



BILL MOYERS' WORLD OF IDEAS

Martha Nussbaum

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Martha Nussbaum

BILL MOYERS: *[on camera]* Good evening. I'm Bill Moyers. Imagine yourself faced with this choice: If you don't give your brother a proper funeral, you doom his soul to unrest forever. But if you save your brother's soul, the state will bury you alive as punishment. Or imagine being told that the only way to save your entire fleet from shipwreck is to sacrifice your own daughter. Wrenching predicaments like those were the stuff of Greek tragedy over 2000 years ago. Surely, you say, we don't face dilemmas so difficult in real life today. Or do we?

Tonight my guest tells us about the tragedy of trying to lead a good life. Join me for a conversation with Martha Nussbaum.

[voice-over] She could pass for one of her graduate students. But Martha Nussbaum is one of the country's most provocative philosophers. Her new book has become such a catalyst for debate that scholars gathered recently at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville to argue over her thesis that human goodness is a fragile thing.

Dr. CHARLES REYNOLDS: Professor Nussbaum does not dodge this hard issue of how we are to reconsider the meaning of love in friendship and family life.

MOYERS: *[voice-over]* Nussbaum, a professor of classics and philosophy at Brown University, sees a message for us in the ideas of ancient Greece.

MARTHA NUSSBAUM: *[lecturing]* I think it has to be said that Aristotle starts out not only believing that people, if they're virtuous enough already, then they don't need to be coerced, but he also believes that their basic childly nature is directed toward virtue. That they will, if they're given decent support and decent love, they will become virtuous.

MOYERS: *[voice-over]* I spoke with Martha Nussbaum in New York about virtue and tragedy. And why she believes we need to hear what ancient Athens has to say to modern America.

[Interviewing] You write about these ancient Greeks, Aristotle, Heraclitus, Anaxagoras, Creon, as if they were next-door neighbors.

NUSSBAUM: I think I've lived with them for a long time. And I guess I think that the big problems that those great works put in front of us haven't changed all that much. And that the Greek works face them head on, with a courage and an eloquence that I don't always find in modern works on moral philosophy.

MOYERS: Great problems? What kind of problems?

NUSSBAUM: Take the problem of moral conflict. Now, here you have, in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, a king who's trying to do his best; he's trying to lead his army, and he's following the commands of the gods, leading his army off to Troy, and suddenly he finds that his expedition is doomed. He can't move forward. And he's told that the reason is that the gods are demanding a sacrifice. He's got to sacrifice, he's got to kill his own daughter in order to complete that expedition.

So here we have two deep and critically legitimate commitments that he has in his life, coming into an absolutely terrible conflict, in which there's not anything he can do that will be without wrongdoing. And at that point he says, thinking about this — and the play says — with tears in his eyes, "Heavy doom is disobedience, but heavy, too, if I shall rend my own child, the pride of my house, polluting my father's hands with streams of slaughtered maiden's blood, close by the altar. Which of these is without evils?" Now, I think this idea — that often when we care about more than one thing, and care deeply, the very course of life will bring you around to a situation where you can't honor both of the commitments, and it looks like anything that you do will be wrong in some way, will be perhaps even terrible in some way — and this is true. **MOYERS:** Do you think it's true for the taxi driver out there in the street right now? He doesn't see himself as a king, making those awful, horrific choices. Life doesn't present itself to him that way.

NUSSBAUM: But I think it does on a smaller basis. That is, these things happen every day, so long as you care deeply about more than one thing. I mean, just take a person who works, who has a career, who also has children, and who has to juggle every day those two responsibilities. Well, nothing will guarantee that in some event that you can't prevent from arising, you're just going to have to neglect one of those commitments. And neglect something that's really, really

important, because the very course of life has produced a terrible conflict. I face this every day myself. I —

MOYERS: Personally?

NUSSBAUM: Yes, well, personally, as a mother who has to juggle a career and child raising. I find so often, you know, just on a very mundane level; you've got a meeting and your child's acting in a school play. You can't do both things. And it's not simply that you can't do both, but whatever you do, you're going to be neglecting something that's really important.

MOYERS: But we were taught to rank obligations, to, you know the old term, choose priorities. And not to make of every conflict of competing goods a great moral drama.

NUSSBAUM: There's nothing illogical, it seems to me, about saying, "I am going to care deeply about my work and my writing. I'm also going to care deeply about my family and my child." You know, it's only somebody who's trying to evade the recognition of what's actually happening who's going to say, "Oh, look, I'll rank my obligations and I'll decide, oh, well, in this situation it's the work that takes priority, so the other one just drops out, and it's not only not a duty, it's contrary to duty." I mean, that isn't what real people do. And I think it's also not what good people do.

MOYERS: Good people?

NUSSBAUM: No, well, suppose you had a person who in that situation would really say, "Oh, well, given that work comes in here, I'm not going to care about my daughter. I don't care if I go off to that school play," or what have you. I think that's a callous person, a person who doesn't feel what it is to love something. And I think if you really feel what it is to love someone or some commitment, and be bound to that, then when a conflict arises, you will feel deep pain.

And you will feel what Agamemnon felt, even at a smaller level. You will feel, "Which of these is without evils?" And I think Agamemnon pretty clearly has to sacrifice his daughter. Still, he has not got the right to think just because he's made the right choice, everything's — all is well. In fact, in the play, he does say, "It may all be for the best," and the chorus says that he's mad.

MOYERS: One of my favorites is Antigone and the conflict between her loyalty to her family, "I must bury my dead brother, even though he's been a traitor to the state," and Creon's loyalty to the state, to the welfare, protection of the whole society. Sadly, they all end up dead. No one, no one comes to peace with that conflict.

NUSSBAUM: And yet, Creon, by the end of the play, has seen something that he didn't see before. Because all through the play, he defines enemies as anyone who opposes the good of the city, even if it happens to be a member of his own family. The claim of the family just doesn't exist for him. But then by the end of the play, the fact that his son has died and that that does mean something to him, that has come forward, and he now says that his deliberation has been very bad.

MOYERS: I saw Antigone with a clarity that I had never imagined possible when I watched Lyndon Johnson — pursuing the war in Vietnam, which he thought absolutely right to do for the sake of the state — refuse to stop his two sons-in-law from going. Knowing that their death there could be a personal blow, indescribable. I saw the torture of the conflicting loyalties there.

NUSSBAUM: The sad thing is he didn't learn enough from that, perhaps, he didn't see quickly enough what that meant for families in America generally.

MOYERS: Do you think Creon saw — did he do something about what he saw? Or was the seeing of it, was the realization, the recognition, enough?

NUSSBAUM: Well, up to then he thinks of the state somehow as though it doesn't consist of families. And he keeps talking about the city, but he forgets that — what does a city consist of? It consists of families who love their children. And who are torn apart by civil war, and who have relatives on the opposing side. He won't see the state in complex enough terms. By the end of the play, I think he's on the verge of doing that, he's ready to do that. But it's too late.

MOYERS: You just said something that I think is very important. That what these moral conflicts reveal is the truth of personality behind the abstractions. If you think of the state without thinking of the family, you're thinking of something abstract that enables you to do what you would never do as a ruler if you thought of the human beings behind those abstractions.

NUSSBAUM: Yes, and I think in general the Greeks were on the right track when they thought that what we're aiming at in political life is to produce a good life that is very complex, that has

many different elements. But we have to look at each one of them.

MOYERS: Let's take an example. You have written that these ancient Greeks were preoccupied with the notion of a liveable life. Now, what do you take that phrase to mean, a liveable life?

NUSSBAUM: 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. Now, I think if you see human life that way, and you think of the role of politics as providing conditions of support for all the richly diverse elements in a full human life, that does have very definite consequences for the way you're going to think.

MOYERS: What has long excited me about the ancient Greeks, from the first time I read Edith Hamilton to Professor Osmond at the University of Texas, is that they were carrying on a vital discussion about the kind of culture they wanted, the kind of public society they were after, a public culture and society that stood for something. The debate that was going on in those times among the philosophers was exhilarating. Do you find that?

NUSSBAUM: I think that it's extraordinary the way the whole society was involved in this debate. And if you even think about the performance of the tragedies — the tragedies were not performed like going to a Broadway show, where you go into this darkened auditorium and you see somebody up there on the stage, and you think, "Well, what has this got to do with me?" — the tragedies were a civic festival, where all citizens came in there, and they looked across the theatre at their fellow citizens. And they saw this as a scene for feeling and thinking about the life of the city.

MOYERS: Politics was really a conversation between the artists, the politicians, the statesmen and the people, the people being in the audience; the congregation, so to speak.

NUSSBAUM: I think this is an attitude towards literature that to some extent we've lost. And that it's very important to recover. Because I really do think that these poetic works, with their richness of exploration of emotional experience, of the various ways in which human life is vulnerable to disaster, that in their very shape, they're doing something in ethics that we need to look at.

MOYERS: What do you think about the level of our public discourse today?

NUSSBAUM: I think it's very impoverished. I think it's lost a lot, that I think it had in the time of Lincoln, for example, when Walt Whitman could speak of Lincoln as the "large, sweet soul that has gone." How many people today could you reasonably say that of? I think we've lost the idea that politicians are part of the humanities. And we think of them as part of a natural science tradition, and we don't expect them to have the contact with literature, with history, with the richness of descriptive language that the humanities have always stood for. And I think that's a great loss.

MOYERS: But you're not arguing, are you, that politicians should speak as novelists, as poets?

NUSSBAUM: Well, I think in effect I am. See, Whitman preferred the poet's language, because it was concrete, and it was human, and it was suffused with feeling. And I think that's the language that we need in the political life.

MOYERS: The common perception of philosophy is of a thinker of abstract thoughts. But stories and myths are very important to you as a philosopher, are they not?

NUSSBAUM: They're very important, because I think that the language of philosophy has to come back from the abstract heights on which it so often lives, to the richness of every day discourse and every day humanity. And it has to listen to the ways that people talk about themselves, talk about what matters to them in human life. And one very good way to do this is to listen to literature.

MOYERS: To stories?

NUSSBAUM: To stories.

MOYERS: Is there, out of all of this vast array of stories, is there one that you find most grip-

ping, that you think speaks most to us today?

NUSSBAUM: I wake up at night thinking about Euripides' *Hecuba*. That to me is a story that says so much about what it is to be a human being in the middle of a world of unreliable things and people. Do you know the story?

MOYERS: Well, from a long time ago. She was the queen of Troy, whose country was destroyed by war, and her whole life was changed. She fell from here to here.

NUSSBAUM: Right, right. She lost her husband, she's lost most of her children, she's lost her political power. She's been made a slave. But up to that point, she remains absolutely firm morally. And she even says she believes that human good character is something extremely stable in adversity and can't be shaken. But then, her one deepest hope is pulled away from her. She left her youngest child with her best friend, who was supposed to watch over him and watch his money, too, and then bring him back when the war was over. And when she gets to the shore of Thrace, she sees a naked body that's been washed up on the beach. And she looks at it more closely, and then she notices that it's the body of her child.

And she realizes right away that what this friend has done is to murder the child for his money, and to do it in a callous, heedless way, without even taking thought for burying the child, just has tossed it out into the waves. And all of a sudden, the roots of her moral life are undone. She looks around, and she says, "Everything is untrustworthy. Everything that I see is untrustworthy," because her moral life had been based on the ability to trust things and people that were not under her own control. And if this deepest and best friendship proves untrustworthy, then it seems to her that nothing can be trusted, and she has to turn to a life of solitary revenge.

MOYERS: Against the friend.

NUSSBAUM: And we see her at the end of the play putting out the eyes of this former best friend, and turning herself into, what the chorus says is in effect, a dog. I mean, they predict that she will literally turn into a dog. But we know that the story of metamorphosis from the human to something less than human has really taken place before our very eyes.

No, I think it's pretty clear that this comes about not because she's a bad person, but in a sense because she's a good person, because she has had deep friendships on which she staked her moral life. And so what this play says that's so disturbing, is that the condition of being good is such that it should always be possible for you to be morally destroyed by something that you couldn't prevent. To be a good human being is to have a kind of openness to the world, an ability to trust uncertain things beyond your own control that can lead you to be shattered in very extreme circumstances, in circumstances for which you are not yourself to blame.

And I think that says something very important about the condition of the ethical life. That it is based on a trust in the uncertain, a willingness to be exposed. It's based on being more like a plant than like a jewel, something rather fragile, but whose very particular beauty is inseparable from that fragility.

MOYERS: But the other side of it, is it not, expressed by Victor Frankel, who survived the death camps, who says, "I'm not responsible for my circumstances. I'm only responsible for my attitude toward those circumstances. That I may live in the degradation of the camps, I may be put upon by the beasts who are human, but I will not let them turn me into a beast."

NUSSBAUM: Well, I think if you can maintain that separation, that's a very fortunate thing. And actually here, the tragedians do see that character itself — if the circumstances are crushing enough and severe enough — can be itself polluted, as Euripides puts it, by something that you yourself don't control. Because however much she tried to live well in a world of uncertain things, she had to be able to trust something. And when — by a rare chance, to be sure, but it certainly can happen — this very best friend, the one who was in a sense the basis of her contentedness to the world, proved untrustworthy, then it was not her fault that she couldn't sustain the moral life.

MOYERS: Is this what you meant when you wrote once that tragedy is trying to live well?

NUSSBAUM: Tragedy happens only when you are trying to live well. Because for a heedless person who doesn't have deep commitments to others, Agamemnon's conflict isn't a tragedy. Somebody who's a bad person would, could go in and slaughter that child with equanimity, or could desert all the men and let them die. But it's when you are trying to live well, and you deeply care about the things you're trying to do, that the world enters in in a particularly painful way. And it's in that struggle with recalcitrant circumstances that a lot of the value of the moral

life comes in.

MOYERS: You're not trying to suggest to your students who are watching that the lesson is not to try to live well, and if you do that, you could certainly avoid the pain of choice and of frustration and of denial?

NUSSBAUM: No, the lesson certainly is not to try to maximize conflict, or to romanticize struggle and suffering. But it's rather to see that you should care about things in a way that makes it a possibility that tragedy will happen to you. If you never trust any people, or if you don't trust the political setting — which is certainly something I see very often in my students — then it doesn't hurt you when things go badly. But you want to tell them to live their lives with such a seriousness of commitment that they're not adjusting their desires to the way the world actually goes, but they're trying to wrest from the world a good life, the good life that they desire. And sometimes that does lead them into tragedy.

MOYERS: I asked you about the lesson, the moral. And you said what the tragedies show us — in one sense there is no lesson and no moral, is there? It's simply the revelation of life, as seen through the artists, the philosopher, the sufferer, the pilgrim. It's the revelation. There's no effort to instruct?

NUSSBAUM: But you know, sometimes just to see the complexity that's there, and see it honestly, without flinching, and without re-describing it in the terms of some excessively simple theory, that is itself a progress. And I think it's a progress for public life, as well as private life. Because it's only when we've done that step that we can then ask ourselves, "How can our situations make it less likely that those conflicts will happen to people?"

MOYERS: As Gabriel says in *Green Pastures*, "Everything that's tied down is coming loose." Goodness, the good life, the life one attempts to lead by one's moral bearings is always going to be a fragile thing, is it not?

NUSSBAUM: I think so. As long as it's understood well and richly, it will be a fragile thing. I think that the stories that we sometimes tell ourselves — that the free will is free no matter what conditions people are living in, that these people in misery are really okay, because they have free will — those are evasive stories and really pernicious stories. Because they prevent us from looking with the best kind of compassion at the lives of other people.

MOYERS: It did occur to me once that maybe the unintended moral of Hecuba was that by transposing herself into a dog — which the Greeks considered the lowest form of life — by becoming a dog, she relieved herself of all emotions, of all necessity to lead, or to make moral choices. There's a certain contentment that comes from being a dumb beast.

NUSSBAUM: This can happen. When you say to yourself, "It's too much to bear." Being human, where that means accepting promises from other people, trusting that other people will be good to you; when that is too much to bear, it is always possible to retreat into the thought, "I'll live for my own comfort, for my own revenge, for my own anger. And I just won't be a member of society anymore." Which really means, "I won't be a human being anymore."

You see that. You see people doing that today where they feel that the society has let them down, they can't ask anything of it. They can't put their hopes on anything outside themselves. You see them actually retreating to a life in which they think only of their own satisfaction. Only of their own — maybe the satisfaction even of their revenge against society — but the life that no longer trusts another human being and no longer forms ties to the political community is, the Greeks went on to say, not a human life any longer.

MOYERS: Or a human society.

NUSSBAUM: Or a human society.

MOYERS: [voice-over/ From New York, this has been a conversation with Martha Nussbaum. I'm Bill Moyers.

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