

## ***Reshaping Liberal Education: An Appeal To The Stoic Tradition***

**Brian Crittenden**

In recent years, Australian universities, like many in other countries, have been increasingly driven by the values of commercial enterprise. A key consequence has been the growing emphasis on the kinds of vocational education likely to attract large enrolments and be financially profitable. In strengthening such programs (and related research), universities have been whittling down their involvement in what has traditionally been known as liberal education. Of course, what has been done under that rubric has often been deficient.

In a book published in 1997, Martha Nussbaum presents a strong and interesting argument on what the characteristics of liberal education should be and why it should hold a central place in the work of universities.<sup>1</sup> She discusses examples of various programs in American universities that illustrate how the essential features of liberal education can be embodied. I shall not comment on the examples, interesting though they are, but shall focus on the general features she identifies as defining liberal education.

One of the fundamental objectives of liberal education, reiterated through the long history of the Western philosophical tradition, has been to cultivate the broad desirable values of our common humanity.<sup>2</sup> These values relate both to our personal life and to our social life as 'citizens of the world'.

As Nussbaum points out, some interpret the last phrase in a way that gives primacy to general human association over regional or national identity; others uphold the primacy of local identity provided it is combined with tolerance, sympathy and so on for human beings everywhere. Nussbaum herself supports this 'softer' interpretation of 'world citizen'.

Unless our lives are swept by advancing technology into some form of global virtual reality, I think there are sound reasons for developing the range of desirable human qualities in relation to the

Copyright Agency Limited (CAL) licensed copy. Further copying and communication prohibited except on payment of fee per Copy or Communication and otherwise in accordance with the licence from CAL to ACER. For more information contact CAL on (02) 9394 7600 or [info@copyright.com.au](mailto:info@copyright.com.au)

social, political and environmental context that individuals directly experience and then, by extension, to all fellow human beings and the common world we inhabit. To proceed the other way runs the risk of producing what Alasdair MacIntyre calls 'rootless cosmopolitanism'.

In any case, the education that emphasizes our development as human beings (whatever our local identity) is referred to as 'liberal' precisely because it enables us to go beyond the beliefs and practices of a particular group and live with an understanding of our common humanity.

Nussbaum suggests that there are three capacities essential for the achievement of this objective in the contemporary world. First, one needs to be equipped to reflect critically on oneself and one's tradition. Second, there is the understanding that enables us to see ourselves as citizens of the whole world of human beings and not simply as members of one society. Thirdly, there are the skills, knowledge and attitudes involved in the exercise of "narrative imagination". This is the ability to enter sympathetically into the perspective of others, an essential condition for judging them fairly and for deciding what action on our part would be morally desirable.<sup>3</sup>

One of the basic objectives of a liberal education is to develop in each individual the skills and attitudes required for critical thinking on important personal and public issues. It is the effort to achieve the Socratic ideal of "the examined life" <sup>4</sup>. As Nussbaum notes, Socrates was committed to democratic values, but did not exempt them from critical inquiry. He held that anyone with ordinary ability to reason should become a good reflective citizen. The all-too-common tendency was (and still is) for argument in a democracy to take the form of claim and counterclaim among contending interest groups. Socrates was confident that, through appropriate education, this could be displaced by processes of deliberative judgment, engaged in by all, about the common good.

Socrates did not develop a plan of education for the achievement of the ideal of "the examined life". Seneca and other Stoics in the Roman world during the first two centuries A.D. supported Socrates' ideal. They made an important contribution to the theory and practice of education that would promote its achievement. They were particularly concerned to break from the practice of simply memorizing and reproducing in word and action what had been learnt without critical reflection. The task was "to confront the passivity of the pupil, challenging the mind to take charge of its own thought".<sup>5</sup> It was Seneca who reinterpreted 'liberalis', applied to education, as 'making free' rather

than its traditional sense of 'suitable for the freeborn'.<sup>6</sup> However, he was not talking about the traditional program of liberal studies. It may serve as an apprenticeship, but the real liberal studies - those that make a person free - consist in the pursuit of wisdom (which, for Seneca, is the attainment of moral virtues). It should be noted that, while Seneca regards traditional liberal education as capable of contributing to wisdom or morality, it is neither a sufficient nor even a necessary means. "For wisdom does not lie in books but truths. Wisdom publishes not words but truths - and I'm not sure that the memory isn't more reliable when it has no external aids to fall back on."<sup>7</sup> Seneca's interpretation of 'liberalis' as applied to education is, thus, rather more complex than Nussbaum's summary suggests.

In relation to the writings of Seneca and other Stoics, she identifies four key principles in their interpretation of the Socratic approach to education. I think it can justifiably be claimed that they have a timeless relevance for the theory and practice of education.

1. Although the focus is on what we call 'higher' or 'tertiary' education, these studies are regarded as being appropriate for every human being. They build on the basic skills and knowledge acquired at earlier stages. The emphasis is on the development of practical reasoning, of which most people are assumed to be capable, and is closely related to the duties of citizenship and family life. Because it includes all citizens, this advanced education is particularly fitting for a democratic political order. I think it should be noted, however, that there are levels of knowledge and skill that only a minority have the capacity and interest to achieve. Such education can be provided in a way that is consistent with - and enhances the quality of - a democratic society. The various levels could be accommodated within universities. However, if a stage of education beyond the secondary school is envisaged for virtually everyone, it would seem desirable to have a flexible variety of institutional forms, and not expect universities to provide for all levels of 'further' liberal education.
2. "Socratic education should be suited to the pupil's circumstances and context."<sup>8</sup> As in medical treatment, the ideal is that the methods of instruction and the details of the curriculum should be adapted to each individual's needs in order most effectively to reach the commonly desired objectives. Again, I would note that, while diversity of this kind is desirable at any level of education, it points to the need for a variety of 'tertiary' institutions broadly distinguished by the advanced mode of liberal education at which they aim.

3. "Socratic education would be pluralistic, that is, concerned with a variety of different norms and traditions." In other words, comparative studies should have an important place in the curriculum. As Nussbaum points out, this does not imply relativism. In fact, one outcome is the testing and strengthening of the conviction that there are universally valid beliefs, values and so on.
4. "Socratic education requires ensuring that books do not become authorities." It is how we use books that is crucial for a sound education. Simply to memorize and repeat what someone else has written falls seriously short of what is educationally desirable. The challenge is to reflect critically on what we read or are otherwise taught so that what we claim to know depends on our own effort at understanding - not on the authority of another whom we quote from memory. As Seneca put it: "To remember is to safeguard something entrusted to your memory, whereas to know, by contrast, is actually to make each item your own, and not to be dependent on some original and to be constantly looking to see what the master said".<sup>9</sup>

Acquiring the skills of logical analysis and reasoning is particularly important for the exercise of responsible, informed citizenship in a democracy. It can also help us to overcome prejudice and crude self-interest in our dealings with others.

The Socratic approach stands in opposition both to conservatives, who object to any critical reflection on their traditional beliefs, and to radicals (such as postmodernists), who reject any effort at objective inquiry and regard truth claims simply as fantasies serving various interests. At the same time, as Nussbaum points out, Socratic commitment to the quest for truth through rigorous critical scrutiny also applies to Socrates' own methods and objectives.

The basic lesson to be drawn for formal education from the Socratic mode is the need "to make the effort of sorting things out and finding an account that can endure critical scrutiny".<sup>10</sup> This depends crucially on teachers fashioning their approach on that of Socrates. To do so, they must have reflected critically on what they teach and have a sound estimate of the capacity of each of their students for such reflection. The process can occur in any area of systematic knowledge and inquiry. However, because philosophy is directly concerned with the general nature of logic and rational inquiry, it needs to be given explicit attention in the program of studies. This can be done through the

philosophical treatment of significant moral and other human values, either in a separate course or in the context of some other subject ( such as literature, economics, political science). Cultural relativism is one of the important topics that should be the subject of close philosophical discussion.

If universities in a democratic society seriously pursue the Socratic (and Stoic) ideal of an educated person, one of the major contributions they will make is the development of citizens who can think in a reasoned, critical way about important issues that affect the common good. (Of course, it also equips them to think in this way about their personal lives.)

While Nussbaum emphasizes this outcome in relation to universities, I believe that it applies to systematic education at every stage. By the end of Year 10, secondary students should have acquired the basic skills, knowledge, and attitudes that any citizen needs in order to think critically about important social and political issues. By the end of Year 12, the basic components should have been developed to a more sophisticated level. By the end of an undergraduate program in a university (or other systematic program of adult education) there should be competence in the more advanced levels of critical, rational reflection, and knowledge of the main underlying issues that affect the nature of such reflection (such as subjectivism, cultural relativism, incommensurable goods).

A key ingredient in an educational program that seeks to achieve the Socratic ideal of the 'examined life' is systematic cross-cultural study. The objective, Nussbaum emphasizes, is not primarily to foster diverse group identities, but to bring out the common human identity that exists across these diverse groups. (The Stoics did not undervalue the beliefs and practices that formed local identity; what they required was that these should be consistent with respect for common human dignity.) The cross-cultural comparison of beliefs and practices also aims at challenging us to consider what sound arguments, if any, do justify one set of beliefs and practices over another.

A suitable curriculum program can be arranged in many ways. One approach is to have a core course in 'world civilizations', along with electives that take up in detail various significant differences between the common culture of the society to which the educational institution belongs and several other cultures.

A key issue here is how the term 'multiculturalism', which has come to be widely used to name an ideal for Western democratic societies, is to be interpreted. It is often used with a meaning that is close to 'ethnocentrism'. In this sense, the emphasis is on distinct, ethnic (or otherwise identified) groups living by their own cultural values, practices and so on within a minimally defined common political order. Often, there is a much stronger sense of identity with the 'mother' culture (and the society from which the individuals or their ancestors have come) than with the 'multicultural' society in which they are living.

From her comments on an example of a 'cross-cultural' program,<sup>11</sup> it is clear that Nussbaum emphatically rejects any interpretation of 'multiculturalism' that stresses the uncritical acceptance of cultural diversity within and among societies. She endorses the view that in this sense it supports relativism and exaggerates the place of particular cultural identities in a political order. It encourages a pedagogy "limited to an uncritical recognition or celebration of difference, as if all cultural practices were morally neutral or legitimate".<sup>12</sup>

Nussbaum notes that the program to which she is referring (which prefers 'interculturalism' to 'multiculturalism') is in harmony with the outlook of the Stoics. They emphasized that the effort to achieve the examined life required contact with other cultures: to become aware of common human needs and objectives, to test the practices of one's own culture and those of others for obstacles to the achievement of a desirable human life. An important objective of education is to "promote the ability to doubt the unqualified goodness of one's own ways, as we search for what is good in human life the world over".<sup>13</sup>

In addition to the employment of systematic knowledge and critical judgment in cross-cultural studies, Nussbaum gives special emphasis to the development of "narrative imagination"<sup>14</sup>. It is the capacity to understand and enter imaginatively into the way others think and feel, even when we do not share their outlook. It is the basis for compassion, a sense of our common vulnerability as human beings. This kind of sensitive judgment, essential for responding to the humanity of others in conditions very different from our own, is encouraged through close attention to the aesthetic quality of the various arts. In all the arts, significant work involves an intertwining of aesthetic form with the content of moral and other value judgments that bear on our role as citizens (as well as on our personal lives).

Literature is particularly important in this regard. It vividly presents diverse characters (many of whom we would not wish to meet), and explores motives for acting, the conflict of personal ideals, self-deception and so on. The aesthetic quality of literature draws us into an imaginative reflection, both sympathetic and critical, on people quite different from ourselves.

For Nussbaum, the study of literature should be "at the heart of a curriculum for citizenship".<sup>16</sup> Whether one agrees with this claim or not (history is another very strong contender), there is no doubt that literary studies can contribute powerfully to a broad sympathetic, yet critical, understanding of what being human involves. As she notes, most significant literary (and other) works of art are concerned with basic human values (moral, political etc.) as well as with criteria of formal excellence. She refers to the novels of Charles Dickens and George Eliot, which dramatically present such issues as the need for reform in education and in the treatment of workers. As they attend to these aspects of literature, teachers should promote a thorough debate on such conflicting positions as conservatism and liberalism, relativism and anti-relativism. For this purpose, there is need for interdisciplinary dialogue between teachers of literature and teachers of philosophy.

In addition to the appropriate methods of teaching and learning, the selection of what deserves to be studied in the name of literature (and this applies to the other arts) is a critically important issue. A problem to which Nussbaum does not refer is the choice by teachers of works of fiction (and other arts) that reflect their own values, and are used to encourage these values rather than to provoke critical reflection. This can even happen when teachers are using what is generally recognized as literature of high quality, but it is less likely to happen with such works.

One particular criterion Nussbaum proposes is the inclusion of literature that addresses and gives insight into the experience of minority groups in the students' society. (Presumably, this criterion would extend to the inclusion of some of the literature - usually, in translation - of external cultural traditions.) In relation to the study of literary works that present the experience of minority groups, Nussbaum warns against the approach of multiculturalism that treats such works as instruments of "identity politics".<sup>16</sup> That is, they are used to promote the priority of one's group identity over one's general human existence - and, it should be added, the inclusive political order of which the group is a part. The approach which Nussbaum supports is that of

the "world citizen": diversity is respected subject to the condition that we are all citizens of the world.

There are a few occasions on which, for Nussbaum herself, narrative imagination seems to become detached from critical reflection.<sup>17</sup> However, her general position is the need for the close combination of the two, enabling the study of literature to make its distinctive contribution to the development of individuals who can combine membership of a particular society with being citizens of the world, and can engage at both levels with a reflective mixing of commitment and criticism.

The objective of "cultivating our humanity" in an educational program within a Western society requires the inclusion of the study of non-Western cultures. Nussbaum draws attention to two serious distortions that can affect such study. The first she refers to as "descriptive chauvinism".<sup>18</sup> It is the reading of other cultures in the image of our own. This can affect not only the study of cultures that we acknowledge as different from our own but also those we assume to be much the same. Nussbaum warns explicitly against the tendency to regard classical Greek (and Roman) culture, writing, ways of thinking as "ours". It should be noted that this warning also applies to the treatment of much later periods in Western history.

The second distortion that often threatens the proper study of non-Western cultures is what Nussbaum calls "descriptive romanticism". It goes to the opposite extreme from the first: the differences between such cultures and our own are exaggerated and are treated as superior.

From her knowledge of recent teaching programs (in various U.S. universities and colleges), Nussbaum suggests that the satisfactory *descriptive* study of cultures should stress the following:<sup>19</sup>

1. "Real cultures are plural, not single."
2. "Real cultures contain argument, resistance, and contestation of norms."
3. "In real cultures, what most people think is likely to be different from what the most famous artists and intellectuals think."
4. "Real cultures have varied domains of thought and activity."  
(This confronts the tendency to focus on urban elites and to



ignore ordinary life and that of rural people.)

5. "Real cultures have a present as well as a past."

In the *evaluative* study of cultures, there are several major pitfalls to be avoided.<sup>20</sup> The first is "normative chauvinism": judging other cultures, often on the basis of an inaccurate description, as being inferior to our own. The opposite mistake, "normative Arcadianism", assumes that other cultures are, without question, superior to our own. Thirdly, there is the position of "normative scepticism" - not the expression of tolerance, but the suspension of any judgment on the quality of the cultures studied. All three run counter to one of the more important objectives of cross-cultural studies: to submit assumptions about the superiority of Western culture to close critical scrutiny.

Other important components of undergraduate cross-cultural studies proposed by Nussbaum are: some attention to major world religions; the acquisition of a reasonably good grasp of at least one foreign language; an indepth study of one non-Western culture.

The basic objective of the whole program of liberal education that Nussbaum supports is to lead students to "a Socratic knowledge of their own ignorance - both of other cultures and, to a great extent, of our own".<sup>21</sup> It is an antidote to the acceptance of simple clichés about our own and other cultures and it provides the basis for the critical inquiry that can lead to sound understanding.

In her concluding comments, Nussbaum refers to the grave threat to liberal education that is coming from the increasingly heavy emphasis on vocational education (accounting, computer science, business studies etc.) as the main role of universities. "It would be catastrophic to become a nation of technically competent people who have lost the ability to respect the humanity and diversity of others."<sup>22</sup> Universities in Australia are being shaped more and more by the criterion of 'vocational relevance'. One of the ironies of this trend is that many areas of employment in our society are looking to universities, not for vocationally trained graduates, but for those who have acquired a broad perspective of knowledge, have learned to identify significant issues, and can think critically and imaginatively about them.<sup>23</sup>

Although I believe that Nussbaum makes a strong case for the cultivation of our common humanity as central to liberal education, she perhaps underestimates the extent to which a great many people identify themselves with a particular ethnic, racial, regional (usually, national) group. Being Australian, American, British, Greek, French etc.

(or a member of a geographic area within a nation) often far outweighs a sense of common humanity. Seneca's advice ("while we live, while we are among human beings, let us cultivate our humanity") would be interpreted by many as referring to membership of a particular national or regional group.

The development of the examined life and the cultivation of our common humanity should certainly be basic to the educational role of universities. To ensure that they are, we need a much sharper awareness of counterpressures that come from the current entrepreneurial trend (and the related belief in the market value of specifically tailored vocational courses), and from the partisan character of ethnic, national and other particular group identities.

### NOTES

1. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997 (4th. printing, 1998). The author is Ernst Freund Professor of Law and Ethics in the Philosophy Department, Law School, and Divinity School, University of Chicago.
2. In one of his moral essays, *De Ira (On Anger)*, Seneca writes: "...while we live, while we are among human beings, let us cultivate our humanity". He lived from 4 B.C. to 56 A.D. and was one of the leading Roman Stoics.
3. Nussbaum notes (p. 11) that the development of an understanding of the physical sciences is "one of the ingredients of first importance" in a liberal education. However, because of her areas of academic work, she focuses attention on the humanities and, to a lesser extent, the social sciences.
4. Nussbaum points out (p. 23) that Socrates' ideal of "the examined life" as the key outcome of education for living in a democracy strongly influenced the writings of Seneca and other Roman Stoics. In referring to this ideal, Socrates comments (in Plato's *Apology*) that "the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being".
5. Nussbaum, op. cit., p. 28.
6. Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic*, R. Campbell (trans.), Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1969, Letter LXXXIII, p. 151. The letter begins: "You want to know my attitude towards liberal studies".
7. *Ibid.*, p. 158.
8. Nussbaum, op. cit., p. 32. The quotations that follow are on p. 32 (point 3) and p. 33 (point 4).
9. Seneca, op. cit., Letter XXXVIII, p. 80. Nussbaum, op. cit., p. 35 quotes from a different translation.
10. Nussbaum, op. cit., p. 41.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 79-83.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

13. Ibid., p. 83. Earlier (p. 69), Nussbaum refers to a program developed by E. D. Hirsch Jr. and others, published in a book edited by Hirsch called *What Your Second Grader Needs to Know*, New York: Doubleday, 1991. The material includes stories of Buddha, Hindu myths, African folktales, incidents in the life of Confucius.
14. Nussbaum, op. cit., Ch. 3.
15. Ibid., p. 97.
16. Ibid., pp. 110-11.
17. For two examples, see Nussbaum, op. cit., pp. 101, 125.
18. Nussbaum, op. cit., p. 118. The reference to "descriptive romanticism" in the next paragraph is on p. 123.
19. Ibid., pp. 127-28.
20. Ibid., pp. 134-39.
21. Ibid., p. 147.
22. Ibid., p. 300.
23. A report, 'Employment Satisfaction with Graduate Skills' prepared by the firm A. C. Nielsen, claims that more than three-quarters of Australian university and TAFE graduates are ill-prepared for employment. The problem is not so much the lack of technical skills as of general educational skills such as being able to speak and write clearly and accurately, think imaginatively, apply broad problem-solving skills (and work collaboratively with others in this process). The report was discussed in 'The Higher Education Supplement', *The Australian*, 12 January and 16 February, 2000.