Tragedy and the Philosophical Life:  
A Response to Martha Nussbaum

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This paper is a brief summary of my three-volume series of books criticizing Martha Nussbaum’s interpretation of Plato in her book, The Fragility of Goodness: luck and ethics in Greek tragedy and philosophy. I present an alternative reading of all four of the dialogues Nussbaum discusses: the Protagoras, Republic, Symposium, and Phaedrus.

Although Nussbaum claims Plato is anti-tragic, my books demonstrate that in relation to his predecessors and contemporaries, Plato’s dialogues are shown to be neither the same as traditional Greek tragedies nor entirely different from them. Plato appropriates many characteristics of tragic literature but goes beyond tragedy, both in his view of the human condition and in his writing style. The structure of these four dialogues is similar; readers are supposed to understand them as parts fitting into a larger whole which ultimately leads to a consistent view of the principles of reality, human nature, and human history. The properties and patterns running throughout the dialogues can be placed into four classes: 1) the tragic characteristics of Plato’s dialogues; 2) the way Plato’s dialogues go beyond tragedy 3) the way Plato’s famous images of the two roads, the Cave, the Divided Line, and the three-part soul are represented in the characters and conversation of the dialogues themselves; and 4) the way Plato’s Theory of Forms is embedded in the education of the human mind (nous) that is occurring continuously throughout the dialogues. Each of these points will be discussed, followed by a brief outline of how these patterns occur in the Protagoras, Republic, Phaedrus, and Symposium.

The first task in determining whether Plato’s work is tragic, anti-tragic, or a third alternative, is to define tragedy. As a way of understanding the human condition, using a variety of sources and scholars, my books focus on the following characteristics of tragedy: 1) humankind’s radical insecurity; 2) human blindness: characters are unable to recognize who they are, what they know and don’t know, and how insecure they really are; because they are blind,
they make bad judgments about truth, justice, and virtue, the most serious issues in human life; 3) the curse of honesty: the person who knows suffers from his wisdom because he does not have delusions about himself and those around him and because is ignored or hated by the public; this does not occur in every tragedy, but is a common theme; and 4) everyone will experience some degree of tragedy in life: no one can avoid being ignorant and vulnerable, and those who are wiser are often tragically misunderstood.

As a literary genre, referring primarily to Aristotle, my books look at a number of properties of tragedy. In their organization: 1) the plot is most important; 2) then character; 3) and finally, thought. The work has 4) a tightly written structure, with a beginning, middle, and end, and 5) takes place within one day. The characters: 6) are engaged in a serious action; 7) they experience a reversal from happiness to misery, 8) they suffer; 8) their suffering is caused by a mistake in judgment; 9) the characters are closely related; 10) true to type and true to life; 11) are morally intermediate, neither outstandingly good or wicked; and 12) experience a reversal from ignorance to wisdom. Tragedy is 13) poetry rather than history, because 14) it focuses on the universal rather than the particular. This focus on recurring, universal patterns in human behavior and human history makes it possible for audience members to draw analogies between the events, characters, and arguments on stage and their own lives and experiences. This, in turn, enables them to learn from the characters’ mistakes. 15) The goal of tragedy is education.

On this understanding of tragedy, the *Protagoras*, *Republic*, *Symposium*, and *Phaedrus* include a great deal of tragedy. To understand the tragic nature of these dialogues readers must consider the historical context within which they take place. These dialogues either take place or describe a conversation that took place when Athens was still the most powerful city-state and the greatest democratic society anyone living at the time ever knew. By the time the dialogues were written, Athens had fallen from being a great democratic society to electing Critias as President and being subjected to nine
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months of tyrannical rule. The great tragedy underlying all four dialogues is the fall of Athens, the loss of political and intellectual freedom.

Plato’s readers know how blind the characters are to their situation. The characters are overconfident, arrogant, proud, and unaware of the way their own beliefs and ways of life are contributing to the fall of Athens. The dialogues include many different types of characters. The major character types are the philosopher, timocrat, oligarch, democrat, and tyrant, as described in the Republic. Each character’s speeches and choices before, during, and after the dialogues take place are consistent with his character. The tyrannical characters are worse than most people; the philosopher, Socrates, is better than most; the rest are morally intermediate. All of them experience tragedy but in different ways and to different degrees. The characters are discussing the most serious questions in life. The characters are not all blood relatives, but they are closely related in the sense that they belong to the ruling class of Athens. Thus their actions will determine the future fate of their city.

One apparently large difference between Aristotle’s view of tragedy and Plato’s dialogues, a difference Nussbaum considers fundamental, is that Aristotle places plot first, then character and, finally, thought. Plato, however, places thought first, then character, and appears to omit any plot whatsoever. But if one takes the historical context, the fall of Athens from democracy to tyranny, a fall from happiness to misery, as the main theme of the dialogues, then plot is, indeed, the most important characteristic of these dialogues. Plato shows his readers that the “plot,” the fall of Athens, was caused by the Athenians’ beliefs about human passion, truth and falsity, good and evil, justice and injustice, and most of all by their beliefs about the nature of a democratic society. Nussbaum and I agree that Plato’s personal experience of witnessing the fall of Athens had a profound effect on his drive to establish the Academy and to write his dialogues as the cornerstone for a kind of philosophical education which would prevent such tragedy in the future. But we disagree on the nature of that education and the philosophical life which it tries to cultivate. Nussbaum believes that Plato’s view of the philosophical life is much more
intellectually, emotionally, and physically detached from everyday life and the concerns of “normal” people than I do.

Plato cherished political and intellectual freedom, the real meaning of democracy. He shows his readers the great damage which results when the essence of a democracy degenerates into the false beliefs of the democratic personality. These four dialogues are targeted most directly at the one opinion everyone except the philosopher shares: the belief that the essence of a democracy, its greatest value, is the freedom given to citizens to live their lives in whatever way they see fit, whether that be as timocrats, oligarchs, tyrants, or as people who dabble in many different ways of life without bothering to develop any expertise which can be used to promote the well-being of their fellow citizens.

The way of life that corresponds most closely with the love of freedom as an end in itself is the democratic personality, the man who treats all choices as equally good. On my view, Nussbaum goes too far in defending this view of freedom and this way of life. Nussbaum’s model of a “normal” person, the democratic personality, is Plato’s version of a tragic character: a morally intermediate type who makes a mistake in judgment and undermines Athenian democracy. A society with political and intellectual freedom that becomes dominated by such personalities, especially among the privileged class, has no leadership; without educated and trained citizens who move into positions of leadership and use their authority for the good of those over whom they exercise it the city will flounder. Those who are motivated will use their power for their own personal gain, whether it be honor, wealth or personal power. The city will become less and less stable and eventually an authoritarian, tyrannical ruler will gain power and be able to force the citizens to obey him because of their failure to control themselves.

Unlike tragedy, Plato’s dialogues do not show the character’s reversals from happiness to unhappiness. Nussbaum accuses Plato of setting up a model of the philosophical life as disembodied minds engaged in meaningless conversation without any connection to emotions or actions. But the dialogues
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contain many hints of what is to come. The conversations are anything but meaningless; the opinions the Athenians hold are lived out in their lives; the logical mistakes Socrates points out to the interlocutors become ontological mistakes and lead to the destruction of the city.

Also unlike tragedy, the characters do not experience a reversal from ignorance to wisdom. They do not learn what Socrates tries to teach them. The dialogues appear to end in confusion, aporia. I argue that there is a way out of the impasse. Socrates’ way of life, as he shows his readers throughout the dialogues, is the “answer” to the question. Socrates exhibits the courage of the philosopher throughout the dialogues; the issue comes up specifically in the Laches. Socrates exhibits the temperance of the philosopher throughout all the dialogues; the issue comes up specifically in the Charmides, etc.

Plato is trying to engage his readers: readers need to learn what Socrates’ interlocutors were either unable or unwilling to learn. Readers can recognize how blind the Athenians are to their situation: they think they are secure when they are not; they think they will remain a powerful democratic society forever but within a very few years they lose the war and their democratic way of life; they think they are intelligent and educated when they are ignorant and arrogant; they think they are open-minded but they will soon kill Socrates for his way of life, showing they are willing to silence the citizen who questions their way of life the most; they think they know what justice and injustice are but they are corrupt and are undermining the foundation of their society and the notion of justice upon which it was based.

When Solon wrote a constitution that provided free speech, free elections, trial by jury, and an Assembly chosen by lot, he did not do so because he believed the citizens should be free to live in any way they preferred. Rather, the institutions of his democratic society were based on the view that a fairly large number of citizens were naturally capable of understanding the public good, making good judgments about when to fight in a war and why, how to create laws that ensure fair treatment of citizens, how to elect officials who have the common good at heart, how to decide what is just in criminal and civil law.
cases, etc. Solon believed that cultivating these powers of the souls of a large number of citizens was possible and desirable.

A just society is one that is structured to develop the highest potential in the most people possible. A just society is one that makes it possible for all the citizens to exercise the power of practical wisdom in the running of their societies to the degree that they are naturally able to do so. A society that cultivates practical wisdom in the souls of its citizens can avoid the problem of abuses of power that often occurs when rulers are given absolute power and demand blind obedience.

Plato wants his readers to make analogies between his dialogues and their own thoughts, experiences, religious traditions, and national history. Citizens in any society whose laws allow Plato’s dialogues to be read and discussed need to take heed of Plato’s message. They need to avoid abusing the freedom they have; they need to use it to educate themselves about the public good and continually discuss the philosophical questions Socrates discusses so that they can develop practical wisdom and make the judgments necessary to preserve political and intellectual freedom, the highest fruits of any civilization.

Ironically, perhaps, I argue that Nussbaum has made exactly the mistake Plato saw in his fellow Athenians. First, she associates Plato’s philosophy with an extreme reaction against the abuse of freedom he observed in the Athenians. She claims that Plato wanted to replace the open-ended freedom the Athenians enjoyed with an unhealthy intellectual fixation on the “Forms,” leading to a way of life similar to that of Theodorus, who is so fixated on detached mathematical abstractions that he knows nothing about how his neighbors are living. Nussbaum embraces Protagoras’ relativism and defends a certain kind of secular humanism as the most natural and happiest life. Plato’s dialogues show why this kind of secular humanism is both pseudo-philosophy, the mere appearance of wisdom, and will lead to the loss of cultural flourishing.

Plato’s dialogues also imply that the fall of Athens was not inevitable. The Athenians could have learned what Socrates was trying to teach; if they had, they could have avoided many of the mistakes which led them eventually to
lose the war and then to elect a dictator. Their ignorance and arrogance was understandable and often happens in human history. But it is not inevitable; it does not occur by necessity. Human beings can choose to love wisdom rather than power, pleasure or honor. Plato’s dialogues include a great deal of tragedy, so they are not anti-tragic; but they also show readers a way out of tragedy. The Athenians could have avoided tragedy; readers who have the freedom to read Plato’s work can also choose to learn what Socrates has to teach and avoid the worst tragedies and abuses in their own societies. Again, perhaps ironically, Nussbaum’s concept of humanism has dominated liberal politics in the United States long enough to lead to a counter-reaction under the Bush administration. The pendulum has swung from one extreme to the other. The United States has just experienced a milder form of what Plato experienced in Athens.

But what is Socrates trying to teach? What is the way out of tragedy? This is where I present a completely different view from Nussbaum’s. Plato’s dialogues are a unique literary genre both in their form and in their view of the human soul and its education. As a literary genre, the dialogues are divided into three parts. The dialogues represent a scene that appears to be a particular historical incident but is so tightly organized that it focuses instead on universal types of people and the types of arguments they get into, types which could actually occur but did not actually occur in the systematic way Plato presents it. The dialogues are divided into three parts. They begin in the world of imagination and opinion, the middle section turns away from this “cave” toward another view of the human soul and the nature of being, and the third section returns to the world of opinions, but now with the ability to understand it through the light of reason.

The arguments in the first section of each dialogue assume a model of the human soul made explicit in Books II-V of the Republic: the appetitive part of the soul is by far the largest, the driving force behind human behavior. The spirited part tries to keep appetites in check. The so-called rational part directs the spirit in how to maintain harmony in the city and the soul by cultivating the virtues of courage, temperance, and justice. Societies institutionalize this view
of the soul by having three different classes: the ruling class makes all the decisions about how to keep the city and the citizens’ souls in order, the spirited class enforces the rulers’ orders, and the appetitive class provides the goods and services dictated by the rulers. Members of the economic class have to cultivate the virtues of courage, understood as the willingness to suffer and die for one’s country if the rulers decide it is necessary, temperance understood as self-control in eating, drinking, and sex and as agreement to follow what the rulers order, and justice, understood as no desire to change one’s social standing unless the rulers demand it. In the first section, a sophist is using his intellectual talents to defend a way of life motivated by the love of money, status and power.

In the middle section of each dialogue, Socrates presents an entirely different model of the human soul and of courage, temperance, and justice. The Republic Book VI makes this explicit: the philosopher’s soul has an erotic passion for truth, a passion far stronger than his appetites. Since such a soul does not have to be repressing appetites, there is no need for a spirited part of the soul. The philosopher’s soul is a unity: all the soul’s energy is dedicated to the love of wisdom; there is no desire for honor, pleasure, or power. The middle section includes different kinds of visual images, images motivated by a passion for wisdom, represented in the character and way of life of Socrates.

At approximately two-thirds of the way through, the dialogue reaches a climax: the implications of the discussion in the middle section should lead the interlocutors to reject the position in the first third and to recognize an entirely different way of living. In the Protagoras, Socrates is trying to show Hippocrates in particular and the Athenians in general that the kind of dialogue they have just engaged in, a dialogue about how to conduct the dialogue between Socrates and Protagoras, is the only possible way to move toward dialectic. Long speeches and rhetorical contests about virtue and justice will never get to either; they create the appearance of being serious about living well while really functioning as entertainment only, leading citizens to ignore and deny their real responsibilities to the city. In the Republic, Socrates tells
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Glaucion and Adeimantus they have not yet begun to be trained in dialectic; they need to spend many years in school before they will have the training necessary to know how to handle power. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates gives Phaedrus a model of philosophical passion for wisdom that he should then use as the standard by which to judge the sophists who teach rhetoric and the politicians who employ it in the Assembly and the courts. In the *Symposium*, Socrates gives Agathon a model of the kind of spiritual and intellectual development he should pursue, under the tutelage of Socrates, rather than making himself the object of Pausanias’ sexual pleasure or of Alcibiades’ drive for power.

All four dialogues reflect particular examples of the process of education Socrates describes in the Image of the Cave in *Republic* VII. In each case, Socrates is talking to at least one young man who is caught between the two worlds: he has been exposed to the opinions of the other Athenians, who advocate either the pursuit of irrational goals or irrational blind obedience to traditional beliefs, customs, and the dictates of authority figures. In each dialogue, these young men know that Socrates has different motivations; Socrates is trying to lead them out of the cave and toward the light; he wants to activate the power of the human mind in their souls, a power which will enable them to live examined, philosophical lives dedicated to the love of wisdom. In each case, the young men fail to learn what Socrates has to teach, but the readers do not have to fail. There is a way out of the tragedy of Athens; democratic societies do not have to decay into tyrannies.

In each dialogue, Socrates is arguing head-on with at least one other grown man whose character is formed and who is committed to an irrational way of life. Socrates’ philosophical Eros is contrasted with a man who erotically pursues an irrational goal. Each man is trying to gain the trust of the young man; each man wants to be the teacher and mentor for the youth of Athens; each man uses rhetoric to try and persuade the young man to pursue his way of life.

This confrontation between two fundamentally different types of teacher reflects another theme made explicit in the *Republic*: the image of two
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different roads in life, mentioned in Book I when Socrates asks Cephalus to describe the road of life, at the end of Book V when Socrates abandons the road they have been on and chooses the “hard, high road” of the philosopher, and in Book X, when Socrates tells Glaucon he has to choose between two fundamentally different roads in life. In each dialogue, the two adults representing each road also exercise the powers of soul that reflect the road they are on. Readers can observe the difference between philosophical courage and unphilosophical courage, philosophical and unphilosophical temperance, philosophical and unphilosophical rhetoric, philosophical and unphilosophical friendship, philosophical and unphilosophical justice, philosophical and unphilosophical teaching, philosophical and unphilosophical Eros, the way of life driven by a philosophical idea of the Good and the ways of life driven by an unphilosophical idea of the Good.

This basic structure of the dialogues is also a concrete example of the image of the Divided Line. The Divided Line describes four levels of powers belonging to the human soul: noesis, the highest power; dianoia, the powers related to other intellectual activities; pistis, the powers connected to the world of facts; and eikasia, the power of imagination that holds a mirror to the world of facts and makes an image of it. The young men exist at the level of pistis because they have not yet made a commitment to a way of life; they could turn either upward toward the life of the mind or downward toward the life of images. The sophist holds up a mirror to the world around him, notices that the vast majority of people pursue irrational ends, and creates an educational system that uses the powers of dianoia in the service of gaining money, power, and fame. Such men are focused on eikasia, refining and magnifying irrational desires and figuring out how to manipulate and cultivate these desires. They are highly intelligent people, but they have turned their eye of the soul in the wrong direction, as Socrates says in Republic VII. They are three removes from philosophy and the truth. The philosopher’s soul is exercising the power of noesis, always focused on the Idea of the Good before deciding how to act or how to treat his interlocutors. Everything Socrates says and does, his entire way
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of life, is an incarnate example of how the Idea of the Good is manifested in a human life. Socrates uses his intellectual powers, such as the powers of rhetoric, logic, and myth-making, to serve his philosophical passion, his love of wisdom.

There is no need to posit the existence of a world of forms separated from the powers of soul and natural powers that exist and are being activated within the dialogues themselves. The ways of life represented in the dialogues are what courage, temperance, justice, etc., are. Socrates represents the real version of each; the other adults represent the false appearance of each. A philosophically educated person will exercise these powers throughout life, not thinking about or worrying about an afterlife or the existence of another world apart from this one.

So, what position do my books take on “Tragedy and the Philosophical Life?” I show that the characters in Plato’s dialogues who assume human nature is irrational and base their choices on this assumption inevitably experience many different kinds of tragedies. Protagoras is a tragic character because he is blind to the effect of his teachings on his students. In Hippocrates’ case, he might enable Hippocrates to gain status, money and power within the traditional institutions of Athenians society. In Alcibiades’ case, however, he provided one of the brightest young men in Athens the tools to become a tyrannical soul and, ultimately, betray his own city, leading to the destruction of Athens. The “friend” to whom Socrates is retelling the story has the same type of soul as the Athenians at Callias’ house who are observing the debate between Socrates and Protagoras. They are paradigm examples of the “democratic personality” Socrates describes in Book VIII of the Republic. They think merely discussing serious questions is what a free and open society is all about. They do not realize that they needed to develop self-control and a desire to work for the well-being of the city as a whole in order to maintain the stability and freedom they so enjoyed. Glaucon and Adeimantus are tragic characters because they do not get what Socrates is trying to teach them. They do not admit how little they know. Phaedrus is a tragic character because he
does not understand the kind of philosophical Eros Socrates is describing to him in the myth and showing him by living a certain way. In the *Symposium*, readers see that Phaedrus has rejected the love of pleasure as a worthy goal for human life but has replaced it with the love of honor. He has become a timocrat and follows a way of life that is more Spartan than Athenian. Phaedrus is an intermediate type of person whose life comes to a tragic end because of a mistake in judgment about what to live for. The *Symposium* begins with speeches by former students of Socrates, men who had become enthralled with the “philosophical frenzy” in their youth, as Alcibiades points out, but gave it up and chose another, irrational road to travel on throughout their lives. They defend their ways of life, their erotic passions, even using the city’s most sacred texts to defend their secular lives. Agathon is the only interlocutor who is not yet formed, who has not yet made a choice about what to live for; he, too, will make a mistake in judgment and come to a bad end. Alcibiades is the tyrannical soul, the character who most understands Socrates’ way of life and its value and yet rejects it. The other characters are intermediate types who make mistakes in judgments about how to live and fail to recognize how important it is to educate the most talented youth to dedicate their talents to the love of wisdom. They allow Alcibiades to get trained in rhetoric by the sophists, giving him the power to manipulate the Athenians, drive them into a suicidal war and then betray them.

In each dialogue, Socrates’ way of life provides a model for how the fall of Athens could have been prevented. Socrates’ way of life goes beyond ignorance and tragedy. But neither Plato nor Socrates would be arrogant enough to believe they could eliminate tragedy. Given the many, many ways human life is filled with ignorance, vulnerability, and tragedy, tragedy will never end. But philosophy can prevent the worst tragedy, the end of the political and intellectual freedom necessary to educate citizens and give them the opportunity to govern themselves justly and wisely, so they are not forced to obey blindly a tyrannical ruler.
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Nussbaum misreads Plato when she accuses him of arrogantly trying to overcome tragedy in human life. We are all born ignorant, living in the world of the cave, but through dialectical education, we can educate the natural power in our souls, the power of mind (nous), and go beyond complete ignorance and tragedy. Philosophical insight does not consist in a contemplative escape from the world of the cave. The philosopher, when asked, must return to the cave and try to educate those who also want to live the life of the mind. Only then will unnecessary tragedy be avoided and the opportunity to continually develop the love of wisdom be pursued. We will never achieve “perfect” wisdom and evade tragedy; but we are required by our innate desire to seek some kind of transcendence, to cultivate our most sacred natural gift, our minds, and use them to continually choose the better life over the worse, examining and reexamining our lives and the lives of those around us.

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