Nussbaum

Martha Nussbaum and the Fragility of Good Education

Lynne Wolbert

Introduction

Educational philosopher Richard Smith observes that parents are required to become "ever more efficient and effective," and should be better controlled and monitored (2010, pp. 357–358). The notion of 'parenting', which represents a way of speaking about childrearing as a 'job' that requires skills that can be improved, and the term 'expert-parent', which refers to the idea (and ideal) of the parent as a professional, are gaining popularity, claims Smith (see also Lambeir and Ramaekers 2007). The article titled "A Neuroscientist on How to Really Read to Kids" from the website 'psychology today' gives a good taste of what Smith is worried about:

> Most parents read to their children. We're steeped in studies about the benefits of reading to kids, so it's become rather like a box we have to check as responsible guardians—the bare minimum a parent must do to ensure success. But most parents don't intentionally read to their child to improve their language skills. No, instead we read to them to make them sleepy, or so they can have something to write down on their school reading logs. We pull out a nightly book to have a bedtime routine (as prescripted by child-rearing experts), to calm down our ADHD child, or maybe to get in some cuddle time before bed. (..) This is perhaps a start, but books can be far more useful tools. We just have to learn to stop simply reading to our children, and start engaging them. (..) From a neuroscientific perspective, each night most parents are losing an incredible opportunity to use artificial conflict as

L. Wolbert (✉)
Department of Education Sciences and Family Studies, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
e-mail: l.s.wolbert@vu.nl

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> real-life practice. (..)As parents, we are in control of what our children practice in an intimate and powerful way. We all want kids to be proficient readers. But on a deeper level, what do we really want our children to be good at?[1]

Educational philosopher Gert Biesta observes how a call for a “double transformation of both educational research and educational practice” paved the way for the idea of ‘evidence-based’ education (2007, p. 2). Evidence-based education stands for a model of (scientific) research that wants to find out ‘what works’, and an educational practice that implements that which has proven to be effective. An intervention is effective when there is a secure, measurable relation between the intervention (cause) and its result (effect) (Biesta 2007, p. 7). This implies that what the intervention is supposed to bring about is clear and a given, while to the most, if not all those involved in education, the question of ‘what school is for’, and what good education is, (still) is subject of a heated debate and ongoing (empirical and theoretical) investigation. On the website www.neuroparent.org, the website’s mission reads: “neuroparent’s mission is to educate parents about normal brain development. This is a resource to

1. Get the facts
2. Parent with intent
3. Use parenting time wisely”.[2]

Smith and Biesta, as well as others, object to the tendency to think about education in ways that are predominantly informed by science (‘get the facts’), risk-management (‘what a parent must do to *ensure* success’), and ‘economic’ thinking (‘using parenting time wisely’). The aim of this chapter is first to give a clear account of this current issue in philosophy in education. What is it that these scholars precisely object to and why? Second, I propose that Martha Nussbaum’s 1986 book *The Fragility of Goodness* offers fruitful insights in this issue.[3] I suggest that Nussbaum’s interpretation of the Greek discussion of how much ‘luck’ a good human life needs offers a possibility to counter the assumption implicit in the use of the ‘languages’ of science, risk, and economy, namely that it is both necessary and possible to *control* education.

In the section ‘Current Issue in Philosophy of Education’ of this chapter I will elaborate on the current issue, in the section ‘Martha Nussbaum and *The Fragility of Goodness*’ I will lay out the position Nussbaum offers in her book. In the section ‘The Fragility of Good Education’ then, the value of her argument for the current issue will be explored and in the section ‘Implications for Education’ I will evaluate what might be the implications of an idea of fragility for good education.

[1] https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/neuroparent/201609/neuroscientist-how-really-read-kids

[2] http://www.neuroparent.org/neuroparent-mission.html

[3] Martha Craven Nussbaum is an American philosopher and the Ernst Freud Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics at the University of Chicago. Her main areas of interest are ancient Greek philosophy, political philosophy, and ethics. Important topics in her work have been and are the emotions, the status of women worldwide, and the capability approach which she further developed working with economist Amartya Sen. See her webpage at http://www.law.uchicago.edu/faculty/nussbaum/

Current Issue in Philosophy of Education

The Need and Possibility to Control Education

In the introduction I gave two examples of non-academic texts that reflect a tendency of educational media, as well as educational policy, (educational) science, and educators themselves (teachers and parents) to think and write about education (both formal schooling and childrearing) as if it were something that needs to be 'controlled', and which it is possible to control. It is the perception of several philosophers of education that these texts make use of a scientific discourse ('research has shown that'), a discourse of risk ('families at risk'), and/or a terminology that originally stems from economics. All three discourses assume that education is a practice that is best kept under control by educators and that it is possible to do so (in the example in the introduction it literally says that 'parents are *in control* of what their children practice in an intimate and powerful way'). Educational sciences, as well as (developmental and neuro-)psychology are permeated with a striving for control; threats to a good development (of the child) are preferably *prevented*, or else *contained*. Situations or things that threaten all that we have under control are called *risks*. Third, a language of economics also implies the need for control, for a lack of control is a possible reduction of 'efficiency and effectivity'.

In the following I will give some examples of scholars who object to the 'scientization' of education and some who object to the discourse of risk. For purposes of clarity I have distinguished between discourses of science, risk, and economy, because different scholars emphasize different phenomena to which they object, but in actual texts they are very much interrelated and interwoven (as the above examples show). For example, science is used to calculate risks and research is done with the purpose of finding ways to prevent or diminish risks. In turn, science often expresses the value of its findings in economic terms such as profit, valorization, and so on.

Scientization

The main reason for Smith to object to 'parenting' is that it implies that parents are to be fully informed and skilled when they arrive at parenthood, which is highly unrealistic, or maybe even principally impossible. Moreover, it excludes how parents can learn from their children as well (2010, p. 361). 'Parenting' expresses a conception of childrearing as one-sided input into the development of the child, whereas many philosophers of education emphasize the importance (and many-sidedness) of the parent-child relationship (e.g., Spiecker 1984; Suissa 2006). Stefan Ramaekers and Judith Suissa also argue that the common modern way of speaking about childrearing and parents is (a) strongly informed by the language of (developmental) psychology and related to this that (b) somehow parents should be educated to be able to do a proper job (2012, p. 3). They call this the "scientization of the

parent-child relationship," which they claim impoverishes the ways in which we can address the rich, complex, normative, and personal dimensions of parenthood and the parent-child relationship (see also Suissa 2006). In her 2016 book *Neuroparenting, the Expert Invasion of Family Life*, sociologist Jan Macvarish states that "neuroparenting is a way of thinking which claims that 'we now know' (by implication, once and for all) how children ought to be raised," hence that we now, because we 'know' how the human brain functions, can fully control childrearing, and thus, in principle, can ensure a good education (2016, p. 1).

A Discourse of Risk

Several philosophers of education (e.g., Smeyers 2005, 2010; Smith 2005, 2006; Papastephanou 2006; Biesta 2013) have used the concepts of 'risk' and 'risk society' to describe the desire to make education as risk-free as possible. The term 'risk society' was first coined by the German sociologist Ulrich Beck, who wrote his academic bestseller *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (also) in 1986. Beck writes that the "paradigm of risk society" is the search for an answer to the question how we can handle the risks that are systematically produced in the process of modernization (1986, p. 2).

Paul Smeyers argues that the tendency to speak of children and families as being 'at risk' seems to lead in many cases to a "climate in which the legitimacy of government intervention comes to be broadly accepted" (2010, p. 272). Also, the discourse of risk might lead to "a redefinition of what it [childrearing or education in general] is supposed to be about" (ibid). Finally, referring to both Papastephanou (2006) and Smith (2005), Smeyers argues "that trying to minimize chance and uncertainty in the interests of making the world more predictable, more controllable, and safer is self-deceptive" (ibid, p. 281). Biesta takes the discussion a step further by claiming that we should even 'embrace' the risk of education and see it as something positive. He argues that we should not think of education in what he calls "strong terms," as the production of something (which can be controlled), but in "weak existential terms," that is "in terms of encounters and events" (2013, pp. 11–12). If we think about education in such terms, the thought that we in fact cannot control the outcome of the event becomes more admissible, as well as that the 'outcome' itself becomes a less important part of the endeavor.

Both scholars argue that 'risk' is an inherent part of education, of human life, and to frame risk as something that should be eliminated ignores an inherent aspect of what education *is* (see also Wolbert et al. 2018 for an analysis of different kinds of risk-taking in child rearing). Risk and uncertainty being part and parcel of what education is, it is not always worthwhile, nor feasible (but rather 'self-deceptive') to strive for complete control. Neither is therefore the reduction or elimination of risk a legitimate argument, on its own, to justify educational policy or practices.

Martha Nussbaum and *The Fragility of Goodness*

The Fragility of Goodness

The central theme of Nussbaum's book is the question of luck versus self-sufficiency. Luck is defined as what happens to people as opposed to what they do or make (p. 3, related to the Greek word *tuchē*), i.e., that which is not under our control (and can be good or bad for us, i.e., good or bad luck). How much of our human lives are we able to control and plan, and how much is up to luck? And how much of a good human life *should* be up to luck? This question occupied most early Greek philosophy and literature (tragedy). Nussbaum derives three themes from this general question: (1) "the role in the human good life of activities and relationships that are, in their nature, especially vulnerable to reversal" (p. 6); (2) "the relationships among these components [of an excellent life, such as friendship, love political activity, attachment to property or possessions]" (p. 6); and (3) "the ethical value of the so-called 'irrational parts of the soul': appetites, feelings, emotions" (p. 7).

No summary can do justice to the depth and broadness of the topics discussed in *The fragility of Goodness* (FG). It would be impossible to reduce all of the various ways in which the topics are interconnected into a short summary like this one, i.e., to succinctly set out all the different storylines available in this small book chapter. Therefore, I have chosen to follow one storyline, set out in Nussbaum's first chapter, that when asking the question about luck in a good human life, four other questions have to be answered as well: (1) why has this question moved to the background of ethics?; (2) what was the position and impact of Greek tragedy on the discussion on luck?; (3) how should Plato's attempt to free the human being from luck be understood?; and (4) what was Aristotle's reaction to the Platonic position? In this section, I will give a brief overview of points 1–3, and then I will discuss Aristotle separately.

Nussbaum writes that the question of how much luck a good human life needs is both strange and not strange. It is not strange, because it is a very human and intuitive question about the good life that we all ask ourselves. How much luck do I need to bear in my life? How much can I actively plan and control? And moreover, how can I secure a good life for my children? It has become a strange question in moral philosophy though, because since Kant's philosophy the idea that a good life is a *morally* good life has taken hold, in combination with the idea that moral value is immune to luck. According to Nussbaum, it is since this paradigm shift that luck is no longer a central theme in ethics (p. 5).[4] In a sense, it has been one of Nussbaum's aims in this book to restore the importance of this question, and make us understand that it would be good to address it (again).

In Chaps. 2 and 3, Nussbaum shows the broadness and depth of Greek tragedy. The function of tragedy is to force people to think about the inevitability of having to cope with things that happen to them without their choosing, and to explore what

[4] Until the subject was reintroduced by Williams and Nagel, among others.

human beings value. Human goods are diverse and can conflict. Moreover, because Greek tragedies tend not to offer (satisfying) solutions to the problems presented, people are forced to recognize that some problems aren't easy to 'fix' or not at all, or that the available solution doesn't necessarily solve the problem (p. 49).

This brings Nussbaum to make two points; first, she will not make a distinction between moral and non-moral claims, because the tragedies show us that all that is moral does not neatly fit in these two categories. There rather is a "messier continuum of claims judged to have various degrees of force and inevitability" (p. 30). Above that, the distinction is not self-explanatory, for different moral accounts make for different divisions between moral and non-moral. Second, Nussbaum explains that for the Greeks there was no clear division between writers of philosophy, tragedy, or poetry. All disciplines took part in the same ethical discussion of what makes a human life good, none of them any less serious than the other. This is unthinkable in modern philosophy, but Nussbaum argues that although tragedies "may be repellent to practical logic; they are also familiar from the experience of life" (p. 34). She therefore advocates a return to the use of literary texts in philosophy, a thesis she elaborates on in *Love's Knowledge* (1990).

Part II of FG analyzes the work of Plato. In the *Protagoras*, Socrates and Protagoras are eager to 'solve' the 'problems' of human vulnerability, they are in search of a *technē* (a science) of measurement that will save the human being from being vulnerable to luck. In the *Republic*, Plato defends a much more extreme conception of the best human life, namely "the life of the philosopher, whose soul the *Phaedo* describes as akin to the forms it contemplates: pure, hard, single, unchanging, unchangeable. A life then, of goodness without fragility" (p. 138).

Such a conception of the best human life implies a radically different set of values – a reduction of the plurality of values we saw in tragedies. In a sense, Plato says that reason prescribes that human beings shouldn't value things that are, or make us, vulnerable. A flourishing human being cannot be vulnerable, on the contrary, she is 'unchanging and unchangeable'. A logical consequence of the *Phaedo's* conception of the best life is for example that human beings cannot get so attached to other human beings that they can be hurt by them (i.e., be vulnerable). Note: this is something else than suggesting to tolerate goods that can make us vulnerable, but try to control this vulnerability (which was the conclusion of the *Protagoras*).

No 'ordinary' human being can ever lead the life of a Platonic philosopher. Moreover, 'ordinary' human beings wouldn't even want to; they are not willing to give up goods such as intimate relationships. According to Nussbaum, Plato nevertheless shows us two important points: (1) that human beings can be distracted or deceived by their desires, feelings, and needs, i.e., that our feelings do not necessarily always tell us the right thing to do; and (2) he reminds us that human beings *do* long to become something better than they are; it is not true that humans are happy and satisfied with their vulnerabilities and do not wish to be more in control of our lives (p. 163). Human beings would certainly wish to have worthwhile intimate relationships and never get hurt.

Aristotle: The Fragility of a Good Human Life

In part III of the book (Chaps. 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12), Nussbaum discusses Aristotle's ethical position, both as an objection to Plato and as an affirmation of the wisdom of Greek tragedy. In short, Plato's *Protagoras* defended the elimination of luck by developing a science to unequivocally master our lives, and the *Phaedo* concluded that a good life necessarily has to exclude things that could render us vulnerable, while Aristotle claims that practical deliberation can never be scientific nor invulnerable. Plato needs an extra-human perspective to determine the unchangeable best life, while Aristotle demands an anthropocentric view of this best life for human beings (the person of practical wisdom, p. 290). According to Nussbaum, Aristotle's anthropocentricity implies that (a) values can be incommensurable, i.e., that there are (possibly unsolvable) dilemmas and conflicts in human lives, and (b) that priority lies with capturing the "fine detail of the concrete particular, which is the subject matter of ethical choice" (p. 301).

This conception of a flourishing life does allow for human vulnerability. There is nothing to do but to accept and value (not in itself, but for what it brings us, for example intimate relationships) this fragility. A good human life "stands in need of good things from outside" (Aristotle 2009, 1099a31–1). But, a human life is not completely at the mercy of luck: "we believe that human life is worth living, only if a good life can be secured by effort. (..) Our deep beliefs about voluntary action make it highly unlikely that we would ever discover that there was no such thing" (Nussbaum 1986, p. 321). However, Aristotle insists that a Platonic conception of the invulnerable good life is untenable, because it is forced to leave out important human values (p. 322).

The consequences of an Aristotelian conception of the good life is that uncontrolled circumstances may interfere with excellent activity (p. 327) and *eudaimonia* itself may be disrupted by the absence of certain external goods (p. 331).[5] This will not happen very often or very swiftly, because *eudaimonia* is, when reached, stable. But if the misfortune is great or happens frequently enough, eventually it will (p. 333).

The Fragility of Good Education

In juxtaposing ancient Greek ethics with the current discontent with how education is being framed, I assume one central thing: that education is "thoroughly moral" (Biesta 2007, p. 6). Because comparing conceptions of human flourishing to ideas about education assumes that we can speak about education within the same (ethical) discourse. The question then is how the objections to the framing of education

[5] *Eudaimonia* is the Greek word commonly used in ancient Greek philosophy to describe the ultimate aim, the highest good for human beings. It is often translated as 'human flourishing'.

as striving for control can be understood in light of this assumption. Is it that the proponents of such a discourse fail to grasp the thoroughly ethical nature of education (as for example Biesta 2007, and Ramaekers and Suissa 2012 imply), or *are* the proponents and opponents having a thoroughly ethical discussion about education, and do they disagree in their ethical stances on what constitutes a good life/a good education?

The first part of the question can be linked to Nussbaum's rejection of a moral/non-moral dichotomy (1986, p. 30). The languages of risk, economy, or science are generally not *explicitly* moral. However, we can ask whether this is of crucial importance for the discussion. Whether or not both sides are conscious of or explicate that the discussion is ethical, both sides do take a stand, and they disagree. I have interpreted Nussbaum's suggestion of a messier moral continuum as saying we can still, and perhaps even better, have a discussion about which claims have which importance in education without pinpointing what is a moral claim and which not. In other words, the perceived failure to recognize the ethical dimension of education is not the core of the current issue described in this chapter. Then what do they precisely disagree about?

If we compare how Nussbaum opposes Plato and Aristotle with my opposition between a discourse of control and the objections raised by philosophers of education, at first glance it seems that we can equate 'control' with Plato and the discussed scholars with Aristotle. A good education in a Platonic sense would then not be, nor have the potential to make us fragile.

However, there is one essential difference between Plato and the current desire for control. As discussed in the section 'Current Issue in Philosophy of Education', according to Nussbaum, Plato's *Phaedo* rejected the possibility of 'stabilizing' a good human life with a *technē*, and argued that the consequence of a good human life that is invulnerable has to be that certain goods that are vulnerable (or can make us vulnerable) thus cannot be incorporated in a conception of the flourishing life. The modern idea of control on the other hand, made visible in the use of the languages of science, risk, and economy, does have an underlying conception of the best life that includes vulnerability, but does not accept its consequences at the same time. It strives for control to eliminate our fragility. As in the example of intimate relationships, this idea of the best life wants to have intimate relationships without the risk of getting hurt.

Nussbaum shows us with her interpretation of Plato and Aristotle that the *desire* (to have full control) is understandable but the *belief* that it is possible to have full control, e.g., have the relationship without the risk of getting hurt, is untenable. Put differently, if someone has the perfect relationship(s) and never gets hurt, that person has been (very) lucky, but it is not something that can be enforced. The scholars discussed in this chapter object, justly, to the flaw in the conception of a good human life that underlies the desire to control that permeates the discourses I have discussed.

I think that approaching the current issue from the angle that Nussbaum provides (the question of how much luck a good human life should bear/needs) sheds light on the conceptions of the good life underlying this discussion. Whereas educational

philosophers object to seemingly different trends in education (why one should be careful with the translation of science to a broader audience; why the fact that some families are 'at risk' does not automatically legitimize an intervention; why evidence-based education is problematic; etc.), I think Nussbaum's interpretation of the ancient Greeks shows us what these objections have in common, namely a shared idea about how much luck a good human life needs, i.e., what the limits are of human control.

The consequences Nussbaum sketches are that if human beings do not wish to give up these fragile goods (and I think that it is safe to assume that they do not), they must accept that there is unavoidable fragility involved in pursuing these goods. What would the acceptance of the idea of human beings as fragile mean for education?

Implications for Education

What could be the implications of Nussbaum's interpretation of fragility for educational theory and/or practice? Firstly, it offers an argument against the unbridled pursuit of control in education. If we value goods that contribute to or are constitutive of good education that render us fragile, such as for example the parent-child relationship or the teacher-pupil relationship, then we cannot, at the same time, claim that controllable education is a real possibility. It is not only not yet within human reach but not attainable in principle. This is not to say that we do not have the desire to be invulnerable/in control, nor that we should not have this desire, as Nussbaum has Plato remind us. Nussbaum writes in the preface of the revised edition of FG that the fact "that a completely invulnerable life is likely to prove impoverished by no means entails that we should prefer risky lives to more stable lives, or seek to maximize our own vulnerability, as if it were a good in itself. Up to a point, vulnerability is a necessary background condition of certain genuine human goods" (2001, p. xxx).

I think this philosophical point of the fundamental impossibility of invulnerability should receive more attention in philosophy of education. My hope is that this will make clearer what kind of 'thing' education is, and as such will promote the use of 'different languages' than the discourses of science and risk, or offer a different perspective on what science and risk *are*. This is mainly a theoretical point, but it leads to a second, more practical point.

We can explore what an Aristotelian anthropocentric ethical approach has to offer for the language that one has available to think and speak about education. Nussbaum explains what Aristotelian ethical deliberation is by looking at the tragedy of Hecuba (by Euripides). Hecuba mourns for her dead grandson who died for his city, and demands a fitting burial, although this is against the will of the gods. She deliberates about what is the proper thing to do in this particular situation, and she takes into consideration the perspective of the Greek gods, the demands of the city, but also her own grief. Hecuba displays "a flexible movement back and forth between particular and general. (…) This deliberation is itself fragile, easily influ-

enced and swayed by external happenings. Aristotelian deliberation, furthermore, is well suited to the high evaluation of fragile constituents of human life. For in allowing herself to use perception, rather than conformity to rule, as her standard, Hecuba opens herself to the value and special wonder of a particular city, a particular child; therefore to the deep grief she here expresses" (1986, pp. 316–317).

I think it important to promote the use of a language for education that takes the form of an Aristotelian deliberation. Aristotelian deliberation as a method of talking about, and doing research in education implies what one might call a 'discourse of flexibility and fragility'. 'Flexibility' requires moving between the particular and the general, always reflecting on general guidelines from the position of the "fine detail of the concrete particular" (Nussbaum 1986, p. 301). 'Fragility' implies a certain instability of discussion, influenced by desires, feelings, and incommensurable values. In other words, under the influence of the complexity of real life. A proper educational discourse requires a deep understanding of the fragility of things that are constitutive of or contribute to good education.

Concluding Remarks

Surprisingly, very few scholars I have discussed refer to FG. For instance, Biesta's 2013 book about the beauty of risk is reminiscent of Nussbaum's work, for she writes that the Greek poet Pindar's work suggests that "part of the peculiar beauty of *human* excellence just *is* its vulnerability" (Nussbaum 1986, p. 2).

Most philosophers of education discussed here give direct or indirect account of their indebtedness to Aristotle. The fact that Nussbaum's interpretation of the fragile human life is not mentioned is remarkable, because the particular way in which she interprets Plato and Aristotle does, in my opinion, contribute to grasping what can be said in defense of the existence of human vulnerability, as well as to clarifying how conceptions of 'risk' and 'effectivity' are colored by their underlying conception of a good human life.

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