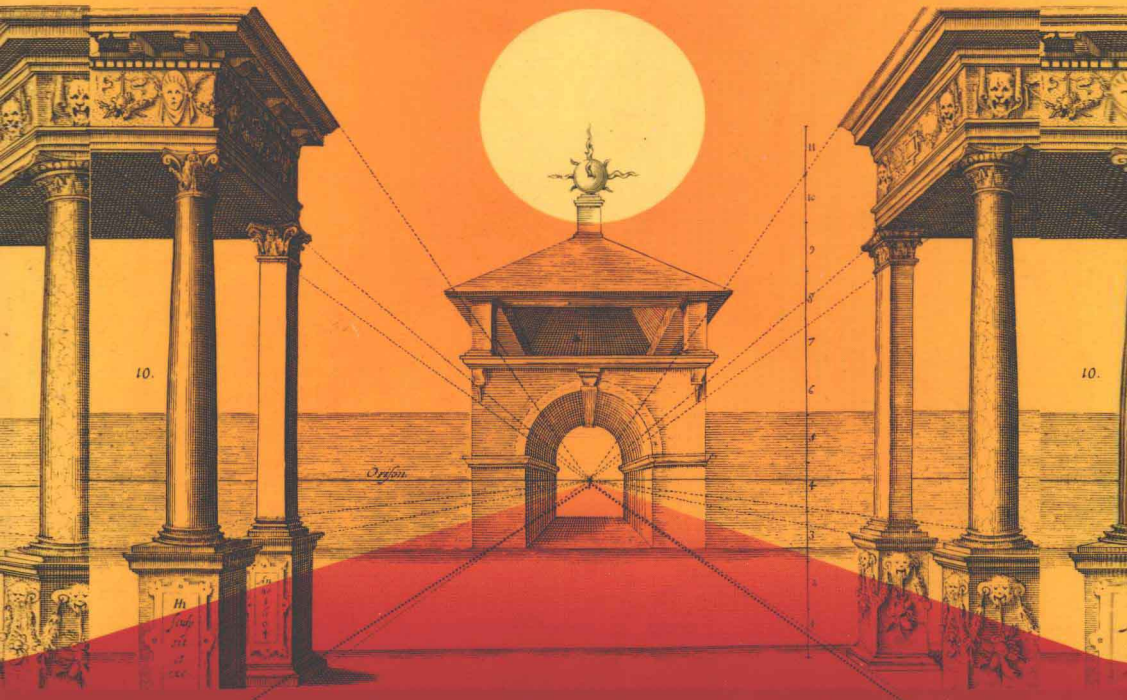
MARTHA C. NUSSBAUM



CULTIVATING HUMANITY

A CLASSICAL DEFENSE OF REFORM IN LIBERAL EDUCATION

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CULTIVATING HUMANITY

For Rachel
"Aliquid et de tuo profer"

PREFACE

This book began from many experiences stored up from twenty years of teaching at Harvard, Brown, and the University of Chicago and from travels to dozens of American campuses, both as a visiting lecturer and as a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Professor. During the latter program I visited ten campuses for three days each, in each case teaching three or four undergraduate classes (in either philosophy or classics) as well as giving public lectures to students and faculty and holding many informal office hours. The Council for Philosophical Studies has a similar program, funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, in which I regularly participate. The aim of both programs is to bring speakers to campuses that might otherwise be unable to afford such visits. As time went on, I found myself comparing what I had experienced with what I read in books about higher education; frequently I felt that the reports did not correctly represent the overall situation in our colleges and universities. I began to express this discontent in review pieces written for the *New York Review of Books* and the *New Republic.*

My own approach was, and is, philosophical. I intend to argue for a particular norm of citizenship and to make educational proposals in the light of that ideal. But philosophy should not be written in detachment from real life, and it is therefore important to me to ground my proposals in understanding of current developments in American colleges and universities. This experiential basis is all the more important since the general public may well have internalized a picture of these developments that is incomplete or even seriously misleading. It seems important, too, to stress the variety of American students and colleges, in order to make proposals that would not be too abstract to be useful. This project neither attempts nor requires a statistical survey; it will not furnish data about how many college English courses study Shakespeare or how many institutions teach

Bengali and Hindi. What is required, however, is a rich and variegated description of institutions of many different types whose efforts in the direction of curricular change can usefully exemplify, and ground, the philosophical proposals. Most books on higher education confine themselves to a few, usually famous and elite, institutions or to a few anecdotes drawn from others. My aim was to convey something of the feeling of life at institutions of a variety of types, in order to put the reader in a position to think clearly about the changes that are taking place.

In order to make my understanding of higher education in America more systematic and more focused for the book, I initially selected for close examination a "core" group of fifteen institutions chosen to represent different types of U.S. colleges and universities. I preferred campuses where I had spent some time. In each case I selected a single primary source, someone I knew and could trust. (Usually this meant that the person was in philosophy or classics or political theory.) This person, in all cases but one a faculty member, was invited to write a report on campus efforts to incorporate these new forms of education, to send me other names and printed materials, and to assist me or my research assistants on a visit to the campus. Inevitably, life did not proceed exactly according to plan. I received more detailed reports from some schools than from others; in some cases the original "informant" wrote nothing, but I met other people who filled the gap. In some cases other schools came to my attention with curricular initiatives so interesting that I shifted my original focus. The St. Lawrence program, for example, was unknown to me at the beginning of my work, although I had visited the campus. In all cases I sought out different points of view and talked to students as well as to faculty.

Throughout the project I have been immeasurably helped by four fine research assistants. Since they play a role in the book—especially the two who did many campus interviews—the reader should know something about them. Sam Houser, a graduate student in the Brown Classics Department (currently finishing a doctoral dissertation on Stoic political thought), gathered published materials, wrote dozens of letters of inquiry, and organized my files during the first six months of my work. Eric Klinenberg, who worked for me during 1993–94, just after receiving his B.A. in American Civilization from Brown, is currently in the Ph.D. program in sociology at the University of California at Berkeley. He visited Morehouse, Spelman, and Belmont as my representative, interviewing and gathering materials. It was not easy for a Jewish man raised in Chicago and educated at

Brown to go first to Belmont, a conservative Baptist school in Nashville, and the next day to Morehouse and Spelman, inspiring confidence in both places across barriers of religion, culture, and race. When I listen to the hours of interviews he taped I feel that, through intelligence and tact, he succeeded. In the spring and summer of 1994, Yasmin Dalisay worked for me, traveling to the University of California at Riverside, to Brigham Young, and to the University of Nevada at Reno. Yasmin's parents, both Filipino doctors, shortly after moving to the United States accepted job offers in Orem, Utah, near Provo, where Brigham Young is located. They had no previous knowledge of Mormonism. Yasmin grew up as a liberal mixed-culture foreigner in that highly conservative community. Her deep knowledge of Mormonism and her respect (albeit critical) for Mormon traditions made her able to conduct searching interviews there, as well as on campuses where most Brown students would have felt more at home. Yasmin graduated from Brown in 1996 with a philosophy major. In the final days of preparation of the manuscript, my research assistant was Ross Davies, a University of Chicago law student and 1996–97 editor-in-chief of the *University of Chicago Law Review;* in 1997–98 he will serve as a clerk with Judge Diane Wood of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit.

Throughout the process all interviewees were aware of the nature of my project; they consented to be interviewed, taped, and cited. A few student names used in the text are pseudonyms, though most are real.

I owe thanks to many individuals who have helped me in conceiving and writing the book, and in the first place to four marvelous editors. Robert Silvers of the *New York Review of Books,* by inviting me to review Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* in 1987, started the whole thing; and Leon Wieseltier and Andrew Sullivan of the *New Republic* helped me along by working with me in 1992 on an article on controversies about gay studies. But I owe a special debt of gratitude to Joyce Seltzer of Harvard University Press. She suggested the project to me and has shepherded it through its development, always an exigent, meticulous, tough-minded critic.

For several years before I began work on this book, I found myself living and raising children in a multicultural and multinational family, whose origins were in India, Germany, Italy, and England. Through my own awareness of my ignorance, I learned to ask critical questions about the education I had received, which gave me no information about Hinduism and Islam, about Indian history, or, indeed, about the economic and social situation of

the developing world in general. As I worked in a project on development ethics at the World Institute for Development Ethics Research in Helsinki, my awareness of ignorance grew deeper, and I am grateful to Lal Jayawardena and to all who worked with me at the Institute for their patience and support. But it is above all to the Sen family that I owe whatever I have been able to grasp in the area of world citizenship: to Indrani, Kabir, Tumpa, Picco, "Thamma," Babu—and, above all, to Amartya, whose imagination, compassion, and moral commitment are exemplary of what a "world citizen" can achieve.

I owe a palpable debt of gratitude to the hundreds of people who consented to be interviewed for this book or who sent me information, and especially to the campus "informants" who gave me detailed and comprehensive material. Some of these also sent comments on the manuscript, and I wish to thank Scott Abbott, Deborah Achtenberg, John Armstrong, Grant Cornwell, Marilyn Friedman, Ronnie Littlejohn, Walter Massey, Susan Moller Okin, Philip Quinn, Eve Stoddard, and Paul Weithman, and especially David Glidden for his detailed comments on the entire manuscript. Others who contributed very helpful comments include Lawrence Blum, Victor Caston, Thomas D'Andrea, Henry Louis Gates, Amy Meselson, Jean Porter, Witold Rabinowicz, Steven Strange, Candace Vogler, and Robert Gooding Williams. The University of Chicago Law School provides an atmosphere in which deep intellectual and political differences can be discussed with a truly Socratic civility and commitment to reason; I am grateful to my colleagues there for discussing and commenting on a project with parts of which some of them disagree deeply—and especially to Elizabeth Garrett, Dan Kahan, John Lott, Michael McConnell, Tracey Meares, Richard Posner, Mark Ramseyer, David Strauss, and Cass Sunstein.

Finally, I want to thank my many students at Harvard, Brown, and Chicago for all that I have learned about citizenship from teaching them, and for the great pleasure of arguing with them over the years.

But there is one student with whom I have argued more than any other, and with greater pleasure and pride. This is my daughter, Rachel Nussbaum. Wagnerite and market libertarian, Socratic arguer and Nietzschean romantic, she has disputed almost every claim in this book from some point of view within this complex identity—and has made my formulations sharper and more adequate.

Chicago
November 1996

. . . while we live, while we are among human beings,
let us cultivate our humanity.

Seneca, *On Anger*

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INTRODUCTION

The Old Education and the Think-Academy

In Aristophanes' great comedy *The Clouds,* a young man, eager for the new learning, goes to a "Think-Academy" run by that strange, notorious figure, Socrates. A debate is staged for him, contrasting the merits of traditional education with those of the new discipline of Socratic argument. The spokesman for the Old Education is a tough old soldier. He favors a highly disciplined patriotic regimen, with lots of memorization and not much room for questioning. He loves to recall a time that may never have existed—a time when young people obeyed their parents and wanted nothing more than to die for their country, a time when teachers would teach that grand old song "Athena, glorious sacker of cities"—not the strange new songs of the present day. Study with me, he booms, and you will look like a real man—broad chest, small tongue, firm buttocks, small genitals (a plus in those days, symbolic of manly self-control).

His opponent is an arguer, a seductive man of words—Socrates seen through the distorting lens of Aristophanic conservatism. He promises the youth that he will learn to think critically about the social origins of apparently timeless moral norms, the distinction between convention and nature. He will learn to construct arguments on his own, heedless of authority. He won't do much marching. Study with me, he concludes, and you will look like a philosopher: you will have a big tongue, a sunken, narrow chest, soft buttocks, and big genitals (a minus in those days, symbolic of lack of self-restraint). Socrates' self-advertisement, of course, is being slyly scripted by the conservative opposition. The message? The New Education will subvert manly self-control, turn young people into sex-obsessed rebels, and destroy the city. The son soon goes home and produces a relativist argument that he should beat his father. The same angry father then takes a torch and burns down the Think-Academy. (It is not made clear whether the son is

still inside.) Twenty-five years later, Socrates, on trial for corrupting the young, cited Aristophanes' play as a major source of prejudice against him.

In contemporary America as in ancient Athens, liberal education is changing. New topics have entered the liberal arts curricula of colleges and universities: the history and culture of non-Western peoples and of ethnic and racial minorities within the United States, the experiences and achievements of women, the history and concerns of lesbians and gay men. These changes have frequently been presented in popular journalism as highly threatening, both to traditional standards of academic excellence and to traditional norms of citizenship. Readers are given the picture of a monolithic, highly politicized elite who are attempting to enforce a "politically correct" view of human life, subverting traditional values and teaching students, in effect, to argue in favor of father-beating. Socratic questioning is still on trial. Our debates over the curriculum reveal the same nostalgia for a more obedient, more regimented time, the same suspiciousness of new and independent thinking, that find expression in Aristophanes' brilliant portrait.

This picture of today's campuses bears little resemblance to the daily reality of higher education in America, as faculty and students grapple with issues of human diversity. Sensationalistic descriptions of horrors may sometimes be more fun to read than nuanced accounts of responsible decision-making, but the latter are badly needed, since they represent the far more common reality. In order to evaluate the changes that are taking place in colleges and universities, we have to look more closely to see exactly what is changing, and why. What are faculty and students really doing, and how do newly fashionable issues about human diversity affect what they do? What sort of citizens are our colleges trying to produce, and how well are they succeeding in that task? To answer these questions, we need to look not only at one or two well-known institutions but at a wide range, representative of the variety that currently exists in American higher education: institutions public and private, religious and secular, large and small, rural and urban, four-year and university.

When we look in this way, we do see problems; and we do see tendencies that ought to be criticized. But on the whole, higher education in America is in a healthy state. Never before have there been so many talented and committed young faculty so broadly dispersed in institutions of so many different kinds, thinking about difficult issues connecting education with

citizenship. The shortage of jobs in the humanities and social sciences has led to hardships; many have left the professions they love. But those who have stayed are intensely dedicated; furthermore, the ablest teachers and scholars are now no longer concentrated in a few elite schools. They are all over the country, reflecting about the mission of higher education, trying out strategies to enliven the thinking of the students who come their way. The real story of higher education in America is the story of the daily struggles of these men and women to reason well about urgent questions and to engage the hearts and minds of their students in that search.

At St. Lawrence University, a small liberal arts college in upstate New York, near the Canadian border, the snow is already two feet deep by early January. Cars make almost no sound rolling slowly over the packed white surface. But the campus is well plowed, even at Christmas. In a brightly lit seminar room young faculty, gathering despite the vacation, talk with excitement about their month-long visit to Kenya to study African village life. Having shared the daily lives of ordinary men and women, having joined in local debates about nutrition, polygamy, AIDS, and much else, they are now incorporating the experience into their teaching—in courses in art history, philosophy, religion, women's studies. Planning eagerly for the following summer's trip to India, they are already meeting each week for an evening seminar on Indian culture and history. Group leaders Grant Cornwell from Philosophy and Eve Stoddard from English talk about how they teach students to think critically about cultural relativism, using careful philosophical questioning in the Socratic tradition to criticize the easy but ultimately (they argue) incoherent idea that toleration requires us not to criticize anyone else's way of life. Their students submit closely reasoned papers analyzing arguments for and against outsiders' taking a stand on the practice of female circumcision in Africa.

In Riverside, California, already at 8 A.M. a brown haze blankets the mountains and the orange groves. It is the first day of the summer session at the University of California campus, and the ethnically mixed student body, more than 40 percent minority, crowds the campus green. Richard Lowy, a young white instructor in Ethnic Studies, talks rapidly to my research assistant Yasmin Dalisay, herself a daughter of two Filipino doctors who immigrated to Orem, Utah. Lowy speaks in a low, gentle voice, peering through his thick glasses. He describes the difficulty of teaching about im-

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I haven't seen before—tall, beefy, red cheeked, in his late teens, wearing a red baseball cap and a bright purple sweatshirt with "Washington" in silver letters across the top and a glow-in-the-dark picture of the White House. He tells me his name is Billy. He is reading Plato's *Apology* and *Crito.* So you're reading Plato, I say. "Yeah. You like that stuff?" he asks, and his eyes light up. I tell him I like that stuff a lot, and I ask him about his class. It's at Bentley, a college in nearby Waltham, focused on business education. Who's the instructor? "I don't remember," he says, "She's foreign." The syllabus reads, "Dr. Krishna Mallick." Krishna Mallick, originally from Calcutta, has written some wonderful study questions about Socrates' mission of self-examination, his obedience to the laws of Athens, his willingness to die for the sake of the argument. Soon students will go on to use the techniques they have learned from Plato to stage debates about moral dilemmas of our time. Before I head for the Stairmaster, we talk for a while about why Socrates did not escape from prison when he had the chance, and it's plain that Krishna Mallick has produced real excitement. "You know, I really like this philosophy. Most courses, you have to remember lots of little facts, but in this one they want you to think and ask questions."

At the University of Chicago, a chain-link fence out back of the law school parking lot marks the line between the university campus and the impoverished black community that surrounds it. Black children sometimes climb over the fence or get round it by the driveway, but they are not allowed to stay long. On a May afternoon seventy students, one black, sit in a law school classroom discussing Richard Wright's *Native Son,* a novel set in that very part of Chicago in 1940. They talk about the "line" that Bigger Thomas thought of as the symbol of white hatred and black shame, and they argue intensely over Bigger's state of mind and the degree of his criminal responsibility. Since Justice Clarence Thomas has recently made a statement opposing mitigation in sentencing for blacks who trace their criminal tendencies to their deprived backgrounds, they ask whether Wright's novel supports or subverts Thomas' claims.

Scott Braithwaite, a young gay Mormon, recent graduate of Brigham Young University, gives a Sacrament meeting talk referring to the importance of including discussion of the history and variety of human sexuality in the liberal arts curriculum. This is currently a topic of intense controversy at BYU, and Braithwaite's talk is thick with references both to biblical texts and

migration, assimilation, and the political struggles of new minorities in a political climate saturated with sensationalism, mistrust, and appeals to irrational emotion. "Certainly there are some people who teach multiculturalism in a provocative way. I choose a more gentle approach. I try to tell everybody I'm not here to degrade you and I'm not here to condemn anybody for what your ancestors, relatives, or anybody did; I just try to explain what's going on, and I hope that the knowledge I present will begin to affect people, whereas the emotionalism of some people is what turns people off. I think that for people to be orienting their humanity only in political terms is too narrow, and I always tell people that you can either package your humanity in your politics or you can package your politics in your humanity, and if you're really a decent human being with the right attitude and the right heart and good faith toward people it will come out. So I try to put things in that kind of perspective."

In Reno the University of Nevada campus is a small enclave of red brick and manicured lawns in the middle of casino-land. Yasmin talks with Eric Chalmers, a senior health science major from Carson City, who describes himself as having "more bigoted ideas than some people at the university level." Chalmers, who has never heard of the recently introduced "diversity requirement," requiring new freshmen to take one course on a non-Western culture or on an ethnic or gender issue within the United States, applauds the trend to internationalizing, wishing he had had the opportunity to study Islam and the Middle East. But he criticizes a course on domestic violence taught by a "liberated woman professor" because it seemed to him "too demeaning to men." As the interview is drawing to an end, he laughs, remembering something. "Here's another interesting thing. In English 102 we had to write a letter putting ourselves in the shoes of a gay person, like breaking the news to our parents saying we were gay, and explaining our lifestyle to them. At the time, when I was a freshman, it seemed really off the wall to me, and it was kind of an uncomfortable assignment, but now, looking back on it, it seems as though I can understand why he would do something like that—because you come into contact with people like—you know, different types of people—all the time, and maybe it's an understanding of their belief system." He laughs nervously.

On a dark afternoon in February 1995, I go to my Cambridge, Massachusetts, health club. There is a young man behind the check-in desk whom