thought implicated in the uniquely human realm of praxis or values? How fragile is the goodness that can be ours?

These questions can be encapsulated as follows: In what sense is practical reason *tragic* in nature? This formulation poses difficulties, however, for tragedy, as both an historical phenomenon and a conceptual category, has long vexed its examiners. Aristotle, for example, arrives at a definition of tragedy, but only at the price of narrowing his focus. His definition may well account for Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, but not for Aeschylus' *Persians* or Euripides' *Helen*. In confronting the few plays of the classical period that have survived the 2500 years of transmission, one is thus well advised to speak of 'tragedies' rather than 'tragedy'. Nevertheless, if it is possible to unify these various plays in any respect, perhaps it would be through the notion, admittedly vague, of limit. Tragedy discloses the limits of human reason, of virtue, of heroism, of love. It reveals what occurs at the juncture, often the collision, of human striving with the boundaries of its efficacy.

The goal of *Fragility* is to raise the possibility of, and in itself to exhibit, a tragic conception of philosophy. Nussbaum carefully affirms the goodness of reason while at the same time acknowledging its profound limitations. Through her reading of Aristotle, she develops an account of the proper relationship between reason and both the actions and passions of practical life. She argues that through the kind of phenomenological analysis practised by Aristotle, it is possible for the philosopher to preserve and protect the essential insights of the tragedians, insights she takes to reflect ordinary life truthfully. More implicitly, Nussbaum writes in such a manner as to acknowledge the limitations of her own analysis. (See, for example, p. 17.) Her prose is not only lucid and rigorous, but also limpid, generous, at times lovely and evocative. She frames the major philosophical/exegetical argument of her book with two chapters on tragedy (ch. 2 on *Agamemnon*, ch. 13 on *Hecuba*). The book begins and ends with a reference to the poet Pindar (1 and 421). She is reminding us, I think, that the philosophical enterprise of clarification and argumentation must be circumscribed by what is beyond rational control, by life itself, which (perhaps) finds its best voice in poetry.

Taking up tragedy as a philosophical theme is, of course, not new. One need think only of Hegel's treatment of the *Antigone*. It is also not new to attempt to forge a tragic conception of philosophy: Nietzsche did this in *The Birth of Tragedy*, and he has since often been followed. But from the perspective of 'our Anglo-American philosophical tradition' (15), such a venture is more radical. *Fragility* has as part of its intended audience those philosophers who, in their ethical theorizing, have dismissed literary texts as inappropriate for serious inquiry (16). Interpreting such texts 'is a messier, less determinate, more mysterious matter than assessing a philosophical example' (14). Nussbaum is intent on broadening the ethicists' reading list by persuading them that the very 'messiness' of tragedy is both its truth and its virtue.

This is an important task. If I may generalize broadly, recent developments in both ethics and epistemology have been heading towards a tragic conception of philosophy. Occasionally this is made somewhat explicit, as in the works of MacIntyre (1981) and Williams (1981 and 1985), both of whom acknowledge their debt to Greek literature. More often, however, this tendency is implicit and there appears to be little awareness that contemporary philosophy is, once again, retreading old ground. For instance, much work along the lines of Wittgenstein, Kuhn, or Rorty concentrates on the limits, even the impossibility, of philosophy and in this sense gropes towards a tragic sense of itself. Rescher, in his *The Strife of Systems*, even goes so far as to describe 'the tragic fate of philosophy'. With this phrase he refers to the incapacity of reason to resolve certain fundamental dilemmas.[1] But nowhere does he cite any actual tragedies. *Fragility* performs the good service of reminding us of the enduring vitality of Greek texts as well as of the problematic distinction between literature and philosophy. It invites its 'Anglo-American' audience to broaden its conception of ethical reasoning.

In sum, *Fragility* has raised the right issues at a good time. But the book has one considerable flaw: its treatment of Plato, who for Nussbaum is the great enemy of tragedy. In part 1, I briefly sketch her thesis. In part 2, I discuss more specifically the problems in her treatment of the dialogues. Throughout I hope it is clear that despite my misgivings about one of the central tenets of *Fragility*, I have benefited from it and urge my colleagues to do the same.

I

Fragility argues for a complex, but clear, thesis. Greek tragedy presents a conception of human life as vulnerable, necessarily precarious, and beautiful. Finally, it is one that Nussbaum believes to be truthful. In his early and middle dialogues, Plato attacks this tragic vision. He proposes a practical τέχνη, a rigorous and systematic mode of knowledge that would eliminate contingency from human experience by rationally controlling τύχη (chance), the passions, and the body. Later in his career, principally in the *Phaedrus*, Plato retracts such 'theoretical optimism'[2] by celebrating the goodness of eros. Nevertheless, throughout her book Nussbaum refers to Plato as her, and tragedy's, enemy.[3]

By contrast, Aristotle is tragedy's friend. He 'has a high regard for tragedy. Both in *Poetics* itself and in the *Politics*. . . he gives it a place of honor, attributing to it both motivational and cognitive value' (378). Aristotle provides an 'explicit theoretical articulation of the position about plurality and richness that we found in the *Antigone*—and, more generally, in Greek polytheism. Once again he "saves" the appearances of his culture' (297).

Nussbaum argues that the plurality of values and ends is one of the causes of tragic conflict. Plato had sought to eliminate such conflict by eliminating such plurality: he homogenized the domain of value in order to make it susceptible to technical (quantitative) treatment. As a result, 'After Plato, tragedy needs Aristotle' (393). In other words, by reaffirming the wisdom of tragedy Aristotle protected it from the onslaught of Platonic reason. By allowing tragedy to inform his conception of practical reasoning Aristotle rescued philosophy from what would have been an intolerably abstract and impoverished, i.e., Platonic, conception of human life.

This view is hardly novel. Nietzsche proclaimed loudly the fundamental opposition between Platonism and tragedy, and a huge portion of 20th-century thought has responded by repeatedly damning Plato as the founder of our contemporary, technical world. Pierre Aubenque, on the other hand, has also argued that Aristotle represents a welcome return to the truly Greek, i.e., tragic, conception of life.[4] As the remainder of this essay will make apparent, I disagree with this very broad interpretation of Greek culture for I think Plato has been falsely described as the great enemy of Greek tragedy. This is a misreading that has wide repercussions, not only for reading the dialogues, but for taking a stand towards western philosophy itself, of which Plato is regularly taken to be a founder. Prominent thinkers such as Rorty and Derrida repeatedly advise us to overthrow, deconstruct, or simply ignore the 'Platonic conception of reason'.[5] Whether they understand what this phrase means or not remains to be seen.

I shall attempt to illustrate this misreading of Greek culture by discussing several passages from Nussbaum's book that I take to be paradigmatic. I hope both to be fair to her work and to show that, while she may well be correct in her conception of the tragic nature of practical reason, she is incorrect in denying Plato his rightful place as a tragic philosopher.

Aeschylus' portrayal of Agamemnon is that of a good man who does, and cannot but do, bad things (25).[6] In order to fulfill the demand of Zeus that Troy be defeated, Agamemnon must also fulfill the demand of Artemis that his daughter be sacrificed. He is forced to violate a familial norm in order to satisfy a divine command. His dreadful dilemma and the constraints on his power of choice originate in contingent and external circumstances (34). This does not imply, however, that Agamemnon is somehow flawed or that a superior rational agent could have reasoned himself out of such a dilemma. Instead, it is to credit Aeschylus with a truthful representation of human life: we are, too often, victims of what is beyond our control.

The *Agamemnon* shows us not only Agamemnon's actions, but also his 'passional reactions' (45) to the terrible circumstances in which he is placed. A central element in Nussbaum's argument is that passions, emotional responses to that which is beyond our control, are part of a character's moral composition: 'suffering (is) itself a piece of practical recognition or perception. . . at least a partial constituent of the character's correct understanding of his situation as a human being' (45). Such a view challenges the more familiar position that evaluation of an agent depends solely on the responsible, rational, choice of actions. In the tragic world characters cannot reason themselves efficaciously out of contingent dilemmas or dismiss them as morally insignificant. The consequence of this fact should be pathos and the 'only thing remotely like a solution here is . . . to describe and see the conflict clearly and acknowledge there is no way out' (49).

From the point of view of Socratic reason such a view is repugnant (30).[7] As a rendition of real life, however, it is truthful: 'These poems return us to the complex "appearances" of lived practical choice and preserve them' (50). With such language Nussbaum prepares us for her essential thesis: Aristotle's version of practical reason is fundamentally similar to tragic literature for it too preserves the harsh appearances of ordinary life.

Nussbaum offers a fascinating reading of the famous 'ode to man' of the *Antigone*. On the surface this passage seems to express enthusiasm for the human capacity to master nature and for rational progress. The chorus invokes navigation, agriculture, and hunting to exemplify man's skill and concludes that 'clever beyond hope is the inventive craft he possesses'.[8] But such praise is misleading if read out of context. For example, Creon takes great pride in his navigational skill. He claims to guide the 'ship of state' through the turbulent waters of Thebes. (See *Antigone* 188-191 and *Fragility* pp. 58-59.) But his is a claim which, even if well-intentioned, is doomed to fail and mock itself. If the ode to man is read in light of this failure, then the apparent enthusiasm the chorus expresses for 'craft' is undercut and cannot be attributed to Sophocles.

Nussbaum suggests this is a typical pattern in Sophoclean tragedy. The images in the ode 'must be pursued backwards and forwards through the play, until we grasp their full web of connections. . . If we do this we undercut this happy story' (73). When read contextually, what had appeared to be a 'statement of human triumphs through reason turns out to be also a compressed document of reason's limitations, transgressions, and conflicts' (75).

The tragic style is dense, self-referential. Its images play against, and thereby compromise, one another. And this is not merely a matter of style. The tragic world is a tightly woven web of causal relations, many of which necessarily remain hidden from human view. As such, no action can be isolated and evaluated in and of itself. Instead, its value and meaning can only be understood contextually, i.e., within the entire panoply of human and divine events which may only become visible during the twilight of the action's completion.

Such a view and style are, says Nussbaum, utterly opposed to Platonism. The Platonic soul is 'directed, in its singleness and purity, to ethical objects that are single-natured and unmixed, themselves by themselves' (69). The unambiguous telos of Platonic thought is to ascend from particularity to universality. By contrast, Sophocles recommends that practical choice be a matter of 'flexibility of perception, rather than conformity to a set of simplifying principles' (69). Such language could well be used to describe Aristotelian φρόνησις, practical wisdom.

II

Nussbaum adheres to the familiar view that Plato's thought changed significantly as he matured. She finds the origin, both thematic and chronological, of this development in the *Protagoras*.[9] Here she sees Socrates arguing that there can and should be a 'science of practical deliberation',[10] one that is analogous to counting and measuring. In other words, Nussbaum believes that ἡ μετρητικὴ τέχνη ('the art of measurement'), presented by Socrates at 356d ff., is a sincere and serious theoretical proposal. Coupled with this claim is her suggestion that the hedonism presented at 351c ff., where Socrates identifies the good and the pleasant, is equally sincere.

Both claims are highly controversial. The hedonism of the *Protagoras* is one of the riddles of the Platonic corpus, since nowhere else does Socrates propose that the pleasant and the good are to be identified. Indeed, in other dialogues he argues forcefully against such a view.[11] Nussbaum's solution to the riddle is this: Plato's concern in the *Protagoras* is not with hedonism as such, but with the need to supply his 'practical science' with a homogeneous unit of measurement. His goal is to quantify the realm of value in order to make goodness a reliable matter of calculation. Pleasure is only a candidate, a '*pro tempore*' (112) venture, for such a unit at this stage of his career. As such, Plato is not deeply committed to hedonism and so soon abandons it. The authentic Platonic commitment, one animating him for decades, is to the rational control of human experience and the attainment of goodness.[12]

Fragility's Plato interpretation follows from this premise. According to Nussbaum, dialogues such as the *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and *Symposium*, continue the search for a homogeneous, rationally attainable, realm of virtue. But this search is profoundly misguided, for it fails to recognize that the very plurality and the contingent adventures of values are essential to the human condition. Their homogenization and consequent quantification would thus imply the impoverishment of the human soul (see p. 120). In the *Phaedrus*, however, Plato returns to his senses, for here he dramatically recants his previous distaste for eros, for the body and its maddening plurality of passions. Such a severe change requires an explanation. Nussbaum speculates that Plato had fallen in love with Dion of Syracuse and so had discovered the error of his ways.[13]

Clearly this story hinges on its initial chapter: that Plato in the *Protagoras* sincerely pursued a practical science. Nussbaum, however, fails to make her case concerning the art of measurement and the hedonism of this dialogue. While both proposals are obviously made by Socrates, one needs to be very cautious in ascribing them to Plato as theoretical positions. Both proposals, I suggest, should be read in precisely the same manner in which Nussbaum reads Sophocles' ode to man: contextually. If this is done, then the theoretical optimism they apparently express will be dramatically qualified.

Unlike too many commentators, Nussbaum discusses the prologue of the *Protagoras* in some detail.[14] Actually, the dialogue has two prologues. The first is dramatic: it shows Socrates bumping into an unnamed friend and recounting to him the story of his conversation with Protagoras. The second prefaces Socrates' narration. The dialogue begins with the friend saying, 'Where are you coming from Socrates? Ah, it is clear that you're coming from the hunt after Alcibiades' youthful beauty' (309a). The friend teases Socrates: Alcibiades is no longer a boy. He wants to know the status of their affair. Socrates responds by saying that it seems to be going well. But there is something surprising. Socrates has just returned from a gathering at which Alcibiades was present, but he had ignored him. The friend wonders whether Socrates has found someone more beautiful. Socrates agrees: he had just seen the wise, and therefore beautiful, Protagoras. The friend wants to hear more and Socrates tells his story (309a-310a).

To Nussbaum this brief encounter is evidence that Socrates is actually hunting, and is eager to gossip about, Alcibiades' beautiful body. She goes so far as to claim that 'Socrates' pursuit of Alcibiades has often eclipsed all his other pursuits' (94). At the same time, however, Socrates is also attracted to Protagoras' wisdom. Nussbaum takes all of this to imply that he is quite 'confused about his erotic and philosophical motivations' (93). The essential function of the prologue, then, is to exemplify the pre-philosophical mire in which Socrates and the friend are held. The dialogue proper attempts to formulate a rational method with which they can heal themselves. In terms borrowed from the *Symposium*, the prologue is a dramatic representation of the bottom rung of Diotima's ladder, one that Socrates plans to transcend (92).

The evidence does not warrant Nussbaum's claims. We have no way of knowing whether Socrates is actually preoccupied with Alcibiades. What we do know is that the friend believes that this is the case. (Nussbaum says that the friend 'knows' this is the case [91]; but how does she know that?) It is therefore possible that the friend is quite wrong and is projecting his own impressions upon Socrates who in turn adjusts his terminology in order to converse with him. The dialogue itself gives no indication that Socrates is really in love with Alcibiades. At 316a and 336b, for example, Socrates appears utterly uninterested in him. Furthermore, there is no evidence in the dialogue itself that Socrates is confused about his motivations. Quite to the contrary, he seems totally in control of himself throughout his encounter with Protagoras.

Nussbaum draws a parallel between the prologue of the *Protagoras* and that of the *Charmides*. In the latter, when Socrates catches a glimpse of Charmides' beautiful young body, he says, 'I caught the flame and was no longer in control of myself' (155d). Nussbaum again reads this as a straightforward report of Socrates' condition (92). Nothing, however, in his speeches or deeds, including the lines that immediately follow 155d, indicates that Socrates is out of control or taken by Charmides. In fact, the impression is quite the opposite,[15] and so this remark is best read as ironic. Indeed, in its choice of interlocutors the *Charmides* is one of the most ironic of all dialogues, for here Socrates discusses σωφροσύνη (moderation) with two of Athens' most notoriously immoderate men: the future tyrants Charmides and Critias.[16]

Why mention any of these apparently trivial matters? Because Nussbaum's reading of these passages is paradigmatic of her failure to appreciate a central feature of Platonic writing, that is, the manner in which he has Socrates craft his comments and adjust his terminology to meet the needs of particular interlocutors. This failure is all the more distressing since Nussbaum devotes an entire section of her book ('Interlude I') to an examination of Plato's style of writing.[17] She acknowledges that in a dialogue, 'We see an active, ongoing discussion, rather than a list of conclusions or a proclamation of received truths' (126). Unfortunately, her own reading isolates various Socratic statements without making reference to the ongoing discussion of which they are a part, i.e., to their dramatic context, and then uses them as support for the interpretation she proposes.

Nussbaum fails, for example, to consider the possibility that the friend in the *Protagoras* is an 'eroticist' who assumes, but does not know, that Socrates is chasing a beauty, and that Socrates addresses him as such. Similarly, she does not take into account the fact that Critias is immensely proud of young Charmides and that Socrates, in order to lure Critias into a serious discussion, would feign attraction to the boy.[18] Instead, she elicits from these prologues evidence of Socrates' sexual confusion. By so doing she prepares the way for her reading of the dialogues as unambiguous efforts to ascend from particularity to universality.

The dramatic contexts of the dialogues are more complex and demanding than Nussbaum makes them out to be. Consider further the narrative prologue of the *Protagoras*. Here Socrates tells his friend how that night, just before dawn, young Hippocrates had knocked loudly at his door and then had rushed in filled with excitement: Protagoras had come to town! He wished to meet the famous sophist and urged Socrates to accompany him. Two points are worth noting. First, Hippocrates is much like his father, Apollodorus, Socrates' fanatical disciple. He is rash and excessive and on intimate terms with Socrates.[19] Second, when Hippocrates announced that Protagoras had arrived, Socrates was unsurprised and said, 'the day before yesterday; have you just heard?' (310b8). This line is critical for it implies that before Hippocrates' outburst Socrates had no interest in visiting Protagoras. He does so *only at Hippocrates' request*. He is motivated by concern for the boy and loyalty to the boy's father. Hippocrates is on the verge of impulsively joining the sophists' camp and Socrates feels impelled to protect him. From 313a to 314c he questions the boy, who does not know what Protagoras teaches, and forces him to recognize the shameful consequences of becoming a sophist.

This passage shows Socrates in his most appealing demeanor. Gone is the often severe edge of the elenchus. Instead, we see him acting like a surrogate father counseling a wayward son. Hippocrates is much in need of such counsel as his account of his night's activities shows:

> It was during the evening, after I had gotten in very late from Oenoe. For, you see, my slave Satyros had run away. And of course I was going to tell you that I was going to chase him, but I forgot on account of some other matter. When I came home and we had our dinner and were about to retire my brother told me that Protagoras had arrived. Right away I tried to come to you but then it seemed to me too late at night. But as soon as sleep had gotten rid of my fatigue I got up at once and came over here (310c2-d2).

By reading this carefully we can reconstruct Hippocrates' evening. He had spent a late night at Oenoe, an Attic deme, since he had lost control of his slave, Satyros. 'Oenoe' is derived from 'οἶνος', meaning 'wine'. 'Satyros' is obviously related to 'satyr', the companion of Dionysus. I suggest that Plato here playfully alludes to the fact that Hippocrates had lost control of the satyr and had been on a binge in 'wineville'. When he returned home and was told that Protagoras had arrived he was unable to act upon this valuable piece of information. Why not? He claims it was because it was too late at night. But this is highly unlikely since Hippocrates has already shown himself to have no concern for the hour: he has just aroused Socrates well before dawn. He had not left immediately to see Socrates because, after having been out drinking, he returned home, learned that Protagoras was in town, wanted very much to go to Socrates, but was unable to do so because of his drunkenness. He napped instead.

There is obviously no way of proving that the sequence of dramatic events occurred as I suggest.[20] My appeal instead is to a carefully detailed dramatic context. But if I am correct, then Socrates' encounter with Protagoras should be interpreted in light of his relationship to Hippocrates.[21] The boy is in need. He is lazy: he wishes simply to pay a fee and be made wise rather than engage in any difficult course of study himself (310d6). He wants someone else, Socrates, to enlist Protagoras' aid for him. He is impetuous, immoderate, and perhaps given to drunkenness. He is, conceivably, a 'proto-hedonist', i.e., one whose deeds prefigure the belief that pleasure is the good. Socrates' strategy against Protagoras is shaped by his desire to address Hippocrates. The dialogue, in other words, is essentially protreptical.

The interpretation I propose can be used to support the widely held view that the hedonism of the *Protagoras*, as well as Socrates' introduction of the art of measurement, are essentially *ad hominem*. As Vlastos puts it, 'the majority of commentators have held that [hedonism] is not Socrates' own position' but instead represents the unconscious hedonism of the average person.[22] My interpretation simply helps to specify one person at whom Socrates is aiming his remarks.

The *ad hominem* would run roughly as follows: assume, as Hippocrates does, that the good is identical to the pleasant. Assume further that pleasure is quantifiable. If so, then the determination of the good is through the hedonist's calculus. But the introduction of the calculus reveals that knowledge, not pleasure, commands us what to do (357c3). Therefore, it and not pleasure is the good. The argument can be read as a *reductio*. Even beginning with pleasure, an apparently non-epistemic version of the good, the interlocutor is led to the conclusion that knowledge is the highest desideratum. The overall tone of the passage, then, is protreptical. It is designed to urge the proto-hedonist, who assumes pleasure is the good, to pursue knowledge.

My reading is compatible with Nussbaum's in one sense: we both see Socrates urging Hippocrates to amend his ways. She, however, understands the art of measurement, using pleasure as its unit, as an actual method to accomplish this. I read it as a dialectical device which addresses Hippocrates, a proto-hedonist, on terms familiar to him. As such, its presence in the dialogue does not commit Plato to a technical or scientific conception of practical knowledge. The only commitment it brings with it is that practical knowledge ought to be sought. It is not clear what form such knowledge would take (i.e., whether it would be technical) or whether Plato believes it is actually attainable.

Nussbaum argues against the *ad hominem* interpretation simply by labelling Socrates' statements as sincere. 'It is only with the aid of the hedonistic assumption that Socrates is able to reach conclusions that he clearly claims as his own' (111). But how does she know what conclusions Socrates would claim as his own? How does she know that Socrates is not responding to the contingencies of a specific dramatic situation? It is of course possible that these conclusions are Socrates' own and that Socrates represents the young and sincere Plato. But to argue for such a view one must suppress the dramatic context which surrounds, and so conditions, all of Socrates' statements.

This is what Nussbaum does. She reads Plato as a theoretical optimist who believes that our lives can be comprehended and rehabilitated by a science of practical reasoning. In contrast, I propose that if the *Protagoras* passage is read 'backwards', i.e., contextually, its happy story is dramatically qualified. There is no hard evidence that Socrates possesses the art of measurement he appears to advocate. At one point he says, 'we will consider later what this τέχνη and ἐπιστήμη are' (357b5-6). What needs explication, therefore, is why he extols the τέχνη and does not exhibit it. Is Socrates withholding his knowledge from others?[23] Or is Plato allluding to his plans for future research? Nussbaum opts for the latter, and of course her answer is possible. But her position relies on a fundamental speculation: that we have access to the putative development of Plato's psyche. Her view requires an extensive chronological argument, which in Nussbaum's case is particularly difficult to accept since it culminates in Plato's Dion-inspired '*Kehre*'. My own interpretation is more cautious. It takes its bearings, not from what we might infer Plato is promising, but from what Socrates *actually does* in the dialogue. And what he does in the *Protagoras* is attempt to dissuade his young friend from a thoughtless pursuit of pleasure and sophistry.

The central point is this: the Platonic dialogues are filled with glorious pictures of the beauty and power of knowledge. Socrates often seems to advocate a universal or technical conception of practical reason. But his pictures and admonitions are always imbedded within a dramatic context, itself woven together from particulars. As such, the picture presented is implicitly and necessarily qualified, since it is always possible that the very call to reason is Socrates' response to a particular situation. Socrates' saying that reason ought to be technical to Hippocrates is not necessarily equivalent to Plato's believing it ought to be technical. What practical reason is for Plato may well be a 'messier, less determinate matter' than Nussbaum would have us believe.

It is in this sense that there is an important affinity between tragedy and the Platonic dialogues. Consider Oedipus, a man convinced of the power of reason. He drives himself forward, determined to discover the cause of and then heal his city's wounds. But of course his confidence is terribly ill-conceived. His story is that of the progressive realization of his own ignorance. His final insight is into, and then accompanied by, his own blindness. The *Oedipus Tyrannus* thus begins with an assertion of the efficacy and autonomy of reason and then systematically qualifies that assertion. Through its three recognition scenes, it peaks with the discovery of reason's limits. It concludes with the paradoxical knowledge of human ignorance.

I suggest that the *Protagoras* implicitly contains a similar pattern. Socrates asserts the goodness and power of reason by proposing an art of measurement whose unit is pleasure. But the reader only hears about, and never actually witnesses the workings of, this wonderful device. With reflection, then, must come suspicion. Can Socrates flesh out his beautiful story? At this point, the reader can leave the dialogue and postulate another story: that of the maturing Plato. Or the reader can stay within the dialogue and seek good reasons why Socrates would proclaim, but not flesh out, the art of measurement. One good reason is that Socrates aims his remarks at Hippocrates, an 'average person' or proto-hedonist in need of exhortation. But to say this is to call into question the status of Socrates' proposal. Is his call to theory a consequence of the demands of praxis? Is theory somehow subordinate to the contingencies of praxis? If so, then theory is neither autonomous nor fully reliable. It emerges and never departs from the particulars of human life.

Nussbaum describes the Platonic dialogues as 'a pure crystalline theater of the intellect' (133), whose particulars serve only as data to be used by theory to achieve universality (134). I suggest that the dialogues' characters, place, and time, comprise an inescapable context in which all of Socrates' assertions are embedded. When read from this perspective, Platonic drama is anything but crystalline. 'Kaleidoscopic' would be a better description. We see beautiful forms flying by quickly, but they elude us when we try to anchor them to the solid ground of theoretical argumentation. There is no such solidity in a Platonic dialogue, for none of Socrates' beautiful speeches, his promises of a τέχνη yet to come, his remembrance of Diotima, his proof of the immortality of the soul, his divided line, can be counted as determinate theoretical positions. Instead, they are precarious ventures, whose origin in the contingency of dramatic praxis should never be forgotten.

Conclusion

Martha Nussbaum has given her readers much to ponder. She has brought ancient books to life and demanded that they be taken seriously. Her project of expanding the reading list of 'our Anglo-American' philosophers to include works of literature is admirable. Much of her work on Aristotle is superb. But in the final analysis she commits an injustice. She disregards the significance of the dialogue form of Plato's writing. As such, she has been induced to join that growing chorus, founded by Nietzsche and directed today by Rorty and Derrida, which sings so incessantly of Plato's wrongs. That this should have happened to so fine a scholar, one who has explicitly concerned herself with the problem of 'philosophy and its style', is a pity.[24]

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NOTES

[1] Rescher 1985, 54. Rescher here refers to the impossibility of reconciling the actual and the possible, but his comments can be fairly generalized to describe the incapacity of reason to solve other fundamental disputes.

[2] This is a phrase I borrow from Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (see Nietzsche 1967, 97). My reasons for doing so will become apparent below.

[3] Platonism takes on a modern guise in the form of Kant and Nussbaum often associates the two. See, e.g., pp. 44, 329, 361, 386, and 394. For similar comments in an earlier work, see Nussbaum 1978, xvii and 98.

[4] Aubenque 1976, especially part 2, ch. 2, 'Cosmologie de la prudence', and the conclusion, 'La source tragique'. I have serious misgivings about the view, shared by Aubenque and Nussbaum, that Aristotle is a 'tragic philosopher'. I believe that his very mode of writing, which is best described as 'theoretical', belies this claim. Nussbaum addresses the issue of Aristotle's style and the view of the world it expresses on pages 391-394. I think her position is inadequate, but space permits me only to state my opinion.

[5] This obvious trend in recent philosophy is well documented in McCarthy 1986.

[6] See pp. 36-37 for her characterization of Agamemnon. This is a very controversial issue, especially the reading and the text of lines 214-217.

[7] Or Kantian reason: see p. 49.

[8] The translation is Nussbaum's and the lines are *Antigone* 365-366.

[9] I do not mean to imply that she thinks this is Plato's first dialogue.

[10] This is the title of her chapter on the *Protagoras*.

[11] See *Gorgias* 495d ff., *Republic* 505b, 509a, *Phaedo* 64d. As Adam says, none of the other dialogues 'contains an ethical theory so difficult to reconcile with ordinary Platonic teaching' (Adam 1953, ix).

[12] Hackforth 1928 and Irwin 1977 hold compatible views.

[13] See Griffin 1986 for a criticism of this argument.

[14] Nussbaum is good with prologues as her reading of the *Symposium* makes clear (167-171). In what follows, the Greek text of Plato comes from Burnet's Oxford edition, and the translations are my own.

[15] Again, Socrates' mastery of the rhetorical demands of the situation seems total throughout the dialogue. Note also how sharply he rebukes Charmides at 161b8.

[16] For a useful corrective to Nussbaum on the *Charmides*, see Hyland 1985, 21-32. Nussbaum also finds Socrates sincerely attracted to that 'impressive young person' Phaedrus (200). Again, this is a doubtful characterization. See Griswold 1986, 18-25.

[17] Here she cites both Hyland and Griswold favorably (453).

[18] It is not just Critias he is trying to lure. Charmides has a fine reputation among many. Praise of him, therefore, is a useful device in addressing the many.

[19] The evidence for this claim is that Hippocrates does not hesitate to burst into Socrates' room and Socrates immediately recognizes the boy's voice (310b4). On Apollodorus, see *Symposium* 172c and 173d and *Phaedo* 117d.

[20] Indeed, it is just this lack of certainty, this indeterminacy, that needs to be taken into account when considering the 'Platonic conception of reason'.

[21] And possibly even to his friend of the dramatic prologue, an eroticist who thinks only in terms of Socrates chasing Alcibiades.

[22] Vlastos 1956, ix. Vlastos is here referring to remarks made by A.E. Taylor.

[23] This is a position suggested by Cleitophon in the *Cleitophon*.

[24] Ron Polansky was extremely helpful in the editing of this essay.

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