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The Philosopher of Feelings

Martha Nussbaum's far-reaching ideas illuminate the often ignored elements of human life—aging, inequality, and emotion.



By [Rachel Aviv](#)



“What I am calling for,” Nussbaum writes, is “a society of citizens who admit that they are needy and vulnerable.”

Photograph by Jeff Brown for The New Yorker

Martha Nussbaum was preparing to give a lecture at Trinity College, Dublin, in April, 1992, when she learned that her mother was dying in a hospital in Philadelphia. She couldn't get a flight until the next day. That evening, Nussbaum, one of the foremost philosophers in America, gave her scheduled lecture, on the nature of emotions. “I thought, It's inhuman—I shouldn't be able to do this,” she said later. Then she thought, Well, of course I should do this. I mean, here I am. Why should I not do it? The audience is there, and they want to have the lecture.

When she returned to her room, she opened her laptop and began writing her next lecture, which she would deliver in two weeks, at the law school of the University of Chicago. On the plane the next morning, her hands trembling, she continued to type. She wondered if there was something cruel about her capacity to be so productive. The lecture was about the nature of mercy. As she often does, she argued that certain moral truths are best expressed in the form of a story. We become merciful, she wrote, when we behave as the “concerned reader of a novel,” understanding each person's life as a “complex narrative of human effort in a world full of obstacles.”

In the lecture, she described how the Roman philosopher Seneca, at the end of each day, reflected on his misdeeds before saying to himself, “This time I pardon you.” The sentence brought Nussbaum to tears. She worried that her ability to work was an act of subconscious aggression, a sign that she didn't love her mother enough. I shouldn't be away lecturing, she thought. I shouldn't have been a philosopher. Nussbaum sensed that her mother saw her work as cold and detached, a posture of invulnerability. “We aren't very loving creatures, apparently, when we philosophize,” Nussbaum has written.

When her plane landed in Philadelphia, Nussbaum learned that her mother had just died. Her younger sister, Gail Craven Busch, a choir director at a church, had told their mother that Nussbaum was on the way. “She just couldn't hold on any longer,” Busch said. When Nussbaum arrived at the hospital, she found her mother still in the bed, wearing lipstick. A breathing tube, now detached from an oxygen machine, was laced through her nostrils. The nurses brought Nussbaum cups of water as she wept. Then she gathered her mother's belongings, including a book called “A Glass of Blessings,” which Nussbaum couldn't help noticing looked too precious, the kind of thing that she would never want to read. She left the hospital, went to the track at the University of Pennsylvania, and ran four miles.

She admired the Stoic philosophers, who believed that ungoverned emotions destroyed one's moral character, and she felt that, in the face of a loved one's death, their instruction would be “Everyone is mortal, and you will get over this pretty soon.” But she disagreed with the way they trained themselves not to depend on anything beyond their control. For the next several days, she felt as if nails were being pounded into her stomach and her limbs were being torn off. “Do we imagine the thought causing a fluttering in my hands, or a trembling in my stomach?” she wrote, in “Upheavals of Thought,” a book on the structure of emotions. “And if we do, do we really want to say that this fluttering or trembling is *my* grief about my mother's death?”

Nussbaum gave her lecture on mercy shortly after her mother's funeral. She felt that her mother would have preferred that she forgo work for a few weeks, but when Nussbaum isn't working she feels guilty and lazy, so she revised the lecture until she thought that it was one of the best she had ever written. She imagined her talk as a kind of reparation: the lecture was about the need to recognize how hard it is, even with the best intentions, to live a virtuous life. Like much of her work, the lecture represented what she calls a therapeutic philosophy, a "science of life," which addresses persistent human needs. She told me, "I like the idea that the very thing that my mother found cold and unloving could actually be a form of love. It's a form of human love to accept our complicated, messy humanity and not run away from it."

A few years later, Nussbaum returned to her relationship with her mother in a dramatic dialogue that she wrote for Oxford University's Philosophical Dialogues Competition, which she won. In the dialogue, a mother accuses her daughter, a renowned moral philosopher, of being ruthless. "You just don't know what emotions are," the mother says. Her father tells her, "Aren't you a philosopher because you want, really, to live inside your own mind most of all? And not to need, not to love, anyone?" Her mother asks, "Isn't it just because you don't want to admit that thinking doesn't control everything?"

The philosopher begs for forgiveness. "Why do you hate my thinking so much, Mommy?" she asks. "What can I say or write that will make you stop looking at me that way?"

Nussbaum is drawn to the idea that creative urgency—and the commitment to be good—derives from the awareness that we harbor aggression toward the people we love. A sixty-nine-year-old professor of law and philosophy at the University of Chicago (with appointments in classics, political science, Southern Asian studies, and the divinity school), Nussbaum has published twenty-four books and five hundred and nine papers and received fifty-seven honorary degrees. In 2014, she became the second woman to give the John Locke Lectures, at Oxford, the most eminent lecture series in philosophy. Last year, she received the Inamori Ethics Prize, an award for ethical leaders who improve the condition of mankind. A few weeks ago, she won five hundred thousand dollars as the recipient of the Kyoto Prize, the most prestigious award offered in fields not eligible for a Nobel, joining a small group of philosophers that includes Karl Popper and Jürgen Habermas. Honors and prizes remind her of potato chips; she enjoys them but is wary of becoming sated, like one of Aristotle's "dumb grazing animals." Her conception of a good life requires striving for a difficult goal, and, if she notices herself feeling too satisfied, she begins to feel discontent.

Nussbaum is monumentally confident, intellectually and physically. She is beautiful, in a taut, flinty way, and carries herself like a queen. Her voice is high-pitched and dramatic, and she often seems delighted by the performance of being herself. Her work, which draws on her training in classics but also on anthropology, psychoanalysis, sociology, and a number of other fields, searches for the conditions for *eudaimonia*, a Greek word that describes a complete and flourishing life. At a time of insecurity for the humanities, Nussbaum's work champions—and embodies—the reach of the humanistic endeavor. Nancy Sherman, a moral philosopher at Georgetown, told me, "Martha changed the face of philosophy by using literary skills to describe the very minutiae of a lived experience."



[“Of course you still make me laugh, just not out loud.”](#)

Unlike many philosophers, Nussbaum is an elegant and lyrical writer, and she movingly describes the pain of recognizing one’s vulnerability, a precondition, she believes, for an ethical life. “To be a good human being,” she has said, “is to have a kind of openness to the world, the ability to trust uncertain things beyond your own control that can lead you to be shattered.” She searches for a “non-denying style of writing,” a way to describe emotional experiences without wringing the feeling from them. She disapproves of the conventional style of philosophical prose, which she describes as “scientific, abstract, hygienically pallid,” and disengaged with the problems of its time. Like Narcissus, she says, philosophy falls in love with its own image and drowns.

In several books and papers, Nussbaum quotes a sentence by the sociologist Erving Goffman, who wrote, “In an important sense there is only one complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports.” This sentence more or less characterizes Nussbaum’s father, whom she describes as an inspiration and a role model, and also as a racist. He was prejudiced in a “very gut-level way,” Nussbaum told me. “It was about shrinking and disgust.”

For the past thirty years, Nussbaum has been drawn to those who blush, writing about the kinds of populations that her father might have deemed subhuman. She argues that unblushing males, or “normals,” repudiate their own animal nature by projecting their disgust onto vulnerable groups and creating a “buffer zone.” Nussbaum thinks that disgust is an unreasonable emotion, which should be distrusted as a basis for law; it is at the root, she argues, of opposition to gay and transgender rights. Her work includes lovely descriptions of the physical realities of being a person, of having a body “soft and porous, receptive of fluid and sticky, womanlike in its oozy sliminess.” She believes that dread of these phenomena creates a threat to civic life. “What I am calling for,” she writes, is “a society of citizens who admit that they are needy and vulnerable.”

Nussbaum once wrote, citing Nietzsche, that “when a philosopher harps very insistently on a theme, that shows us that there is a danger that something else is about to ‘play the master’ ”: something personal is driving the preoccupation. In Nussbaum’s case, I wondered if she approaches her theme of vulnerability with such success because she peers at it from afar, as if it were unfamiliar and exotic. She celebrates the ability to be fragile and exposed, but in her own life she seems to control every interaction. She divides her day into a series of productive, life-affirming activities, beginning with a ninety-minute run or workout, during which, for years, she “played” operas in her head, usually works by Mozart. She memorized the operas and ran to each one for three to four months, shifting the tempo to match her speed and her mood. For two decades, she has kept a chart that documents her daily exercises. After her workout, she stands beside her piano and sings for an hour; she told me that her voice has never been better. (When a conductor recently invited her to join a repertory group for older singers, she told him that the concept was “stigmatizing.”) Her self-discipline inspired a story called “My Ex, the Moral Philosopher,” by the late Richard Stern, a professor at the University of Chicago. The story describes the contradiction of the philosopher’s “paean to spontaneity and her own nature, the least spontaneous, most doggedly, nervously, even fanatically unspontaneous I know.”

Nussbaum is currently writing a book on aging, and when I first proposed the idea of a Profile I told her that I’d like to make her book the center of the piece. She responded skeptically, writing in an e-mail that she’d had a long, varied career, adding, “I’d really like to feel that you had considered various aspects of it and that we had a plan that had a focus.” She typically responded within an hour of my sending an e-mail. “Do you feel that you have such a plan?” she asked me. “I’d like to hear the pros and cons in your view of different emphases.” She wasn’t sure how I could encompass her oeuvre, since it covered so many subjects: animal rights, emotions in criminal law, Indian politics, disability, religious intolerance, political liberalism, the role of humanities in the academy, sexual harassment, transnational transfers of wealth. “The challenge for you would be to give readers a road map through the work that would be illuminating rather than confusing,” she wrote, adding, “It will all fall to bits without a plan.” She described three interviews that she’d done, and the ways in which they were flawed. Among other things, they hadn’t captured her devotion to teaching and to her students. One of the interviews, she said, had made her “look like a person who has contempt for the contributions of others, which is one of the biggest insults that one could direct my way.”

For our first meeting, she suggested that I watch her sing: “It’s the actual singing that would give you insight into my personality and my emotional life, though of course I am very imperfect in my ability to express what I want to express.” She wrote that music allowed her to access a part

of her personality that is “less defended, more receptive.” Last summer, we drove to the house of her singing teacher, Tandra Black, who lives in a gentrifying neighborhood with a view of the churches of the University of Chicago. It was ninety degrees and sunny, and although we were ten minutes early, Nussbaum pounded on the door until Black, her hair wet from the shower, let us inside.

Nussbaum wore nylon athletic shorts and a T-shirt, and carried her sheet music in a hippie-style embroidered sack. Her fingernails and toenails were polished turquoise, and her legs and arms were exquisitely toned and tan. She stood beside Black’s piano with her feet in a ski-plow pose and did scales by letting her mouth go completely loose and blowing through closed lips.

The first aria she practiced was “Or sai chi l’onore,” from “Don Giovanni,” one of the few Mozart operas that she has never run to, because she finds the rape scene reprehensible. As she ascended in pitch, she tilted her chin upward, until Black told her to stop. She excelled at clarion high notes, but Black thought that a passage about the murder of the heroine’s father should be more tender. “Can you make it a little more pleasant?” Black asked.

The next aria was from the final act of Verdi’s “Don Carlos,” which Nussbaum found more challenging. She had to embody the hopelessness of a woman who, knowing that she can never be with the man she loves, yearns for death.

“Put a little longing and sadness in there,” Black said. “Don’t give too much too early.”

Nussbaum softened her tone for a few passages, but her voice quickly gathered force.

“You have too much power,” Black told her. “Save a little for the end.”

“I’ll have to work on that,” Nussbaum said, her eyes fixed on the sheet music in front of her. “It’s difficult to get all the emotions in there.”

Hours later, as we drove home from a concert by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Nussbaum said that she was struggling to capture the resignation required for the Verdi piece. She couldn’t identify with the role. “I feel that this character is basically saying, ‘Life is treating me badly, so I’m going to give up,’ ” she told me. “And I find that totally unintelligible.”



SIPRESS

[“ ‘The Walking Dead,’ ‘American Horror Story,’ ‘Bates Motel,’ or the Convention?’ ”](#)

When Nussbaum was three or four years old, she told her mother, “Well, I think I know just about everything.” Her mother, Betty Craven, whose ancestors arrived on the Mayflower, responded sternly, “No, Martha. You are just one person among many.” Nussbaum was so frustrated by this response that she banged her head on the floor.

Her father, George Craven, a successful tax lawyer who worked all the time, applauded her youthful arrogance. He thought that it was excellent to be superior to others. He liked to joke that he had been wrong only once in his life and that was the time that he thought he was wrong. The Craven family lived in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, in an atmosphere that Nussbaum describes as “chilly clear opulence.” Betty was bored and unfulfilled, and she began drinking for much of the day, hiding bourbon in the kitchen. Nussbaum’s younger sister, Gail, said that once, after her mother passed out on the floor, she called an ambulance, but her father sent it away. Nussbaum’s half-brother, Robert (the child of George Craven’s first marriage), said that their father didn’t understand when people weren’t rational. “It was an emotionally barren environment,” he told me. “You were supposed to just soldier on.”

Nussbaum spent her free time alone in the attic, reading books, including many by Dickens. Through literature, she said, she found an “escape from an amoral life into a universe where

morality matters.” At night, she went to her father’s study in her long bathrobe, and they read together. Her father loved the poem “Invictus,” by William Ernest Henley, and he often recited it to her: “I have not winced nor cried aloud. / Under the bludgeonings of chance / My head is bloody, but unbowed. . . . I am the master of my fate: / I am the captain of my soul.”

Her father’s ethos may have fostered Nussbaum’s interest in Stoicism. Her relationship with him was so captivating that it felt romantic. “He really set me on a path of being happy and delighted with life,” she said. “He symbolized beauty and wonder.” Gail Busch found her father’s temperament less congenial. “I believe he was probably a sociopath,” she told me. “He was certainly very narcissistic. He was extremely domineering and very controlling. Our mother was petrified for most of their marriage.” Busch said that when she was a young child her father insisted that she be in bed before he got home from work.

Nussbaum once wrote of Iris Murdoch that she “won the Oedipal struggle too easily.” The same could be said of Nussbaum herself. Busch told me, “There were very few people that my father touched that he didn’t hurt. But one of them was Martha, because they were just two peas in a pod. I know that he saw her as a reflection of him, and that was probably just perfect for him.”

Nussbaum excelled at her private girls’ school, while Busch floundered and became rebellious. In an interview with a Dutch television station, Nussbaum said that she worked so hard because she thought, This is what Daddy’s doing—we take charge of our lives. Of her mother and sister, she said, “I just was furious at them, because I thought that they could take charge of their lives by will, and they weren’t doing it.”

Nussbaum attended Wellesley College, but she dropped out in her sophomore year, because she wanted to be an actress. Playing other people gave her access to emotions that she hadn’t been able to express on her own, but, after half a year with a repertory company that performed Greek tragedies, she left that, too. “I hadn’t lived enough,” she said. She began studying classics at New York University, still focussing on Greek tragedies. She came to believe that reading about suffering functions as a kind of “transitional object,” the term used by the English psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, one of her favorite thinkers, to describe toys that allow infants to move away from their mothers and to explore the world on their own. “When we have emotions of fear and pity toward the hero of a tragedy,” she has written, “we explore aspects of our own vulnerability in a safe and pleasing setting.”

Nussbaum felt increasingly uncomfortable with what she called the “smug bastion of hypocrisy and unearned privilege” in which she’d been raised. She had spent her childhood “coasting along with assured invulnerability,” she said. In a class on Greek composition, she fell in love with Alan Nussbaum, another N.Y.U. student, who was Jewish, a religion she was attracted to for the same reason that she was drawn to theatre: “more emotional expressiveness,” she said. She associated the religion with the social consciousness of I. F. Stone and *The Nation*. Her father, who thought that Jews were vulgar, disapproved of the marriage and refused to attend their wedding party. Robert Craven told me, “Martha was the apple of our father’s eye, until she embraced Judaism and fell from grace.”

Four years into the marriage, Nussbaum read “The Golden Bowl,” by Henry James. She kept thinking about Maggie Verver’s “wish to remain, intensely, the same passionate little daughter she had always been.” She was so captivated by the novel that she later wrote three essays about the ways in which James articulates a kind of moral philosophy, revealing the childishness of aspiring to moral perfection, a life of “never doing a wrong, never breaking a rule, never hurting.” Nussbaum told me, “What drew me to Maggie is the sense that she is a peculiarly American kind of person who really, really wants to be good. And of course that’s impossible. She has a particularly demanding father, and, in order to be fully herself with her husband, she has to leave her father and hurt him, and she just had no way to deal with that. She was not prepared.”

Nussbaum entered the graduate program in classics at Harvard, in 1969, and realized that for years she had been smiling all the time, for no particular reason. When her thesis adviser, G. E. L. Owen, invited her to his office, served sherry, spoke about life’s sadness, recited Auden, and reached over to touch her breasts, she says, she gently pushed him away, careful not to embarrass him. “Just as I never accused my mother of being drunk, even though she was always drunk,” she wrote, “so I managed to keep my control with Owen, and I never said a hostile word.” She didn’t experience the imbalance of power that makes sexual harassment so destructive, she said, because she felt “much healthier and more powerful than he was.”

She soon drifted toward ancient philosophy, where she could follow Aristotle, who asked the basic question “How should a human live?” She realized that philosophy attracted a “logic-chopping type of person,” nearly always male. She came to believe that she understood Nietzsche’s thinking when he wrote that no great philosopher had ever been married. “I think what he was saying is that most philosophers have been in flight from human existence,” she said. “They just haven’t wanted to be entangled.” She rejected the idea, dominant in contemporary philosophy, that emotions were “unthinking energies that simply push the person around.” Instead, she resurrected a version of the Stoic theory that makes no division between thought and feeling. She gave emotions a central role in moral philosophy, arguing that they are cognitive in nature: they embody judgments about the world.



[“Ugh, stop it, Dad—everyone knows you’re not making that happen!”](#)

One of her mentors was John Rawls, the most influential political philosopher of the last century. He stuttered and was extremely shy. She said that one day, when they were eating hamburgers for lunch (this was before she stopped eating meat), he instructed her that if she had the capacity to be a public intellectual then it was her duty to become one.

Utilitarian and Kantian theories were dominant at the time, and Nussbaum felt that the field had become too insular and professionalized. She was frustrated that her colleagues were more interested in conceptual analyses than in attending to the details of people’s lives. While writing an austere dissertation on a neglected treatise by Aristotle, she began a second book, about the urge to deny one’s human needs. In “The Fragility of Goodness,” one of the best-selling contemporary philosophy books, she rejected Plato’s argument that a good life is one of total self-sufficiency. She argued that tragedy occurs because people are living well: they have formed passionate commitments that leave them exposed. She began the book by acknowledging:

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 something 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 practical wisdom.

Nussbaum describes motherhood as her first profound experience of moral conflict. Her pregnancy, in 1972, was a mistake; her I.U.D. fell out. She had just become the first woman elected to Harvard's Society of Fellows, and she imagined that the other scholars must be thinking, We let in a woman, and what does she do? She goes off and has a baby. Nussbaum carried on for nine months as if she weren't pregnant. She ran several miles a day; she remained so thin that her adviser told her she must be carrying a "wind egg"; she had such a rapid delivery—with no anesthesia—that doctors interviewed her about how she had prepared for birth. She told them that "Lamaze was for wimps and running was the key." She brought Aristotle's *Politics* to the hospital. Her husband took a picture of her reading. She was at a Society of Fellows dinner the next week. "I wanted everyone to understand that I was still working," she said.

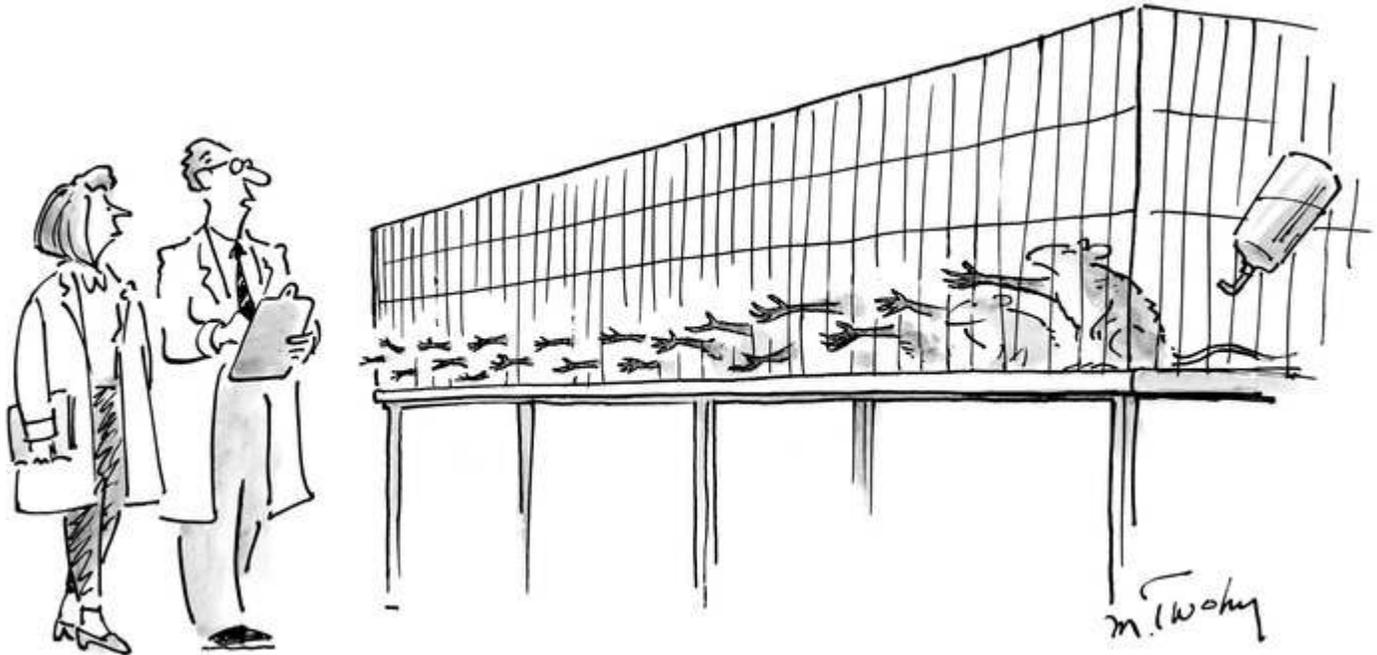
Alan Nussbaum taught linguistics at Yale, and during the week Martha took care of their daughter, Rachel, alone. "Among the good and decent men, some are unprepared for the surprises of life, and their good intentions run aground when confronted with issues like child care," she later wrote. They divorced when Rachel was a teen-ager. When Nussbaum joined a society for female philosophers, she proposed that women had a unique contribution to make, because "we had an experience of moral conflicts—we are torn between children on the one hand, and work on the other—that the male philosophers didn't have, or wouldn't face up to." She rejected the idea, suggested by Kant, that people who are morally good are immune to the kind of bad luck that would force them into ethically compromised positions. She told me, "A lot of the great philosophers have said there are no real moral dilemmas. Well, we were saying, 'No woman would make that stupid mistake!'"

Nussbaum left Harvard in 1983, after she was denied tenure, a decision she attributes, in part, to a "venomous dislike of me as a very outspoken woman" and the machinations of a colleague who could "show a good actor how the role of Iago ought to be played." Glen Bowersock, who was the head of the classics department when Nussbaum was a student, said, "I think she scared people. They couldn't wrap their minds around this formidably good, extraordinarily articulate woman who was very tall and attractive, openly feminine and stylish, and walked very erect and wore miniskirts—all in one package. They were just frightened."

This was the only time that Nussbaum had anything resembling a crisis in her career. I was eager to hear about her moment of doubt, since she always seemed so steely. Projecting a little, I asked if she ever felt guilty when she was successful, as if she didn't deserve it. "No—none of that," she said briskly. "I think women and philosophers are under-rewarded for what they do." After she was denied tenure, she thought about going to law school. "The doubt was very brief," she added. "I thought about law school for about a day, or something like that."

Instead, she began considering a more public role for philosophy. One of her mentors, the English philosopher Bernard Williams, accused moral philosophers of “refusing to write about anything of importance.” Nussbaum began examining quality of life in the developing world. She was steered toward the issue by Amartya Sen, the Indian economist, who later won the Nobel Prize. In 1986, they became romantically involved and worked together at the World Institute of Development Economics Research, in Helsinki. At the institute, she told me, she came to the realization that “I knew nothing about the rest of the world.” She taught herself about Indian politics and developed her own version of Sen’s capabilities approach, a theoretical framework for measuring and comparing the well-being of nations. Her earlier work had celebrated vulnerability, but now she identified the sorts of vulnerabilities (poverty, hunger, sexual violence) that no human should have to endure. In an Aristotelian spirit, Nussbaum devised a list of ten essential capabilities that all societies should nourish, including the freedom to play, to engage in critical reflection, and to love. The capabilities theory is now a staple of human-rights advocacy, and Sen told me that Nussbaum has become more of a “purist” than he is. When it comes to judging the quality of human life, he said, “I am often defeated by that in a way that Martha is not.”

Nussbaum went on to extend the work of John Rawls, who developed the most influential contemporary version of the social-contract theory: the idea that rational citizens agree to govern themselves, because they recognize that everyone’s needs are met more effectively through cooperation. Nussbaum argued that Rawls gave an unsatisfactory account of justice for people dependent on others—the disabled, the elderly, and women subservient in their homes. For a society to remain stable and committed to democratic principles, she argued, it needs more than detached moral principles: it has to cultivate certain emotions and teach people to enter empathetically into others’ lives. She believes that the humanities are not just important to a healthy democratic society but decisive, shaping its fate. She proposed an enhanced version of John Stuart Mill’s “aesthetic education”—emotional refinement for all citizens through poetry and music and art. “Respect on its own is cold and inert, insufficient to overcome the bad tendencies that lead human beings to tyrannize over one another,” she wrote. “Public culture cannot be tepid and passionless.”



[“At this point, we know it’s addictive.”](#)

By the late nineties, India had become so integral to Nussbaum’s thinking that she later warned a reporter from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* that her work there was at the “core of my heart and my sense of the meaning of life, so if you downplay that, you don’t get me.” She travelled to developing countries during school vacations—she never misses a class—and met with impoverished women. She said she felt as if she were “a lawyer who has been retained by poor people in developing nations.”

In the sixties, Nussbaum had been too busy for feminist consciousness-raising—she said that she cultivated an image of “Doris Day respectability”—and she was suspicious of left-wing groupthink. Once she began studying the lives of women in non-Western countries, she identified as a feminist but of the unfashionable kind: a traditional liberal who believed in the power of reason at a time when postmodern scholars viewed it as an instrument or a disguise for oppression. She argued that the well-being of women around the world could be improved through universal norms—an international system of distributive justice. She was impatient with feminist theory that was so relativistic that it assumed that, in the name of respecting other cultures, women should stand by while other women were beaten or genitally mutilated. In “Sex and Social Justice,” published in 1999, she wrote that the approach resembles the “sort of moral collapse depicted by Dante, when he describes the crowd of souls who mill around in the vestibule of hell, dragging their banner now one way now another, never willing to set it down and take a definite stand on any moral or political question. Such people, he implies, are the most despicable of all. They can’t even get into hell because they have not been willing to stand for anything in life.”

In 1999, in a now canonical essay for *The New Republic*, she wrote that academic feminism spoke only to the élite. It had become untethered from the practical struggle to achieve equality for women. She scolded Judith Butler and postmodern feminists for “turning away from the

material side of life, towards a type of verbal and symbolic politics that makes only the flimsiest connections with the real situations of real women.” These radical thinkers, she felt, were focussing more on problems of representation than on the immediate needs of women in other classes and cultures. The stance, she wrote, “looks very much like quietism,” a word she often uses when she disapproves of projects and ideas.

In letters responding to the essay, the feminist critic Gayatri Spivak denounced Nussbaum’s “civilizing mission.” Joan Scott, a historian of gender, wrote that Nussbaum had “constructed a self-serving morality tale.”

When Nussbaum is at her computer writing, she feels as if she had entered a “holding environment”—the phrase used by Donald Winnicott to describe conditions that allow a baby to feel secure and loved. Like the baby, she is “playing with an object,” she said. “It’s my manuscript, but I feel that something of both of my parents is with me. The sense of concern and being held is what I associate with my mother, and the sense of surging and delight is what I associate with my father.”

She said that she looks to replicate the experience of “surging” in romantic partners as well. She has always been drawn to intellectually distinguished men. “I suppose it’s because of the imprint of my father,” she told me one afternoon, while eating a small bowl of yogurt, blueberries, raisins, and pine nuts, a variation on the lunch she has most days. Her spacious tenth-floor apartment, which has twelve windows overlooking Lake Michigan and an elevator that delivers visitors directly into her foyer, is decorated with dozens of porcelain, metal, and glass elephants—her favorite animal, because of its emotional intelligence. “I used to observe that my close female friends would choose—very reasonably—men whose aspirations were rather modest,” she told me. “That works out nicely, because these men are really supportive of them. I’ve thought, Wouldn’t it be nice to have romantic and sexual tastes like that? But I certainly don’t.”

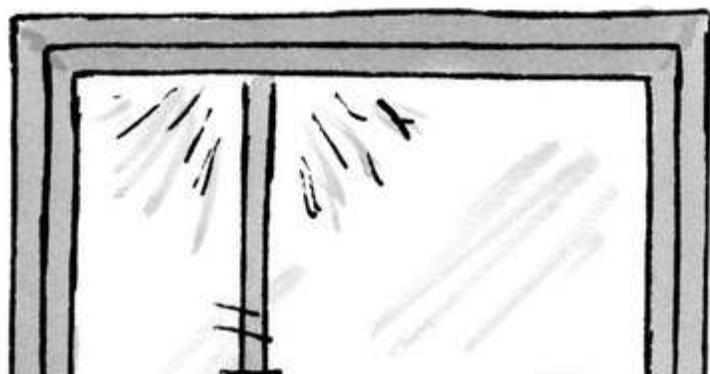
After moving to the University of Chicago, in 1995 (following seven years at Brown), Nussbaum was in a long relationship with Cass Sunstein, the former administrator for President Obama’s Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs and one of the few scholars as prolific as she is. Nussbaum said that she discovered her paradigm for romance as an adolescent, when she read about the relationship between two men in Plato’s *Phaedrus* and the way in which they combined “intense mutual erotic passion with a shared pursuit of truth and justice.” She and Sunstein (who is now married to Samantha Power, the Ambassador to the United Nations) lived in separate apartments, and each one’s work informed the other’s. In an influential essay, titled “Objectification,” Nussbaum builds on a passage written by Sunstein, in which he suggests that some forms of sexual objectification can be both ineradicable and wonderful. Straying from the standard line of feminist thought, Nussbaum defends Sunstein’s idea, arguing that there are circumstances in which being treated as a sex object, a “mysterious thinglike presence,” can be humanizing, rather than morally harmful. It allows us to achieve a state that her writing often elevates: the “abnegation of self-containment and self-sufficiency.”

Nussbaum is preoccupied by the ways that philosophical thinking can seem at odds with passion and love. She recognizes that writing can be “a way of distancing oneself from human life and

maybe even a way of controlling human life,” she said. In a semi-autobiographical essay in her book “Love’s Knowledge,” from 1990, she offers a portrait of a female philosopher who approaches her own heartbreak with a notepad and a pen; she sorts and classifies the experience, listing the properties of an ideal lover and comparing it to the men she has loved. “You now begin to see how this lady is,” she wrote. “She goes on thinking at all times. She won’t simply cry, she will ask what crying consists in. One tear, one argument.”

Nussbaum isn’t sure if her capacity for rational detachment is innate or learned. On three occasions, she alluded to a childhood experience in which she’d been so overwhelmed by anger at her mother, for drinking in the afternoon, that she slapped her. Betty warned her, “If you turn against me, I won’t have any reason to live.” Nussbaum prayed to be relieved of her anger, fearing that its potential was infinite. “I thought it would kill somebody,” she said.

Anger is an emotion that she now rarely experiences. She invariably remains friends with former lovers, a fact that Sunstein, Sen, and Alan Nussbaum wholeheartedly affirmed. In her new book, “Anger and Forgiveness,” which was published last month, Nussbaum argues against the idea, dear to therapists and some feminists, that “people (and women especially) owe it to their self-respect to own, nourish, and publicly proclaim their anger.” It is a “magical fantasy,” a bit of “metaphysical nonsense,” she writes, to assume that anger will restore what was damaged. She believes that embedded in the emotion is the irrational wish that “things will be made right if I inflict suffering.” She writes that even leaders of movements for revolutionary justice should avoid the emotion and move on to “saner thoughts of personal and social welfare.” (She acknowledges, “It might be objected that my proposal sounds all too much like that of the upper-middle-class (ex)-Wasp academic that I certainly am. I simply deny the charge.”)



For a long time, Nussbaum had seemed to be working on getting in touch with anger. In the nineties, when she composed the list of ten capabilities to which all humans should be entitled—a list that she’s revised in the course of many papers—she and the feminist legal scholar Catherine MacKinnon debated whether “justified anger” should make the list. Nussbaum was wary of the violence that accompanies anger’s expression, but MacKinnon said she convinced Nussbaum that anger can be a “sign that self-respect has not been crushed, that humanity burns even where it is supposed to have been extinguished.” Nussbaum decided to view anger in a more positive light. “I thought, I’m just getting duped by my own history,” she said. In an interview a few years later, she said that being able to express anger to a friend, after years of training herself to suppress it, was “the most tremendous pleasure in life.” In a 2003 essay, she describes herself as “angry more or less all the time.”

When I asked her about the different self-conceptions, she wrote me three e-mails from a plane to Mexico (she was on her way to give lectures in Puebla) to explain that she had articulated these views before she had studied the emotion in depth. It was not full-fledged anger that she was experiencing but “transitional anger,” an emotional state that embodies the thought: Something should be done about this, in response to social injustice. In another e-mail from the air, she clarified: “My experience of political anger has always been more King-like: protest, not acquiescence, but no desire for payback.”

Last year, Nussbaum had a colonoscopy. She didn’t want to miss a workday, so she refused sedation. She was thrilled by the sight of her appendix, so pink and tiny. “It’s such a big part of you and you don’t get to meet these parts,” she told me. “I love that kind of familiarization: it’s like coming to terms with yourself.”

Her friends were repulsed when she told them that she had been awake the entire time. “They thought it was disgusting to go through the procedure without their consciousness obliterated,” she said. She wasn’t surprised that men wanted to be sedated, but she couldn’t understand why women her age would avoid the sight of their organs. “Here are the same women who were inspired by ‘Our Bodies, Ourselves,’ ” she told me. “We said, ‘Oh, let’s not shrink from looking at our vaginas. Let’s not think, Our periods are disgusting, but let’s celebrate it as part of who we are!’ Now we get to our sixties, and we are disgusted by our bodies again, and we want to be knocked out.”

Nussbaum believes that disgust “draws sharp edges around the self” and betrays a shame toward what is human. When she goes shopping with younger colleagues—among her favorite designers are Alexander McQueen, Azzedine Alaïa, and Seth Aaron Henderson, whom she befriended after he won “Project Runway”—she often emerges from the changing room in her underwear. Bodily functions do not embarrass her, either. When she goes on long runs, she has no problem urinating behind bushes. Once, when she was in Paris with her daughter, Rachel, who is now an animal-rights lawyer in Denver, she peed in the garden of the Tuileries Palace at night. (Rachel was curt when we met; Nussbaum told me that Rachel, who has co-written papers with her mother on the legal status of whales, was wary of being portrayed “as adjunct to me.”)

Nussbaum acknowledges that, as she ages, it becomes harder to rejoice in all bodily developments. Recently, she was dismayed when she looked in the mirror and didn't recognize her nose. Sinking cartilage had created a new bump. She asked the doctor who gives her Botox in her forehead what to do. "He is a minimalist," she told me. "He's very artistic." He fixed the problem by putting filler above the tip of her nose. It wasn't that she was disgusted. "But I do feel conscious that at my age I have to be very careful of how I present myself, at risk of not being thought attractive," she told me. "There are women like Germaine Greer who say that it's a big relief to not worry about men and to forget how they look. I don't feel that way! I care how men look at me. I like men."

In a new book, tentatively titled "Aging Wisely," which will be published next year, Nussbaum and Saul Levmore, a colleague at the law school, investigate the moral, legal, and economic dilemmas of old age—"an unknown country," which they say has been ignored by philosophy. The book is structured as a dialogue between two aging scholars, analyzing the way that old age affects love, friendship, inequality, and the ability to cede control. They both reject the idea that getting old is a form of renunciation. Nussbaum critiques the tendency in literature to "assign a 'comeuppance' " to aging women who fail to display proper levels of resignation and shame. She calls for an "informal social movement akin to the feminist Our Bodies movement: a movement against self-disgust" for the aging. She promotes Walt Whitman's "anti-disgust" world view, his celebration of the "lung-sponges, the stomach-sac, the bowels sweet and clean. . . . The thin red jellies within you or within me. . . . O I say these are not the parts and poems of the body only, but of the soul."

At a faculty workshop last summer, professors at the law school gathered to critique drafts of two chapters from the book. Nussbaum wore a fitted purple dress and high-heeled sandals, and her blond hair looked as if it had recently been permed. She appeared to be dressed for a different event from the one that the other professors were attending. As she often does, she looked delighted but not necessarily happy.

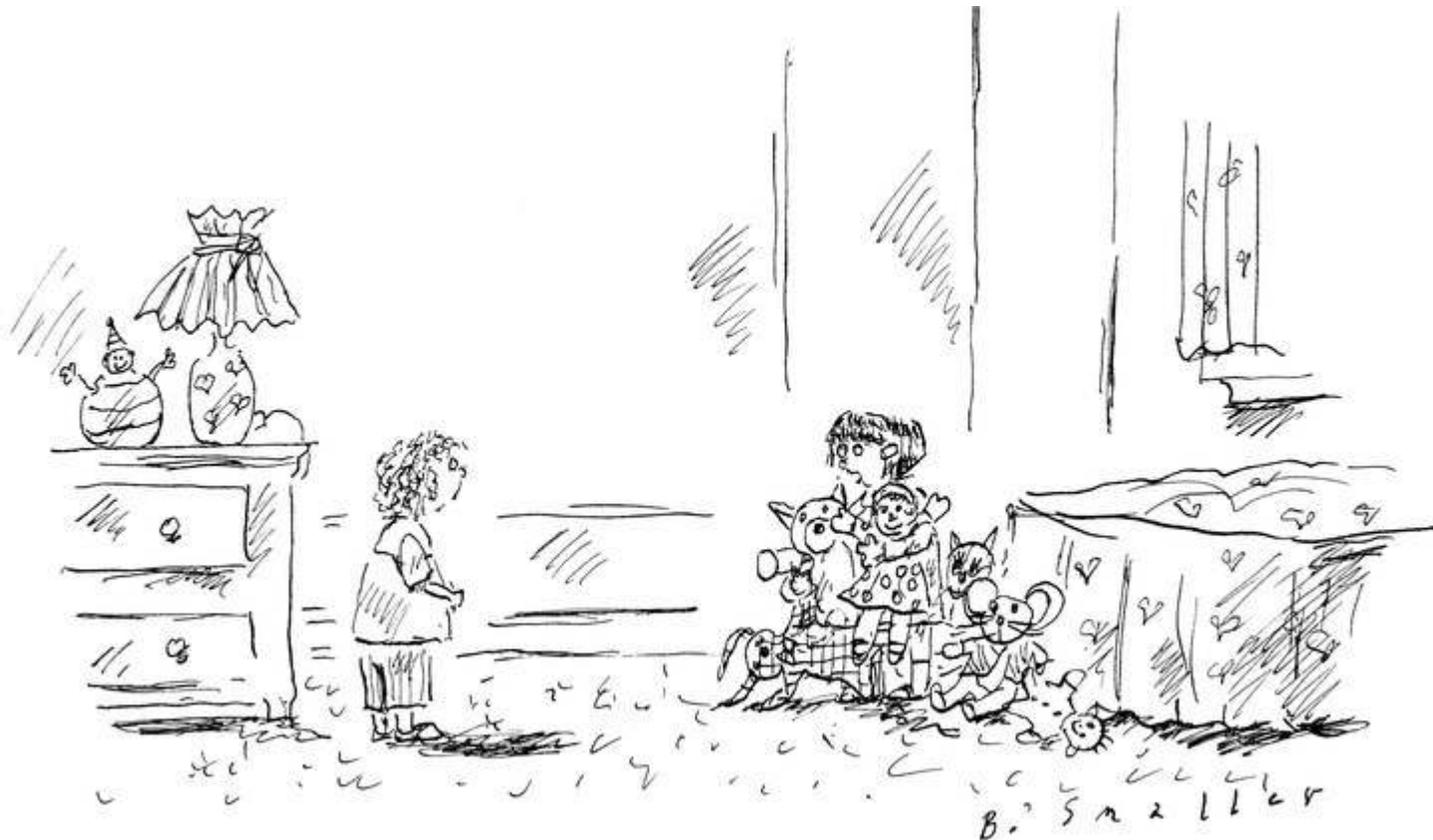
In one of the chapters, Levmore argued that it should be legal for employers to require that employees retire at an agreed-upon age, and Nussbaum wrote a rebuttal, called "No End in Sight." She said that it was painful to see colleagues in other countries forced to retire when philosophers such as Kant, Cato, and Gorgias didn't produce their best work until old age.

The libertarian scholar Richard Epstein raised his hand and said that, rather than having a national policy regarding retirement, each institution should make its own decision. "So Martha, full of vim and vigor, can get offers from four other places and go on and continue to work," he said.

"Sure, I could go and move someplace else," she said, interrupting him. "But I don't want to." If she were forced to retire, she said, "that would really affect me psychologically in a very deep way. And I have no idea what I'd do. I might go off and do some interesting thing like be a cantor. Or I might just get depressed."

"Martha, it's too autobiographical," Epstein said. His concern was not that "Martha stays on. It's that a bunch of dead wood stays on, as well, and it's a cost to the institution."

When another colleague suggested that no one knew the precise moment when aging scholars had peaked, Nussbaum cited Cato, who wrote that the process of aging could be resisted through vigorous physical and mental activity. Her celebration of this final, vulnerable stage of life was undercut by her confidence that she needn't be so vulnerable. She said that her grandmother lived until she was a hundred and four years old. "Why do I have my outlook?" she said. "It's a matter of the habits you form when you are very young—the habits of exercise, of being active. All of that stuff builds to the sense of a life that can go on."



["I would share, but I'm not there developmentally."](#)

Not long ago, Nussbaum bought a Dolce & Gabbana skirt dotted with crystal stars and daisies. "It had a happy look," she told me, holding the hanger to her chin. She planned to wear it to the college graduation of Nathaniel Levmore, whom she describes as her "quasi-child." Nathaniel, the son of Saul Levmore, has always been shy. Saul told me, "Of my two children, this is the one that's the underdog, and of course Martha loves him, and they talk for hours and hours. Martha has this total belief in the underdog. The more underdog, the more charming she finds them."

Nussbaum has taken Nathaniel on trips to Botswana and India, and, when she hosts dinner parties, he often serves the wine. When I joined them last summer for an outdoor screening of "Star Trek," they spent much of the hour-long drive debating whether it was anti-Semitic for Nathaniel's college to begin its semester on Rosh Hashanah. Their persistence was both touching and annoying. Just when I thought the conversation would die, the matter settled, Nathaniel

would raise a new point, and Nussbaum would argue from a new angle that the scheduling was anti-Semitic.

Recently, when I had dinner at Nussbaum's apartment, she said she was sorry that Nathaniel wasn't there to enjoy it. We sat at her kitchen island, facing a Chicago White Sox poster, eating what remained of an elaborate and extraordinary Indian meal that she had cooked two days before, for the dean of the law school and eight students. She served me heaping portions of every dish and herself a modest plate of yogurt, rice, and spinach.

I mentioned that Saul Levmore had said she is so devoted to the underdog that she even has sympathy for a former student who had been stalking her; the student appeared to have had a psychotic break and bombarded her with threatening e-mails. "I feel great sympathy for any weak person or creature," she told me. She mentioned that a few days before she had been watching a Webcam of a nest of newborn bald eagles and had become distraught when she saw that the parent eagle was giving all the food to only one of her two babies. "The other one kept trying to eat something, and didn't get it!" she said. "I thought it was possible that one of the eagles was getting weaker and weaker, and I asked my bird-watcher friend, and he said that kind of sibling rivalry is actually pretty common in those species and the one may die. I was really upset by this."

"Isn't that the sort of dynamic you had with your sister?" I asked.

"Yeah, it probably is," Nussbaum said, running her finger along the rim of her plate. "It is, I guess." She said that her sister seemed to have become happier as she aged; her musical career at the church was blossoming. "Well, this is what we'll have to talk about in class tomorrow," she said. "Can guilt ever be creative?" She licked the sauce on her finger. "'Guilt' might not even be quite the right word. It's a kind of sorrow that one had profited at the expense of someone else."

We began talking about a chapter that she intended to write for her book on aging, on the idea of looking back at one's life and turning it into a narrative. "Did you stand for something, or didn't you?" she said. She said that she had always admired the final words of John Stuart Mill, who reportedly said, "I have done my work." She has quoted these words in a number of interviews and papers, offering them as the mark of a life well lived. The image of Mill on his deathbed is not dissimilar to one she has of her father, who died as he was putting papers into his briefcase. Nussbaum often describes this as a good death—he was doing his work until the end—while Nussbaum's brother and sister see it as a sign of his isolation.

She said, "If I found that I was going to die in the next hour, I would not say that I had done my work. If you have a good life, you typically always feel that there's something that you want to do next." She wondered if Mill had surrendered too soon because he was prone to depression.

"It does sound a little bit final," she went on, "and one rarely dies when one is out of useful ideas—unless maybe you were really ill for a long time." She said that she had been in a hospital only twice, once to give birth and once when she had an operation to staple the top of her left ear to the back of her head, when she was eleven. It poked out, and her father worried that boys

wouldn't be attracted to her. "I just enjoyed having this big bandage around my head," she said. "I was acting the part of Marley's ghost in 'A Christmas Carol,' and it made quite an effect."

She stood up to clear our plates. "You're making me feel I chose the wrong last words," she called out from the sink. She returned with two large cakes. "I think last words are silly," she said, cutting herself a sliver. "Probably the best thing to do with your last words is to say goodbye to the people you love and not to talk about yourself." ♦

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- Rachel Aviv joined *The New Yorker* as a staff writer in 2013.

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