

Martha C. Nussbaum's *Political Emotions*

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Martha Nussbaum's new book *Political Emotions* is a contribution to political philosophy and, simultaneously, a moral-psychological study of the emotions. In it, she revisits some of the most prominent themes in her 2004 book *Hiding from Humanity* and her 2001 treatise, *Upheavals of Thought*. As Nussbaum points out in the opening pages of *Political Emotions*, one of her goals in this work is to answer a call issued by John Rawls for a "reasonable moral psychology" (9) that would be conceptually refined and empirically grounded, since a complete theoretical account of the just society must be informed by a suitably complex, accurate conception of human emotions. On the whole, *Political Emotions* is a remarkably successful book that combines several areas of philosophical research in which the author's proficiency is well known. It shows how problems that lie on the more intimate side of ethics, pertaining for instance to friendship and family life, have relevance for social justice and public culture; along the way, it also incorporates insightful readings of literary texts. Nussbaum's book therefore ought to introduce readers of her work in one area (such as social philosophy) to aspects of her work in another (such as the philosophy of mind, or literary criticism). It explores the nature of human emotions, as they form early in life and develop in the context of personal relationships, in order to clarify some of the conditions of possibility for a just liberal democracy. *Political Emotions* asks: which emotions are essential for such a society to flourish, and which are apt to undermine its values and goals? In order to offer an account that can answer this question, Nussbaum draws upon her influential cognitive theory of emotion and, in the process, reformulates it in subtle yet significant ways. For the sake of this book symposium, I concentrate mainly upon how human emotions are depicted and explained in *Political Emotions*, and on what Nussbaum's latest work reveals about her considered view about the nature of emotion. First, I address her analysis of some types of emotion that are specifically important to her project, voicing a few critical worries about how Nussbaum describes certain emotions that can undermine a just society; then, in the latter (and larger) part of this essay, I make several related observations about how *Political Emotions* appears to modify Nussbaum's theory of emotion, making some friendly suggestions about which

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modifications are especially promising and how they could perhaps be developed more overtly.

i.

In *Political Emotions* as in *Hiding from Humanity*, Nussbaum draws upon research in the fields of developmental and social psychology, as well as affective neuroscience – and also upon studies of nonhuman animals – for the sake of understanding the human emotions that are most liable to undermine social justice. Emotions such as shame, envy, and disgust are singled out for attention because such emotions can *in some instances* threaten to destroy a compassionate and pluralistic society, or to prevent its development in the first place. One of Nussbaum’s goals is to examine and bring to light the roots of the emotions that have especially “pernicious tendencies” (315). Even grief is named in *Political Emotions* as a potentially harmful emotion, at least if it is so narrowly focused that it commands our attention to the exclusion of all else. However, we can in some cases justifiably feel grief, when “sorrow befalls” our nation (13), as we grieve when we suffer a more personal loss¹; and we can be appropriately afraid when some danger threatens us, others whom we love, or our fellow citizens. What is pernicious in a political context is the tendency to avoid extending our concern more broadly, limiting it only or primarily to those we care about or people who are like ourselves. In the same manner, shame is an emotion that can take improper objects, although Nussbaum points out that certain expressions of shame have a place in the just society: shame at one’s own greed, for example, can be valid even if we should try to eradicate the attitudes that encourage people to be ashamed of their skin color or the like (23). Nussbaum thus attempts to distinguish what is morally problematic about these potentially destructive emotions, while noting that they can have a brighter side as well.

One reservation I have with this part of Nussbaum’s project is that she occasionally seems to speak as though one of these emotions is entirely bad, although this conflicts with her general claim that emotions such as fear, for instance, *can* take pernicious forms but are not always at odds with social justice. In her analysis of speeches by Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt, she shows how political leaders can concede that fear “is warranted and rational” in a given situation, while providing hope that the present danger can be averted or overcome (324–325). Yet the force of these examples appears to be undermined when she calls fear a “primitive emotion” and claims that it “hijacks thought” (320–322). If fear is at odds with rational thought, then how could it ever be warranted and rational? Or, if – more plausibly – Nussbaum’s claim is the Aristotelian one that the emotion of fear is susceptible to being either warranted or unwarranted, helpful or pernicious, then how do we distinguish between misplaced or mistaken fear and fear in response to a genuine social threat, the kind that we could hardly do without? Most of the time, the reader of *Political Emotions* gathers

¹ Central to Nussbaum’s book *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge UP, 2001) is an extended consideration of a highly personal experience of grief. The phrase “sorrow befalls” in *Political Emotions* is also an echo of this earlier work, in which Nussbaum explains that an affective attachment to someone or something will bring the person so attached “into fear, when it is threatened,” and “into grief, when catastrophe befalls it.” – *Upheavals of Thought*, 87.

that the latter question is the right one to be asking – but I worry that Nussbaum's remarks about the irrationality of fear *in general* could have the effect of diverting attention from the more important issue here, especially after several philosophers have argued within the past decade for a noncognitive account of emotions, sometimes citing research which has (debatably) been construed as showing a divorce between fear and “higher” cognitive activity.

In similar fashion, Nussbaum distinguishes between “projective disgust,” an emotion that stigmatizes certain social groups, and “primary disgust” in response to waste and decay, which is not pernicious because it is appropriate to feel disgusted by such things as spoiled milk and other potential sources of illness. Relying on research by Paul Rozin, among others, Nussbaum argues quite persuasively that the emotion which originates as “primary” visceral disgust toward putrid substances and odors – that is, potential sources of contamination – is disturbingly liable to turn into “projective” disgust, a response to members of society who are stigmatized as “contaminants” in a metaphoric sense due to their ethnicity, gender, social class, or sexual orientation. Projective disgust is therefore a vehicle of hatred and bigotry, and Nussbaum offers examples that show how irrational projective disgust can be: for instance, she reminds us of the once common fantasy that African-Americans would somehow contaminate the drinking fountains used by whites (see 184). Yet what leads one person to “project” disgust onto an “other” in this way, while another person's disgust extends no further than the organization of shelves in the kitchen pantry? It seems fairly harmless to be disgusted at the thought of storing the dog food on the same shelf with the peanut butter, even if both are sealed in containers and there is no actual risk of contamination. In other words, not every episode of disgust at the very *idea* of being contaminated is alarming in the same way that some kinds of disgust are.

Yet, at times, Nussbaum argues that disgust is a *categorically* unreliable emotion, and this is a less convincing claim. The value of the distinction between primary and projective disgust is compromised if not only *projective* disgust, but *primary* disgust as well, is described as “a form of anthropodenial,” a refusal to acknowledge our status as mortal beings (183; see also 159). Disgust, Nussbaum adds, is one emotion that we simply need to “rise above” (201), as if there could be no such thing as disgust felt toward appropriate objects, to the proper degree, or for decent reasons. Yet there is: for example, toward a dead rat, I feel sufficiently disgusted to steer clear of it, since I believe that it may carry disease and I value my health. When Nussbaum argues that what must “be overcome” is a “tendency to feel disgust toward bodily fluids and to project this disgust onto other humans” (114), her reader could readily agree that the latter variety of disgust is pernicious without accepting that primary disgust is already problematic, for it doesn't seem to be the case that anyone who is disgusted by the smell of vomit is on a path that will lead them inexorably to bigotry, sexism, or xenophobia. It seems to me that Nussbaum's thesis is more compelling when she notes the characteristic dangers of fear or disgust *without* indicating that these emotions are comprehensively unsound because of the faults to which they are prone.

Like fear and shame, disgust has something to do with our unease about mortality and vulnerability, as Nussbaum recognizes (see 184). It would be well worth investigating why some people respond to this unease with vicious forms of projective disgust, while others feel anxious or apprehensive about their finitude *without* becoming disgusted with groups of human beings. What Nussbaum offers in *Political*

Emotions, as a partial explanation, is that when one is feeling projective disgust one is not conscious of one's mortality but in denial of it. Of course, a person who is aware that he or she will die – as will those whom he or she loves – might understandably have mixed feelings about this. Plainly, Nussbaum believes it is possible to feel discomfort with our mortality, and our susceptibility to bodily illness and injury, without harboring an unhealthy wish to “rise above” the human condition entirely. She states that the “desire not to die” is *not* to be condemned as anthropodenial (159–160): in other words, we need not be refusing our situation as finite creatures when we experience negative emotions associated with the prospect of death. It could be that we feel these emotions precisely when we are most keenly aware of our animality, along with our wish to stay alive and strive to realize our highest aspirations. Nussbaum traces many social evils to our refusal to embrace our embodied condition, but I doubt that she intends to give the impression that unsettledness about our impermanence and bodily infirmity is either highly suspect or downright blameworthy. As she remarks at one point in *Political Emotions*, all human beings are vulnerable to bodily frailty and pain, disease and injury, and death (154). And she says that the “disgusted repudiation of mortality itself, and the body as its seat,” is a troubling phenomenon which is “not always easy to distinguish” from “the normal aversion to death” (160), which is only human. This sounds just right to me: ambivalence toward one's own creatureliness is not a denial of being human, just as discomfort at human mortality is not to be equated with the horror at contingent existence that Nussbaum rightly disdains (see 51, 411). Likewise, a person who advocates the pursuit of “distant goals” and who wishes to bring into being a better society than any which has yet existed should not be accused for this reason of refusing to come to terms with an imperfect world. This is what Nussbaum herself argues, in support of her contention that goals which seem utopian are not always unrealistic (384–385, 185).² What puzzles me is why she occasionally advises distrust toward *all* episodes of shame, disgust, fear, or even grief.

ii.

Throughout *Political Emotions*, it is evident that emotions involve our living bodies just as much as they involve our values and ideals. Some of the tensions that Nussbaum seeks to resolve arise from the conjunction of those two facts, as we have already seen. As we shall see, the bodily nature of emotions is relevant in another way to Nussbaum's views on cognition and embodiment in affective experience. Early on, Nussbaum restates the case in favor of an account according to which “emotions involve cognitive appraisals” (9). Thus, she defends

a conception of emotions according to which they all involve intentional thought or perception directed at an object and some type of evaluative appraisal of that object made from the agent's own personal viewpoint (399).

² In her earlier book *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford UP, 1990), Nussbaum displays sensitivity and good judgment in writing about why the human aspiration toward transcendence has an important place in our lives, and why it is prone to misfire: see, e.g., 378–380.

Nussbaum makes these comments in the context of summarizing her theory of emotion, which is most elaborately explained in *Upheavals of Thought*. Her aim in the newer book is to draw upon that theory, not necessarily to amend it; nevertheless, there are significant ways in which *Political Emotions* develops and explicates ideas from Nussbaum's prior works on emotion, in the process of reformulating her view.

Taking notice of the "friendly attunement" that is shown in an exchange between Susanna and the Countess in Mozart's opera *The Marriage of Figaro*, Nussbaum observes that this harmony between the two characters is achieved musically to a degree that surpasses what is implied by the text of the libretto (36). This implies that song alone, considered apart from any narrative content it may contain, can move us emotionally. By the same token, she praises Rabindranath Tagore for his ability to create "bodily as well as intellectual" effects in song, composing what might be called "a dance as well as an argument" (108). In *Upheavals of Thought*, her account of music pays more attention to how a musical composition can contain a progression resembling that of a narrative; this, in some cases, may be approximately captured in a text that accompanies the music, such as the programs attached by Mahler to some of his symphonic works.³ Although Nussbaum has not ever claimed that the meaning of instrumental music can be reduced to its propositional content, she does rely heavily in *Upheavals of Thought* on the notion that music can be about our lives by doing something akin to telling a story. This would explain why it affects us emotionally. In the terms that she employs in the passage from *Political Emotions* that I just cited, her earlier book places more stress on how a musical piece can be analogous to an intellectual argument, and less upon how it might be similar to a bodily – and not so obviously cognitive – dance. In *Political Emotions*, greater emphasis is placed on the aspects of emotion that are less clearly intellectual. This is evident in her portrayal of Abraham Lincoln's 2nd Inaugural Address as communicating "sentiments" that "are not simply abstract" in their mode of expression but delivered in "rhythmic cadences of language," often "verg[ing] on the musical," which "make the moral principles come alive" (232–234). Moreover, Nussbaum describes Martin Luther King's celebrated "I Have a Dream" speech as powerful and effective due in part to "the moving cadences" of his "extraordinary voice," and to his use of poetic language in which "the image of America" is "made concrete and physical," linked with "well-known features of geography" (235–239). Like Walt Whitman's poem "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," King's speech offers a "concrete sensuous grasp of America, its beauty, [and] the beauty of its people," provoking "the shiver down the spine that only great poetic imagery can inspire" (238, 279–281). In each of these examples, the emotional impact of written or spoken words is explained by Nussbaum in terms of their musical qualities and their use of palpable imagery, both of which surpass what would be contained in an abstract synopsis of their poetic "argument," in the Shakespearean or Miltonic sense of the term.

Hence, a major theme in *Political Emotions* is that emotions are aroused not by an appeal to merely our abstract rational capacities but, crucially, by affecting us in a way that involves a felt sense of agitation (a "shiver down the spine," for example). This, on Nussbaum's view, is why dry reasoning is less persuasive than speeches, poems, and songs with the qualities that she locates in the work of Tagore, Lincoln, Whitman, and

³ See *Upheavals of Thought*, 254–265, 615–621.

King (among others). One way in which she indicates what sort of cognition must be involved in our emotional responses is by means of contrast with cognitions or judgments that are relatively emotion-free: these include the “embrace of abstract principles presented as such” (10). A character in one of Tagore’s novel is depicted as being “easy to approve of, but not so easy to love” (86), for although he has commendable ethical values he can hardly motivate anyone to accept these values wholeheartedly. As Nussbaum asks, why is it that the right values and ideals often seem “boringly uninspiring” (87), such that a person could agree that they are worth affirming but not actually affirm them? Her answer is that, when these are presented in the right way, they need not seem flat or boring. And how should we understand the difference between finding a view credible and actually giving credence to it? If we turn back to some of Nussbaum’s examples, it would appear that rhythmic cadences of language in a speech or a poem can move us to recognize a meaningful truth that wouldn’t register in our awareness if it were spelled out in a valid but abstract argument: yet why should musical features of language have such a power to influence our cognition? Or, if embodied feelings are neither sufficient nor necessary for emotion to occur, then why should it be that a shiver down the spine is part of the experience in which we are moved to recognize that Lincoln’s life, and the social ideals he strove to realize, are noble and inspiring?

In raising these questions, my intent is not to signal astonished incomprehension, but to suggest that Nussbaum’s discussion of political emotions may contain insights that have not been fully captured by her theoretical account. She rightly points out that emotions are evaluative and based in our sense of what falls into our own “circle of concern” (11); from this, it follows that they embody a recognition of what matters to us. Clarifying her position, Nussbaum cites findings by Daniel Batson which show that “the experience of vivid imagining” of another person’s plight can enable us to feel compassion more readily upon hearing their story (146). This emphasis on the imagination also figures into her account in *Upheavals of Thought*, where she mentions that one feature of emotional responses, which differentiates them from dispassionate modes of judgment, is “the concrete picturing of events in imagination.”⁴ However, in that book Nussbaum makes it clear that the imagination is not always involved in our emotional responses, and thus cannot be a necessary condition for evoking emotions. Has she come to think, since *Upheavals of Thought*, that imagination is essential to emotional arousal after all? For it seems that Nussbaum is onto something important when she explains how embodied feelings and vivid imaginative experience figure into emotion, and when she implies that they might contribute to its cognitive function.

Another prominent aspect of her account of emotions, in earlier writings as in *Political Emotions*, is that they are essentially particularized: although affective partiality has its dangers, to eradicate it would be to abolish the intense care with which we can love our child, our friend, or our country (see 219, 385–386), and thereby to deprive us of powerful motives to pursue what is good. Much like our love for a particular human being, love toward our own nation permits us to embrace a concrete “other” in all of its beauty *and* imperfection, with faith in what, at its best, it aspires to be. This is why successful evocations of positive emotions toward one’s country often refer to concrete individuals, particular features of the land, and specific narratives of

⁴ Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, 65; see also 84.

the struggle and hope of a people (see 209). They invite citizens “to assume in body and voice” a “spirit of love and concern for the fate of this land” (14) – and the term “this” is of decisive significance. Here we find, again, that an intentional state – viewing a nation’s fate as significant, in this case – is linked with a certain bodily comportment. I say this because, in the passage I just quoted, Nussbaum is describing the effects of song and dance, and highlighting the way that being viscerally moved by singing or dancing is linked with adopting and maintaining a distinct cognitive outlook on one’s country and fellow citizens.

This returns us to an issue I brought up earlier: if being shaken or otherwise moved (in a bodily manner) distinguishes emotional recognition of value from apathetic judgment, if without being so moved we must fall short of genuine cognition of this kind, then is it adequate to argue that, though “all emotions are embodied,” and some can be “profoundly agitating,” bodily feelings are nonetheless inessential features of emotion, such that a complete definition of emotion need not include them (400)? On the same page of *Political Emotions* that I just cited, after describing embodied feelings as non-cognitive or non-intentional, Nussbaum points out that whatever “feels wrenching and visceral about emotions” is “not independent of their cognitive dimension.” This is a different claim, but an intriguing one: instead of assuming that feelings of bodily agitation are irrelevant to the cognitive role of emotions, Nussbaum is now suggesting that when these feelings occur as part of an emotional response they are intrinsic to the intentionality of emotions. Would it be fair to conclude that bodily feelings can, on Nussbaum’s view, be related to what an emotion is about? In *Political Emotions*, she does appear to alter her view of emotions as distinguished by judgment alone. Or, perhaps, she is putting forward more directly a claim that was suggested in *Upheavals of Thought* without being fully incorporated into her theoretical account. In that book, an emotion is characterized as a specific kind of evaluative judgment or cognition; yet Nussbaum implies through her use of examples that one *must* be shaken up by an affective upheaval in order to accept the evaluative judgment in question: “to recognize this [that someone whom I love has just died] *is* to be deeply disturbed,” she writes, adding that one who did not feel agitated could not be recognizing his or her beloved’s death as such.⁵ This indicates that the phenomenological turbulence we feel when undergoing an emotion is necessary in order for its intentional content to “hit home,” so to speak. To affirm that this is true would provide Nussbaum with a stronger reply to critics who maintain that any cognitive view of emotions must invariably leave the body out of account,⁶ although I’m unsure of how she would want to flesh out this idea if she were to endorse it explicitly. Based upon what *is* actually stated in *Political Emotions*, we can gather that the visceral disturbances she has in mind bear a stronger resemblance to Peter Goldie’s “feelings that” than they do to Jesse Prinz’s “embodied appraisals,” because their intentionality is intrinsic rather than just reliably caused or elicited. Yet she mentions these feelings of agitation without building them into her account of what emotions are. So I have come to wonder why Nussbaum hesitates to include embodied feelings in her theory of emotion. My suggestion is that she ought to

⁵ *Upheavals of Thought*, 40–45. The direct quotation is from page 41, and the emphasis is mine. There is an illuminating discussion of this problem by Matthew Ratcliffe, in *Feelings of Being* (Oxford UP, 2008), 26–28.

⁶ See, e.g., Jesse J. Prinz, *Gut Reactions: A Perceptual Theory of Emotion* (Oxford UP, 2004), 25–26: “cognitive theorists are united,” he assures us, in holding the view that “emotions are disembodied.”

argue that affective cognition does indeed require a felt sense of being moved, as many of her own examples seem to convey: this, I think, would make it harder to misunderstand cognitivism in the philosophy of emotions. And it's from a standpoint of agreement with Nussbaum's overall account that I make this friendly suggestion. Her theory of emotion gets things right in the most important respects if, as she says, "all my qualifications are taken duly into account" (401). Yet it would be a useful emendation if she could add one further qualification, by openly articulating a point that is already hinted at in *Political Emotions*.