

**The Enduring Value of the Humanities: A
Conversation between Martha Nussbaum, Aristotle,
and Aquinas.**

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The Need for Humanities in Education

Education, often seen as a tool for transmitting knowledge, cultivating skills, and preparing individuals for employment, has a deeper and more transformative purpose within philosophical traditions. Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* provides a profound metaphor for education as a liberating force, moving individuals from the shadows of ignorance into the light of understanding.

In the allegory, prisoners, shackled and facing the wall, perceive only shadows of the real world. When one prisoner is freed and exposed to the outside world, he experiences the painful but necessary process of enlightenment merging from the dark shadows into the full light of knowledge (Plato 2008).¹

In this sense, education is not merely the acquisition of technical skills, but a journey that allows individuals to transcend ignorance, develop rationality, and attain a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them. Plato's approach has been effectively employed by numerous individuals across history, displaying its enduring relevance and impact.

This philosophical perspective on education is reflected in the work of Martha Nussbaum, who in *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (2010)² argues passionately about the importance of the humanities in education. Nussbaum criticizes the trend in education that prioritizes technical training and market skills over the development of critical thinking, moral reasoning, and democratic citizenship. For Nussbaum, education must prepare individuals for economic life and foster the

¹ Plato. *The Republic*. Translated by B. Jowett. Dover Publications, 2008. (Originally published c. 380 BC).

² Nussbaum, Martha. *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010.

capabilities that support a flourishing democratic society. Nussbaum argues that education transforms individuals, equipping them to engage thoughtfully, empathetically, and responsibly in the world.

"The humanities help us to cultivate the ability to reason about the good, the just, and the humane, and to see others as persons deserving of respect and dignity." (Nussbaum 2010, 4)³

This aligns with Plato's vision of education as a moral and intellectual journey that transcends the mere acquisition of practical skills. However, Nussbaum's vision can be significantly complemented by the Aristotelian and Thomistic traditions, which view education as central to human flourishing and the cultivation of virtues. Examining education through the views of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas shows why removing the humanities from teaching could be harmful.

Aquinas and Aristotle's Views on Education

For Aristotle, education plays a central role in the pursuit of *eudaimonia*, or human flourishing, which is the highest good that a human being can achieve. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that to lead a flourishing life, one must cultivate both intellectual and moral virtues. These virtues are not merely innate but developed through education and habituation, a process that involves the cultivation of rationality, the development of emotional regulation, and the capacity to engage in ethical deliberation (Aristotle 2009)⁴.

Aristotle's educational philosophy emphasizes that human beings are rational creatures whose highest purpose is to live in accordance with reason. This can only be

³ Ibid

⁴ Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by W. D. Ross. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. (Originally published c. 350 BC).

achieved through the cultivation of intellectual virtues, such as wisdom and understanding, and moral virtues, such as courage and temperance (Aristotle 2009).⁵

Aristotle explains that *eudaimonia* is the result of living in accordance with the rational part of the soul, which is cultivated through education. The virtuous life, for Aristotle, is a life lived in balance, where emotions and desires are guided by reason, and rational deliberation governs ethical decisions.

“The good for man is an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue, in a complete life.”
(Aristotle 2009, 1098a)⁶

For Aristotle, education’s primary purpose is to nurture virtue, both intellectual and moral, through the development of habits and rational reflection. This vision of education emphasizes the need for individuals to be taught not only facts but also how to live well morally and rationally.

The teaching of Aristotle’s principles is only possible through the study of the humanities. Philosophical traditions cannot be excluded from modern curricula; otherwise, we will not be able to understand the concept of happiness, or *eudaimonia*. The teaching of Aristotle’s principles is connected to the study of the humanities, which includes philosophy, literature, history, and the arts. These disciplines provide a rich context for understanding the complexities of human existence and moral reasoning. It is vital for modern educational curricula to incorporate philosophical traditions, as neglecting them can lead to a shallow grasp of significant concepts like happiness. Aristotle's idea of *eudaimonia*, often interpreted as human flourishing or the realization of one’s potential, invites us to delve deeper into the virtues that contribute to a

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

meaningful life. By exploring these timeless principles, we unlock the wisdom needed to cultivate true fulfillment and purpose.

St. Thomas Aquinas, deeply influenced by Aristotle, integrates his educational principles with a Christian metaphysical framework, emphasizing that human beings are made in the image of God and that education should guide them toward their ultimate end, the union with God. Aquinas agrees with Aristotle that education should cultivate virtue and reason but emphasizes that true happiness (and the highest form of human flourishing) is found in the knowledge of God and alignment with divine will (Aquinas 1993)⁷.

For Aquinas, education is not simply a matter of intellectual development or moral virtue in the worldly sense, but it also involves the cultivation of spiritual virtues that help individuals orient their lives toward God.

"The end of education is to cultivate virtue and understanding, so that the human being may be disposed to achieve the happiness that is found in the knowledge of God."
(Aquinas 1993, Part II-II, Q. 47, A. 1)⁸

Aquinas, like Aristotle, sees education as integral to human flourishing, but his ultimate aim for education extends beyond intellectual and moral development to encompass spiritual fulfillment. He envisions education as a holistic process that includes intellectual, moral, and spiritual growth, all directed toward the ultimate goal of divine knowledge. Both Aristotle and Aquinas stress the centrality of virtue cultivation in education, yet they diverge in how they frame this educational goal.

⁷ Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologiae*. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. 2nd ed. New York: Benziger Brothers, 1993. (Originally published 1274).

⁸ Ibid

For Aristotle, the path to human flourishing (eudaimonia) is tied to the exercise of reason and the development of practical and intellectual virtues. His vision of education is rooted in the idea that a virtuous life is one lived by reason, where the cultivation of virtues like courage, temperance, and wisdom enables individuals to live well.

Aristotle's emphasis on reason and rational self-governance places him in the tradition of intellectual ethics, where education serves as a tool for individuals to align their actions with rational principles. However, Aquinas adds a theological layer to this perspective, framing education as a means to lead individuals toward their ultimate end, the union with God. According to Josef Froula, Aquinas sees education as more than just the development of intellectual virtues; it involves an alignment with divine truth.

"Aquinas' view of education goes beyond intellectual and moral development; it is fundamentally a theological enterprise. Education, for Aquinas, is about aligning the intellect and will with divine truth, guiding human beings toward their ultimate purpose: union with God" (Froula, 1999, p. 107).⁹

For Aquinas, education aims not only for human flourishing through rationality but also for aligning one's life with God's divine order. This theological foundation emphasizes the cultivation of virtues, which requires engagement with the humanities. These subjects are crucial for developing intellectual and moral virtues and neglecting them can hinder the formation of virtuous citizens and thinkers.

A Contemporary View on Education by Martha Nussbaum

Martha Nussbaum's defense of the humanities in *Not for Profit* brings a modern twist to the classical Aristotelian and Thomistic views of education. In a world

⁹ Froula, Josef. St. Thomas Aquinas on the Nature and Purpose of Education. *Journal of Medieval Philosophy*, 1999.

increasingly driven by economic imperatives, Nussbaum argues that the humanities are more important than ever. According to Nussbaum, the humanities: philosophy, literature, history, and the arts are essential for fostering critical thinking, empathy, and moral imagination. These capacities, she argues, are vital for the preservation and enhancement of a democratic society.

"The humanities are the essential tools for thinking critically about the world. They are central to a life of liberty and moral imagination, and they foster the emotional capabilities needed for democratic citizenship." (Nussbaum 2010, 5)¹⁰

Nussbaum's argument aligns with Aristotle's emphasis on moral reasoning and intellectual virtue, but she extends it by emphasizing the need for empathy and moral imagination in a globalized, pluralistic society. While Aristotle and Aquinas focused on developing virtues in a local context, Nussbaum's vision of education is a little different. It is about fostering the capacities necessary for individuals to function in a democratic society and engage with people from diverse backgrounds and perspectives.

Nussbaum's vision of education can be related to Plato's philosophical view that education is about liberating individuals from the darkness of ignorance and leading them to the light of truth. She stresses that the humanities are essential for developing individuals who can engage with others morally and intelligently, who can critically analyze social issues, and who can engage in the difficult work of democratic citizenship. She asserts:

"The humanities are not luxuries, but vital tools that help us think deeply about issues of justice, human dignity, and what it means to live a good life." (Nussbaum 2010, 11)¹¹

¹⁰ Nussbaum, Martha. *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010.

¹¹ *Ibid*

For Nussbaum, education should foster a sense of empathy and a desire for justice. It should teach individuals not just to gain knowledge, but to apply it in ways that promote the common good and human dignity.

Classical Ideals in a Modern Framework

While Nussbaum's defense of the humanities resonates with the Aristotelian and Thomistic traditions in its emphasis on intellectual and moral development, there are notable differences between her approach and those of Aristotle and Aquinas. One key difference lies in Nussbaum's secular framework for understanding education, which contrasts sharply with Aquinas's view of education as oriented toward divine knowledge.

Aquinas's perspective on education is fundamentally teleological, meaning its purpose is to prepare individuals for their ultimate goal: complete union with God. For Aquinas, education should guide individuals toward the transcendent good. This process involves cultivating not only intellectual virtues but also theological virtues such as faith, hope, and charity. In contrast, Nussbaum emphasizes justice and human flourishing but does not connect education to any transcendent or divine purpose. This secular approach may seem limited when evaluated through Aquinas's lens, as it focuses on human flourishing in the temporal world rather than the eternal perspective emphasized by Aquinas.

Aristotle also emphasizes the cultivation of virtues as integral to education, while Nussbaum's focus on the development of moral imagination and empathy is vital for a thriving democracy. Aristotle would argue that moral virtues such as courage, temperance, and justice must be cultivated through rational deliberation, not just emotional engagement. Aristotle believes that emotional responses need to be aligned with reason to achieve true virtue. In this sense, Nussbaum's emphasis on empathy could

be seen as insufficiently tied to the rational framework necessary for achieving the full range of virtues.

Moreover, Aristotle and Aquinas emphasize the communal aspect of education. For them, education is not solely about individual development but also about preparing individuals to contribute to the common good. While Nussbaum emphasizes democratic citizenship, which can be seen as a modern extension of Aristotle's ideas, her focus on the individual's emotional and intellectual capabilities may not fully address the broader communal and social responsibilities that education should foster.

Empathy vs Rational Virtues

Martha Nussbaum emphasizes the importance of the humanities in fostering critical thinking and moral development, stating, "The ability to imagine the situation of another is the foundation of justice" (*Creating Capabilities*, p. 55)¹². While empathy and moral imagination can promote inclusiveness and understanding, they risk being insufficiently grounded in the rational virtues championed by Aristotle. Aristotle's model asserts that true virtue is achieved by aligning emotional responses with reason. For instance, while empathy can motivate altruistic behavior, without rational deliberation, it may lead to partiality or misjudgment.

This critique raises a pressing question: Can the emotional focus in Nussbaum's model sustain the moral rigor necessary for democracy? Aristotle's framework suggests a need for balance, a harmony where empathy complements reasoned judgment. Modern education should not only nurture moral imagination but ensure it is tethered to rational principles that underpin ethical decisions.

¹² **Nussbaum, Martha.** *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011.

Aristotle's model of virtue ethics argues that true virtue is not simply the presence of emotional responses like empathy, but the proper alignment of emotions with reason. According to Aristotle, virtue is achieved when emotional responses, such as empathy, are shaped and guided by rational deliberation. As he writes in *Nicomachean Ethics*, "The virtuous person feels the right emotions at the right times, in the right way, and for the right reasons" (Aristotle, 1106b)¹³. This highlights the importance of harmony between reason and emotion, where emotional responses like empathy must be integrated into a larger framework of rational judgment. Without this balance, emotions can lead to partiality or misjudgment, as empathy might become overly directed toward those with whom we feel a connection, neglecting a more reasoned or universal moral perspective.

For example, in a democratic context, while empathy may lead one to act in favor of a vulnerable or marginalized group, without the rational framework that Aristotle advocates, this action might become biased or misplaced. Aristotle emphasizes the need for *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, which enables individuals to make sound moral decisions by balancing emotional responses with rational deliberation. In the case of empathy, this means that while it is important to connect emotionally with others, one must also employ reason to ensure that these emotional responses do not distort ethical decisions. Aristotle writes, "The man who is to be good must also have the capacity to judge well in particular situations" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1142a).¹⁴

This idea of rational deliberation within emotional engagement suggests that empathy when guided by rational judgment, can serve as a powerful tool for democratic action. However, without the guiding influence of reason, empathy alone risks being

¹³ Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by W. D. Ross. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

¹⁴ Ibid

partial or overly specific, potentially undermining the impartiality that democracy requires. Aristotle's insistence on the alignment of reason and emotion ensures that emotional responses are not only ethically appropriate but also rationally defensible.

For modern education, this means that nurturing moral imagination, particularly through the cultivation of empathy, should be complemented by the development of rational capacities. Education should encourage students not only to feel for others but also to critically examine how their emotional responses align with broader moral principles. Aristotle's framework provides a valuable counterpoint to Nussbaum's emphasis on empathy by arguing that moral rigor requires more than emotional engagement; it requires a balance where emotions are informed and regulated by reason.

The critique raises an important question, in response, Nussbaum would likely emphasize that emotional focus, particularly through the lens of moral emotions like empathy, is not only compatible with moral rigor but is, in fact, integral to it. In *Not for Profit*, Nussbaum argues that the humanities cultivate the critical capacities needed for democratic participation, emphasizing that "the humanities are the arts of critical thought, without which democracy cannot function" (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 25).¹⁵ This view reflects her belief that emotions such as empathy, when properly cultivated, guide us toward a deeper understanding of moral and social issues, thus enhancing democratic engagement and moral judgment.

Nussbaum asserts that the cultivation of moral imagination through emotional engagement helps individuals see the human dimensions of moral dilemmas, fostering a society grounded in justice and respect for others. In *Creating Capabilities*, she states that

¹⁵ Nussbaum, Martha. *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010.

“to be capable of functioning as a fully human person requires the ability to identify with the emotions of others and to engage with them in ways that are morally and socially appropriate” (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 68).¹⁶ This idea suggests that the emotional focus in her model is not an oversimplified response but rather a necessary aspect of ethical reasoning in a democratic society. By engaging in the feelings and experiences of others, individuals can make more informed and compassionate moral decisions that serve the common good.

While Aristotle’s framework advocates for the alignment of emotion with reason, Nussbaum’s emphasis on emotional engagement recognizes that reason alone cannot fully capture the complexities of human experience. Reason is often shaped and guided by the emotional understanding of others’ perspectives. Nussbaum explains that “the full development of a person’s capabilities requires not just reasoning, but emotional and social understanding as well” (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 103).¹⁷ This suggests that Nussbaum does not view emotions as separate from rational thought, but as intertwined in a way that enables more nuanced and just decision-making. Empathy, in her framework, is not merely an emotional reaction but a rational tool for understanding and addressing injustice.

The Tension Between Aristotle, Aquinas, and Nussbaum on Education

A core tension between Aristotle, Aquinas, and Nussbaum lies in their differing conceptions of education’s ultimate purpose. Aristotle and Aquinas ground education in a teleological framework, for Aristotle, the goal is eudaimonia, or human flourishing, achieved through the cultivation of rational and moral virtues. Aquinas builds on this,

¹⁶ Nussbaum, Martha. *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011.

¹⁷ *Ibid*

adding a theological dimension where the ultimate aim is union with God. He writes, “The end of education is to cultivate virtue and understanding, so that the human being may be disposed to achieve the happiness that is found in the knowledge of God” (*Summa Theologiae*, Part II-II, Q. 47, A. 1).¹⁸

Nussbaum, by contrast, approaches education through other lenses, prioritizing empathy, critical thinking, and moral imagination as tools for democratic engagement. While she asserts that “education should teach individuals not just to gain knowledge, but to apply that knowledge in ways that promote the common good and human dignity” (*Not for Profit*, p. 11)¹⁹, her model may lack the metaphysical depth of her predecessors. Aristotle’s emphasis on reason suggests that Nussbaum’s focus on empathy risks reducing education’s rigor if not anchored in rational deliberation. Similarly, Aquinas might argue that Nussbaum’s framework is incomplete without a transcendent aim, as it confines education’s purpose to temporal human flourishing.

Integrating the wisdom of Thomistic and Aristotelian principles with Nussbaum's inspiring vision.

Martha Nussbaum’s defense of the humanities provides a modern perspective that may align with and extend the Aristotelian and Thomistic traditions of education. Aristotle and Aquinas both emphasize the importance of education in cultivating the intellectual and moral virtues that are essential for human flourishing. Nussbaum builds on these ideas by arguing that the humanities are crucial for fostering critical thinking, moral imagination, and democratic citizenship in today’s world. While her perspective differs from the theological aspects of Aquinas’s views, and her focus on empathy may

¹⁸ Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologiae*. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. 2nd ed. New York: Benziger Brothers, 1993. (Originally published 1274).

¹⁹ Nussbaum, Martha. *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010.

appear more emotionally driven compared to Aristotle's emphasis on rational virtue, all three philosophers share a common vision of education as a means for individuals to achieve a flourishing life, contribute to society, and engage meaningfully with others.

By integrating Thomistic and Aristotelian principles with Nussbaum's advocacy for the humanities, we can create an educational framework that prioritizes intellectual, moral, and emotional development, while also promoting the democratic and communal responsibilities necessary for a thriving society. In this vision, education is not merely a preparation for employment; it is a transformative process that empowers individuals to become virtuous, empathetic, and engaged citizens capable of contributing to the common good.

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