

# Martha Nussbaum: The public philosopher as practitioner

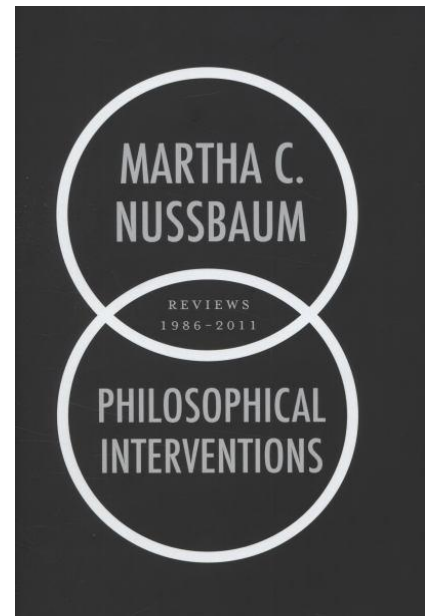
Aug 2 2012

*Emily Coolidge Toker finds this collection of Martha Nussbaum's notable book reviews ideal for anyone seeking to become better acquainted with the development and breadth of Nussbaum's career, or simply for those who would like to be reminded of just how incredibly relevant philosophy can and should be.*



**Philosophical Interventions: Reviews 1986-2011. Martha C. Nussbaum. Oxford University Press. January 2012.**

Martha Nussbaum is a well-known, and rightfully well respected philosopher and activist whose contributions have ranged from practical feminist theory and human rights to law and ethics. All of her work is underpinned by her more daring (and, in my home, controversial) feats of adapting what some would call quintessentially conservative, or at any rate non-liberal, Aristotelian thought to a decidedly more liberal world view, in the tradition of T. H. Green and Jacques Mauritian. Among Nussbaum's principle achievements, she (in the good company of Bernard Williams, etc.) brought the study of especially classical literature to the forefront of ethics in the Anglo-American world, exposing the ethical engagement of these works. All literarily-minded philosophy students and philosophically-minded literature students owe her a giant debt of gratitude.



The productive tension at the heart of Nussbaum's thought has always been her simultaneous commitment to Aristotelian virtue ethics and modern liberalism. The former allows her to highlight the importance of emotions in ethical life without sacrificing the importance of cognitive functions and thereby lapsing into anti-theory, while the latter looks askance at Aristotle's insistence that all social organizations be oriented towards a common understanding of the good. This tension in Nussbaum's thought is wonderfully illustrated in her review of Alastair MacIntyre's *Whose Justice? Whose Rationality?*, and in a longer essay would make an excellent focal point around which to analyze each of the reviews.

Nevertheless, skimming her extensive record of distinguished public service and deep involvement in human rights causes provides all the evidence one needs to defend her against the naysayers: Martha Nussbaum, whatever you may think of her politics, is deeply involved in both theory and practice. Accusations of hypocrisy or sloth, too often readily available to be flung at those one disagrees with, will find no purchase here.

*Philosophical Interventions* incorporates a varied collection of deeply engaged, critical reviews, originally published between 1986 and 2011. Her introduction, the only section written specifically for this collection, is crucial both to the contextualization of the reproduced reviews and as a treatment of the genre itself, here rightly held up as a useful platform for public intellectuals “to find their public” and one which, despite being aimed at a popular audience, ought to nevertheless be microcosms of rigorous argument. While the vast majority of the reviews presented here are quite strong in this respect, one notices that some of her later reviews begin to feature laundry lists of authorial oversights in background research that the less generous reader might think is just showing off. Fortunately for anyone who may want to use these essays to teach rhetoric, most criticisms are fully explained and their relevance to the problem addressed.

I admit to having suffered mild whiplash, reading in rapid succession essays which are better suited to a leisurely pace and which certainly merit considered attention on an individual basis. Despite their variety, however, the reviews are cogent and coherent – by and large strong models of rigorous, well-organized criticism. In fact, Nussbaum’s engagement in each essay occasionally surpasses that of the actual work being reviewed: where relevant, she incorporates an author’s previous work or the work of contemporaries. Putting these authors in direct conversation with one another, Nussbaum invites the readers of her reviews to do a certain amount of additional legwork, if they’re so inclined.

Beneath the whiplash, a remarkably coherent career becomes clear. Essays on the history of feminism and feminist contributions to philosophy and law, on the most productive avenues for the gay rights movement to pursue, on the implications of genetic advancement, on the historical and social roots of modern concepts of justice or the educational needs and rights of individuals, all converge to produce an excellent introduction to what it might mean to lead an “examined life,” here characterized as a critical but open-minded approach tempered with historical rigor matched by a reasonable engagement with contemporary debates. Very rarely does Nussbaum seek or present her readers with what might be termed an easy way out.

I found the negative reviews to be the most satisfactory, possibly a symptom of heat-induced irritability, although if I were to make an effort to be civil I would have to admit that on occasion, Nussbaum’s criticism might be a little heavy-handed. However, the bulk of her criticism (in both positive and negative reviews) regards the presentation of the arguments, and if the author in question were to address her concerns, the books would be greatly improved, if not completely validated.

Her praise, on the other hand, while undoubtedly well merited, lacks the precision of her criticism. She applauds Winkler’s “delicate touch” and “exemplary subtlety” (70), etc, which is high praise indeed, and is certainly the sort of thing that I would have framed on my wall, but it’s not until she presents her criticism that the reader will find solid purchase for constructive, vigorous, debate. The works reviewed, however, are indeed very well chosen – in most cases important contributions to ongoing debates which, without her endorsement, could very well have been shamefully overlooked. I’ve even bookmarked a few to be added to my summer reading.

This collection would be ideal for anyone seeking to become better acquainted with the development and breadth of Nussbaum’s career and thought, or, more generally, for those who would like to be reminded of just how incredibly relevant philosophy can and should be in everything that really matters. She treats every author with unfailing civility and fairness, in some cases more than is perhaps due, but with the effect of imbuing the genre with a professionalism and relevance that, one would hope, will keep its column inches safe in those publications that have seen fit to devote any to book reviews. Nussbaum’s appraisal of Buchanan et. al.’s *From Chance to Choice: Genetics and Justice* would be entirely apt in describing her own book: “It should not be read by anyone hoping for quick solutions, because the work of analysis is far more significant, in these matters, than the “bottom line.” But it should be read by anyone who wants to think well as a citizen about choices that we must increasingly make about our future and the future of our descendants” (238).

---

**Emily Coolidge Toker** is a recent graduate of Sabanci University’s Cultural Studies program. She received her BA in Sociology from Bryn Mawr College in 2007 and has been living and teaching in Istanbul, Turkey, since. Her research focuses on translation theory, mimesis, the globalization and politics of English, and diaspora studies. [Read more reviews by Emily.](#)

Related posts:

1. [Give more power to the European Parliament, says Habermas, the philosopher fighting for Europe \(7.4\)](#)

This entry was posted in [Emily Coolidge Toker](#), [Oxford University Press](#), [Philosophy and Religion](#) and tagged [ethics](#), [law](#), [martha nussbaum](#), [morality](#), [philosophy](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#). [Edit](#)