

Topic 4. "Another problem with people who fail to examine themselves is that they often prove all too easily influenced. When a talented demagogue addressed the Athenians with moving rhetoric but bad arguments, they were all too ready to be swayed, without ever examining the argument". – Martha C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (2010)

The Devaluation of Truth

Introduction

In this quote, Martha Nussbaum addresses a problem that has been around since the ancient Greeks. However, right now, in this moment, this quote may be more relevant than ever. In a time where the left and right demonize each other, in a time where politicians use insults and outrage to get votes, in a time where 'alternative facts' exist, it is more important than ever, to be aware of how easily humans are swayed by emotion, or moving rhetoric as Nussbaum calls it. In this day and age, what actually makes up a valid and sound argument, is lost and irrelevant. Facts and honesty do not matter. Feelings are validated while valid facts are relentlessly torn apart and thrown into the trash.

Nussbaum's work *Not for Profit: Why Democracy needs the Humanities* makes many bold claims. The title in itself is one of those bold claims; Democracy needs the humanities, including but not limited to philosophy, anthropology and sociology. At first, this seems like an obvious statement. Of course the *humanities* are needed in democracy; as democracy is about *humans*. Unfortunately, the humanities have been pushed to the background in recent years as more and more technological and medical advancements are made. The humanities start to seem like a waste of time to some. However, Nussbaum's quote points out *why* they're still needed; to teach people how to differentiate between a good argument, and a charming demagogue¹. In the given quote, Nussbaum goes on to criticize people who 'fail to examine themselves' as she puts it. They are influenced by a charming and skilled rhetorician, rather than objective arguments. In this essay, I will explain why this can be harmful; a society should arguably not be built on emotion, but on reason. I will explore this by showing how the enlightenment brought structure to society by using reason; and how and why that trend should continue into the present day, especially in an age filled with populism and appeals to pathos². I will also explore whether the responsibility of 'self-examination' and keeping our society truthful should lay in the hands of the citizens or the government. By having reason be the foundation of our society, we can avoid the pitfalls that Nussbaum mentions. By having a society, and a democracy, that has found the right balance between emotion and reason, we can avoid the dreaded 'post-truth' society that current philosophers mention often. The definition of a 'post-truth' society varies among scholars, but in this essay I will define it as a society where 'truth' is of secondary importance.

For time's sake, I will focus on how Nussbaum's quote relates to the political system. It is important to note however that the issue of people being influenced by charisma and/or emotion rather than facts and good arguments is present in much more than just politics. It is present in every day conversation and many ideologies use emotion to get more followers; particularly religion. Furthermore, it is also becoming a growing problem in academics. To even begin with creating a society which values good argumentation over charisma, I believe that having a honest and sound government is essential. It is very difficult to run an organized country under a disorganized

¹ Of course, this is not the only thing the humanities are needed for, but it is the most relevant aspect as it relates to this specific quote.

² An appeal to pathos is the rhetorical device of appealing to emotion in order to persuade people.

government. The current fears of a 'post-truth' society mostly come from problems within politics, as well. For that reason, politics will be the focus of this essay.

The Popularity of Populism

So what exactly are the possible consequences when people are too easily influenced by moving rhetoric and arguments built on emotion rather than reason? Firstly, we need to define rhetoric; rhetoric isn't necessarily a bad thing, it is simply a way of persuading people. Political speeches, for example, are loaded with rhetorical devices. Philosophy tends to be full of them, as well. Secondly, it is important to note that when anyone resorts to emotional rhetoric rather than valid and sound argumentation, this tends to be done to get as many people to agree with them as possible. When speaking about politics, this translates to voters. The rhetorical technique of playing into human emotion in politics is called populism. Populism has always been around, but has been a much talked about topic in recent years. Trump, Le Pen, Wilders, Erdogan, these are all current prominent politicians who have used the power of populism. They are probably the first ones you think of when you hear 'populism'. However, that does not mean that populism can only be found on the (conservative) right, on the contrary, populism can be found all over the political spectrum. Hillary Clinton, who ran for the democratic party of the United States, made use of it in her own campaign last year; by calling Trump's voters part of a "basket of deplorables", she attempted to play into the emotions of people all over the political spectrum. The aim of statements like this is to play into the specific emotions of guilt and pride. Trump voters, or those on the fence, would feel guilty, as no one wants to be 'deplorable'. In contrast to that, her own voters would feel prideful that they aren't part of that basket. This example shows that it is wrong to define 'populism' as purely a right-wing way of navigating politics. Anyone can be the 'talented demagogue' that Nussbaum speaks of. Anyone can play into basic human emotion and use it to further their own agenda, as we are all capable of feeling human emotion, and using it.

So what exactly is the danger looming here? By validating statements like Clinton's, we are showing people that this is a valid way of arguing and persuading people. Don't agree with someone? Well, they're just deplorable! Attitudes like this do not serve to strengthen bonds between opposing ideologies such as the left and the right, nor do they invite to open discussion. It only further pushes people into their own echo chambers, as they believe that the other side is simply 'bad', and therefore not worth arguing with. Polarization and demonization are very real, negative consequences when people do not know how to openly talk to the other side. There is always more to learn from the other side, and this fact should not be ignored. Again, this translates to situations outside of governmental politics, too. Social movements such as feminism and the men's rights movement would do well to listen and learn from each other, too. Christians and atheists should encourage open discussion, as well as consequentialists and deontologists.

I have now shown that currently, populism is very popular in the world, particularly in politics. This is an interesting development, as much of our western democratic system³ is built on ideas from the enlightenment; an era that is defined by its profound focus on reason above all. The ideas of John Locke and the trias politica of Montesquieu are still used to this day. The trias politica was instated to ensure that no one person would be able to be omnipotent in a country. Absolute rulers should be avoided at all costs. By splitting judicial power, executive power and legislative power between many different people, it is ensured that a decision cannot be made solely by one person's emotions

³ For length and time's sake I will be focusing on western democracy in this essay. I am aware of the existence of other political systems which may place more or less value on objectivism, but unfortunately it would be impossible to touch upon all of these right now.

and personal motives, as tended to happen quite often in Europe before the enlightenment and the French Revolution, and arguably, even after. Montesquieu's trias politica is based on reason and logic. It is, however, flawed in a way. It might ensure that a single person can not make a big change on a whim, but it does not prevent the influence of biases and emotions of others on decisions. For example, a judge should not be influenced by the emotions of a potential convict, but as a judge is only human, this is inevitable. I therefore do recognize that we cannot simply eliminate emotion. This is not only impossible, but dangerous. Humans are emotional beings and we should not change that, as emotions motivate us to take action. Fear motivates us to find safety and anger motivates us to make changes. Many of the changes that came about during the 17th and 18th century would not have been possible if people weren't driven by emotions such as discontent and anger with the system that was in place at the time.

The argument could thus be made that we should place much more importance and emphasize on emotion, and that objectivism isn't always favorable over subjectivism, precisely because we are emotional creatures. Neither Nussbaum nor I are calling for the eradication of emotion. Nussbaum even recognized the role of human emotion in her earlier works. Because of the huge role emotion plays in our life, it is essential that we learn to recognize it in both ourselves and in others. It is not necessarily wrong to act upon emotion, but one does need to be aware of the fact that their actions are driven by emotion. The aforementioned of being scared of the 'other side' is also lurking right around the corner in a society where there is no balance between emotion and reason. Emotions can be irrational, and when too many people are swayed by emotion and therefore act irrationally, reason and truth take a backseat, and that is when we are in danger of a post-truth society.

The Responsibility of Reason

Earlier I mentioned that anyone can be the 'talented demagogue' that Nussbaum speaks of. Next I would like to touch upon the other side of this exchange; the 'easily swayed Athenians' in Nussbaum's statement. As I stated earlier, we are all driven by emotion to some extent, and therefore we cannot entirely avoid being the 'easily swayed Athenian'. All of us have most likely been in that position at some point in our lives. If a child uses his charms to persuade his mother to give him candy, the child is using 'moving rhetoric' and his mother is in the role of the 'easily swayed Athenian'. Furthermore, studies have shown that people as a whole are more likely to believe a suave man in a sharp suit, rather than a homeless man in dirty rags, regardless of the soundness of their argument. These biases are even apparent in the judicial system in many countries. In certain western countries, women on average get a lighter jail sentence for the same crimes as men, because we tend to have more sympathy with women than men. Subconsciously, even highly-educated people are still influenced by their inner emotions and pre conceived notions.

So if we are biologically more susceptible to be swayed by charisma and emotion over good arguments, can we really expect ourselves, or the Athenians, to be responsible for choosing to follow our basic human emotions? I would argue that yes, we do have a certain degree of responsibility. We have the collective, civic responsibility of keeping the government accountable. In order to do this, we shouldn't follow them blindly, but we should question them frequently, and we should not be satisfied with bad arguments or dishonesty. In her quote, Nussbaum talk about a "problem with people who fail to examine themselves", it is important to note that she talks about self-examination, rather than examining those around you and your surroundings. She claims that being too easily influenced is a result of a lack of self-examination. This can be interpreted as a call for responsibility. The only one responsibility for what you believe, is you. It is up to people themselves to learn how to differentiate between an argument founded on emotion and an argument founded on fact. This relates back to the title of Nussbaum's work. Having the humanities

be an integral part of the educational system of a democracy can be a way to ensure that people learn how to recognize a good argument. It can teach people to recognize their emotions, especially when these are being played into in order to influence the person's opinion. Therefore, there is a responsibility that everyone has; the responsibility to use reason to avoid being easily influenced.

A counter-argument can be made that we should be able to trust our government regardless; they're there for a reason, right? It would be wrong to vote people into office, and then proceed to not trust them. However, it is unfortunately not that simple. By making sure people are educated, by which I mean teaching them to differentiate between emotional rhetoric and sound arguments, we can ensure that politicians are held accountable by the people both before, during and after the elections. Citizens should not simply lay back when a government is elected. It can be argued that civil duties extend far beyond simply voting once every four to five years. Part of these civil duties is as I mentioned, holding politicians accountable. In a democracy we give power to the people; but with power comes great responsibility.

Conclusion

In this essay I have argued the importance of truth, honesty and facts within a democracy, and how having a truthful government will lead to a truthful society, rather than a post-truth one based on emotion, dishonesty and irrationality. I introduced this topic by analyzing Nussbaum's statement, as well as the title of the work the quote is from and how it relates to the quote itself. I explained my reasoning for focusing on this matter from a political perspective, however it is important to note that this issue is much broader than just politics, and I attempted to show this fact throughout the essay.

I attempted to show how Nussbaum's quote relates to current events and populism, and I have attempted to clarify the consequences of populism becoming the mainstream. I did this by using examples from the 2016 elections of the United States, as it is a very current event and has in part caused exactly what Nussbaum warns about; truth being second to moving rhetoric. I argued for an open discussion between contrasting ideologies, not just on a political level but also on a social level, rather than polarization and the creation of echo chambers. I briefly went into the history of reason versus emotion in political philosophy, particularly how it relates to the enlightened thinker Montesquieu and his trias politica, which still plays a big role in how our society works today. I particularly did this to show that even a system based on reason, is not completely safe from the inevitable grasp of basic human emotion.

I expanded on the issue of people being swayed by emotion and influenced by rhetoric and why this is a negative thing. I briefly touched upon the fact that emotion is inevitable, and that we certainly should not call for the eradication of emotion, but rather for a balance between reason and emotion. It is however important that we do not ignore our inherent biology; it is simply a fact that studies have shown that we are not safe from biases and that we will to some extent, always be motivated by emotion. This fact does not mean, however, that we cannot take control of our emotions and beliefs. We can in fact, protect ourselves from the talented demagogue, the suave man in the sleek suit, or the charm of the woman in the courtroom. One of the first steps in doing so, as Nussbaum so profoundly calls for with the title of her work, is to place value on the humanities in our society. Because only by valuing and understanding the humanities, can we value and understand humans themselves. I believe that this will prevent a post-truth society and instead lead to a more open society, one where the automatic response to disagreement is not demonization, but discussion.
