

Diversifying Syllabi Text Summary and Teaching Tips

Article/Essay Title: “Plato on Commensurability and Desire”

Author: Martha Nussbaum

Readability: Moderate

Might be too long for some purposes; could be excerpted

Possible Applications:

Ethics – critique of utilitarianism, ancient ethics

History of philosophy

Relationship between theory and practice

Complimentary Texts/Resources:

Thesis: Plato’s belief in the commensurability of values (shared by modern utilitarians) ultimately “cuts very deep: taken seriously, it will transform our passions as well as our decision-making, giving emotions such as love, fear, grief, and hence the ethical problems that are connected with them, an altogether different character” (56). The upshot is that “certain proposals in ethics and social choice theory that present themselves as innocuous extensions of ordinary belief and practice could actually lead, followed and lived with severity and rigor, to the end of human life as we currently know it” (56).

Key Definitions:

Summary:

I. Platonic commitment to measurable/commensurable

- “What is measurable or commensurable is graspable, in order, good; what is without measure is boundless, elusive, chaotic, threatening, bad. The tremendous anxiety brought about by the discovery of incommensurability (and therefore 'irrationality') in the subject matter of mathematics, the clearest of the sciences, testifies to the power and pervasiveness of such beliefs.” (57)
- “And it would be natural that, confronted with a subject matter as confusing in its variety and indeterminacy as human valuation and choice, a thinker with an interest in order and progress should ask himself whether this area of our lives could be, or become, a science of measurement” (57)
- From the *Symposium*:
 - “And looking towards the great extent of the *kalon*, he will no longer, like some servant, loving the *kalon* of a particular boy or a particular man or of one set of customs, and being the slave of this, remain contemptible and of no account. But turned towards the wide sea of the *kalon* and contemplating, he gives birth to many *kalon* and grand speeches and reasonings in his abundant love of wisdom” (210C7-D6)

- Nussbaum says that this commitment entails the following: “What would it be like to look at a body and to see in it exactly the same shade and tone of goodness and beauty as in a mathematical proof- exactly the same, differing only in amount and in location, so that the choice between making love with that person and contemplating that proof presented itself as a choice between having n measures of water and having $n + 100$?” (69)
- What this means for *akrasia*: incontinent agents are simply confused/in error; if they saw things properly (as commensurable) they would realize that choosing a different option was straightforwardly better

II. Problems/questions Nussbaum raises

- Is Plato's idea logically/metaphysically coherent?
 - “We must take very seriously the fact that every property of objects relevant to practical motivation will be homogenized qualitatively with every other” (71)
 - “Now the question is, what is left of objects and persons in this scheme? Everything about an object or person that counts for desire and action is flattened out into the 'wide sea'... A body, a person, will seem to be nothing but a pure container or location for a certain quantity of value” (72). “Commensurability had better work on this problem, especially if it wants to claim to bring benefits to persons” (73)
- Is it psychologically plausible?
 - “Is it even remotely likely that any agent will ever live in the world who thinks and acts like this? There are at least two questions here. First, is it possible to bring up an agent for whom the belief in commensurability is deep and thoroughgoing enough to satisfy Plato? And, second, are there some desires in the human being that are not responsive to belief at all?” (73)
- And is it ethically desirable?
 - “Now we might wonder about the positive motivational question: in getting rid of so much, what motivations has Plato left us with to propel our ethical lives?” (77)

Possible Class Activities: