

CITATION FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF CIVIL
LAW AWARDED TO PROFESSOR MARTHA
NUSSBAUM



Mr Chancellor,

Martha Craven Nussbaum, whom we are honouring today, is the Ernst Freund Distinguished Professor of

Law and Ethics at the University of Chicago, a chair that includes appointments in the philosophy department and the law school. She also holds associate appointments in classics, divinity and political science. The two major areas of Prof. Nussbaum's philosophical work are the normative theory of social justice, where she has developed the 'capabilities approach', an influential theory of social and global justice, and the theory of emotions. She is also a world expert on ancient Greek and Roman philosophy. One particularly attractive and necessary aspect of her work is that she is the intellectual seek-and-destroy antidote to 'Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells'. I should explain perhaps that this is a generic name used in the United Kingdom for a person with strongly conservative political views, who writes letters to the press, usually in a tone of moral outrage. The phrase originated in the 1950s in the *Tunbridge Wells Advertiser*, when the editor insisted his staff pen a few letters, supposedly from readers, to fill space. One signed his letter simply 'Disgusted, Tunbridge Wells'. We shall return to this theme and examine it in more detail shortly.

Martha C. Nussbaum was born in New York City. Her father George Craven was a hardworking self-made man, who rose from modest beginnings to become a partner in a Philadelphia law firm. He

taught her the value of determination and hard work. Her mother, Betty Warren, gave up her career in interior design to become a homemaker. Nussbaum attended school in Bryn Mawr, where she grew to dislike elitism and to question the privileged life of the east coast 'WASP' elite. A brilliant student, she went on to study at New York University, where she studied theatre and classics, and later to graduate school at Harvard, where she switched to philosophy. Her acting skills have been very useful to her in a distinguished career as a lecturer. Her approach, which enthralled undergraduates and general audiences alike, is to dramatize human problems when lecturing about philosophy, illuminating abstract ethical and moral issues through real-life encounters.

During the 1970s she studied with the philosopher G. E. L. Owen, and was encouraged by Bernard Williams, who was at that time a visiting scholar at Harvard, to develop her study of moral dilemmas and the emotions. She has spoken out about the sexual harassment that was commonly suffered by women in academia at the time, and the lack of a family-friendly culture, something which she experienced directly following the birth of her daughter while she was still a graduate student. As the first woman to hold the Junior Fellowship at Harvard, Nussbaum received a congratulatory note from an unnamed senior classicist who suggested that since 'female fellowess' was awkward, she should be called *hetaira*, the ancient Greek word for courtesan, since these were the only educated women allowed to participate in philosophical symposia.

Nussbaum began her teaching career at Harvard, and later moved to Brown University where she taught until the mid-1990s. She established her reputation with *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and*

Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy in 1986. This work explored the theme of human vulnerability, which, as for Aristotle, continues to be a driving issue for our honoured graduand. How do human beings make plans, knowing that life is fragile? Nussbaum proposes that emotions are our way of registering necessary and desirable – though vulnerable – attachments in the world – such as love, and care for children. These questions intersect with political philosophy, she argues, since it is within the control of governments and societies to provide the optimum conditions for the security of individuals for example, in the realm of health care provision and adequate food and water supply.

Martha Nussbaum is one of those rare intellectuals whose work is cited across the humanities and beyond. Her 2010 book *From Disgust to Humanity: Sexual Orientation and Constitutional Law* questions the ‘politics of disgust’ as a valid approach to institutionalised discrimination – and here we return to our putative letter-writer, ‘Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells’. She questions the rationality of using disgust as the basis for constitutional law. Her main subject is the legalized discrimination suffered by gay and lesbian Americans, but she draws parallels with disgust as the historic basis of (among other things) statutes governing racial segregation, caste distinction and anti-Semitism across the world.

Her work therefore addresses and informs debates in many countries around currently-contentious issues. Her ideas have had a significant impact beyond academia in the realm of global campaigns for political justice and social equality. While it is impossible to make an adequate synopsis of her many publications in the brief time permitted here, it is fair to say that her ‘capabilities’ approach to the main

challenges facing humanity today has had significant impact worldwide. During the 1980s, Nussbaum co-wrote a paper with the Nobel Prizewinning economist Amartya Sen on development and ethics, which culminated in their 1993 publication *The Quality of Life*. Through a series of symposia in Helsinki with Sen and other leading economists and thinkers, Nussbaum was inspired to go and live for extended periods of time in India, meeting women's groups and discussing with them the range of issues that affected their lives, such as how to secure land ownership for women, avoiding child marriage, and securing girls' education.

Martha Nussbaum's work developed Sen's idea of capability in the philosophical realm, distilled in her 2011 book *Creating Capabilities: the Human Development Approach*. Questioning whether GDP is an adequate measure of a nation's success, she interrogates what people are actually able to do and be within a society. She proposes central indicators against which national success may be judged in terms of a person's opportunities for: life, health, and bodily integrity; development of the senses; imagination, thought and reason through education; access to play and recreation; material, social and environmental control; access to nature, and emotional health. These ideas have influenced policy-makers and the international community, to the extent that UN Development reports now take these indicators into account. Launched in September 2004, the Human Development and Capability Association, whose members live in 70 countries, promotes research from many disciplines on key problems including poverty, justice, well-being, and economics. Their Past President from 2006-2008 was Martha Nussbaum.

Mr. Chancellor, as the philosopher Bernard Williams once remarked, 'humanity' is a name not merely for a species but also for a quality.' To devote oneself to the study of literature and languages, art and music, philosophy, religion and history, is therefore to be a steward of that quality. Martha C. Nussbaum, whom we are honouring today, is the epitome of a humane humanist. She holds numerous prestigious prizes, including the 2012 Prince of Asturias award for Social Science, and 46 honorary degrees from colleges and universities in North America, Europe, Africa and Asia. It must make for quite a challenge finding wall space to display that number of awards. As of today, we hope that she will find room for one more.

Mr Chancellor, for her distinguished contribution to the study of constitutional law and philosophy, I present Martha Craven Nussbaum for the award of a Doctorate in Civil Law, *honoris causa*.

Helen Berry, 12 July 2013