

## Bill Moyers' Interview with Philosopher Martha Nussbaum

A very engaging 30 minute interview with Martha Nussbaum by Bill Moyers in 1988 is a great teaching tool for a number of reasons: 1) it explains the fragility of moral goodness; 2) it brings Greek philosophy and drama to life as a guide to our daily lives; and, 3) it shows careful thought unfolding before your eyes. The added bonus is that the girls in my class are energized seeing a woman philosopher in action. The video entitled Applying the Lessons of Ancient Greece: Martha Nussbaum is available through Films for the Humanities and Sciences, PO Box 2053 · Princeton, NJ · 08543-2053, phone: 800-257-5126 or through their web site [www.films.com/Films\\_Home/Item.cfm/1/4964/ixs](http://www.films.com/Films_Home/Item.cfm/1/4964/ixs)

Below is a worksheet I have my students read beforehand and use as a guide to take notes.

### Worksheet for Bill Moyers' interview with Martha Nussbaum

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ (READ BOTH SIDES PRIOR TO VIDEO)

Prof. Martha Nussbaum talks about some Greek tragedies in an effort to redefine some basic elements of moral philosophy and moral living. For her the traditional approaches are too limited and do not reflect the true nature of human life. The summaries below are offered as a guide to the video.

#### The story of Antigone:

Antigone is a niece of king Creon. Antigone's brothers, Polyneices and Eteocles, both die fighting each other, the former in an effort to overthrow Creon, the latter defending Creon. As a result, Creon plans to bury Eteocles with great honor and ritual, but makes it a crime for anyone to bury the traitorous Polyneices. Out of sibling love, Antigone buries her brother. Creon, sacrificing his family for the higher good of the state, condemns his niece to death. As she is led to her execution, Antigone says, "...Behold me, what I suffer, Because I have upheld that which is high."

#### The story of Hecuba:

Hecuba, a defeated but noble queen, sends her son away from the defeated capitol she once ruled. She trusts a friend to take the boy and some money to a safe haven. When Hecuba finds the murdered boy lying on the beach, she realizes that her friend killed the boy, threw him overboard, and kept the money. Having lost her city, her wealth, and now her child, Hecuba's suffering overwhelms her. She can no longer remain a good person; through no fault of her own, she has been broken by life.

**Take notes during the video and then answer the following questions:**

- 1) In Moyers and Nussbaum's conversation, how are President Johnson's decisions regarding Vietnam compared to King Creon's situation? Are their predicaments avoidable, or are such things just a part of living? Are you ever caught in such a situation?
  
- 2) Why does Nussbaum feel that stories are the best way to explain moral dilemmas and to guide moral philosophy? Do you learn ethics best this way?
  
- 3) According to Nussbaum, how is the ability to trust others and to care about more than one thing related to the moral quality of an individual? Do you trust others? Does your ability or non-ability affect how you understand morality?
  
- 4) In the context of Nussbaum's discussion, what does it mean to say that goodness is more like a flower than a gem? Do you agree with her?
  
- 5) According to Nussbaum, how does much of traditional philosophy allow individuals to avoid suffering at the cost of being fully human? Do you avoid suffering by using traditional philosophy or common responses to problems?