In November, Martha C. Nussbaum, the University of Chicago’s Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics, was awarded the Kyoto Prize in Arts and Philosophy for achievements that include developing the Capabilities Approach, a measure of global welfare that focuses on human capabilities rather than only on economic growth. The honor, bestowed annually by Japan’s Inamori Foundation but given only once every four years in the Thought and Ethics subcategory, is among the most significant international accolades for scholarly work and is widely regarded as the most prestigious award in fields that are traditionally not recognized with a Nobel Prize.

Nussbaum—a world-renowned philosopher who was also chosen to deliver the 2017 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities on May 1 (see box, p. 19)—donated a portion of the 50 million yen (about $472,000) that accompanied her Kyoto Prize to the Law School and the University’s Department of Philosophy, where she is also appointed. The gift will create a financial award designed to encourage law-and-philosophy scholarship among graduate students.

At the 10-day event in Kyoto in November, Nussbaum—who has earned international acclaim for her work on moral and political theory, emotions, human rights, social equality, education, feminism, and ancient Greek and Roman philosophy—delivered several talks, including a commemorative lecture, “Philosophy in the Service of Humanity.” A portion of that lecture is excerpted below. Both the excerpt and photos are published courtesy of the Inamori Foundation.
Near the start of Plato’s famous work *Republic*, as the characters quarrel about how to define justice, Socrates reminds them: “Remember: it is no chance matter we are discussing, but how one should live.” Political philosophy, as practiced in the Western tradition and also in the traditions of East Asia, South Asia, and Africa, has always been a practical discipline, seeking to construct a theoretical blueprint for just and decent lives in a world full of division, competition, fear, and uncontrolled catastrophes. In this lecture I hope to provide some reasons for thinking that philosophy continues to play an important role as we work together for a better world. I’ll then propose some criteria for valuable philosophical work on urgent human issues.

First, why do we need philosophy? Most of the world carries on without it. In discussions of domestic priorities, philosophical theories of justice have received at least some respectful attention from politicians and economists. Thus John Rawls’s theory of justice is known, in at least its main outlines, to leaders in most Western countries, and the ideas of Jürgen Habermas about democratic discourse are well known in Europe at least, and have influenced at least the aspirations of the public debate. The Utilitarian views of 19th-century thinkers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, though mostly misunderstood by today’s economists, have a vast influence on that profession all over the world.

When we turn to the global arena, however—to debates concerning welfare, human rights, and how to compare the achievements and quality of life of different nations—things are otherwise. Economists hold center stage, and philosophers, until very recently, were utterly ignored. . . . This neglect is new. Early economists such as Adam Smith were themselves philosophers. Even much later, great economists such as John Maynard Keynes and Friedrich Hayek took a very keen interest in philosophy. Today, the disconnect is almost total.

Of recent winners of the Nobel Prize for Economics, only Amartya Sen, with whom I have been privileged to collaborate, is also a philosopher. And, as I recorded in my acceptance speech for the Inamori Ethics Prize last year, even students and supporters of Sen frequently neglect philosophy when they consider how to forward or fittingly honor his ideas. I note that the great Japanese economist Kotaro Suzumura is a wonderful exception: he has continuously fostered the intersection between the two fields through seminars for younger scholars and in his own distinguished work. His younger colleague Reiko Gotoh, now a leading economist in her own right, is another exception: she has organized conferences and books dedicated to exploring these interactions, and she plays a pivotal role in the Human Development and Capability Association, an association dedicated to bringing philosophical insight to bear on the problems of development economics. (Amartya Sen and I are the two founding presidents of this association, but the real work has been done by a group of younger scholars within which Gotoh is prominent.)

Why, then, is philosophy needed in debates about global welfare and inequality? It is useful to start by describing what development economics was like without philosophical input. For many years, approaches to poverty in the international development and policy-making world were obtuse in human terms. They focused on economic growth as the primary goal of development, and measured quality of life simply by looking at gross domestic product per capita. That crude measure, of course, did not even take distribution into account, and thus was utterly useless in confronting nations with a lot of poverty and high rates of inequality. And it was actually worse than useless, because it gave high marks to nations that contained huge inequalities, encouraging people to think that such nations (for example South Africa under apartheid) had done things right.

Moreover, as that example shows, the GNP approach also failed to take cognizance of other aspects of the quality of life that are not well correlated with economic advantage, even when distribution is factored in: aspects such as health, education, and gender and racial justice. And once again, by suggesting that things were well done when nations increased their GNP, it positively distracted attention from these factors.
GDP, in short, eclipsed what really matters for people, which is the ability to lead lives that they value. As the late Mahbub Ul Haq, the distinguished Pakistani economist who inaugurated the UN Development Program’s Human Development Reports, wrote in 1990, “The real wealth of a nation is its people. And the purpose of development is to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy, and creative lives. This simple but powerful truth is too often forgotten in the pursuit of material and financial wealth.” …

More needs to be said, then, about what type or rather types of philosophy can really help the progress of humanity.

Income and wealth are not adequate proxies for ability to function in many areas. They are especially bad proxies for social respect, inclusion, and nonhumiliation. Even if we equalized wealth and income completely, that would not get rid of stigma and discrimination. There are some goods, moreover, that might be completely or largely absent in a society in which wealth and income are both reasonably high and pretty equally distributed. Such a society might still lack religious freedom, or the freedom of speech and association. Or it might have these and yet lack access to a reasonably unpolluted environment.

It was in response to these ethical deficiencies that the Capabilities Approach was born. Drawing insight from Aristotle and from the British socialists T. H. Green and Ernest Barker, Sen and I argued that the key question development needs to ask is, “What is each person able to do and to be?” Capabilities are defined as the substantive opportunities people have for valued choices. …

My well-known Capabilities List is a provisional attempt to supply this ethical content, saying that the protection of ten central capabilities, up to a minimum threshold level, is necessary for any society that is going to claim to be even minimally just. I connect this threshold to the idea of human dignity, saying that only the protection of these ten capabilities gives people lives worthy of the (innate and inalienable) human dignity that all possess. I shall not discuss the contents of the list here, but I simply note that it is humble and revisable, and that ample room is left for each nation to specify its thin content in accordance with its history and circumstances. More recently, I have also extended this approach to address the entitlements of nonhuman animals.

From this account of my theory of justice it is possible to get a sense of why philosophy matters in the development debate. But justice is not the only philosophical issue development practitioners need to consider. They need, as well, to develop sophisticated and philosophically informed accounts of other key notions well treated by philosophers, such as: the nature of freedom; the meaning and significance of ethnic and religious pluralism; the nature of human welfare and happiness; the concepts of desire, preference, and emotion. There is also the overarching metaquestion about how one ought to attempt to justify an ethical or political theory (for example whether by seeking some indubitable foundation, as Plato thought, or by seeking the greatest fit and coherence among all the contending concerns, as John Rawls thought). We will not make progress unless we continually wrestle with all of these large questions, and economics, as I’ve said, has an unfortunate tendency to seek premature closure so that mathematical sophistication can take its happy course.

However, it is not enough to say, “The world needs philosophy.” For philosophy takes many forms, some of those not conducive to a useful global dialogue about the enhancement of human welfare. To the task of supplying some norms for my own profession, I now turn.

II

Philosophy is many things. There are many world philosophical traditions, and in each there are different, usually opposing currents. More needs to be said, then, about what type or rather types of philosophy can really help the progress of humanity. In this section of my lecture I shall set out five criteria for philosophical work that can be truly helpful.

1. Rigor and Transparency

Philosophy, as I understand and love it, begins with the Socratic commitment to careful and explicit rational argument, and to transparency of speech. Socrates’s aim was to show people the inner structure of their own thought, or, at times, the lack of clarity in their thought. He did this by eliciting hidden assumptions, arranging the premises in order, and showing what conflicts and contradictions emerged when all was set forth in the open. At every step, Socrates and the person being questioned have to agree: indeed Socrates famously insisted that he himself added nothing. He was simply a “midwife,” eliciting thoughts that belonged to the person he talked to and setting those thoughts in a perspicuous order.
This commitment to reason has social importance. As Socrates saw, most thought in political life is sloppy, full of unclearly defined terms, fallacious reasoning, and hidden or not-so-hidden contradictions. When thought is sloppy, we don’t make progress; we talk past one another rather than understanding one another and really deliberating. Socrates said that he was like a “gadfly,” a stinging insect, on the back of the democracy, which he compared to a “noble but sluggish horse.” In other words, making clear and rigorous arguments is a way of waking democracy up so that public deliberation is conducted in a more productive and less confused way.

Clarity in argument is also a way of respecting other people. Nothing is concealed, and nothing relies on privilege or esoteric knowledge. Rational argument is common to us all, and Socrates insisted that rational argument must be forthright and not marred by hidden areas of secrecy and privilege.

2. Respect for other Disciplines

When philosophy began in the Greek and Roman world (and also in the various philosophical traditions of Asia), it basically contained all rational inquiry. What was outside was tradition, mysticism, and so forth. But philosophy at that early date contained physics, chemistry, biology, cosmology, linguistics, and even history. Those disciplines gradually spun off, like planets from a star, and became their own separate disciplines. But until the 20th century philosophy still contained what we now call the social sciences: economics, psychology, anthropology, political science, and sociology. The American Philosophical Association at its founding in the late 19th century prominently included psychology, and early presidents of the association were psychologists, or, like the great William James, both philosophers and psychologists. As I mentioned in Part I of this lecture, economics was a part of philosophy in the time of Adam Smith in the 18th century (whose professorial chair was in philosophy), and of Karl Marx in the 19th (whose doctorate was also in philosophy). And, as I’ve mentioned, this concern with philosophy continued into the 20th century with the work of Keynes and Hayek.

As I’ve said in Part I of this lecture, this separation has had costs on the side of those social sciences, who too often forget that they might have something to learn from philosophy. But the same thing is clearly true of
philosophers: being in their own separate department, they forget that they need to care about the other disciplines and to draw on them for illumination. The need for cross-disciplinary curiosity and learning arises in different ways in connection with different philosophical problems. …

One way philosophers can learn what they need to learn is by being part of an interdisciplinary university community, and I have always found being partly in a law school especially fulfilling in that regard, since it then is possible to work and teach with economists, historians, and experts in a variety of other areas. Coauthorship is also valuable, though too rare in philosophy. I especially value my coauthored projects with legal economist Saul Levmore, which have taught me a great deal and made my work more fun. I teach Global Inequality with another economist, and I teach issues of discrimination and sexuality with an expert in constitutional law. The modern university is fond of hyperspecialization, and we must each find our own ways of avoiding being trapped.

3. Respect for Religious Belief and Practice

For much of its history in the Western tradition, although not during the medieval era, philosophy has been a skeptical critic of dominant forms of religious belief and practice. The pre-Socratic philosophers challenged traditional religious accounts of natural phenomena, which invoked the activity of gods in our world, by producing naturalistic causal accounts of how things happen. Socrates was charged with subverting the gods of the city and inventing new gods. Aristotle’s god was an abstraction, totally different from the gods that most people worshipped. Most leading philosophers of the 18th century, similarly, were Deists: that is, they accepted the existence of some type of god, but understood God in a rationalistic way, as an immanent order in nature. …

Today philosophers should not think this way. We observe that under conditions of freedom, and indeed wherever there is not brutal repression, people in every part of the world turn to religions for insight, community, meaning, and guidance.
Many people reject religion, but many reasonable people do not. Moreover, among the people who consider themselves religious in some regard, there is not much agreement about what that commitment entails. …

Respecting one’s fellow citizens means respecting their choice to live their lives in their own way, by their own doctrines, so long as they do not invade the basic rights of others. …

4. Curiosity about and Respect for the World’s Many Philosophical Traditions and Interest in Establishing a Cross-Cultural Philosophical Dialogue

All departments of philosophy in the US and Europe are really departments of Western philosophy. Only rarely is there any inclusion of the philosophical traditions of Asia and Africa. If those traditions are taught it is usually in other departments: religion, South Asian Studies, East Asian Studies, etc. But of course that is itself distorting, leading to a neglect of the mainstream philosophical issues within those traditions: for example to a focus on mystical religion in the study of India and a neglect of India’s traditions of logic, epistemology, and philosophy of science. Above all, there is little dialogue between scholars who pursue Western philosophy and scholars expert in these other traditions. A further problem is that, while Western philosophy gets coverage over its entire history, Asian philosophy is thought to be truly Asian only when it is very old: thus people think about Confucius and Mencius when they think about “Chinese thought,” but neglect the creative work being done by contemporary Asian philosophers; or they consider ancient Hindu and Buddhist thought to be truly Indian, while neglecting the great 20th-century Indian philosopher Rabindranath Tagore. Western philosophers don’t make the same mistake about their own traditions: they know that philosophy is a living and growing set of arguments, that John Rawls is a part of the tradition that began with Socrates.

There is no easy “fix” for these problems. In particular, I am a stickler for linguistic expertise, and I will not even consider for a faculty appointment anyone who does not demonstrate

Nussbaum after receiving her Kyoto Prize medal.
the highest level of expertise in the original languages of the philosophers he or she studies. That’s hard enough: but then you have to insist on the same standards for PhD students. So it probably makes no sense for any but the largest departments to try to be pluralistic in the historical traditions they cover, since it’s hard enough to find graduate students competent to work on Plato or Descartes in the original languages, and it would right now be impossible to find a critical mass of US graduate students who had the linguistic preparation to work on Buddhist logic or on Mencius. (Tagore is different, since he wrote all his philosophical works in English.) So what do I recommend?

First, I recommend much greater awareness of the one-sidedness of our current approach. Thus, the expression “ancient philosophy” should never be used as it now is in the US, to refer to the Greco-Roman tradition. If that’s what people mean, let them say, “Ancient Greek and Roman philosophy,” as I have long insisted and annoyed my colleagues into doing. And if people try to use the word “classics” to mean “the Greek and Roman classics,” I give the same reply: you don’t mean the Sanskrit or African or Chinese or Japanese classics, so you should say what you mean. Precise language makes us aware of the partiality of our own approach, and the rich plurality of the world.

Second, and more substantive: philosophers should search for opportunities for dialogue and learning. One avenue is coteaching, often a way to learn more about an unfamiliar tradition without having to learn the languages. I’ve cotaught courses with colleagues in the South Asian Studies department, for example. Another strategy is conferences. I recently attended a very illuminating conference on the philosophy of crime and punishment in Hong Kong, at which we had illuminating discussions comparing Asian and Western traditions. My university is hosting a conference on African philosophy this spring, inviting a group of leading experts in that area, most of them from Africa, to exchange ideas with those of us whose primary orientation is Western, and to see what avenues of cooperation might be opened up. This sort of thing is really essential, if global problems are to be confronted on a basis of mutual respect and understanding.

5. Concern with Previously Excluded Voices

Western philosophy has not simply excluded the rest of the world, it has excluded, for the most part, and for most of its history, the voices of women and racial minorities, and of people with disabilities. Today this is much less true, and a great part of my own work in philosophy is feminist in nature. Feminist philosophy today is an influential part of philosophy, and it is internally diverse, containing many approaches and arguments. The same is true of the philosophy of racial equality and the philosophy of disability. These changes in philosophy were long overdue, and they have been extremely valuable. However, they are not yet sufficiently integrated into the whole work of the profession, and this integration, and the perpetual atmosphere of healthy critique it prompts, must continue, if philosophy is to contribute justly to the service of humanity.

6. Concern with Real Human Life in All Its Messiness and Complexity

Philosophers are often fond of neat and highly general theories that omit a great deal of the complexity of life. General theories can illuminate, and we need them; but in the ethical and political area they will impede understanding if they omit too much of the messy detail and complexity of real human life. This is one reason why I have long insisted that philosophy needs a partnership with literature. But philosophy itself should educate itself to understand the messier aspects of human life better.

I’ve tried to restore the area of emotion to the center of philosophical work.

Study of the emotions and the imagination, once central topics in Western philosophy, from Plato straight through the medieval period to the 18th century, fell out of fashion for more than 200 years, and this was an immense loss. I’ve tried to restore the area of emotion to the center of philosophical work, where it was when Aristotle wrote the Rhetoric or the Stoics their major ethical works.

I think this insurgency of mine has succeeded, and there is currently a lot of good work in the area of emotion, and, more generally, what is known as “moral psychology.” But we always need to beware of simplification and reduction. We need, for example, to bear in mind the fact that emotions are in part social artifacts and vary with the cultural tradition within which people grow up. This makes their study very difficult. But complexity and difficulty should not prevent us from confronting the whole issue!

Another important aid to philosophy at this point is a partnership with the study of literature. I have spent part of my career fostering this partnership, and am currently engaged in the related enterprise of bringing literature into legal education. Literature needs the normative guidance of philosophy if it is to help humanity. Literature can embody bad values, such as misogyny and retributivism. Indeed
it is safe to say that one of the main sources of pernicious retributivism in modern culture is the almost universal popularity of literary works that teach small children that it is a great thing when wrongdoers get some gruesome punishment. Here I want to commend the great Japanese artist Hayao Miyazaki for creating a different type of art for children, a world that is full of gentle, well-intentioned people, where there are no villains who must be punished, and the creative imagination soars. In any case, a dialogue with literature, both admiring and critical, seems very important for any philosophy that intends to come to grips with the complexity of human life.

Philosophy can serve humanity. And indeed it ought to. The world needs the ideas that good ethical and political philosophy contains; and we who lead privileged lives in the academy would be selfish if we did not try hard to bring those ideas into the world where social and political decisions are made. But philosophy also needs to criticize itself, and in some ways to change itself, if it is to serve the world well, and it is fortunate that today there are so many young people eagerly taking up that challenge.

Nussbaum to Give 2017 Jefferson Lecture

Martha C. Nussbaum will deliver the 2017 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities at 7:30 p.m. EST on May 1 at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC. Her talk, “Powerlessness and the Politics of Blame,” will draw on her years of work on the role of emotion in politics to explore the emotional dynamics at play in American and other societies today—including the ways in which uncertainty leads to the blaming of outsider groups.

The Jefferson Lecture is free and open to the public and will stream live online at neh.gov. Tickets will be available to the public in April through neh.gov.

The lecture, established by the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1972, is the highest honor the federal government bestows for distinguished intellectual achievement in the humanities.