

Lacking Focus: Recreating the main argument of Martha

Nussbaum's "Tagore, Dewey, and the Imminent Demise of Liberal Education"

While we might think that science and technology are torchbearers for the growth of society, Martha Nussbaum believes that they alone are insufficient. In her paper "Tagore, Dewey, and the Imminent Demise of Liberal Education", Nussbaum's main argument is that a healthy democracy could only be achieved through liberal education provided by the humanities and arts. A democracy where the citizens can think for themselves, understand and appreciate the diversity of the world, and empathise with others is considered healthy (Nussbaum, pg.4-5). The humanities and arts prepare citizens to behave in the abovementioned manner, and such an education system is called liberal.

At this point, it must be made clear that Nussbaum is not against teaching science at institutions; she wants it to be complemented by the humanities and arts. This need arises as humanities and arts are being side-lined due to profit-motive (Nussbaum, pg.3) and logistical challenges such as lack of willing teachers (Nussbaum, pg.7). Therefore, she wants the side-lining to stop. This change is not merely a good-to-have, the importance of liberal education cannot be undermined as "*They [humanities and arts] only do what is much more precious than that [make money]: make a world that is worth living in...*" (Nussbaum, pg.11), implying it is a bare minimum requirement for good living conditions. To better understand her firm belief in liberal education, this paper will give an account of the two steps that Nussbaum employs to support her main argument, which is showcasing the three abilities necessary for a democratic

citizen and discussing the dire state due to the current focus on science and technology.

Firstly, Nussbaum strengthens her argument by explaining the important features of the humanities and arts: the three abilities imparted to make a democratic citizen. She uses John Dewey's and Rabindranath Tagore's beliefs to base these three abilities off. The first is Socratic self-criticism (Nussbaum, pg.4), which is the ability of an individual to think critically about their own beliefs and the outside views being thrown at them. They do not take facts at just face value but rather analyse them themselves. This makes the individual independent in thought. The second is seeing ourselves as part of a heterogeneous world (Nussbaum, pg.5) and understanding the diverse traditions and cultures. This makes the individual flexible in today's cosmopolitan world and understands the inequity present across different groups of people. This prevents the building of stereotypes and makes us cooperative. The third is narrative imagination (Nussbaum, pg.5) which means being able to empathize, allowing an individual to understand the intricate feelings of each other. All three of these link directly to a healthy democracy, and they can be imparted by the humanities and arts. For example, analysis of different art forms not only develops critical thinking but also provides context about the artist or the culture towards whom we might be oblivious otherwise. It also provokes empathy towards the subject of the art form. Subjects like history allow students to form opinions about different events, understand their own culture, and become sensitive towards negatively affected groups. Similarly, some art forms also challenge prejudice and subversion for groups of people, such as dance allowing women to be appreciative of their bodies and break the stereotypes. Performing them allows individuals to achieve freedom and thus independent thought

and critical thinking. Overall, only humanities and arts can provide these abilities as science and technology do not focus on them, which supports her argument.

However, it is not sufficient to just look at the benefits of a liberal education, without exploring what happens in its absence. Thus, Nussbaum also shows how the current pedagogical discourse is motivated by profit-driven ideals that are detrimental. While this may seem unrelated to support her main argument, this step allows us to appreciate the value of the three abilities previously mentioned and the unfortunate consequence if they are absent. Nussbaum states how the discourse does not focus on what is best for the students, but rather on imparting technical skills through science and technology education to drive profit (Nussbaum, pg.3). She gives an example of Tagore's short story titled *The Parrot's Training* in which everyone was so focused on ensuring a parrot receives the best education in the best environment that they even built a golden cage for it, but no one cared for the parrot, so it died (Nussbaum, pg.9). She shows this is indeed today's education system, as her account of an educational conference in India shows everyone arguing about the content of the textbooks, ignoring the students (Nussbaum, pg.2). The "death of parrot" is a symbol for the dying democratic abilities of the students. In fact, she goes on to say that the lack of humanities and arts is crushing the "mind's freedom" (Nussbaum, pg.10) for young students, not only debilitating them from ever becoming good democratic citizens but also making them harmful elements of society. This is evident by how the "*lack of critical thinking in public schools*" caused some engineers to "*enact the most horrendously racist and anti-democratic policies*" (Nussbaum, pg.11). For students that do end up learning some of the three abilities, they are unable to practice and enjoy them due to overwhelming workload due to homework (Nussbaum, pg. 10). Overall, it becomes evident when the pedagogical focus is not on the students, the

result is unfortunate for society. Therefore, it is important to include humanities and arts to prevent harm to democracy, which is in line with Nussbaum's main argument.

Concluding, this paper recreates Nussbaum's argument that humanities and arts are important for a healthy democracy by explaining the three important abilities they impart, and the detrimental effect if they are absent. It is important to note that while this is her main argument, it is not the only argument, and the original paper should be referenced for further enlightenment.

References

[1] Nussbaum, Martha. "Tagore, Dewey, and the Imminent Demise of Liberal Education" *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Education*. 2009. pp. 52-65.