

John Owens

Good Shepherd College, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand

ABSTRACT

Martha Nussbaum wants to keep religion out of ethics. She thinks that religion distorts ethical practice, and tends to reduce the process of human decision-making to a calculus that bypasses the uncertainties of life in time. The critique goes back to positions developed by Nietzsche and Lucretius. It seems able to withstand most of the counterarguments that religious believers bring against it, and it bears in on the best examples of religious practice as well as the worst. It largely assumes a Kantian notion of religion, along with the idea of a Kantian autonomous subject, where religion is overall subordinated to ethics. The article tries to show the depth of Nussbaum's criticisms, suggesting that they reach well beyond surface arguments to reflect deep changes that have occurred in Western thought in the last two hundred years or so, especially in the way human identity is understood. In this, the criticisms represent a serious challenge to religious traditions, especially to those of Western Christianity.

KEYWORDS

Martha Nussbaum, ethics, religion

INTRODUCTION

Martha Nussbaum is in favour of ethics (of course) and even in favour of religion. But she is against religion's interfering in ethics. She seems to have two main reasons for this. When it is taken as a moral guide, religion tends to pull human lives out of joint. The gospel injunction to be perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect, seems a formula for neurosis if it is applied to a fallible human life in time. Secondly, religion hinders real decision-making, and prevents people from growing up morally, in that it tends to promote an idea of morality as conformity to the demands of an external authority. People easily fall into self-righteousness when they think they have achieved this. While both these criticisms are found in Nietzsche (Nussbaum also refers them to Lucretius),¹ Nussbaum gives them new life through her inspired treatment of literary examples, exhibiting along the way the significant alle-

¹ Martha C. Nussbaum, "Narrative Emotions: Beckett's Genealogy of Love," in *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 286–313, esp. 306.

giances and fissures that characterize recent Western ethical discussion. Her essay on Samuel Beckett offers a vivid contemporary treatment of the negative effects of religion on moral attitudes and practice.² She deals with larger background issues in her discussions of classical antiquity. These include a striking commentary on the offer of immortality made to Odysseus by Calypso in Book IV of the *Odyssey*,³ and reflections on the sacrifice of Iphigenia from Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*.⁴ I have treated some of these matters in more general terms in an earlier article, which focuses on their significance for Nussbaum's early Aristotelianism.⁵ Also of note is Nussbaum's discussion of Mahler,⁶ where she treats of the influence of European Romanticism on Western notions of the self.

The approach to ethics that Nussbaum herself recommends takes a broadly "hermeneutical" line, settling for correcting and rearranging shallower principles of moral practice in terms of deeper principles. We argue against racism not by appealing to timeless standards of nature or religion, but by showing that racism conflicts with principles that we already hold, which commit us to equal recognition for all. She develops a striking interpretation of Aristotle along these lines, arguing against the received view that Aristotle's ethical approach sets out to show how the demands of a fixed human nature can be satisfactorily fulfilled, as if ethics was first of all about a sort of correspondence. She thinks Maritain guilty of this, seeing him as describing humans as "like pianos, to be tuned to an external and independent (immutable) standard, the standard of human nature established for all time by God."⁷ She interprets Aristotle in a more open-ended and autonomous way, as encouraging us to discover and articulate our humanity for ourselves, in a way that balances all the capacities of the human. The process of addressing this task, which involves an acceptance of the human in all its dimensions, is seen as more important than conformity to a fixed ideal. The Aristotelian position finishes up close to that of the contemporary liberal political ethicist John Rawls in fact, in that ethics is seen as aiming at "wide re-

2 Nussbaum, "Narrative Emotions."

3 Martha C. Nussbaum, "Transcending Humanity," in *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 365–91.

4 Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 32–39.

5 John F. Owens, "Transcendence and the Human," *Colloquium* 33, no. 2 (2001): 121–34.

6 Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 614–44.

7 Martha C. Nussbaum (ed.), *Aristotle's De Motu Animalium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 103.

flective equilibrium.”⁸ Nussbaum quotes Henry Sidgwick approvingly: “What he [Aristotle] gave us … was the Common Sense Morality of Greece, reduced to consistency by careful comparison: given not as something external to him but as what ‘we’—he and others—think, ascertained by reflection.”⁹

I want to look at the central issues in Nussbaum’s engagement with religion and ethics. I will suggest that her criticisms are worth taking seriously, in that they raise questions for religious believers that acutely articulate the pressures Western culture brings to bear on traditional religious belief in the present age.

RELIGION AND ETHICS

The first sort of criticism, that religion pulls human lives out of joint, is set out vividly in Nussbaum’s treatment of Beckett’s *Malloy* trilogy. The background is the rigid and demanding framework of Irish Catholicism, where the inflexible eye of God imposes standards from beyond, and always finds its objects wanting. The eye can be internalized, so that humans themselves carry out a kind of surveillance on behalf of the divine. The result is a feeling of permanent failure at meeting the one standard that matters. The only alleviation is hope for “succour,” or a “merciful waiving of just punishment …”¹⁰ Even this needs constant renewal, with every worship service beginning with a call for mercy and forgiveness. These characteristics of Beckett’s religious world show the difficulty of integrating religious ideals of perfection into a life lived in time. Bodily limitations are no longer seen as the natural background of the human condition, but easily become objects of loathing and disgust. There is no possibility of rejoicing in the human condition in itself. Nussbaum even suggests that an absence of joy in the finitude of human life is *evidence* that a religious viewpoint is in play.¹¹ She sees the protagonist of Beckett’s *Malloy* as charting the course of one who begins in religion like this, but finally realizes he will never get free of the need for forgiveness. He concludes that the only release worth seeking is not from imperfection and sin, but from the religious conception of life itself. As Nussbaum puts it, “we can be redeemed only by ending the demand for redemption.”¹²

Nussbaum’s second main criticism of religion’s interfering in ethics focuses on the point that for a religious perspective, the ethical task often comes

8 Nussbaum, *Aristotle’s De Motu*, 105.

9 Henry Sidgwick, *Methods of Ethics*, 6th ed. (London: MacMillan, 1901), xix. See Nussbaum, *Aristotle’s De Motu*, 105.

10 Nussbaum, “Narrative Emotions,” 299.

11 Nussbaum, “Narrative Emotions,” 309

12 Nussbaum, “Narrative Emotions,” 305.

down to identifying an external moral good or moral law, and conforming one's behaviour to it. It does not matter whether the identification takes the Platonic form of a vision of original patterns, or the Christian form of a list of fixed commandments. When in this frame of mind, moral agents feel they have penetrated beyond the ambiguities of the human situation to uncover the source of morality itself, so that nothing more is required than obedience to what they have discovered. As a consequence, ethical decision is reduced to a technical exercise, where we fit our conduct to an absolute standard. Once we achieve this, we tend to think we are in the right, and can confidently proceed with whatever action is prescribed.

Nussbaum takes an example from Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, where the religious seer claims that Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia is required if there is to be a favourable wind for the fleet.¹³ While Nussbaum is critical of Agamemnon's agreeing to the dreadful deed, the criticism is not directed in the first place at the action itself, but rather at the attitude Agamemnon adopts as he sees the business through. Nussbaum (along with the chorus of the play) accepts that people are sometimes forced into tragic decisions, where they incur guilt whatever they do, and it is possible that Agamemnon finds himself in such a situation. His fault lies rather in his setting his face against the natural human feelings and attitudes that play into the situation. All that matters for him is that his action is justified, and once this is settled, he proceeds without further thought, carrying his daughter to the place of sacrifice as if she were no more than an animal. In this he refuses to enter the messy ambiguity of the human, with its associated suffering. Without a thought, he sheds most of his humanity so as to carry the decision through. The real immorality is this priggish refusal to give the matter further thought. Nussbaum defines her own approach in opposition to that of Agamemnon, seeing the good human agent as one who is open to all the suffering of life's tragic tensions, and who realizes that guilt cannot always be avoided in a world where no one comes through with hands entirely clean. A good ethical approach helps humans survive in such a world, while retaining their humanity. She thinks that Aristotle offers such an ethics, in that he concentrates on decisions made within a temporal horizon, without appeal to a transcendent standard. His ethics aim at developing the sort of spontaneity and flexibility that enable humans to live among the tensions of temporal life without trying to avoid them. For Nussbaum, Aristotle promises "a flexible immersion in the 'adventure' of living."¹⁴

13 Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, 32–39.

14 Nussbaum, "Narrative Emotions," 290.

Nussbaum believes that the very nature of human ethical choices requires that they be bound up with temporal conditions like this. Virtues like courage or loyalty help us to cope with situations where we precisely lack the sort of vision that religious viewpoints (which include the position of Plato) recommend. For Nussbaum, the attempt to bypass vulnerability and uncertainty is in fact an attempt to escape the human. One of her most striking discussions of this point concerns the offer of eternal life made by the goddess Calypso to Odysseus, that he stay with her on her island to be happy forever, and forego the rest of the perilous journey home to his wife, to grow old with her, and eventually die.¹⁵ In fact Odysseus turns down Calypso's offer, in favour of an outcome that is risky and uncertain. Nussbaum thinks his choice shows a commitment to the human, the space where bodily limits and ambiguities, for all the suffering they involve, constitute the vulnerable background of human identity. Nussbaum remarks that for all its supposed insufficiencies, such a life is interesting in a way that the sort of divine life offered by Calypso is not. A broadly Aristotelian ethics is aimed at showing us how to cope with the tensions of such a life in time.

Nussbaum therefore regards any moves to introduce religion into ethics as attempts to escape what is properly human. We bypass the vulnerabilities of time, and transfer our hopes to the beyond. One of the consequences of this aspiration is that temporal things tend to be seen as secondary. Nussbaum is critical of the view of Dante, that the loss of a loved child, say, is "nothing in the context of eternity, where all losses will be made up."¹⁶ The qualities that attach themselves to this view, mandarin calm, possible irony, a refusal to be bowed, start to look like ways of keeping our distance from the human itself. A recent article on Nussbaum refers to the foreword written by Francois Mauriac to Elie Wiesel's *Night*, where Mauriac, the Christian believer, considers what he might have said as a Christian to the young author (Mauriac could not in fact bring himself to say it). He would have said that "(w)e do not know the worth of one single drop of blood, one single tear." And he concludes: "All is grace. If the Eternal is the Eternal, the last word for each one of us belongs to Him."¹⁷ It does not occur to Mauriac that this might not be good news for the human, and could be seen as robbing it of any real importance, and of its deepest identity.

15 Nussbaum, "Transcending Humanity," 365–91.

16 Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 589.

17 Francois Mauriac, "Foreword" to *Night*, *The Night Trilogy* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972) 7–11, esp. 11. See Martin Kavka, "Judaism and Theology in Martha Nussbaum's Ethics," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31, no. 2 (2003): 343–59, esp. 351.

Nussbaum's attack on the Western ethical tradition has its antecedent in Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, where Nietzsche argues for a recovery of the Greek tragic perspective, and a repudiation of the Socratic tradition of ultimate rational harmony.¹⁸ Plato's Socrates thinks that if we can enter the ultimate timeless order of things, and identify with it, we can leave bodily concerns largely behind. He is ironic towards the body and its fears, so that he is not really identified with them. He makes a joke about his friends' not being able to catch him, to bury him, as if it is not his real self that dies.¹⁹ This attitude privileges a distanced relation towards the temporal order, in that temporal things are regarded from the viewpoint of eternity. While this attitude has been much admired in Western history, the Nietzschean critique sees it as founded on a repudiation of the human. Nietzsche and Nussbaum want us to rediscover our fundamental temporality, holding that we might then find possibilities of love that are suppressed so long as we cling to a non-temporal foundation, or an aspiration to rise beyond the temporal. If we are to manage this, we have to keep religion out of ethics.

DEBATING THE POSITIONS

Believers can of course reply that these arguments focus on historical cultures where the religious impulse has gone wrong or become distorted. They can argue that the picture changes once the focus shifts away from something like Beckett's Irish Catholicism, to more benign examples of religious belief and practice. They can also point out that religious impulses sometimes lead people *into* the messy and dangerous business of temporal life. An interesting classical example is Virgil's Aeneas, who is moved by religious reasons to begin the perilous journey to found a new city. The episode with Dido, where he is tempted to abandon the quest in favour of a settled happiness, is a striking reversal of Calypso's offer, in that a religious relation to the beyond urges Aeneas away from static happiness, to continue the dangerous journey.²⁰ A similar sort of reply can be given to the accusation of priggishness that Nussbaum sees exemplified in the story of Agamemnon (and even more strongly in the *Antigone* of Sophocles),²¹ where an agent's sense of acting for the Good leads to self-righteousness. Religion often inveighs precisely

18 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

19 *Phaedo* 115c. *Plato: Complete Works* ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 50–100, esp. 98.

20 Virgil, *Aeneid*, bk. iv, in Virgil, *Elegies, Georgics, Aeneid*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, revised G. P. Goold (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999) 1:422–71.

21 Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, 51–82.

against this sort of attitude, as with the gospel story of the Pharisee and Publican, or the Jewish prophetic recommendation that hearts be broken rather than garments torn. One thinks of the death of Christ himself, which shows no trace of Socratic irony, but is filled with the horrors of life in time. Nussbaum recognizes that some Christian thinkers, like Augustine, powerfully articulate the neediness of the human.²²

We should not however underestimate the power of the post-Nietzschean critique, which holds that even at its best, religion as traditionally understood is damaging to the human, and takes it away from the temporal conditions that are its native element. It is not hard to imagine answers it can offer to the first line of religious defence. Even the most benign versions of traditional Christianity see temporal life as a kind of preparation for a better state, implying that humans are made for something better than the vulnerabilities and ambiguities of life on earth, so that in the end, the latter are seen as having secondary importance. The critique can agree that in a case like that of Aeneas, religion can move believers to address a vulnerable and ambiguous future. But it would insist that the interest of religion in cases like this reduces to that of a kind of catalyst for earthly ventures. The example does not show it as being in itself an interesting or fitting goal for humans. If Aeneas is moved by religious reasons, the immediate object of the quest is a human project, the founding of a city, and the interest of the story is surely bound up with the uncertainties that beset a temporal project, and not with the religious convictions as such. Fortunately for Virgil's story, while obedience to the "beyond" carries Aeneas from Troy to Italy, it does not carry him beyond the human itself. Its interest is limited to its function as an impetus for human stories that take place in time. Nussbaum notices this sort of pattern in controversy with Robert Adams. She remarks on how much practical agreement there is between Adams' religious view of the nature of ethics and her own autonomous view. She thinks however that this agreement is a sign "that the transcendent Good does less ethical work, and autonomous ethical judgment more work," than Adams generally recognizes.²³

A further point can be made here, that while historical Christianity could have developed an ethic that remains within temporal horizons, usually it has not made much use of this possibility. More often it has commended a Socratic path, where martyrs go to their deaths unconcerned, fortified by a faith that places them beyond earthly concerns. In this, the tradition has

22 Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 527–28.

23 Martha C. Nussbaum, "Transcendence and Human Values," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 64 (2002): 445–52, esp. 445.

moved away from the image of its founder on Calvary, back towards the Socratic ideal of an ironic distance from bodily life.²⁴

Some believers try to take the case further, and argue that a relation to the divine opens up possibilities of human perfection that could not otherwise exist. Robert Adams proposes St. Francis and Gandhi as examples of the divine intruding into human life in a way that enhances it, with results that show new and higher possibilities for the human.²⁵ In a review of Adams' book, Nussbaum sees Adams' choice of Gandhi as unfortunate, given that whatever his virtues, Gandhi seems to show the worst side of religious ethics, for example a self-centred preoccupation with asceticism, diet, and sexuality, while treating his wife as a kind of servant. He sleeps with young girls to test his chastity, never considering the relation from their point of view. Nehru explicitly attributes Gandhi's complacency about poverty to his religious outlook, according to which "transcendence of this world is the important thing."²⁶ Nussbaum concedes that these negative aspects were a substantive part of Gandhi's appeal, in that the nation needed something extreme, if it was to be jolted into a common awareness at a time of crisis, and that the more realistic and balanced Nehru could never have united India in the same way. But on the moral level, Gandhi illustrates the fundamental point that when it interferes with ethics, religion distorts the human, and does not enhance it.

The believer might here resort to a different line of attack, suggesting that Nussbaum's view of a good human life is simply non-religious in the end, so that it lacks any affinity for the supposed goods that a religious commitment could offer, and is understandably against religion's interfering in ethics. There is something in this argument, though probably not as much as the believer wants. Nussbaum is generally aware that her position relies on a particular understanding of religion, and that this might give her argument a circular quality. She raises the possibility that she and Adams are "talking past one another."²⁷ She has however her own religious affiliation, having converted from the Episcopalian Christianity of her childhood to a version of reformed Judaism. The latter religious commitment owes a lot to Kant, with a focus on the autonomous moral subject, and a tendency to subor-

24 An example is Thomas More's wonderful remark at the foot of the scaffold, "see me safe up; and as to my coming down, let me shift for myself." William Cobbett, *Cobbett's Complete Collection of State Trials*, vol. 1, (London: Hansard, 1809), 396.

25 Robert Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 56.

26 Nussbaum, "Transcendence and Human Values," 450.

27 Nussbaum, "Transcendence and Human Values," 451.

dinate properly “religious” elements to this.²⁸ She reports a striking discussion with a rabbi about the incident in the Book of Genesis where Abraham is commanded to sacrifice his son Isaac. Nussbaum asks whether God could be seen as having acted rightly in the scene, and concludes, “I firmly believe that he did not.” She thinks that the test to which Abraham is subjected is not in fact a test of religious obedience, but a test of Abraham’s autonomous commitment to the moral law, a test he conspicuously fails, in that he “chooses obedience over morality.”²⁹

Because the moral law speaks for itself, and its performance is necessarily a work of freedom, God’s interference is either superfluous, reinforcing a law that we already know, or it is bad, because it encourages us to break the law. Nussbaum’s position is all the more striking in that she does not see morality as beginning in Kantian fashion with a categorical imperative, where a command comes to us from beyond (implying perhaps an ultimate theological origin, as Arthur Schopenhauer notes),³⁰ but as going back to a developing agreement on how humans should live. Once reached, however, the conclusions of such an agreement are sacrosanct, and if God has a part, it is to affirm our autonomy and challenge us to enter a genuine process of ethical reflection. Nussbaum sums up her view of God’s role in this process with a comment on Mahler’s Second Symphony text, where God is not seen so much as the traditional creator, but as “the one who calls the creative person to self-expressive action.”³¹ Properly “religious” practice is therefore subordinated to the ethical. Humans are made for an interesting life in time that involves real decisions in face of uncertain outcomes. An aspiration towards a timeless security is a desire for a place where humans are not really *themselves* any more.

THE CRITIQUE OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

The specific theological consequences of Nussbaum’s critique are apparent in her treatment of Augustine and Dante in *Upheavals of Thought*. She respects both thinkers, acknowledging their remarkable articulations of the place of the human in face of the beyond. They are more attentive than many Christian thinkers to the conditions of life in time. In particular, they allow feelings of neediness back into human identity, opposing Platonic or Stoic tendencies to

28 Martha C. Nussbaum, “Judaism and the Love of Reason,” in *Philosophy, Feminism and Faith*, ed. Ruth E. Groenhout and Marya Bower (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003) 9–39, esp. 10.

29 Nussbaum, “Judaism and the Love of Reason,” 16.

30 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Basis of Morality*, trans. Arthur Brodrick Bullock (London: Swan Sonnenschein and Co., 1903), 104.

31 Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 635.

exclude these from the human as weaknesses that are simply to be overcome. Nussbaum points, however, to a number of difficulties that still characterize religious positions even when expressed at their best, and which seem to reach back to the very fundamentals of religious belief.

In the first place, there is the charge noted above, that because religious positions lay claim to a view of human affairs that goes beyond the triumphs and reverses of temporal life, temporal things are not to be taken completely seriously. The temporal is at best a prelude to something greater, which will be more satisfactory and more real than anything we know. Nussbaum sees this pattern reflected in Augustine's view of the value of our feelings for other people. While he rehabilitates such feelings as part of the good life, Nussbaum notes that their ultimate focus is not on the other person as such, but rather on "(t)he deep need of all ... for salvation." A similar qualification applies in Augustine's view even to Christ, whose feeling for other human beings "focuses on the impediments to their salvation."³² As Nussbaum notes, real individuals—especially the parts of another person that are not saved, the lovable weaknesses that are nonetheless part of them—seem overlooked. It is as if the act of love is always directed towards God, and not really towards other people, so that people function at best as an "occasion" for practising the love of God.³³ This reflects the fact that when considered in themselves, earthly things are always secondary.

The ultimate insignificance of earthly things shows itself in a different way with the consequences of the doctrine of original sin, the view that all people, whatever their state of life, are born into a hereditary fallen condition. This is often presented as a comforting doctrine, and Nussbaum recognizes its promise, acknowledging that it is good that people be aware of their own guilt, as well as that of others, and that they recognize that in a fundamental sense, all are alike. But as Nussbaum points out, the idea of a community of hereditary guilt also tends to lessen the importance of the actual deeds that divide people into good and bad. Whatever the state of evildoers, and whatever they have done, the original sin doctrine presents them as always more like us than unlike, because we all belong to the one community that fell from grace in the garden. "The idea that in Adam we all sin is surely intended to compromise the idea that our engagements and choices in this world are at the core of who we are."³⁴ Nussbaum remarks that the doctrine encourages us to include a Jew like Hannah Arendt, fleeing at the start of the Second War, with her tormentors in

32 Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 543.

33 Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 550.

34 Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 551.

a single community.³⁵ She thinks that Jews manage to retain a higher sense of moral agency here, in that they simply “blame the bad and praise the good,”³⁶ without seeing any need to reduce both to a deeper common denominator.

Religious traditions, including Christianity, often try to maintain a both-and approach here, claiming to promote the interests of justice on earth, as well as the need for salvation. But Nussbaum’s discussion questions whether this can be done. She shows the degree to which traditional categories have been outflanked by currents of thought following Nietzsche, that ask simply whether we are prepared to judge human things in their own historical terms, or not. A (Nietzschean) ideal of “loyalty to the earth” plays a part here, a willingness to enter fully into the tragedies and triumphs of temporal life, and not to see them as provisional, where they are relegated to the sort of space where they can become a possible target for irony.

This sort of criticism also extends to the way traditional religious attitudes see the place of discussion and dissent. As noted above, Nussbaum rates the process of ethical discussion very highly. Her view of Aristotle moves away from a position that begins with a fixed view of human nature, towards an interpretation where common discussion on the shape of a good human life plays a much bigger part. By contrast, religious traditions see themselves as upholding a final view of things, for example that there is a consummation where good triumphs and evil is defeated. While such traditions might commend people’s personal searches for the truth, they inevitably measure the results against the broad normative conclusions that they regard as prescribed by eternity itself. Major denominations have made progress here, and have come a long way from the anger Augustine tended to feel against heretics.³⁷ But even when Christianity has learned to tolerate other beliefs, the fact that it considers itself to be in possession of a final view, means that it cannot take opinions it considers wrong fully seriously. In her discussion of Dante, Nussbaum notes that individuals are free only “to be ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect.’”³⁸ The search is fully affirmed only if it leads to the right result, and in view of this, the main encouragement offered to human subjects is to “yield your will before the authority of the church.”³⁹

Nussbaum takes this critique a stage further, noticing how traditional religious belief sits uneasily with the kind of moral subject that has become an ideal for Western history since the time of European Romanticism. In face of

35 Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 553.

36 Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 551.

37 Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 548.

38 Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 581.

39 Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 555.

the restless, curious modern subject, the very fact of a final answer can look like a betrayal of the human, a desire to confine it to a *stasis* that contradicts its nature, given that the life of such a subject consists precisely in its moving beyond settled states. Nussbaum notes that while in the garden, so long as they were good, the first parents “were not curious or striving.”⁴⁰ Religious belief wants people to recognize that their hunger for experience and its accompanying curiosity are secondary things, which should be stilled once the truth is discovered. In as much as humans aim at truly independent action, Augustine holds that they should be “ashamed.”⁴¹ Such views are regarded as confirming the Nietzschean criticism that we will never come to love or affirm temporal life until we get rid of the urge to see it in relation to something timeless that exists beyond it and judges it. Nussbaum describes her own preference for Judaism in just these terms, that it “draws close to Romanticism in its insistence on finding the worth and meaning of a life within history, in its choices and striving in this life.”⁴² She sums up this aspiration in her chapter on Mahler: “What is being said, then … is that the reward of a life of striving and love is to have that life.”⁴³

THE KANTIAN NATURE OF THE CRITIQUE

As noted above, a conservative religious critic can focus on the Kantian nature of Nussbaum’s critique, and question whether Nussbaum is *really* talking about religion any more. Classic Christian approaches to religion associate it with piety, the attempt to cultivate an appropriate relationship towards those who stand behind our entire identity, in particular, gods, fatherland, and parents.⁴⁴ By contrast, Kantian approaches are suspicious of any attempt to give these relations a particular moral status, given that the relations are contingent, and no moral injunction can follow directly from a relation that is contingent. Instead, they try to deal with them under a more general ethics of justice or friendship. In this spirit, a recent writer argues that the only duties children owe to parents are the duties of friendship, assuming they are still friends with the parents.⁴⁵ Nussbaum herself has a late essay on patr-

40 Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 555.

41 Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 555.

42 Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 641.

43 Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 639.

44 Cf. for example, Cicero, *Two Books on Rhetoric De Inventione*, II, 66 or Thomas Aquinas, *ST* II-II, 101.

45 Jane English, “What Do Grown Children Owe Their Parents?” in *Vice and Virtue in Everyday Life*, ed. Christina Sommers and Fred Sommers (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 682–89.

riotism that for all its nuance, tends to reduce the virtue to a general concern for justice, and encourages support for the just enterprises of one's own country as a way of furthering this.¹ Similarly, a Kantian approach to religion deemphasizes the traditional sense of absolute dependence on God, and regards belief in God more as a way of articulating the full sublimity of the moral law. Nussbaum's remarks on prayer are instructive. After stating that she does not believe in a personal God, or in an afterlife, she says that she sees prayer not as seeking access to divine help, but rather as sharpening and focussing one's inner moral energy, and therefore realizing more fully one's ethical autonomy. A focus on God helps us access ethical resources of ours. "I think that if we are ever to do right, the power to do it has to come from us."² One can ask whether the result is really *religion*, in that the focus is very much on ethical activity, and religion seems reduced to a means of performing this more effectively. Nussbaum is aware of such misgivings. She insists that she sees religion as having more than just an "instrumental" function, pointing out that the imaginative and emotive acts of ritual are "intrinsically valuable human acts, acts expressive of moral dedication, of fellowship, of longing for justice,"³ so that religion has a value in itself. But if this takes religion beyond the "instrumental," it does not seem to take it very far beyond it. Tellingly, the last word remains with the autonomous moral subject.

The way is therefore open for Nussbaum's religious opponent to dismiss her criticisms of religion's intrusion into ethics by saying that she has effectively left traditional religious concerns behind. Her distaste for religious interference in ethics goes back to an understanding of human autonomy that has effectively *replaced* religion, showing perhaps that traditional religious belief is simply not compatible with a Kantian ethical-religious approach. I think it would be a pity if this were taken to be the last word on the matter. All the terms in the discussion are disputed, and it is not that Nussbaum has overlooked the nature of religion; rather she is contesting it. At very least, her approach to questions of religion and ethics points to profound shifts in Western understanding of the nature of religion itself, which have taken place over the last two centuries. In this she offers a challenging new focus both for supporters and critics, as they address the religious and theological task of articulating the relation between the human and the divine in the contemporary age.

46 Martha Nussbaum, "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism," in *For Love of Country?* ed. Martha Nussbaum and Joshua Cohen (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 3–20. The basic direction of Nussbaum's reflections here is in considerable tension with that of her earlier work. Cf. Owens, "Transcendence and the Human," 126–28.

47 Nussbaum, "Judaism and the Love of Reason," 33.

48 Nussbaum, "Judaism and the Love of Reason," 27–28.