

# Nussbaum: The Importance of Storytelling and Engendering Compassion for Today's Political Life

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## Abstract

Nussbaum's *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* addresses the importance of compassion in social and political practices, in the face of a rather emotionless (and hence, fragmented and reductionistic) Western political mindset. But rather than crude emotion driven by waywardness and directionless thinking, the compassion she suggests is likened to a reasonable political psychology, which is a sort of empowerment for individuals—it opens avenues for understanding the vulnerabilities even of the most marginalized sectors of the society, therefore, rather than hating them for being the way they are, we can be sympathetic about, say, the external economic and institutional causes that deprive them and that disallow them from achieving their potentials. Without doubt, as demonstrated by the paper, Western history and even our local (Philippine) history is filled with examples about administering populations without compassion, and perhaps Nussbaum's philosophy has a special insight about how to deal with this problem.

**Keywords:** Nussbaum, compassion, intelligence of emotions, Reasonable Political Psychology

## INTRODUCTION

The book *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* is without a doubt an enormous display of the philosophical mastery and proficiency of American scholar Martha Nussbaum (born May 6, 1947), who touches on such a wide variety of contemporary problems ranging from understanding the self, to ethics, to politics and even to social-political psychology, to name a few. What has captivated many



of her readers is her remarkable re-appraisal of the role of emotions in the cognitive life of a human being, what she sees as contributing to intelligent coming and going as well as to one's flourishing. The "intelligence" of emotions, notwithstanding its common usage in Greek thought particularly in Aristotle, is often easily dismissed as irrelevant, or even stifling, in much of contemporary American academic-scientific and socio-political culture; such a phenomenon might also be widespread in the rest of Western society. Nussbaum is one of the few thinkers who bring a fresh perspective on the role of emotions in a world that can only be characterized as overly detached, commercialized, driven by political negativities (ranging from conceit to imagined omnipotence) and replete with all sorts of injustice.

While Nussbaum might have dealt with a wide array of emotions, in this paper we will focus mainly on one sort, which is *compassion*. We attempt an exposition, prompted by our philosopher, that will amplify the notion of a level-headed form of compassion through an education of emotions, one that is needed to conduct the present state of our political life. And this is what the first section *Towards a Reasonable Political Psychology* tries to accomplish.

Inspired by Nussbaum's work, the paper also aims to shed light on the idea that storytelling might help foster cultures in which compassion is cultivated; we are called to engage with tragedies in history that enable us to have a grasp of the life of the other—that the other really has a life and potential, the other whom Western society might have branded as lazy, weak and feebleminded (to borrow a term used by American eugenicists) and always appealing to base emotion and pity, and in the process we might begin to understand that many of the social ills and injustices are actual effects of compassionlessness. With that in mind, section II (*A Culture of Hate...*) and III (*The Filipino Poor....*) will use the available historical data and literature to retell two tragedies. The first one brings to mind the American policy on populations back in the 1920s when the application of eugenics became widespread—and very real atrocities were committed due in part to a quest for utopia (what Nussbaum termed as perfectionist society) and in part to the disqualification of compassion towards the poor, the ones of poor I.Q., the black community, from political practice. The second tragedy will be one close to the heart of the researcher, which is a story of how the Philippines fell apart economically due to

the lack of compassion in governance facilitated by an adherence to an international financial policy that does not consider the welfare of the Filipinos, but only works for the benefit of the local and international elite and the technocrats.

In line with the foregoing, section IV *Nussbaum: Educating by Way of Tragedy* continues to inform the reader about the educational benefits of reading tragic drama even from the Greek and Platonic perspective. Given the right understanding and purpose, tragedy can be a means to further appreciate the other as a potential human agency despite his difficult and undesirable circumstances. A better alternative perhaps to the predominant Western attitude at frowning and cringing from human vulnerability, also noticed by Nussbaum, and a good avenue for reconsidering educated compassion and empowering individuals.

### Towards a Reasonable Political Psychology

The question raised at the beginning of Chapter 8 of *Upheavals* was this:

How, then, is it possible to promote appropriate compassion in such a society [of an American liberal democratic sort], and what would a compassionate society look like? Given that there is reason to think that compassion gives public morality essential elements of ethical vision without which any public culture is dangerously rootless and hollow, how can we make this compassion do the best work it can in connection with liberal and democratic institutions?<sup>1</sup>

Early in the book, Nussbaum has been quite critical about the immediate disqualification of emotions from our most serious human tasks, including that of governance; it is evident from here that we must question the very myopic presupposition of much (perhaps not all) of Western/American politics that in legislation and executing public policy, we must be completely “emotionless,” lest we succumb to unmindfulness and clouded decision making. We have many examples

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<sup>1</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 403.

in history, but this utter lack of compassion which has morphed into hatred of the other, the Undesirable, the incapacitated, has led to injustice of the most inhumane sort; we are prompted to use as an example the eugenical sterilization project in America in the 1920s, as discussed in the next section.

In order to respond to this question in the quotation above, and posturing against the Western “emotionless” view, Nussbaum encourages us rather to look for possibilities in which compassion can be practiced and broadly applied by institutions at a level that is reasonable. We are interested in a mode of practice that does not harbor manipulative, self-serving, biased, partial or prejudicial motivations; if you may, we may call this “reasonable political psychology;” a term Nussbaum would borrow from Rawls.<sup>2</sup> The succeeding paragraphs will be able to elaborate a characteristic of this psychology that solicits the citizen’s ideas, motivations, and imaginations. In other words, citizens who belong to different levels of the social body are called to bring their views to the table and reason with, say, the legislative bodies.

From the start Nussbaum was cautious about what sort of compassion may be deemed as appropriate—for even the most crude, everyday forms of compassion might turn out to be flawed. Perhaps a good example of flawed compassion is when, out of pity, government leaders (or perhaps well- to-do individuals, even celebrities) would dole out monetary or material goods to the poor, and then the latter, due to lack of education and reflective thought, become overly dependent as to cling on to the former for their very survival without making efforts for themselves—this is very much the case in a lot of modern Philippine political practices; this is also a very good way to make oneself popular, well enough so that one gets the vote from the masses whom he gave “monetary assistance” to; or, in the case of TV shows, this ensures high rating. In that case, one’s “seeming compassion” as a governing agent or institution, or whatever personality, is motivated by no other than personal interest and gain. To say the least, this sort of “compassion” is both hypocritical and parasitic.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 402. Nussbaum expands on the Rawls concept as “one that is general enough to win broad approval and yet definite enough to assure us that our conception is not fatally flawed from the point of view of human motivation.” The formation of such is participated in by different levels/classes in the social body, including citizens and mere mortals.

Now, we cannot overstate what the *Upheavals* intended to say, which is to embrace an intelligent use of compassion. Governments attuned to social welfare must indeed exercise compassion in various areas and gaps in the social body where it is called to create equal opportunities to all people and to administer basic services, energy, water, education, even health care, and the like to all citizens, no matter what circumstances they are in. Moreover, part of the motivation is the ideal that governments must treat each human as dignified, even those who are regarded by contemporary society as people occupying the hem, the losing end, of the social hierarchy, as implicated by Nussbaum.<sup>3</sup> There is nothing that can stop even the “least” people from learning critique and ethical responsibility given the right conditions. Administering to the less fortunate can be fine-tuned so as to engender enlightenment, teaching them the basic truth that they are also agents capable of bettering themselves through an imagined becoming. The people themselves are not bereft of ideas, and leaders who listen, who are becoming quite rare, are likely to understand what kind of world the people want to make. This even ties in with the Platonic notion that a just government should perform its *ergon*, or proper function. Hence, a two-way street can be established: “compassionate individuals construct institutions that embody what they imagine; and institutions, in turn, influence the development of compassion in individuals.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, the governing body and the citizens must go hand-in-hand in creating the very venue for imagination of similar possibilities and becomings, and this is where compassion for each other can thrive in a more genuine sense.

Nussbaum discovers that one of the causes of the aversion towards the use of compassion in the public sphere, especially in contemporary American culture, is the general disdain for man’s vulnerability and neediness, which was adopted from earlier on,

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 412.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 405.

perhaps from a particular kind of Stoicism.<sup>5</sup> The Western mind has trouble reconciling human dignity with the so-called neediness of man. It was described most clearly by Nussbaum in this manner, “To admit that a person really can be laid low by life seemed to the Stoics a negation of human dignity, and of the equal worth of human beings.”<sup>6</sup> But rather than following this seeming escapism, Nussbaum offers an alternative Sophoclean view on compassion, which contends that “the basic worth of a human being remains, even when the world has done its worst.”<sup>7</sup> There is basically nothing wrong with offering, on institutional level, the necessary aid and strong sympathy for the dignified individual who has experienced tragedy by natural disaster or by deprivation by unjust elements of society. Intelligent people should not be scared of their own vulnerability. In the first place, philosophers are not gods and will never be.

Widespread in American thought, however, is the utter disregard of any positive use of compassion in many areas of concern, “we are urged to think that any sympathy shown to a criminal defendant on account of a deprived social background or other misfortune such as sexual abuse is, once again, a denial of the defendant’s human dignity.”<sup>8</sup> Let him walk away alone with his chin up, so to speak. But is it really

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<sup>5</sup> The history of Stoicism is rather lengthy if one was to consider the individual contributions of Zeno, Cleanthes, and even Chrysippus from the same school. See Anthony Kenny, *A New History of Western Philosophy Volume I: Ancient Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). “The last major figure in antiquity to have Stoicism as his primary allegiance was the emperor Marcus Aurelius in the second century AD, but the influence of the school’s ideas lived on, and ‘stoical’ has become a common expression to indicate acceptance of misfortune without complaint...Stoicism placed ethics in the context of an understanding of the world as a whole, with reason being paramount both in human behaviour and in the divinely ordered cosmos... Stoic ethics indicated that if a perfectly wise, i.e. virtuous, man saw his child in danger of drowning (say), he would try to save it; but that if he failed he would accept this without feeling distress or pity, and without his happiness being diminished. Since everything that happens is governed by divine providence, his failure must have been for the best, even if he could not understand why.” Prof. R. W. Sharples, “Stoicism,” *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. By Ted Honderich (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, 405.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 406.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

undignifying to admit that one is in pain and in need, especially if such trouble is externally caused? Also prevalent in the American justice system is the restraining notion that we could be treating blacks like children (or worse, soulless animals) if we show any sign of sympathy to their plight. Much can be learned from literature, however. In *Les Miserables*, the natural question incited by Hugo in the reader is whether it was really necessary to incarcerate Jean Valjean that long for stealing bread to feed his sister's dying children, or whether or not he deserves our sympathy because of the harsh conditions in his life, or the miserable condition in which he was placed by the existing social structure. What if we were to admit that such poverty might not even be caused by the poor's lack of vision and initiative (Jean Valjean was able to rise above his miserable state) but is itself an "institutionalized poverty," such as what occurred in the Philippines in the mid 80's when the government succumbed to onerous debt servicing as an economic policy? In truth, as a number of notable economists have perceived, the greatest cause of poverty in this country was the adherence to such financial system. Before we even suggest that Filipinos are poor because they chose to be miserable, weak, and lazy (as is the contempt of the West towards us), or because we are overpopulated (China and India have more occupants per square kilometer in terms of population density), our story needs to be retold for better understanding, and the researcher feels the need to do so in order to foster compassion, but also to put it in a proper perspective. What if the poor in this country deserve every amount of compassion they can be given, because they do strive in the face of *deprivation* by internal and external political forces?

Perhaps with that in the background we are now ready to investigate the effects of the lack of compassion and the necessity of the knowledgeable use of it especially in the area of politics and government. While *Les Miserables* might be fictional, the reader, in the forthcoming, will be supplied with stories drawn from history.

### A Culture of Hate: Compassion, or the Lack of It, and its Consequences to U.S. Population Administration in the 1920's

That negative eugenics found its way to USA and was carried out by enforced sterilization is no longer a secret. A brief tracing of how it happened will be quite informative. The main proponent of eugenics as a science was no other than Francis Galton who later gained popular

support from an array of so-called experts, scientists, psychologists, judicial personalities, many of whom were American. At first, the main goal was to enhance the propagation of the well-born, those humans with better and more likeable qualities and characteristics, physical, mental and the like. Its first appearance made eugenics look like it was some sort of a benign social experiment. But this goal soon became only secondary to what he later termed as the *real* aim of the science which he lays down in his *Memoirs of My Life*: “Its first object is to check the birth-rate of the Unfit, instead of allowing them to come into being, though doomed in large numbers to perish prematurely.”<sup>9</sup> An avid supporter of this kind of mentality was Margaret Sanger who believes, “[Eugenical birth control]...[is] the facilitation of the process of weeding out the unfit, of preventing the birth of defectives or of those who will become defectives” was the best way to carry out Galton’s idea.<sup>10</sup> And everyone was taught that there was no better means to attain the goal of establishing a “thoroughbred race” on earth other than by *enforced sterilization* of the Unfit. History tells us that the general fear that grew out of this was not so much about the increase in population itself but had more to do with the presumption that antisocial behavior and criminality was closely linked to a particular class, that criminality resides in “genes” that were passed on from parent to offspring, as was propounded by American biologist Charles Davenport and others.<sup>11</sup> This was later shown to be lacking scientific evidence. At any rate, Nussbaum appears to be correct in addressing the notion that we become sympathetic only to those who share our likeness, those belonging to our immediate community, but to make matters worse, we become violently hateful to those who do not share our characteristics, racial and otherwise. She had already warned

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<sup>9</sup> Francis Galton, *Memories of My Life* (London: Methuen and Co., 1908), 323.

<sup>10</sup> Margaret Sanger, *Women and the New Race* (New York: Blue Ribbons Book, 1920), 229.

<sup>11</sup> This was later on proven to be mistaken, by science of course. Biologist Thomas Hunt Morgan, in experimenting with the *Drosophila* fly, found out that “genes that occur on the same chromosome are linked...some traits are a result of a single gene, but most are due to several genes working together. Morgan also found that the environment might alter the effects of particular genes on an organism.” Thomas Blumenthal, et. al. and Facing History and Ourselves Foundation, *Race Membership in American History: The Eugenics Movement* (Brookline, Massachusetts: Facing History and Ourselves Foundation, Inc., 2002), 79.



about the dangers of *perfectionist politics*, that which she likens to a Platonic mode of ascending that denies differences—that some people are born with different endowments, for instance; that ascent is one that:

leaves out of account, and therefore, out of love, everything about the person that is not [deemed] as good and fine—the flaws and the faults, the neutral idiosyncracies, the bodily history...It loves only what is of a piece with the ideal good...It is no surprise that this refusal goes hand-in-hand with an illiberal perfectionist politics.<sup>12</sup>

The ill effects of such negative emotions, hatred, contempt, disgust, that are born of social and physiological differences are far reaching. There was even an attempt to conceal the hate by packaging negative eugenics as if it was the most compassionate endeavor in favor of all mankind—presumably it protects us from the “threat” of the Unfit. But as we shall see in what will proceed, there is not even enough reason for us to see them as threats of any kind. They made a “science” out of a delusional presupposition. If any, Nussbaum would have encouraged us to address their neediness. But this was something we totally ignored. Most cases of enforced sterilization were products of social bias, mostly propagated by the elite. As it turned out, the so-called perfect race project became one of the worst and malignant blunders in the history of the United States. And scholars even attempted to conceal the history in a manner similar to how anti-Semites continue to deny the severity of the holocaust even today. If it wasn’t a mistake, why hide it?

Let us examine two cases of enforced sterilization to prove our claim of compassionlessness and hatred rooted in the 20<sup>th</sup> century American eugenics. One case that is historically well documented but relatively unknown even to the academic world is that of Carrie Buck. Buck was reported to have been brought into the *Virginia State Colony for Epileptics and the Feeble-minded* near Lynchburg allegedly for being feeble-minded and promiscuous, although later pieces of evidence make the accusations questionable. This happened in 1924. Three years later, the Colony, under the direction of Dr. John Hendren Bell, took Buck’s case to the Supreme Court to prove that the latter was unfit

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<sup>12</sup> Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, 499.

under their medical standards. They then recommended compulsory sterilization. Finally, on October 1927, under the ruling of Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., the infamous *Buck vs. Bell*, the sterilization was authorized, and Buck underwent an operation that required the cutting of her fallopian tubes. The Colony, the doctors, and the Court turned a blind eye to Buck's life circumstances—her poverty and neediness, her condition as a rape victim, her education, the status of her parents, and so on. Had they been more appropriately compassionate, things would have turned out differently:

A simple check of state records would have revealed that Emma Buck and her husband were legally married at the time Carrie was born, although they separated when she was very young. Unable to support Carrie after she and her husband parted, Emma placed the four-year-old in foster care. The child was sent to live with a Mr. and Mrs. J. T. Dobbs. She did chores for the couple and attended school through the sixth grade. She kept up with her classmates and was promoted every year. According to school records, her sixth-grade teacher characterized Buck's work and behavior as "very good." ... Like most poor children in rural Virginia in the first years of the twentieth century, Buck received a sixth-grade education. After leaving school, she continued to live with Dobbsses and work in their home. She attended church and sang in the choir. In the early 1920s, a nephew of Mrs. Dobbs joined the household, possibly to help with farm work much as Buck helped with the housework. In the summer of 1923, when Buck was about 16, the nephew raped her while his aunt and uncle were away from home... When Carrie Buck became pregnant, the Dobbsses tried to commit her to the Lynchburg Colony by claiming that she had appeared "feble-minded" since the age of ten or eleven. Later they said she was "peculiar" since birth, even though she did not come to live with them until much later. State officials did not question these claims. After all, Carrie Buck fit their stereotype of

a “feebleminded” girl. She was poor, pregnant, and uneducated.<sup>13</sup>

The narration above by *Facing History and Ourselves Foundation* corroborates very well with Paul Lombardo’s findings that question the very circumstances of that ruling against Buck. Lombardo found similar data and concluded that “the real story of the Bucks was much more complex: Carrie herself had been raped; her daughter Vivian was perfectly normal and the case itself was a fraud.”<sup>14</sup>

The case of Elaine Riddick Jessie, an African-American woman who was sterilized without her consent in 1968 at age 14, is another case of injustice done on the poor and the helpless by a state that overemphasizes the difference between the desirables and undesirables and whose hatred, of course, was brought to bear down on the latter. This story and others (amounting to about 7,600 cases in North Carolina) only came into fuller view in recent years after the state of North Carolina made public apology in 2013 and announced that it was to compensate its victims. Here is an excerpt from a *World Magazine* article:

From her dining room in suburban Atlanta, Riddick, 61, points to a half-inch scar above her right eye as she remembers the afternoon in 1967 when her life irrevocably changed. At age 13, Riddick was walking home in rural eastern North Carolina when a grown man from her small town attacked her: Riddick says he raped her and threatened to kill her if she told anyone. She stayed quiet...A few weeks later, while she was picking cotton, Riddick vomited. She thought she had a virus, but when she started gaining weight, her grandmother took her to the county health department. The young girl was pregnant...Instead of launching an investigation, welfare officials recommended doctors sterilize Riddick after she delivered her baby.

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas Blumenthal, et. al. and Facing History and Ourselves Foundation, *Race Membership in American History: The Eugenics Movement*, 195.

<sup>14</sup> Paul A. Lombardo, *Three Generations, No Imbeciles: Eugenics, the Supreme Court and Buck V. Bell* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2008), 104, 116.

They deemed her promiscuous and “feeble-minded.” Without benefit of a review or accountability process, the government declared Riddick at age 13 unfit ever to reproduce again...Her forced sterilization wasn’t an isolated incident. From the 1930s to 1970s, officials from government agencies and eugenics boards across 33 states ordered sterilization for at least 60,000 men, women, and children deemed undesirable or unfit... Reasons ranged from family poverty to a sweeping, ill-defined category of “feeble-mindedness” that ensnared victims of both below-average and above-average intelligence. Eugenics literature decried the idea of these “morons” bearing children.<sup>15</sup>

Yes, North Carolina agreed to pay its victims an amount of 10 million in dollars, but the damages done are already marked in history. There is no assurance that hatred of this kind will not continue; rather, it is clear here is that the wealthy and powerful men and women of America up to this day are still very much infatuated with their utopia, that they simply could not bear the presence and the propagation of “lesser” people with lesser intelligence, lesser financial capability, and even of different racial background.

The plan behind eugenics—driven by Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection (also known as survival of the fittest)—was simple and chilling: Eliminate certain future problems by eliminating certain future people...Germany adopted similar sterilization laws in the 1930s, and the American movement in part inspired Adolf Hitler in his genocidal campaign to exterminate millions of victims based on his notions of racial superiority...Tragically, government officials, scientists, politicians, philanthropists, and physicians—including many Planned Parenthood workers—have been making such decisions for nearly a century...In

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<sup>15</sup> Jamie Dean (2015) ‘Unwanted: Planned Parenthood abortion videos stir fresh controversy, but reproductive violence has a long history in America, with many dark chapters,’ *World Magazine*, 19 September. Available at <https://world.wng.org/2015/09/unwanted> (Accessed 5 December 2019).

the early 20th century, Planned Parenthood founder Margaret Sanger—an ardent eugenicist—infamously referred to lower classes and those she deemed unfit as “human waste,” and she championed mass sterilization of so-called defective classes of people.<sup>16</sup>

As it was suggested in *Upheavals*, if we cannot liberate the mind, if we love only those who are near or as nearly perfect as ourselves (and we are not even perfect, no one is), the culture of hate will continue. We have seen the dangers of a completely compassionless state. Hence, compassion within the right frame of mind is indeed necessary.

### The Filipino Poor Deserve Our Compassion: A Defense by Way of Retelling the Country’s Economic Tragedy

The title of this section tells everything that we must undertake at this point. The common Western attitude in viewing the poor, especially in the third world, the Filipino is no exception, is a very noncompassionate one; it discourages sympathy, emotional connection, but above all that, an improper labeling is applied—very often are the poor mischarged of indulging in a miserable state because of their own laziness (“*Tamad and Pilipino*”) and apparent lack of vision, we are told. This, despite the thousands of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW’s) that are scattered abroad and trying to earn a living; and yet, we remain in the eyes of the West as nothing more than a service economy, a slave economy, an exploitable hospitality, a kind of prostitution. Is this something we have chosen or was it imposed from the outside?

As a Filipino, the researcher has always felt that given the right opportunity and soberness, the industrious, diligent, and imaginative Filipino can arise. The country never runs short of Rizals, Mabinis and even contemporaries of superior intellect. The reason why we thrive is that we are also very resourceful and full of heart. He feels we are not really lazy or dumb; rather, we have been stripped of opportunities, economic, political, and social. Hence, the Filipino deserves compassion too. And as if what has just been claimed is not already obvious, we must justify further why we deserve such compassion, and reflect on how that compassion might possibly bring a spark to the Filipino spirit

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

to overcome his plight. We follow up on Nussbaum's basic insight that the correct compassion brings about a sense of reflexivity, agency, empowerment, and critique.

In a primer titled *Hunger, Corruption and Betrayal*, political economist Alejandro Lichauco retells the economic tragedy, the true reason behind poverty in the Philippines. He begins with the story of how a promising country fell into a state of hunger, reporting that the Philippines was one of the top performing countries in Southeast Asia in the 1950s; even the World Bank, says Lichauco, praised the country for its economic growth in the post war era, with a 7 percent annual rate in production, high level of expenditure, education, transport, and industry.<sup>17</sup> And then the fall follows. From one of the better performing nations it became a nation of hunger:

The mutation from a nation with the best performing economy in the region—"second only to Japan"—to one in the grip of mass hunger is a catastrophe of colossal proportion which can't be ignored by those engaged in development economics and who seek to untangle the mystery of why poor nations remain poor—or why nations once so promising have turned over time to be excessively poor.<sup>18</sup>

The popular view, of course, propagated in the media and even in the academe is that our poverty was caused mainly and entirely by corruption and overpopulation—and yet India, China, and Indonesia, while having similar conditions, have recovered or at least are doing much better.<sup>19</sup> Not that corruption and overpopulation do not cause poverty, because they do contribute, but the point rather is to show the shortsightedness of this popular view—if any, corruption and overpopulation may be symptoms of a bigger social malignancy, and such is what we want to address here. There must be a bigger cause from which it became impossible for our country to recover economically.

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<sup>17</sup> Alejandro Lichauco, *Hunger, Corruption and Betrayal: A Primer on US Neocolonialism and the Philippine Crisis* (Quezon City: Popular Bookstore, 2005), 1.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 2.

Again we can charge this to lack of compassion—on the level of the financing world. Common knowledge in finance tell us that there was a major shift in world banking policy that transpired in 1973, when the US President took their country off the gold standard; in other words, from a fixated exchange rate system under the Bretton Woods agreement of 1944 (in which currencies were pegged on the dollar and reflecting each country's gold reserve), a floating exchange rate system took over, this means that whoever is in control of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the central banks will be given the capability to adjust the interest rates. This is where the IMF controllers took advantage; by manipulating the interest rates, they made sure that member nations will be caught in enormous debt—which increases each year by the way—and they also made sure that the financial resources of these nations will be consigned to debt servicing:

[The so-called] *Philippine humanitarian disaster...* is essentially the story of how the IMF, with the full knowledge and prodding of the US government, enticed, if not coerced, Philippine officialdom to collaborate in undermining the independence and sovereignty of this nation...As reported by an editorial (titled "Fixed the Fund") of the *Asian Wall Street Journal* in that paper's issue of May 28, 2001: "The Meltzer report argues that the IMF undermines the sovereignty and democratic processes of member governments receiving assistance."<sup>20</sup>

This has been the major reason for the poverty in this country. Of course in addition, such system will pave the way for other selfish means of economic enslavement: deregulation, import liberalization, devaluation of our currency, and so on. In other words, poverty is institutionalized, it is a tragedy not unlike that of the disasters which the gods of ancient Greek mythology have brought to bear down on humans whom they hated. And Zeus hated humans at least in the eyes of Aeschylus the playwright. It is not something accidental, or born of Filipino nature, no. Poverty and misery is deliberately imposed upon us.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 6,7.

## Nussbaum: Educating by Way of Tragedy

Under Nussbaum's suggestion, then, we will be able to see the victims of sterilization in the US and the Filipino poor masses not simply as victims, but potential agents as well. A lot can be learned in the area of legislation and public policy, for instance, that laws that violate civil liberties and that justify grave coercion should and must be questioned, even by the people. To give them a voice people should be empowered and educated. Leaders must learn to listen to the voices of the different sectors, and not simply capitulate to bureaucracy or to the whims of the technocratic elite. And one of the effective ways of widening our scope of vision is to tell their stories, which is what we just did in the previous sections. And we really need to listen and perhaps take a Socratic stance and say, I know nothing yet, I was filled with prejudice, pride, and hate, I did not understand. Alluding to Philoctetes's story, Nussbaum tells us that there is so much more to the victims of history than our usual reductionism:

We see him as victim, in the sense that we see his loneliness, his poverty, his illness as things that he did not bring upon himself. But we are also led by the play to see him as capable of activity of many kinds. We hear him reason, we see his commitments to friendship and justice...Seeing his basic human capacities, we are led to admire the dignity with which he confronts the ills that beset him, and notice the yearning for full activity that he displays even in the most acute misery.<sup>21</sup>

The younger Plato could have wanted to censor tragic drama away from the very young. He might have had good reasons to do so. But his coming of age is accompanied by a realization, that an exposure to tragedy might become a fruitful experience. And as of Nussbaum, this can be liberating:

For it is here that the ancient Greeks located the enormous educational importance of tragic drama. Tragedy is not for the very young; and it is not just for the young. Mature people always need to expand their experience and to reinforce their grasp of central

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<sup>21</sup> Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*, 408.



ethical truths. But to the young future citizen, tragedy has a special significance. Tragedies acquaint her with the bad things that may happen in a human life, long before life itself does so; it does enables concern for others who are suffering what she has not suffered...the poetic, visual, and musical resources of the drama thus have moral weight.<sup>22</sup>

Instead of an exposure to the “tragic” stories of enforced sterilizations, from the conception of the laws in the 1920s up to their repealing in the 1970s, American academia seems to have done the opposite, it created an atmosphere of silence, placing the information under rug and away from the memories of the young and the old. And so, scholars today need to find clues from the voices of the people, the sons and daughters of the victims of the sterilization procedures, and much of the historical data will be gained from memories that have not become mainstream. Often, when we read about people denying the holocaust, the usual explanation is that the mind cannot wrap itself around the horror of such event; hence, the denial. But our Nussbaum diagnosis goes beyond that; it appears that deeply ingrained in American historical culture is the denial of the reality of its own shameful mistakes, its pettiness, its own vulnerabilities—people are even afraid to ask, for “how can such a powerful country, the great America, that boasts freedom and democracy commit such atrocity on its own people?” Many Americans probably are afraid of losing reputation as patriots, heroes, “saviors” of the world. But perhaps, on a more serious note, part of the reason for the disregard of scary historical facts, again, is the refusal to accept shame as part of human vulnerability, that leaders can create the wrong laws, that the people can be influenced into having a collusion with the government regarding those mandates, that human solutions may turn out to be worse than the social illness itself, especially when lawmakers are informed by no less than false utopian visions. But they must admit that they made a mistake, and no amount of hiding will erase that mistake and all other mistakes—including the initial close door policy by the US when the Jews who were about to be slaughtered needed all the help they can get, another one of the Americans’ failure to

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 428.

make compassion even in times of emergency.<sup>23</sup> And they should not be afraid to admit, the Filipinos even responded sooner by allowing 1200 Jews to take refuge in the country. We must be a more compassionate race then? And this is not to oversimplify, but to remind us once more, through the exposure to tragedy, that we must learn, because those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it.

## CONCLUSIONS

Thus, far we have reconsidered the possible role of compassion in shaping our social and political existence. There is much to be missed out in political and moral understanding if society continues to deny such possibility. What we really need is a compassion of an educated sort, a healthy rational psychology, one that encourages the governing agents and institutions to do well and serve the community of dignified individuals without depriving them opportunities, and one that cultivates in these individuals the kind of rational agency and the sense of dignity they require to become reflexive, attentive, and with a keen sense of imagined possibilities with fellowmen.

And Nussbaum was quite correct—much can be learned from narrative, from listening to one another's stories. It enables one to traverse the horizon, the universe of the other. Taking time to sit and listen is already a sign of compassion. Better yet, reflecting on the other's tragic story will clear our mind of prejudice. Such practice might prove useful in dispelling much of the hate and contempt that are largely due to unfamiliarity. One's ethical understanding should never fall short of understanding not only one's own flourishing but also the flourishing of others.

We are not likely to attain Utopia and social perfection. But even if we had the chance to do so, we must make sure that we are not driven by the same things that drove the eugenicists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century America

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<sup>23</sup> The Smithsonian Magazine tells us all about this, See Daniel A. Gross, "The U.S. Government Turned Away Thousands of Jewish Refugees, Fearing That They Were Nazi Spies" *Smithsonian Magazine*, 18 November 2015. Available at <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/us-government-turned-away-thousands-jewish-refugees-fearing-they-were-nazi-spies-180957324/>. Accessed January 18, 2023.

to do what they did. We must learn at least to come to terms with social differences, and like Nussbaum, learn not to be afraid of such differences. As a matter of fact, we should not even attempt at establishing a perfect society especially if we are clouded by negativities, especially by unwarranted hatred, by social bias, and selfish interest.

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