

The Beauty of the Humanities: A Response to Daniel Cho's "Democracy Beyond the Mirror: A Lacanian Perspective"

Rachel Longa

Teachers College, Columbia University

Daniel Cho opens this thought-provoking article by challenging “the causality that [Martha] Nussbaum posits between education and democracy” in her 2010 volume, *Not for Profit*. “Is it indeed the case,” he asks, that, as Nussbaum suggests, “a crisis in education is causing a crisis in democracy? Or,” he wonders, “could something else be responsible for the poor state of our democracy—something endemic to democracy itself, perhaps?” Cho goes on to suggest that there is a “weakness” in our very notion of democracy. This notion, he argues, is rooted in the ideal of equality, which is “incapable of generating the reciprocity that many democratic theorists, like Nussbaum, seek.” Drawing on the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan, Cho suggests that because our “relationships to ourselves are fundamentally ambivalent . . . future egalitarian relationships” will be characterized by that same “structural ambivalence.” Thus, our appeal to equality as the basis for democratic harmony is ultimately misguided, since the recognition of this very equality is just as likely to inspire aggression and resentment as it is to inspire compassion.

According to Cho, Nussbaum is therefore mistaken to blame democratic dysfunction on the “current instrumentalist turn in education,” for this turn “is not the problem itself, but a symptom of a larger problem in our conception of democracy”—namely: our faulty reliance on the “ideal of equality” to effect reciprocity. Cho hereby effectively reverses the direction of the causality between democratic dysfunction and instrumentalism in Nussbaum’s account: he figures the former as the disease of which the latter is symptom. But how are we to make sense of this scenario in which the failure of the ideal of equality to establish a sense of compassionate reciprocity leads us to jettison humanities education in favor of more marketable skills? I cannot help but wonder whether there is some link missing from this causal chain.

Of course, as psychoanalysis has shown us, the path between symptom and disease is not always easy to trace. Still, I'd like to refer back to Nussbaum here to suggest an alternative interpretation of the political cause of this educational symptom. For although her focus is unquestionably on the deleterious *effects* these changes in educational practice will have on the health of democracy, she is also quite candid about her belief that the educational crisis was *caused* by a set of rash decisions made by the nations themselves. "Radical changes," she writes, "are occurring in what democratic societies teach the young, and these changes have not been well thought through. Thirsty for national profit, nations, and their systems of education, are heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive."¹ According to Nussbaum, the cause of the instrumentalist turn is quite clear: the thirst for national profit.

This very thirst effects a reconfiguration and consolidation of the values of democratic nations—a process that is arguably "endemic" to the structure of democracy—around the nucleus of economic gain. Thus, in Nussbaum's picture, the cause of the educational crisis might still be understood as a weakness or insufficiency in our concept of democracy. This form of weakness, however, is caused not by a failure to acknowledge the fundamental ambivalence of the human subject's relationship to herself, but by a failure to adequately address the crippling effect of capitalism on that subject's freedom to, in Cho's words, "determine the terms of [her] own subjectivity." For the insidious power of capitalism is its almost infallible knack for filling the very gap that opens between the toddler in his *trotte-bébé* and his image in the mirror.

In his account of the democratic citizen's aggression toward the refugee, Cho demonstrates the extent to which the material and psychic economies are almost indistinguishably intertwined. In illustrating the way in which "equality might function as a cause of discrimination," Cho suggests that "seeing the other as my equal may fill me with resentment," precisely because "I may see [the refugee or the immigrant] as someone who is like me ... and therefore wonder why they should enjoy resources and aid I feel are rightfully mine." The refugee or immigrant, in this case, is an iteration of my mirror image and therefore a source of ambivalence: I'm just as likely to approach her with re-

sentment as with compassion. And, in this example, the explicable source of my resentment is the material good to which I see myself as equally entitled: the resources and aid.

"From a Lacanian perspective," Cho goes on, "injustice results ... when we see each other as our equals, for when we see ourselves reflected in the mirror of the other, we will see them as a legitimate rival for the self-determination and autonomy that we feel are rightfully ours." Cho has shifted back to the language of the psychic economy here, referring not to resources and aid but to self-determination and autonomy, the very goods that the Lacanian infant recognizes in his mirror image. In this shift, Cho effectively conflates the material and psychic economies, demonstrating the extent to which the latter is so easily coopted by the former.

In foregrounding the ambivalence of the relationship to the self in his account of Lacanian subjectivity, Cho obscures the importance of the sense of impotence and insufficiency that underwrites that ambivalence. "The important point," according to Lacan, is that the drama of the mirror stage:

... situates the agency known as the ego, prior to its social determination, in a fictional direction that will forever remain irreducible for any single individual or, rather, that will only asymptotically approach the subject's becoming, no matter how successful the dialectical syntheses by which he may resolve ... his discordance with his own reality.²

The toddler's perceived insufficiency in the face of his mirror image orients the path of his desire. Before he even enters the symbolic register—the world of language, concepts, objects, and norms—the subject is primed by the very structure of his subjectivity to be driven by an experience of lack toward whatever it is he imagines might make him whole. As Lacan emphasizes, however, the subject's journey is asymptotic: no matter how effectively he goes about narrowing the space between himself and the mirror, the gap remains precisely *because* the object that marks its limit is imaginary.

And herein lies my worry: in the Lacanian picture, the sheer indetermi-

nacy of the primary identification renders the objects of desire so dependent on their social determination that the psychic economy will organize itself around whatever presents as a good. Thus when Cho concludes that the apprehension of the structure of our own subjectivity will empower us to simply turn away from the mirror—that once I’ve recognized that the ideal is imaginary, I’m free to “determine the terms of [my] own subjectivity for [myself]”—I must admit, I am skeptical.

For one thing, it seems to me that for Lacan, this orientation *toward* the mirror is precisely what constitutes subjectivity as such. Moreover, despite my at least inchoate sense of the structure of my own subjectivity, I still catch myself crying at commercials for online universities because they make me question my own commitment as an educator, or purchasing vases because the woman holding them in the catalog has the kind of hair I’ve always wanted. I am bombarded by images, almost every one of which is designed to present to me as some kind of good: some object that might help me resolve my discordance with my own reality. The structure of capitalism has molded itself to the very structure of subjectivity: it fills the gaps we barely even knew were there.

How, then, might we go about constructing a concept of democracy that takes into account this constant mediation of subjectivity? In “Book VII” of *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan makes the curious suggestion that beauty has the capacity to throw a wrench in these machinations. He writes: “The beautiful in its strange function with relation to desire doesn’t take us in, as opposed to the function of the good.”³ Where the good lures desire toward its objects, the beautiful refracts and reflects the path of desire both away from and beyond objects as such.⁴ Where the good lulls us into a sleepy, partial satisfaction, beauty, Lacan argues, “keeps us awake.”⁵ And so, in conclusion, I wish to make a case for beauty. For if we take seriously that material inequality is at least one of the most dysfunctional aspects of the current state of our democracy, that it has been established and exacerbated by the rampant progress of capitalism, and that capitalism operates in some part through its mediation of subjectivity, then imparting to our students whatever techniques we can conceive of to resist its lure is the responsibility of any educator who takes herself to be a champion

of democratic values. And if one purpose of humanities education is to guide students to the apprehension of beauty, then here I find myself back in Nussbaum's corner, defending the value of humanities education as a fundamentally democratic endeavor.

1 Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2010), 1.

2 Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Écrits* (New York: Norton, 2002), 4.

3 Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 239.

4 *Ibid.*, 248.

5 *Ibid.*, 239.