MARY WARD CENTRE

Martha Nussbaum: Feeling, Fragility, Flourishing

2. Fragility

A liveable life

‘Well, I think it means, first of all, that they are preoccupied with the idea of a life that has many different parts. That is a life that is rich and full, that involves many different activities. Now, it also turns out that these activities are not entirely under people’s control at all times.

That a lot of them, like the ability to love and care for a family, the ability to get an education, the ability to think well, even the ability to be a moral person and to choose well, all of these require support from the surrounding society

And so they have the image often of the person as like a plant, something that is fairly sturdy, that has a definite structure, but that is always in need of support from the surrounding society. And the political leader in that image is like the gardener, who has to tend the plant.’ – Bill Moyers interview

The Death of Socrates

- ‘the philosopher more than other men frees the soul from association with the body as much as possible’ (*Phaedo*)
- a ‘good man cannot be harmed in life or in death’ (*Apology*)
- Socrates to Crito: ‘save a cock for Asclepius’.
- For Nietzsche, this is a life-denying cry for the welcome cure of death for a life one wishes to escape (‘O Crito, *life is a disease*’)


T. II
PL. XXXVIII
Lith. de Bouvenne.
A. Rey sc.

Tragedy

- *Tragedy – tragos* (goat) + *oide* (song)
- … Actors/musicians dressed as goats or satyrs, possibly the chorus
- Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* (1872) – Dionysian and Apollonian
- Two contrary aspects of life as we live it are publicly affirmed
- For Nussbaum, tragedy also reveals new perspectives on human conflicts and behaviour
- Specifically, the fragility of human life and the fickle, unpredictable power of luck and fate in our lives.
- *How should ethical thought respond?*

Chapter 1, “Luck and Ethics”

- The vine and the gem
- ‘a lot about us is messy, needy, uncontrolled, rooted in the dirt and standing helplessly in the rain’
- Yet ‘there is something about us that is pure and purely active, something that we could think of as ‘divine, immortal, intelligible, unitary, indissoluble, ever self-consistent and invariable’’ (Plato, *Phaedrus*).
- Perhaps ‘this rational element in us can rule and guide the rest, thereby saving the whole person from living at the mercy of luck.’
  – this ‘splendid hope’ is the central preoccupation of Greek thought

‘That I am an agent, but also a plant; that I must constantly choose among competing and apparently incommensurable goods and that circumstances may force me to a position in which I cannot help being false to something or doing some wrong;

that an event that simply happens to me may, without my consent, alter my life;

that it is equally problematic to entrust one’s good to friends, lovers, or country and to try to have a good life without them – all these I take to be not just the material of tragedy, but everyday facts of lived practical reason.’ (5)

Over to you

‘How much should a rational plan of life allow for elements such as friendship, love, political activity, attachments to property or possessions, all of which, being themselves vulnerable, make the person who stakes his or her good to them similarly open to chance?’

Let’s discuss in small groups two features of Ch1:

1. In what ways do luck, chance, or fragility challenge rational thinking?
2. What kind of value might tragedy have for understanding this?

Value of tragedy

- Ethical reflection
- ‘confront and explore problems about human beings and luck that a philosophical text might be able to omit or avoid … stories through which an entire culture has reflected about the situation of human beings’
- Complex characters and events that reveal ‘the vulnerability of human lives to fortune, the mutability of our circumstances and our passions, the existence of conflicts among our commitments’
- Characters are forced to deliberate and search for what is morally right, and ‘it forces us, as interpreters, to be similarly active’

‘Our Anglo-American philosophical tradition has tended to assume that the ethical text should, in the process of inquiry, converse with the intellect alone; it should not make its appeal to the emotions, feelings, and sensory responses.

… The conversation we have with a work of tragic poetry is not like this. Our cognitive activity, as we explore the ethical conception embodied in the text, centrally involves emotional response. We discover what we think about these events partly by noticing how we feel; our investigation of our emotional geography is a major part of our search for self-knowledge’ (15)

A	B
agent as hunter, trapper, male	agent as plant, child, female (or with elements of both male and female)
agent as purely active	agent as both active and passive/receptive
aim: uninterrupted activity, control; elimination of the power of the external	aim: activity and receptivity; limited control balanced by limited risk; living well within a world in which the external has power
soul as hard, impenetrable	soul as soft, porous, though with a definite structure
trust reposed only in the immutable and altogether stable	trust reposed in the mutable and unstable
intellect as pure sunlight	intellect as flowing water, given and received
solitary good life	good life along with friends, loved ones, and community

LVX VENIT IN MVNDVN ET DILEXERVNT HOMINES MAGIS TENEBRAS QVAM LVCEM Io. 3. 19

ANTRVM PLATONICVM.

Maxima pars hominum cæcis immersa tenebris
Volvitur assiduè, et studio lætatur inani:
Adsvice ut obiectis obstrictis in sæcula umbris,
Vt VERI simulacra omnes mirentur amenti.

Et stolidi vanâ ludantur imagine rerum
Quam pauci meliore luto, qui in lumine puro
Secreti à stolidâ turbâ, ludibria cernunt
Rerum umbras rectas, expendunt omnia lance:

Hi positâ erroris nebulâ dignoscere possunt
Vera bona, atque alios cæcâ sub nocte latentes
Extrahere in claram lucem conantur, at illis
Nullus amor lucis, tanta est Irrationis cupiditas.

CC. Harlemenses Inv.
Sanredam Sculpsit.
Henr. Hondius excudit.
1604.

HL. SPIEGEL FIGVRARI ET SCVLPI CVRAVIT. AC DOCTISS. ORNATISSQZ DPETRAAW IN LVGDVN. ACAD. PROFESSORI MEDICO D.D.

Three features

1. **Philosophy should be therapeutic**

   ‘Lucretius is a poet; Cicero typically writes in dialogue form; Seneca writes both dialogues and epistles. Precisely because the philosophical agenda of all three of these great thinkers is therapeutic, they have chosen forms of writing that are hard to teach in the usual analytic manner.

   … The point of saying that philosophy should be therapeutic is not to say that philosophy ought to subordinate its own characteristic commitments to some other norms (e.g., flourishing, calm); it is, rather, to say that you can get the good things you are searching for (flourishing, calm) only through a lifelong commitment to the pursuit of argument. Other figures in the culture-soothsayers, magicians, astrologers, politicians-all claim to provide what people want, without asking them to think critically and argue.’

   – *Therapy of Desire*

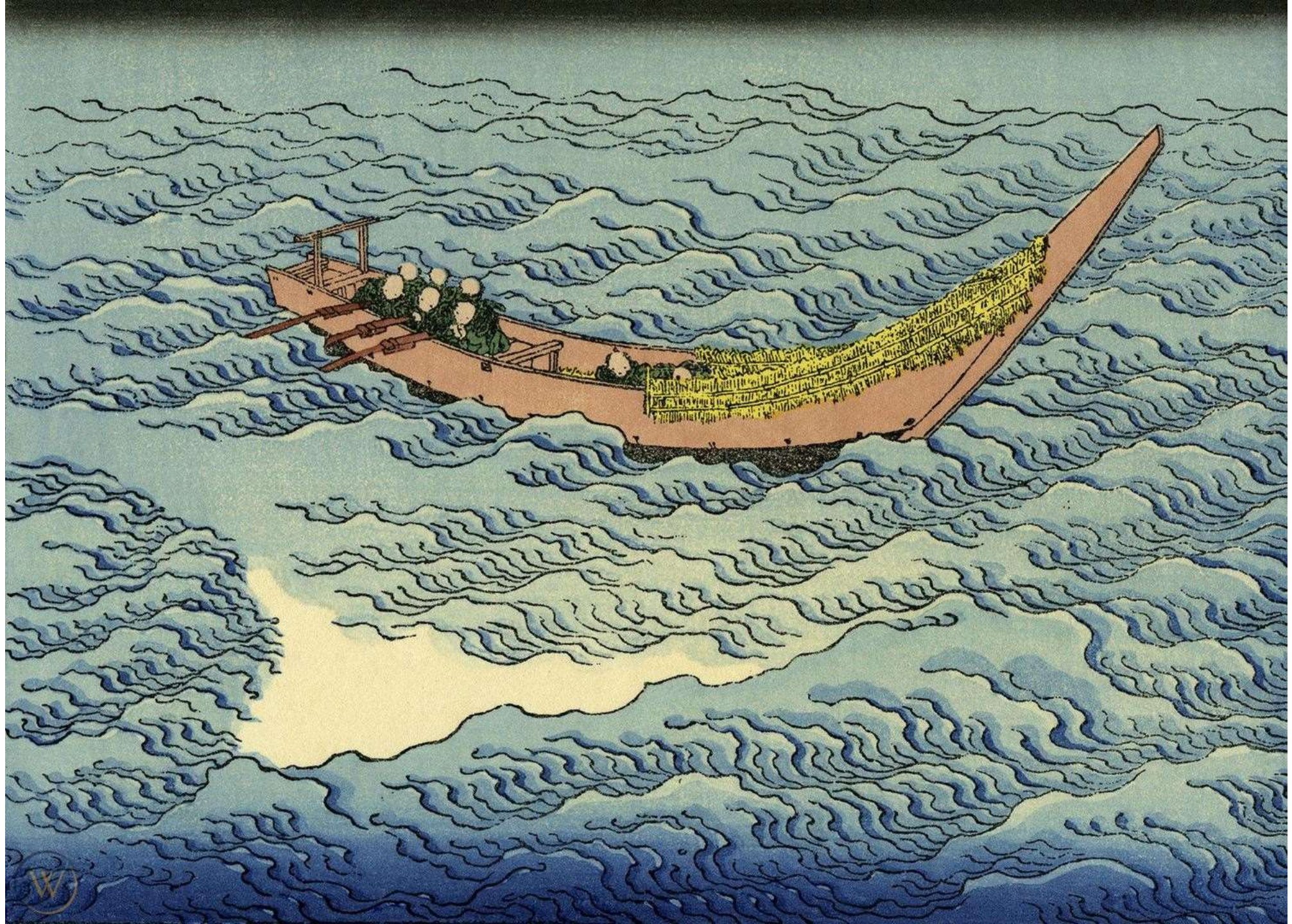
Three features

2. Emotions can enhance our power of thinking

‘Like gusts of wind or the currents of the sea, they move, and move the person, but obtusely, without vision of an object or beliefs about it’

We should understand them instead as ‘intelligent responses’ to important concerns

‘Instead of viewing morality as a system of principles to be grasped by the detached intellect, and emotions as motivations that either support or subvert our choice to act according to principle, we will have to consider emotions as part and parcel of the system of ethical reasoning’
– *Upheavals of Thought*



3. Thinking begins by recognising our dependence on others

‘[Aristotle]’s insistence that human beings are both vulnerable and active, his insistence on their need for a rich and irreducible plurality of functions, his emphasis on the role of love and friendship in the good life

… the absence, in Aristotle, of any sense of universal human dignity, a fortiori of the idea that the worth and dignity of human beings is equal … For the Stoics, by contrast, the bare possession of the capacity for moral choice gives us all a boundless and an equal dignity.’ – *Fragility of Goodness*

‘we must reject one more key element of Stoicism: the contention that human beings are, in matters of the greatest importance, immune to the ravages of luck. Without a full appreciation of the needs people have for things outside themselves – food, shelter, bodily safety, the conditions of political participation – we just don't have sufficient reason to say that certain political arrangements are of urgent importance, and that others violate human dignity.

… human dignity is not impervious to what happens in the world, that it makes demands on the world, and is worthy of certain sorts of treatment. The task of government is to give people the social conditions of a life worthy of human dignity.’ – *Therapy of Desire*

Conflicts of desire (Ch2)

- Can we easily distinguish moral and non-moral conflicts of desire?
- Socrates: moral conflicts arise from a disagreement of principles
  - Sartre – freedom trumps weak moral rules (the son);
  - Hare – recalibrate, develop consistent rules (lying is acceptable if…);
  - Kant – the stronger moral duty always prevails
- Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*…
- A king who must choose between sacrificing his daughter or the complete failure of the Greek mission against Troy

Agamemnon – being forced to choose

- ‘A heavy doom is disobedience, but heavy, too, if I shall rend my own child, the adornment of my house, polluting a father's hands with streams of slaughtered maiden's blood close by the altar. Which of these is without evils? How should I become a deserter, failing in my duty to the alliance?’
- ‘From the moment he makes his decision, itself the best he could have made, he strangely turns himself into a collaborator, a willing victim.’
- ‘Once he had stated the alternatives and announced his decision, Agamemnon might have been expected to say something like, ‘This horrible course is what divine necessity requires, though I embark on it with pain and revulsion.’ What he actually says is very different: ‘For it is right and holy that I should desire with exceedingly impassioned passion the sacrifice staying the winds, the maiden's blood. May all turn out well’

‘Instead of the ritual killing of a ‘willing’ goat, we see the murder of an unwilling girl, his own child, whom he treats, whom he sees, as if she were a ‘willing’ goat. We are invited to witness the monstrous ease with which these boundaries are broken down, these substitutions made

… We are invited to see how easily, in human lives, with what dexterous sleight-of-hand, human beings substitute human for animal, and animal for human, and stranger for loved one, under pressures endemic to life in a world where choice is constrained by necessity’

Question: What is at stake here?

In each case, it’s not a problem of choice, but feeling and disposition around it that choice. Agamemnon and later Eteocles *do not think*, do not face up to the horrible nature of the choices imposed on them

How we might use tragedy

- ‘Aeschylus, then, shows us not so much a ‘solution’ to the ‘problem of practical conflict’ as the richness and depth of the problem itself … Aeschylus has indicated to us that the only thing remotely like a solution here is, in fact, to describe and see the conflict clearly and to acknowledge that there is no way out’
- ‘… We have not fully understood the ‘tragic view’ if we have not understood why it has been found intolerably painful by certain ambitious rational beings.’ (49-50)

Aristotle's uses – later

- Aristotle teaches that 'we have never lived enough', that our experience is 'too confined and too parochial'
- What makes literature (and other story-telling) so valuable is that it can help 'us reflect and feel about what might otherwise be too distant for feeling'
- A moral learning through thinking about the experiences of others, particularly where people can live a human life through events beyond their control
- We can read/understand novels and plays with more clarity than we can our own hearts…

‘It occurred to me to ask myself whether the act of writing about the beauty of human vulnerability is not, paradoxically, a way of rendering oneself less vulnerable and more in control of the uncontrolled elements in life’

(Acknowledgements)

Next week… *The Fragility of Goodness*

- We'll continue work on Nussbaum's 1986 masterpiece
- We will read Chapter 3, "Sophocles' *Antigone*"
- Please also, if you can, read, listen, watch or find out more about Sophocles' play *Antigone* – I will add some links by Wednesday
- I think this will be our last week on *Fragility,* so I will try to integrate some discussion of the final two chapters, 12-13 (also recommended)
- Questions and thoughts to Dan.Taylor@marywardcentre.ac.uk