



ELZEVIR / NONINO PRIZE 2015

Master of our time

By Armando Massarenti

Martha Nussbaum has always accompanied her work of historian of ancient philosophy with a strong civil commitment and a conceptual processing able to deeply impress the contemporary political debate. This happened for example for the theory of the capabilities developed with Amartya Sen in the Eighties and later developed in an autonomous version to which the American philosopher has tied a reflection on the role of education as a fundamental strategy to reform the contemporary society. From her we took inspiration to launch from these columns the proposal of introducing in Italian schools, within the subject of Citizenship and Constitution, the compulsory teaching of logic, an indispensable discipline for the formation of critical thinking, so that the citizens of tomorrow can be equipped with the necessary instruments to think with their own head, to formulate correct opinions, accept the plurality of the points of view, feel empathy towards the other, or the different, and develop clear deliberative skills.

How can logic and rhetoric – but also, thinking about Aristotle, ethics and poetics – supply hints and pedagogical instruments to today's teachers or, even better, to those who want to reform the educational system? And in which thinkers of the past can we find hints to face today's problems?

«Among the many of different ages and different places I could quote – Martha Nussbaum answers – three seem to me the most important: Socrates in Plato's *Dialogues*; the letter of the Roman Stoic philosopher Seneca on “liberal education”; and the theory and practice of the Indian philosopher and educator Rabindranath Tagore».

«Socrates – Nussbaum explains – challenged the Athenian democracy to lead a “thought life”, to worry about the reasons we give for our convictions, creating a democratic culture of reason and reasoning, rather than of the authority and pressure of the Peer. His challenge is as important today as it was at that time, modern democracies have the same defects of his Athens. But a “thought life”, full of reflection and research, is difficult: it means learning to argue, to take care of precision, validity and logic structure. There is no better way to learn these things than studying the first dialogues of Plato in a spirit of critical and open pedagogy».

And how can Seneca and Tagore contribute to this?

«In the first century after Christ, Seneca faced a form of education dominated by passive learning, in which people absorbed the canonical texts of their culture without comprehension of real activities, and they called them “studia liberalia (liberal studies)”, that's to say “fit for a free born gentleman”. Seneca says that we should rather prefer the “studia liberalia” in the sense of studies that *make us free*. With this he meant free from tradition and authority. For this aim, first of all he recommended philosophy, but also literature and history. Tagore learned from both, but he was a poet and in the famous school he founded in 1905 in Santiniketan, he used arts as fundamental means for comprehension. Music, drama and dance were used to extend the students' imagination, so they learned to occupy positions different from their own. I think this example gives a contribution the other two lack: the value of emotions and imagination and how to cultivate them through the arts. Artists and educators all over the world attended Tagore's school, Maria Montessori included. It looked pretty much like John Dewey's School-laboratory and maybe the two of them had met, but we don't know for sure».

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Aristotle too thought that learning should be accompanied with “experiences” of life able to give a meaning to the knowledge for human beings, not for learned people. And Dewey blamed his reforming friends because they didn't see how science could supply the most suitable model of experience to form independence of judgment and refusal of the principle of authority. However many, in Italy, still tend to oppose humanistic knowledge and scientific knowledge. «Science in the best and deepest meaning is deeply imaginative and strict, therefore it has close ties with humanities. Unluckily, what many people learn under that label is not basic science, but a set of skills learned by heart without true comprehension. This is really “sterile”, but science is not».

We know, though, that a large part of ancient philosophy staked on memory as the fundamental cognitive function for the development of logic as well as of the experience of arts, and not by chance *Mnemosyne*, memory exactly, was the mother of the Muses and of the various arts. Today's school has forgotten the very close tie between memory and creativity and has condemned the memory, relegating it to a marginal role, better replacing it with support technological instruments. Do you think it is a right move? «I don't like much using “the ancients” just to speak about “ancient Greeks and Romans”. Actually, each civilization was ancient and therefore there is an ancient African, Chinese thought and so on. I think that Greeks relied a lot on memory mostly because many of them were illiterate. And certainly it is not something to encourage in the modern world. When people can read, they don't have to learn by heart an entire Shakespeare's play. However there might be a reason to memorize some parts of it, if you want to listen to the music rhythm better. In mathematics, calculators are an incomparable advantage and maybe we should ask the teachers of mathematics if children still have to learn how to sum. Memory, however, is crucial to supply a structure or a general frame to a more detailed thought. For example, history has to be learned as an entire narration and not only reading it in dribs and drabs on Wikipedia. Here memory still has a role. And philosophical positions have to be interiorized as a configuration of argumentations and not learning by heart just a line or another by Plato. The target must always be activity and ability, and they are often thwarted by too much memorization, as Plato had already noticed. But some kinds of memorization are productive».

Do you think it is useful to train the philosophic competence already in the children also when very young? «Yes, they should think how to deduce, and which the right instruments are, and so on. There is a lot of research on the matter: at the age of five or six they are already able to find errors in an argument if the theme is suitable for their age and pedagogy attracts them».

Which balance shall we imagine between the subjects that – like *critical thinking*, or logic or rhetoric – give students universal instruments for different uses and the subjects that on the contrary require studying in depth and the acquisition of notions and knowledge? «It is convenient not to become specialized too soon. This is one of the reasons that have made me prefer the university education of “liberal arts”. It allows students to choose a main subject, but also to learn much else. It is the dominant model in the United States, in South Korea and in Scotland and I would like many other Countries to appreciate its importance».

Do you know that Italy has a sad record in the OECD ranking of functional illiteracy? Don't you think it is a great contradiction that the country that in the world is considered the cradle of civilization and culture is so poorly placed from the point of view of the formation of its citizens? «I am sure, however, that Italy is not the first in the world in this category! In developing countries there are too many people who don't even have access to education. In India, where I work most for development, the rate of literacy of adults is 65% for men and about 50% for women. Italians though seem to have a serious problem. I don't know who is responsible of this, but I think it is elementary education. One thing that a modern nation must do is to focus on the needs of the children with particular difficulties, because of malnutrition or poverty, or physical violence at home, or because in the family reading is not encouraged. Each Country that receives immigrants must also provide a linguistic teaching suitable for their needs».

Today's cognitive neuroscience shows us a series of systematic errors we tend to make because we are human beings. How can educational systems make good use of this kind of studies? «I find those results very interesting. They help us resist the temptation of explaining all our rules with our evolutionary origins. In some cases, evolution has equipped us quite well to pursue good targets, some of which, however, need a

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resistance to what we have acquired during evolution. For example, evolution makes us distrust foreigners and people whose aspect is different from ours. But nature is not a rule: we must ask ourselves what we are fighting for and find the way to obtain it. Nobody would ever say that, if we see us badly, never mind, we have to live as nature has made us. We should never say something like this for moral life».

There is also an illiteracy of feelings. Which is the best way to develop not only logical and argument skills but also passions and feelings, at the same time avoiding the traps they involve? «Certainly. We are all born with the capability of looking at the world from the point of view of the others, for example, but usually we develop it in a narrow and selective way, limited to our family, and to our local group. But that skill can be developed systematically with historical and artistic education, so we become able to see how the world looks from many different points of view. We have to succeed in order to make responsible political choices. There is a lot of research on how literature develops this skill. Of course this kind of empathy doesn't tell us the targets we have to aim to, but, whichever they are, it helps us. To formulate the right targets, we need a strict normative thought, in moral philosophy and politics, to have an idea of which emotions are useful and which are not».

The good school according to Martha Nussbaum: more logic, critical thinking, real experiences and imagination.

PHILOSOPHY | Martha Nussbaum is well known for her studies in ancient philosophy, among which the classics «The fragility of goodness» (1986) and “Cultivating humanity” (1997) and for her theory of «capabilities» proposed in «Creating capabilities» (2011), published by Il Mulino. «From disgust to humanity» (2011) on the contrary is published by Il Saggiatore.

A celebration for the 40 years of the prize on Saturday in Percoto

A great celebration for the 40 years of the Nonino Prize, created by the family of grappa producers (together in the famous photo by Oliviero Toscani): the ceremony will take place on Saturday 31st at the Nonino distilleries in Percoto (Ud).

This year's prizewinners, besides Martha Nussbaum and Yves Bonnefoy, are Ariane Mnouchkine and Roberto De Simone. Info: www.grappanonino.it